

#43

Zeszyty Artystyczne

Misteria – rytuały – performanse.
Wymiar estetyczny

Mysteries – Rituals – Performances.
The Aesthetic Dimension



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu

1(43)/2023

Zdjęcie na okładce

Koncert wizualny Adama Garnka, Kielce 2013

fot. K. Peczański

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Zeszyty Artystyczne
nr 1 (43)/2023, s. 198-217
doi: 10.48239/ISSN1232668243200219

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Conceptual Art in Belarus as a Regime-Criticising Art – Ales Pushkin and Alexei Kuzmich¹

Conceptualism in Belarusian art

Conceptual art is not widespread in Belarus. It seems obscure and is hardly addressed in academic art centres, which are few and far between anyway. The only art university is the Belarusian State Academy of Fine Arts in Minsk, but there are also art or design departments at other universities, usually technical colleges and pedagogical universities. In a country where there are no civil liberties, there is also no place for critical, progressive conceptual art.

The situation in Belarusian art illuminates many of the problems facing society. These include the strong ideological censorship present at all levels of cultural and public life, the Soviet, if not Orwellian, methods of planned “management” of artistic education, supervised by the Ministry of Culture, an absence of independent cultural institutions and galleries (after

» 1 This article is an excerpt from a Master’s Thesis, defended in 2021 at Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań. It has been rewritten and slightly updated for publication purposes.

the August 2020 events even the few that exist have been subject to repressions), and the firm rooting of art in the academic narrative. It can be said that everything that happens in art spills over into other spheres of life.

Under such conditions, the existence of conceptual artists, including actionists, seems an exception and a veritable miracle. Why, however, in other European countries performers and actionists no longer surprise anyone, but in Belarus this art is not understood even by those who should know better? Socialist realism and the subsequent propaganda of kitsch, along with the policy of negative perceptions of “Western values” have left their mark on the Belarusians’ artistic tastes. Despite there being old media artists who represent a very high level of expertise, few of them address social issues and practice critical art.

To create the image of a glorious White Russia, the regime needs decorators who extol it or simply make nice wall paintings and do not address ideologically dangerous topics. An interview conducted by Leni Smoragdova with Belarusian conceptualist Alexei Kuzmich, to be discussed later in the article, contains the following question: “Do they know Marina Abramović here?” The answer to it is overly colloquial yet very true: “They do not give a f*** about Marina Abramović!”² I believe the quote aptly sums up the approach to contemporary art in a country where even Malevich’s *Square* is considered “bizarre contemporary art” even though it was created over a century ago.

Widespread criticism of the authorities began in art with the outbreak of protests in 2020 and was a general trend rather than a bold gesture. Although it is now easy to go to jail for a mere poster, the diversity and huge influx of such art allowed people to “hide in the art crowd”. That is why I want to take a closer look at the actionists, who did bold critical work long before the protests began and are an artistic minority, critical of even the mainstream forms of the 2020 demonstrations.

Political actions by 2020

Dissatisfaction with the regime of the Belarusian “bat’ka”³ was not solely due to successive election rigging. Being in power for so many years, he stymied the country’s development by directing a loyal bureaucratic

» 2 Transaction Art, Алексей Кузьмич – “Сделано на коленке” - голый художник, протест против цензуры, 25.10.2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rVekMVnznw&t=972s>

» 3 Bat’ka (Bel. бацька) – father. Lukashenko calls himself such, posing as the father of the nation, the creator and defender of the sovereign state of Belarus. Although the word is of Belarusian origin, it is colloquially used in Russian and spelled differently (from Russian ‘ба́тька’), which is why in Eastern European countries Lukashenko is known by this name. The electorate and the president’s supporters refer to this name seriously, which is why they are called “jabat’ka” and “jabat’ki” (from Russian. ябатька, ябатьки).

apparatus. But already during his first term in office, Lukashenko began repression and “purges” in all spheres of public life. And if the average citizen may have taken the subversion of democracy in favour of dictatorship with a pinch of salt, many journalists, writers and artists were vocal about the repression and expressed their protest in art.

