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Thematic Horizons of Regional Contemporary Art Exhibitions: Existential Values, Micro- and Macro-History, Humanistic Ideals

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ABSTRACT

This study examines contemporary art institutions as spaces of cultural production that exert a normative influence on their audiences. Although contemporary art galleries in Russia are receiving growing attention from social scientists, these studies often concentrate mainly on audience profiles. The study aims to identify the themes that galleries consider important for their audiences, as well as the semantic and value-based emphases in their interpretation of these themes. A content analysis of exhibition announcements from four galleries in Yekaterinburg between 2020 and 2023 was conducted based on grounded theory. The three-stage coding of these announcements allowed us to identify the themes that galleries consider important for their audiences and to reveal the conceptual and value-based emphases in interpreting these themes. We found that exhibitions most frequently address three themes: existential values, micro- and macro-history, and humanistic ideals. The study also describes institutional conditions that influence the exhibition policies of galleries.

KEYWORDS

sociology of culture, construction of meanings, value orientations, contemporary art, exhibition, Yekaterinburg

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Introduction

Contemporary art institutions play a pivotal role in shaping societal values, making it essential to explore the messages they convey and the tools they employ. Such an examination offers profound insights into the broader social and cultural dynamics at work. We approach this question from a social constructivist perspective, which suggests that the communities that individuals belong to have a considerable impact on their values. As Pierre Bourdieu showed, the need to belong to certain social groups and publicly embrace their values and practices plays a crucial role in a person's life (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969/1991). While contemporary society is more segmented and fluid than post-war French society, Bourdieu's idea remains relevant: individuals who are part of multiple social groups tend to adopt and reproduce the distinct values and practices associated with each group. Individual interests align with the values and meanings of broader social fields through various mechanisms, including cultural consumption. Public spaces of cultural production, such as schools, universities, churches, and cultural venues, play a key role in shaping these values.

This study focuses specifically on contemporary art galleries. These institutions were selected as the object of study for three reasons. First, contemporary art is designed to reflect on the most pressing issues of the current moment and the associated value transformations (Groys, 2008). Second, Russian audiences often perceive museums as legitimate spaces for generating meaning and values (Culture of happiness, n.d.). Third, in Russia, contemporary art institutions were among the first to employ participatory practices to engage with audiences. These efforts aim to enhance audience loyalty to the institution and facilitate the internalization of the meanings embedded in exhibitions (Malikova, 2019). Finally, examining the themes of these exhibitions enables us to identify not only the significant issues of the present but also the values that extend beyond the current moment.

The study aims to identify the themes that galleries consider important for their audience, as well as the key meanings and value orientations in their interpretation of these themes. Exhibition announcements provided the material for analysis. The emphasis is on their role in describing the event (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 32); announcements are viewed as institutional statements about exhibitions intended to attract visitors. The language of these announcements reflects the thematic and conceptual landscape relevant to the audience, shaping elements of the social reality they seek to engage with. Unlike curatorial texts in the exhibition space, announcements reach a broader audience, helping both actual and potential visitors navigate the key issues, meanings, and values foregrounded by contemporary art.

Exhibitions under the study were held at four galleries in Yekaterinburg between 2020 and 2023: the Ural Branch of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts¹, the Yeltsin Center Art Gallery², the Sinara Art Gallery³, and the Museum of the Underground⁴. Brief

¹ <https://ural.pushkinmuseum.art/>

² <https://yeltsin.ru/artgallery>

³ <https://sinara-center.com/gallery>

⁴ <https://ugmuseum-ekb.ru>

information about the institutions available on their websites has been supplemented with data from anonymized interviews with experts in Russian contemporary art. These interviews provided insights into art funding, exhibition planning processes, and attitudes toward audiences.

Each of these galleries has its unique identity. The Ural Branch of the Pushkin Museum traces its origins to the Ural Branch of the State Center for Contemporary Art, which was established in Yekaterinburg in 1999. With no permanent collection or dedicated exhibition budget, the museum primarily focuses on contemporary art and the support of local artists. The Sinara Art Gallery, which evolved from the Yekaterinburg Gallery of Contemporary Art founded in 2004, became a new brand when it moved to the Sinara Center in 2019. Its collection owned by businessman Dmitry Pumpyansky mainly comprises the pieces of contemporary Ural and Russian art. The Yeltsin Center Art Gallery, which opened in 2015, does not have a permanent collection. Instead, it operates on exhibition budgets that support showcases of notable Russian artists. Some exhibitions address social issues and values related to Boris Yeltsin, the first President of Russia, and his political career. The Museum of the Underground, established in 2022, features a collection including unofficial art from the 1960s to the 1980s, primarily sourced from the Sverdlovsk⁵ underground movement. The owner of the collection is Ural businessman Pavel Neganov. The Museum's exhibitions are primarily centered around this unique collection.

There is a consensus among gallery professionals that contemporary art represents a collection of artistic practices that emerged in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Furthermore, contemporary art is recognized as meeting the demands and requirements of the present day, both in terms of content and form of expression. Art directors pay particular attention to engaging audiences through active public programs such as workshops, lectures, art mediation, clubs, and schools. As a rule, exhibition schedules are developed by gallery teams a year in advance. They are usually approved without significant changes in accordance with the procedures established by their founders. All these galleries contribute to the broader context of contemporary cultural landscape (Galeeva, 2017; Kudriavtseva, 2022), meeting the needs of the general audience. Therefore, the themes of their exhibition announcements can be examined together. The following section presents the way this topic is reflected in contemporary research, description of the methods used in the study, as well as the analysis of the data collected.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The notion of a museum as a space for the production of meanings has developed under the influence of Foucault's ideas (1975/1979). The concept of the disciplinary museum suggests that the modern museum, which has replaced *wunderkammers* [cabinets of curiosities], is meant not to entertain but to educate and train the viewer. This function is realized through the development of classifications, typologies, and distinctions that the viewer observes in the exhibitions, through the creation of a specific museum

⁵ The name of the Yekaterinburg city during the Soviet period.

space akin to a panopticon, where viewers, observing one another, assimilate certain ideas and notions of publicity (Bennett, 1995). As a result of recent developments in museum theory (Maximova, 2019), museums have come to be viewed as spaces for communication. Contemporary practices, such as mediation and participation, actively engage viewers in understanding and creating the meanings and content of exhibitions (Simon, 2010). This approach facilitates a deeper internalization of these meanings by the audience.

Contemporary art galleries, as a special type of museum space, are of interest to cultural sociology for two main reasons: first, the galleries hold thematic exhibitions addressing issues that are relevant to contemporary social institutions; second, they employ interactive practices that help shape the meaning of these exhibitions. Russian studies mainly consider contemporary art galleries from the perspective of art history and cultural studies, exploring either specific projects (Borzenkova, 2023; Galkin & Kuklina, 2019; Kakurkina, 2019; Kostina, 2015; Sidorova, 2022; Yankovskaya, 2021; Zheleznyak, 2022), or methods of interaction with the audience (Kochukhova, 2019; Malikova, 2019; Melnikova et al., 2023), or the history of the art process (Galeeva, 2017; Kolesnik et al., 2022; Kudriavtseva, 2022; Kuklina, 2022; Kuznetsova, 2021; Lukina, 2021).

Social research is most often dedicated to the profile of the audience of contemporary art institutions. Museums and galleries are primarily seen as active participants in cultural consumption, and a special focus is made on studying their audiences. Standardized surveys of visitors to contemporary art exhibitions in Yekaterinburg, Perm, and Nizhny Novgorod reveal the following demographic data: 65% of the audience are women, and 74% of all visitors are under 35 years old. Additionally, audience segmentation has been proposed, categorizing visitors into core, peripheral, and prospective groups (Petrova & Burlutskaya, 2020). Interviews with visitors to exhibition venues in Tyumen identified four cultural audience profiles that differ in their leisure strategies and understanding of contemporary art (Chistyakova & Pupysheva, 2022). A comparison of audience attitudes toward contemporary art at the Hermitage and the Russian Museum over the past two decades shows that both institutions have experienced similar dynamics, shifting from curiosity and confusion (and occasionally rejection) to genuine interest (Bogacheva & Levleva, 2011).

Only a limited number of social studies examine other aspects of the work of contemporary art institutions. For instance, Kuleva (2015, 2017) explores labor organization in "new cultural institutions." Sorokin and Afanaseva (2025) analyze the issue of agency in contemporary Russian art. Petrova (2023) examines the museum as an institution of solidarity, where socially significant meanings and relationships are produced and reinforced, and norms of mutual understanding and consensus are developed. From this perspective, Petrova analyzes the themes of exhibitions in three contemporary art museums (two in the capital and one in a regional city). Although her study is conceptually close to the present one, its focus on the quantitative analysis of exhibition themes limits the exploration of the contexts in which these themes are interpreted.