One of the first artistic actions criticising Lukashenko’s rule was the public sewing of his lips by the poet and right-wing nationalist political activist Slavamir Hienrychavich Adamovich in 1997. Earlier, he had written a poem called *Ubiej priezidenta*⁴, which was published in the newspaper “Vybar”⁵. He was sentenced to prison for this poem, but was released after 10 months, after which he carried out the action *Zashityj rot (Sewn Lips)*⁶ at one of the demonstrations. Such an artistic gesture symbolised the lack of freedom of expression in Belarus, government censorship and repression of opposition-minded cultural activists.

It should be noted that the act of sewing up his mouth was not accomplished in full; the poet made only a few stitches. It can be said that this was a less radical version of the more famous 2012 action by Russian actionist Petr Pavlensky.

Another important form of protest was the action of Ales Pushkin. Alexandr Pushkin⁷, one of the few conceptual artists in Belarus, carried out the action *Padarunak Prezidentu (A Gift for the President)*⁸ on 21 July 1999. To mark the fifth anniversary of Lukashenko’s coming to power, he brought a wheelbarrow with manure and spread it under the Presidential Palace. He then threw onto the dung millions of devalued Belarusian rubles, Lukashenko’s 1996 Constitution and a portrait-flyer of the president, which portrait he pierced with a pitchfork. The author of the action referred to a folk custom, according to which a person who was unkind to others was dragged to the door with a wheelbarrow of dung or had his windows smashed. Immediately after carrying out the action, Pushkin was detained by the police and received a suspended sentence of two years. He now has received more than ten sentences for various actions and exhibitions. Of course, there was no question of treating the action as an artistic work, but only as a violation of the provision banning the organisation of illegal pickets.

Ales Pushkin is known not only for his political actions and performances. He is involved in classical painting and icon writing and remains

» 4 Transl. “Kill the President”.

» 5 Transl. “Choice”.

» 6 S. Adamowicz, Славамір Адамавіч (акцыя “Зашыты рот”), 1997, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxyjms4rtE4>

» 7 Bel. Ales Puszkin.

» 8 Ales Puszkin, *Подарок Президенту*, Минск, 21.07.1999, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSWtsw5f_MM

a person of deep faith. He was born and still lives in the small town of Bobr in the Minsk Region, where he was commissioned to paint the frescoes in the Church of St. Nicholas the Magnificent. In 1997, he completed a painting in which, in the scene of the Last Judgement, he painted two figures very reminiscent of Alexander Lukashenko and the then Metropolitan Filaret among the sinners⁹. Under strange circumstances, this part of the fresco would disappear and reappear. By order of the church authorities, the fresco was finally painted over in 2005, and in 2011 the building burned down. The artist himself, as a patriot of a free Belarus and optimist, holds annual street exhibitions of his works in his hometown of Bobr. They are dedicated to Freedom Day of March 25, or a day when the BHP¹⁰ was born in 1918¹¹. The works on display are not always political but are still adversely perceived by local authorities. Then there are often absurd actions on the part of the administration: tractors are used to destroy the display and the artist's paintings get stolen. Thus, rural local governments unwittingly participate in artistic actions.

Belarus is a country where an artist, as well as any ordinary citizen, must obtain permission to hold any event: whether it is an exhibition of classical paintings or a picket with a poster. The behaviour of Sielsoviet¹² heads differs little from the methodology of the curators of large state galleries. The principle is the same - the authorities have a monopoly on everything.

Alexei Kuzmich's Actionism. A trickster of contemporary Belarusian art

Alexei Kuzmich Jr., an actionist of the younger generation, is a well-known scandalmonger. His controversial actions strike at the very heart of the problems of Belarusian society and trigger public discussion and opinion. He is also one of the few artists who have criticised the nature of the Belarusian protest and its representation in art.

Alexei Kuzmich Jr. is the son of Belarusian painter Alexei Kuzmich. Kuzmich Sr. was into academic painting; he depicted female nudes, for which he was censored during the Soviet era. He is the author of the largest collection of paintings with the face of the Madonna, for which his muse, Alexei Jr.'s mother, posed. Being the son of a painter, Alexei Jr. was very much connected to art from childhood, but he did not get an art edu-

» 9 «Грешник Лукашенко – замазан» [in:] «Компропат.ру», http://www.compromat.ru/page_14638.htm, 20.03.2004 (04.05.2021).