In contrast to existing sociological research, this study shifts the focus from audience profiling to the key themes that contemporary art galleries present to their

visitors. As opposed to cultural studies and art history research, the study does not analyze the artistic specifics of theme representation or engage with questions of aesthetics and cultural theory. Rather, it examines the broader thematic and conceptual framework that shapes contemporary art audiences' engagement.

Qualitative content analysis is employed to reconstruct the thematic and semantic landscape presented by contemporary art galleries to their audience. The research methodology is based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the open coding phase, each of the 107 exhibition announcements from 2020 to 2023 was assigned primary codes (keywords) reflecting its content. These announcements were retrieved from official websites of the Ural Branch of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts and its official page⁶ in the VK⁷ social network, the Yeltsin Center Art Gallery, the Sinara Art Gallery, and the Museum of Underground Art. Since our main focus is exhibition themes, certain details in the announcements, such as exhibition duration, artist and curator names, artistic techniques and genres, were recorded as metadata though not coded.

During axial coding, the semantic meaning of key terms was clarified based on their context, keyword frequency was analyzed, and codes were selected to group similar terms by meaning. In the selective coding phase, connections between different coding levels were examined, which allowed us to identify the thematic contexts in which the axial codes were interpreted. Additionally, selective coding revealed a high density of connections between frequently occurring axial codes, enabling us to consolidate key exhibition themes into three overarching narratives: existential values, micro- and macro-history, and humanistic ideals.

As a result, 258 unique keywords were identified across 107 announcements. In the phase of axial coding, the following key themes were identified, frequently addressed in the exhibitions: the Artistic Process, Human Existence, the Urals, Yekaterinburg, Personal Stories, the Past, and Family. In the following section, the semantic and value dimensions are further explored in order to describe these themes and the connections they have.

Results and Discussion

Seven axial codes identified in the previous stage were selected for more detailed consideration. Quotes from exhibition announcements are provided to illustrate the connection between the themes.

The axial code "Artistic Process" encompasses two types of themes. First, it includes the exploration of universal human experiences through the artist's personal journey, such as finding one's path, mentorship, and the challenges of precarity. These themes relate to self-discovery, self-expression, and the creation of personal narratives. Second, it addresses the professional aspects of creative work, raising questions about the search for relevant artistic methods, the ethics of art,

⁶ https://vk.com/pushkinmuseum_ural

⁷ VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

the institutional conditions surrounding contemporary art, and the subjectivity of the audience. While some of these questions may align more closely with art historical research, our primary concern is that contemporary audiences actively engage in discussions about its principles, techniques, and organizational features.

The axial code “Human Existence” thematically unites the codes “Person,” “Self,” “Body,” and “Values”. Within this macro-theme, the focus is made on the modern city dweller, an abstracted subject whose experience is likely familiar to that of the viewer.

The relationship of this subject with the external world is considered in three aspects: digital, material, and social. The digital aspect raises questions about the extent to which individuals control digital technologies, accentuating the anxiety caused by the awareness of the limits of this control. The interpretation of the human relationship with the material environment creates a certain dualism: nature is seen as an object of care, while the city is viewed as a space of alienation. Social relationships are problematized as (im)possible communication, as the individual confrontation with social norms. The theme of overcoming alienation in urban life is addressed in the exhibition *Preimushchestvo Vstrechnykh Sblizhenii* [The Advantage of Counter Convergences] that was held from April 12, 2023 to June 11, 2023 in The Sinara Art Gallery. The exhibition announcement formulates questions, encouraging the audience to seek answers:

Streams of people who do not notice each other converge and disperse in the same places every day. We walk toward each other but do not get closer. However, the advantage is always in community. How can we overcome alienation? (Vorobyeva, 2023; Trans. by Elena Kochukhova & Evgenia Vakhrusheva—E. K. & E. V.)

This individual's self-reflection is evident in their search for a personal path, recognition of their feelings, and choice of self-support practices such as self-care, self-love, and self-belief. The interdisciplinary project *SEANS* [SEANCE] was described as “an experiment involving a psychotherapeutic performance format,” in which the main subject of the performance “becomes the viewer, who, for an hour, enters the space of contemporary art exhibitions and, armed with an interactive audio guide, moves from hall to hall, performing various actions” (Ural'skii filial Pushkinskogo muzeia, 2020; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.). Each hall of the exhibition is dedicated to a specific theme: mindful treatment of nature, caring for one's own body, communication with society. The format of an individual journey through these themes will provoke the viewer to interact more sensitively with themselves and the world around them.

The theme of self-reflection in exhibition announcements is often linked to creativity, particularly artistic creativity. It is presented both as a way of being and as a therapeutic practice. For example, the exhibition *Ne Vremia dla Poletov* [No Time for Flying] invites reflection on the theme of finding individuality, the freedom of one's own flight, and art as one of the main languages of communication in the modern world (Borzenkova, 2022). The theme of creativity is also closely intertwined with the issue of cultural diversity as a source of meaning and a foundation for identities.

Cultural diversity, in turn, at one of the exhibitions, serves as an important context for understanding human corporeality. The body is also considered in terms of the dynamic forms of its expression (dance, movement) and its interaction with space. For instance, in the exhibition *Ostrozno, Khrupkoe* [Fragile, Handle With Care], the artist

experiments with space, intentionally placing objects closer to the viewers' bodies—for you to enter the exhibition space, you literally have to come into contact with Ekaterina's works, and to view the artist's video, you lie down on a soft mat, on which the artist's works are reproduced, becoming part of her total installation for a few minutes. (Komleva-Kollontay, 2022; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.)

The axial code "Human Existence" also reflects on freedom, human rights, and the intrinsic value of human life. These values have been placed in a historical context, highlighting their relevance. The discourse surrounding them is thematically hermetic, effectively confined to two exhibitions organized at the Art Gallery of the Yeltsin Center (Narinskaya, 2021; Plotnikov, 2022).

The axial code "Personal History" is also related to humanity, though focusing on exhibitions that emphasize the individual destinies of specific people and the complex relationship between humans and time. This axial code comprises three main thematic fields. Firstly, it addresses existential questions regarding key reference points and anchors in life, the meaning of existence, and relationships with eternity. By reflecting on their own histories, contemporary artists also consider the meaning of creativity and the significance of being an artist. Secondly, it involves approaches to understanding generational connections and family trajectories as the foundation of a personal history. The interpretation of family history serves as a valuable source of meaning for individual existence and identity, establishing one's connection to eternity. At the same time, it problematizes the perception of family history as a single narrative, as it consists of separate memories and testimonies of varying significance that transform over time. For instance, in the exhibition *Esh', Poka Estsia, i Pei, Poka P'etsia* [Eat While You Feel Like Eating, and Drink While You Feel Like Drinking], the exhibits visualize the mechanisms of individual and family memory: some memories are hyperbolized, others erased, while some are endlessly produced. Miniature dolphin figurines, a common souvenir from Russian resorts and the main exhibits in a grandmother's cabinet, transform into a two-meter sculpture (Sycheva, 2022).

Third, it refers to a series of historical events and narratives that shape the framework within which personal histories develop. There is a particular interest in the experience of growing up in the 1990s⁸, closely tied to the personal experiences of contemporary artists whose childhood or youth coincided with that time, and to the experience of the audience, largely represented by young people. The exhibition

⁸ The 1990s in Russia were a period marked by the transition from a Soviet-controlled economy to a market-oriented system, resulting in severe economic hardship and political instability. This era also saw cultural experimentation alongside widespread disillusionment and nostalgia for the perceived stability of the Soviet period.

Devianostye Detei [Children's Nineties] was held in The Yeltsin Centre from February 17, 2023 to April 16, 2023. As the announcement says,

the exhibition invites viewers to reflect on the experience of growing up in the nineties. How did children perceive that time? How do they remember it as adults? The works of fifteen Russian artists create fragmented and non-nostalgic images of the era and life in that era. (Sokolovskaia et al., 2023; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.)

Significant reference points for contemporary art also include the Great Patriotic War and the preceding period of repression, capturing their lasting impact on individuals here and now. Alongside other events, these form a temporal continuum of past–present–future in which personal histories unfold.

The connections of the axial code “Family” are limited to two themes already mentioned above: the search for personal identity, the construction of personal history, and the reflection on the influence of national history on family history.

The axial code “Past” most frequently appears in the context of family history and personal narratives. A particularly striking example is the announcement for the play-installation *Dym* [Smoke], inspired by Olga Lavrentieva’s graphic novel *Survilo*:

Valentina Vikentyevna was born in 1925 in Leningrad. She faced the fate shared by millions of her contemporaries—exile, war, blockade. The storyline of *Survilo*, along with dates and facts, can be found in any history textbook. However, experiencing them, feeling them, and mourning them is quite another matter. It means, if only for a moment, becoming the grandchild to whom this story is addressed. (Tutak, 2022; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.)