» 10 People's Republic of Belarus.

» 11 Ales Puszkin, *Дзень Воли ў Бабры* 2017 | Art performance of Ales Pushkin / Bobr 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhMiex39hwU> (16.02.2023).

» 12 Village councils.

cation and did not practice art until a certain time. As he himself admitted, he is not an artist by profession, but by destiny. When he embarked on his artistic path, he did not carry on his father's painting traditions, which were very revolutionary during the communist era and later conformed to the conventions of academic painting. Instead, he started with new media and became one of the few contemporary Belarusian actionists.

Since the artist does not always publish full versions of his texts online, at my request he sent me the originals of his manifestos and documentation of his actions and allowed me to publish them. As reference material, I used interviews that were conducted with him and are available online, as well as our own correspondence. All reflections on his motivations and intentions were discussed with him, and our conversations helped me gain a better understanding of his art. In his manifestos, the artist often uses neologisms that he believes best capture his ideas, and in the quotes provided I have tried my best to translate these terms.

Kuzmich's actions that I have described either date from the period when he lived and worked in Belarus or are directly related to Belarusian themes. After his forced emigration, the artist travelled around Europe and based on his own experiences as an artist, wrote a book on conceptualism and actionism. After an action related to the Belarusian 2020 protests, *I Protest*, he held two other actions: *Imitation* at the Elysée Palace in Paris and *TransUSSRversion: a Delicacy for an Enlightened Eater, or Conjunction Art action* during the Biennale in Venice.

Artist with no balls

The artistic path of the conceptualist began with the action *Tvoriec biez jajec (Artist With No Balls)* of 2019, held at the Art-Minsk Festival 2019¹³. This is a festival sponsored by the "capitalist employer" Belgazprombank, which needed nice paintings to decorate the gallery spaces. During a speech by one of the festival's organisers, the artist came out in an orange cleaner's outfit and had the word "Tvoriec" (Artist) emblazoned on his back, after which he scattered the pages of his manifesto on the floor and began cleaning the gallery floor. During the opening, the society's bohemian crowd drank champagne and had a good time, and at that very time the Artist performed his mission of cleaning up inconvenient things and entertaining the audience of his art.

In his manifesto, he described that the action depicts the image of the contemporary Belarusian artist, who is nothing more than a service provider fulfilling the wishes of clients and operating in a world of total

» 13 Alexei Kuzmich, Акция "Творец без яЕц". 2019. Видео-документация. Алексей Кузьмич, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87RhbSQLhYk&t=46s79> (16.02.2023)

commercialization of art. There is little better occupation for an artist to seek projects for which he can receive lavish remuneration, or to perform state commissions (after all, there are still portraits of Lukashenko made by artisans). In this action, the artist used the metaphor of castration as a symbol of deprivation of dignity and attachment of the slave to his host (curator or art institution). This is how he described the artist's predicament: "Castrated and stripped of physical and moral dignity, the eunuch had no right to self-expression"¹⁴.

Apart from a lifetime "ban" imposed on the artist of ever participating in this festival again, the action did not elicit a harsh public response. After it was carried out, Kuzmich was invited to exhibit his work at another institution, which, after his second action in this gallery space, regretted it deeply.

Shield or the Ministry of Phalloculture

The subsequent action, due to its scandalous nature, made ripples not only in artistic circles, but also among the ordinary public. Kuzmich was invited to take part in an exhibition at the State Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA)¹⁵. Before starting work on his installation, he asked about the subject matter of the exhibition and possible censorship interference, to which he was told in response: you can do anything except "erect penises", because the exhibition was curated by the Belarusian Ministry of Culture. Such absurd rules and regulations for the event gave rise to three months of research by the artist into the functioning of Belarusian art institutions. In addition to the installation he made for the exhibition, he prepared an action to shed light on the problem of bizarre rules being imposed on artists and the censorship of their art.