Additionally, exhibition announcements coded as “Past” often feature reflections on abstract concepts such as the interplay between past and future, the connections and ruptures between them, as well as references to key events in 20th-century Russian history. Memory forms, which reflect the past, are portrayed as complex and unstable. The situational nature of how they are handled is also emphasized—family histories are preserved or lost in retellings, and archives are selectively maintained and only partially explored. Rational approaches (archiving, analysis) and emotional approaches (mourning, emotional processing) to the past are not mixed within a single exhibition. From a non-anthropological perspective, the question of the past is raised in the exhibition *Mesto Strakha* [Place of Fear], whose main subject is an abandoned NKVD⁹ building in Magnitogorsk. According to the exhibition announcement, “the artists ask: can a place be a witness to forgotten history and bear traces of past events? Do walls, stones, and trees remember?” (Shusharichev, 2021; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.).

⁹ The NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) was a Soviet government agency responsible for internal security, secret police activities, and law enforcement from 1934 to 1946. It played a key role in political repression, including overseeing the Gulag labor camps and conducting mass arrests during the Great Purge under Stalin.

The prominence of the axial codes “Ural” and “Yekaterinburg” is largely a result of our research focus, as the study centered on art galleries within a specific city and region. These codes represent the space in which processes of interest to artists and curators unfold. While the region or city itself rarely became the central theme of an exhibition, it often influenced the direction of the work presented. For instance, Ural art provides a lens to explore the logic and challenges of the artistic process, including the social connections between artists, the influence of collectors and institutional archives, the role of the audience, and the rise of prominent cultural figures. Similarly, the Ural offers examples for discussions on memory and forgetting, both collective and family, within the context of Old Believer history or Stalinist repressions, as well as conversations on religious, national, and linguistic diversity, and the variety of ways of life.

On the other hand, the Ural is personified as a kind of mystical force, endowed with such qualities as strength of character and freedom. This force leaves its complex imprint on everything that happens within its space, making people confront pain and reflect on questions about good and evil, the eternal and the fleeting (and curators and artists position themselves as the conduits of this force).

Yekaterinburg is primarily depicted as a site for social experiments, discussions on urban development, and struggles for space. The focus extends beyond the processes accompanying urban transformation to consider their impact on individuals. On the one hand, this influence can be framed positively, as seen in the exhibition *Chto Delaet Nas Luchshe* [What Makes Us Better], part of a project on the Youth Housing Complex (YHC), a Soviet-era initiative where young people collectively built apartment housing in the 1980s. Examining this initiative in Sverdlovsk, the exhibition’s curator concludes:

For each participant, joining or supporting the YHC became a way to express the best in themselves. And while the construction of YHCs ended with socialism, the people from these communities carried on, proving to be better prepared than others for the challenges that awaited the country after the collapse of the Soviet world. (Starostova, 2021; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.)

On the other hand, the ambiguous and mixed emotions triggered by changes in the urban landscape are also explored. Alena Gur’eva’s exhibition *Ia—Gorod, Khotia i ne Znaiu, Kuda Mne Idti* [I Am the City, Though I Do Not Know Where to Go], which examines transformations in the Elmash district of northern Yekaterinburg where large-scale residential construction began in the 1950s, captures a sense of emptiness and loss: “The renovation program and the work of developers are reshaping the district. As old buildings are demolished, the area loses part of its unique character. Where once life was, now there’s emptiness” (Shusharichev, 2023; Trans. by E. K. & E. V.). The heightened focus on Yekaterinburg as a subject of artistic interpretation and a thematic framework for exhibitions became particularly pronounced in 2023, coinciding with the city’s 300th anniversary celebrations. Yekaterinburg is not simply representative of the Ural region, nor is it understood solely through that lens.

Conclusion

Overall, the key themes of the exhibitions under consideration and the contexts in which they are interpreted align with the broader conceptual horizons of global contemporary art, which frequently engages with topics such as identity, the body, time, memory, place, language, science, and spiritual exploration (Robertson & McDaniel, 2016).

In the Russian context, a quantitative study of exhibition themes in Erarta Museum of Contemporary Art (St. Petersburg), Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (Moscow), and the Ural branch of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Yekaterinburg) for 2021–2022 found that one of the most frequent themes was art itself (Petrova, 2023). This finding partially aligns with our own analysis, which identified artistic process as the most frequently occurring axial code in Yekaterinburg gallery announcements. However, a direct comparison of our results is challenging, as Petrova's coding includes not only thematic categories but also artistic techniques (e.g., photography, gilding). Furthermore, her study does not establish relationships between codes or clarify their contexts, and the results are presented as a word cloud, which does not provide precise information about the prominence of specific themes.

For example, in these visualizations, the code "Human Existence," which is central to our study, appears less significant than installation, while codes related to personal history or the past are entirely absent. These discrepancies stem from differences in research objectives, sampling principles, and coding practices.

Engaging with the experiences of contemporary urban dwellers, their personal histories, and the past, the exhibitions address three main themes: existential values, micro- and macro-history, and humanistic ideals. Existential values are highlighted through the exploration of human existence in the modern world. Contemporary art engages with themes such as the meaning of life, personal growth, self-belief and self-care, encounters with others, and maintaining control over one's life in an increasingly digitalized environment. Overall, the exhibition announcements reflect the portrayal of a person as an unfinished subject, a bearer of memory and emotions. Family as a value is primarily understood in the context of existential quests, as it gives meaning to existence in the present, serves as a link to eternity, and a source of personal identity. Communal values, which emphasize a person's connection to local communities and processes, on the one hand, are linked to reflections on the cultural diversity of the Ural, and on the other, to urban transformation practices. Values associated with historical heritage and collective memory are conveyed through discussions of specific events or periods in Russian history and their lasting impact on contemporary life. Prominent topics include the Great Patriotic War, the preceding period of persecutions, and coming of age in the 1990s. The connection between individuals and local communities is represented in two ways: through artistic exploration of the cultural diversity of the Urals and through the archiving and critical examination of urban transformation practices. Humanistic ideals touched upon in the exhibitions include human rights, freedom, the value of human life, and the inherent worth of individuals.

The discussion of these main themes does not follow the traditional approach of transmitting grand, well-articulated value narratives typical of modern museums. Instead, the galleries in question use horizontal forms of communication, actively involving the audience in discussions on topics that matter to them, often through personal and local stories. Exhibition announcements emphasize the significance of personal experience as a source of inspiration, often inviting reflection and discussion. This emphasis on collaborative meaning-making is further reinforced through public programs and mediation efforts, thus reflecting one of the notable trends in museum practice, that is, engaging the viewer through emotional connections. By using stories that resonate with visitors' experiences, museums create new experiences and emotions (Maximova, 2019, p. 132). In this context, it is understandable why direct discussions of universal values (freedom, life, human rights) are relatively limited.

Our analysis of the codes brought to light the key themes in the announcements of contemporary art exhibitions in Yekaterinburg. Additionally, the limitations that shape the thematic and value spectrum of gallery offerings were identified. First, each gallery's exhibition program is compiled by its director and curators. Curators select exhibition themes depending on both micro- and macro-social contexts. On a microlevel, choices are influenced by professional interests, artistic value judgments, and audience preferences. On a macrolevel, external pressures play a significant role. The increasing scrutiny of exhibition content by regulatory bodies (Kuleva, 2022; V rabote eks-direktora, 2025; Vagner, 2023) and the phenomenon of protest-driven responses to contemporary art (Gomes & Kruglova, 2021; Heinich, 2000) contribute to institutional concerns about preserving a legitimate space for artistic expression. The need to maintain this space is framed as a responsibility toward both the audience and the broader artistic community. Second, the galleries in question have limited material and organizational resources: their teams are small, two of the four galleries lack their own collections, and one does not have a budget for exhibition activities. Consequently, they are restricted in terms of project scale and the geographical diversity of represented artists.

These two reasons narrow the possibility of expression, though the variety of themes that are identified in exhibition announcements does not suggest that institutionalized contemporary art is confined to a narrow thematic corridor. The key themes of the exhibition announcements—Artistic Process, Human Existence, Personal History, The Individual, The Past, Family, The Ural, and Yekaterinburg—form a significant shared framework that brings together the interests of contemporary art audiences. Although there is an emphasis on the Ural, this topic is explored through an interest in its cultural diversity and relationship between people and the place where their lives unfold. This attention to one's immediate environment, the ability to engage in dialogue with it and understand one's connection to it, is regarded as a positive example of a non-confrontational narrative.

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