During the action *Shchit ili Ministerstvo falokultury (Shield or the Ministry of Phalloculture)*, the artist swallowed a Viagra tablet, came to the launch of his own exhibition, took off his clothes and "censored" the hard-on with a banner bearing the inscription "Ministry of Culture", a copy of a plaque from the actual ministry building¹⁶. After undressing, he threw onto the floor the package of a previously used drug and a tablet, on which the sounds of a porn film could be heard and whose screen showed a black background with the word "censored". Later, the artist stood with his hands raised, and his palms bore the inscription: "I agree with everything".

» 14 From the artist's manifesto [author's archives]

» 15 I am going to use the abbreviation SCCA. The very name of this institution is an oxymoron, because "state" and "modern" in Belarus are fundamentally different things.

» 16 Alexei Kuzmich, *Акцыя „Щит или Министерство фалокультуры”*, 2019. Алексей Кузьмич, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaVEucyNpVc&t=204s> (16.02.2023).

By censoring his penis, he expressed “solidarity with the ideological apparatus that aims to protect the public in the space of the State Center for Contemporary Art from taboo subjects in art”¹⁷. And such elements as Viagra and pornographic films playing in the background “are instruments for stimulating erections in the mud of the absurdity of the Belarusian art scene. In an environment where desire cannot appear in a healthy man”¹⁸. Even though he did meet the criteria for participation in the exhibition as he did not depict an aroused penis, the SCCA did not appreciate the action and asked the artist to publicly apologise. The author did not do so, and apologised only for failing to design a mechanism with a motor so that this plaque could rotate. A complaint was then written to the police. In an interview with the newspaper “Nasha Niva”, SCCA director said that Kuzmich had no talent and was simply a boor who had tarnished the reputation of the gallery, and now the state may turn its back on it (and on Belarusian art in general): “And now we have to prove again that we are good and blushing”¹⁹.

The key element of the action, however, was not the five-minute performance at the opening, after which the photos spread online. The most important thing was the aftermath of the deed, which the artist did not control, namely the absurd investigative case, which can be described in a few words as a search for naked genitalia on the footage of the action to accuse the artist of hooliganism and distributing pornographic content. Fortunately, the case did not go to court, although in today’s reality, proving Kuzmich’s guilt would be far easier. All the trolling and trickery of the artist was not recognized by government agencies as a threat. The covert satire proved incomprehensible to officials of the power apparatus. In times of partisan protest, creativity and camouflaging the message were often the salvation from prosecution.

The aftermath of this action makes it very clear what place has been assigned to the contemporary Belarusian artist: you do not exist if you do not “spice up” reality. One can see a widespread lack of self-reflection and a blind acceptance of official ideology. These two important features of Belarusian art and, to some extent, of Belarusian society will often make themselves present in Alexei Kuzmich’s future works. During an online discussion of actionism in Berlin’s Russian-speaking community, the artist observed that the Ministry of Culture had lost its *raison d’être* and that cultural affairs and free art affairs must be separated, since the manage-

» 17 From the artist’s manifesto [author’s archives]

» 18 From the artist’s manifesto [author’s archives]

» 19 L. Kasperowicz, “Минский художник выпил виагру и голым протестовал против цензуры. Организаторы: «Это клоунада»,” in: “TUT.by”, <https://news.tut.by/culture/656285.html>, 07.10.2019 (04.05.2021).

ment of the latter by the ministry is obsolete²⁰. Given that now Belarus comes increasingly closer to the anti-utopia from George Orwell's novel 1984, the statement is definitely not far from the mark.

Homeland-BDSM

Due to the apparent jocularity of the first two actions, the artist gained wider popularity even among people who perceived the artistic actions as merely interesting hooliganism and presentation of the body of the “new sex symbol of Belarus”, but Kuzmich's subsequent works were scathingly critical of the political and social situation of the day.

In early 2020, even before the events of the presidential election campaign, he made a video *Homeland-BDSM (Rodina-BDSM)*, a prelude to his action under the same title²¹. The abbreviation BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism & Masochism) is a reference to BRSM, i.e. the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, an organisation which is in essence the successor of the Soviet Komsomol. BRSM raises the young generation in the spirit of Belarusian patriotism, and for those who want to pursue a career in government membership is mandatory. Its concept resembles both Komsomol and Hitler-Jugend: a cult of unreserved love of the Motherland (only in the Soviet-Lukashenko sense, of course), obedience to the authorities and cultivation of the regime's values guarantees the stability of the dictatorship in Belarus.

The action was carried out as a response to amendments to the law On Preventing Extremism of 1 February 2020. These amendments were another form of restriction of democratic freedoms in Belarus. With this government law, a dissatisfied citizen can be prosecuted and punished, their behaviour interpreted at will. For example, people who disseminate Nazi symbols as well as those who destroy them in public are both subject to this law. However, the latter are not in line with the president's policies and can now be easily disposed of.

The artist made a video in which, his hand over his heart in a gesture of devotion, he burns a cross made from the remains of his installations once displayed in state galleries, then covers his eyes with a red scarf, which was the badge of pioneers (an organisation of teenagers that preceded the BRSM), and a symbol of obedience and blind faith. By showing the Nazi gesture of raising his hand as a symbol of worship and idealising the content of the regime's propaganda, the artist risks legal con-

» 20 Alexei Kuzmich, Беседы об акционизме. Онлайн-дискуссия. Берлин, 2020, 21.12.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U36FRseSO6E&t=1s> (16.02.2023).

» 21 Alexei Kuzmich, *Homeland-BDSM (Родина-BDSM)*. 2020. Alexei Kuzmich, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4clGoPmDCY0&t=1s>

sequences and public offence. Nazism in Belarus is a painful and highly controversial topic, and displaying this gesture seems unacceptable. After publishing the video on his YouTube channel, the artist faced a spate of hate and accusations, even though he only pointed out the general features of any cult ideologies and did not claim to be a Nazi.

In a manifesto for *Homeland-BDSM*, Kuzmich wrote: “We help the regime pretend to be the Homeland, to skillfully portray the ideological machine as the motherland that raised and fed its sons and daughters, who now must prove their loyalty with blood”²². During the action, the artist nailed the BRSM badge to his chest, thereby offering his body and mind in the service of the ideology of the organisation and the state.

As part of the *Homeland-BDSM* action, Kuzmich sent an official letter to the BRSM chairman, in which he described in detail his rite of dedication and proposed it as a way of welcoming new members to the organisation. He pointed out that such a rite perfectly reflects their value. He did not receive a response to his letter, but Dmitry Voronyuk, first secretary of the BRSM, commented on the situation in an interview with TUT.by as follows: “I don’t know if it will be possible to re-educate him, but we can recommend him a good psychotherapist. We have never had rites of sacrifice, but if Kuzmich wants to join the organisation ‘through pain and purification’, we will take it into account”²³. Voronyuk said the badge could be attached with a magnet: “If he had waited a little, it would have been possible to do without the pain. In short, creative boys are always welcome with us”²⁴.

After the action was published, Alexei Kuzmich suffered no legal consequences: neither BRSM nor the state wanted to participate in his further actions. As in the case of the first action, *Tvoriec biez jajec*, the author considered this work a failure, because the best action is the one that provokes a response, and it turned out that the pro-government organisation behaved more calmly than the art gallery, which took offence.

A belated reaction of state services to Kuzmich’s actions followed his very last action in Belarus, known as *Veruju ili Filisterskij mir politiceskih zhyvotnyh* (*I Believe, or the Philistine World of Political Animals*).

» 22 From the artist’s manifesto [author’s archives]

» 23 “«Можем посоветовать хорошего психотерапевта». БРСМ ответил скандальному художнику Кузьмичу”, [in:] “TUT.by”, 03.02.2020, <https://news.tut.by/culture/671106.html> (04.05.2021).

» 24 “«Можем посоветовать хорошего психотерапевта». БРСМ ответил скандальному художнику Кузьмичу”, [in:] “TUT.by”, 03.02.2020, <https://news.tut.by/culture/671106.html> (04.05.2021).

I believe, or the philistine world of political animals

On 9 August 2020, during the presidential election, Alexei Kuzmich performed an action *Veruju ili Filisterskij mir politiceskih žyvoťnyh* in two parts²⁵. In his manifesto, he describes the concept of Belarusian elections, whose rigging triggered events in August and mass protests:

The action examines a realistic absurd ritual known as the “Election of the President of the Republic of Belarus”. This procedure, as I understand it, is a celebration of an eccentric farce, a modern kind of religious cult and hierarchical preservation of primogeniture. [...] Election as an instrument of freedom in Belarus does not exist. It is replaced by a phantasmagorical illusion of post-election, in which the technologization of lies is used, when power is unavailable to the ordinary person²⁶.

On August 9, the last day of the vote, Kuzmich came to the polling place, got undressed and left only a white hip band on his body, blindfolded himself with a red and green flag, and taped to his chest an election bulletin on which a simplified penis was drawn in red paint. He stood like that, imitating the pose of Christ during the crucifixion. The whole action lasted only a few minutes, then the election observer asked the artist to leave.

The other part of the action, which the artist held in the evening of the same day, was titled *Prishestvije 2. Apokalipsis (Advent 2. Apocalypse)*²⁷. When there was a confrontation between the protesters and the police, the artist appeared in the same “costume” in which he had appeared at the polling station, facing a column of OMON and military machines. The biblical motif of the Apocalypse was very close to reality: Kuzmich stood in the open air almost naked, while smoke bombs flew all around; the first shots were fired, sirens squealed, and people raced by and shouted. Eventually the shooting started, there were wounded and killed in the crowd, but luckily nothing happened to Kuzmich. An interesting detail, which would later be significant, is that the artist stood facing the OMON troops with a drawn phallus and then turned around and showed the same to the protesters.

» 25 Alexei Kuzmich, *Верую, или Филистерский мир политических животных*, 09.08.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DlCqf-3HOY> (16.02.2023).

» 26 From the artist’s manifesto [author’s archives].

» 27 Transl. *The Second Coming. Apocalypse*. Alexei Kuzmich, «Пришествие 2. Апокалипсис». Вторая часть акции «Верую, или Филистерский мир политических животных», 09.08.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xN75jRv9cA&t=1s> (16.02.2023).

The next day he was arrested in his own home and taken to the Okrestino temporary detention center²⁸, where he spent three days. He was severely beaten and tortured but managed to leave together with medics in an ambulance. He calls the marks left by the batons of the OMON officers a continuation of his work by the police. As with the artist's previous actions, the reaction from the agents for whom the action was intended was as important as the artistic part carried out by the artist himself. Later, the artist, fearing for his life, left the country. In addition to the case concerning administrative regulations infringement, the possibility of fabricating a criminal provision was only too real and he faced a prison sentence.

During the administrative trial, "the court ruled that Kuzmich, by behaving explicitly and intrusively without taking into account the opinions of other citizens who were in a public place (polling station), where everyone was pursuing their own goals, restrained them with his appearance, thereby limiting their will and ability to make choices with his behaviour"²⁹. It is a pity that in Belarus today a fair lawyer's defence is out of the question, because if the matter had been tried in a real court of law, the artist could have confidently said that he certainly had no intention of restricting someone's choice, simply because the motivation and justification for his action was, by definition, the lack of any choice during the voting process. However, things turned out just as he had predicted in the manifesto: the representatives of the authorities would argue that there is democracy, and whoever says otherwise wants to do away with this democracy and is therefore a criminal. The Belarusian courts turned out to be an even bigger farce than the presidential elections.

These two different parts of the action, one in a solemn atmosphere of pseudo-voting, the other in an almost warlike reality, were compared by Kuzmich to Paradise and Hell. This is another reference to Christianity, in addition to the Christ pose. The artist justifies this by the fact that the ideology of Christianity (in Belarus - mainly Orthodoxy) is very firmly rooted in the consciousness of Belarusians, even non-believers. Christian symbols and associations constitute the cultural base in which we live.

For the artist, the phallus is an archaic symbol of domination, worship and power, which is exercised by one "baboon" and his allies. I was very curious to see if this is also related to the patriarchal nature of power in Belarus (after all, there is a "bat'ka", not a mother) and how this can be related to the concept of "women's protest". Should a woman win the election, a question arises: how will the artist find himself in the new political context and will the next action against future female power involve the

» 28 The site of the vilest torture of the protesters.

» 29 From the official court decision [author's archives].

use of a drawing of female genitalia? Below is an excerpt from my discussion with Alexei on this topic:

A. Kuzmich: The penis as a symbol of power does not directly refer to the patriarchal system; it smacks of fierce populism, and we move from the artistic field to activism. The penis is power, which, regardless of gender, has a phallogocentric construction. Even in art, in what is done today, it is common to see the image of a woman with a strapon and other such things, which is indicative of the appropriation of power and the domination of one human being over another, rather than the liberation of personality. In simple words, we deal with a redistribution of areas of influence. Feminism as I understand it is about anti-authority and liberation from the oppressive system and objectification that modern feminism has now at some points taken over from patriarchal power.

I had to concede his point, because even in Slavic languages it is often said that someone “has balls”, i.e. is bold and strong. This phrase can also be used in reference to women, and so male genitalia in the context of strength and power are indeed not of one sex.

A.K.: Please do not misunderstand me. I am for absolute equality and I am trying to live and accept people, no matter what they have in their pants. Modern feminism is concerned with a sharp separation of the sexes, not with the original idea of equality. Therefore, we have a situation of reverse discrimination or even gender fascism. Belarus, as an illustration of a similar movement, demonstrates vividly another motif in the development of this idea, in which the revolution has a “woman’s face”.

Later on, the artist told me that they did not want to take one of his works for an exhibition about the Belarusian protest because “it had nothing to do with the revolution, which is feminine, and they accepted works either by women artists or only with feminine themes”.

M.P.: I just don’t believe that we have [in Belarus] now a situation of gender fascism through a revolution recognized as a “women’s protest”. In its essence, the current concept of a protesting woman is completely non-feminist. “How can they raise their hand against women! Let’s give them flowers so they don’t beat us!” - after all, they are not in favour of equal treatment, let alone in favour of domination. On the contrary, they are offended by the police handling them

as aggressively as they do men. And the images in protest art rarely resemble those of Joan of Arc. They are often traditional concepts: a mother, a woman in white, with flowers, gentle even towards her abusers, innocent and praying. If the portraits showed elderly ladies fighting with OMON over every detained boy, that would be a very different thing. Although I can't deny the fact that most public attention is drawn to the stories of political female prisoners, rather than male prisoners, who are more numerous. It is an inequality, but I don't think it has emerged from feminism, even from its unhealthy variety.

Everything has stayed the same. Only instead of drawing attention to the negative aspects of male domination, such as sexism, domestic violence, stigmatisation over child-rearing, wages, etc., there has been an outcry that its traditional "advantages" (respect for the weaker sex, the duty to defend and honour) have been annihilated and trampled into the ground by the regime's aggression. The concept of feminism is absolute equality and so the path to "gender fascism" leads through the following: 1) domination of group A over B; 2) equality of A and B; 3) reverse domination of B over A. I suspect that Belarusian women are not so smart as to go straight to point 3.

A.K.: You may be right about feminism, and I have phrased my thought incorrectly. The women's protest tried to play with the beast based on classic principles: the duty to honour and defend because it is a woman. But it was forgotten that the political beast knows nothing but power and does not care about morality. In general, the subject is very fascinating and needs to be explored; I cannot fully grasp the process myself [it is about the concept of women's protest], but it is obvious that it is unfolding.

The critique of the opposition: *I Protest* campaign. A radical change of opinion about the artist

In the situation of Belarusian dualism, most artists declare allegiance to either the protesters or the regime. Artists who have previously refrained from politics in their work have now actively reacted to lawlessness and violence. However, given that most Belarusians were politically inactive even before 2020, this "sudden" awakening of artistic consciousness is not surprising.

There is a popular view among Belarusians that someone's omission of a highly controversial topic immediately indicates their sympathy with the regime: "There will be no place for such artists (policemen, judges,

doctors, etc.) in the new Belarus, and criminals will be punished” is the mantra repeated by the most popular opposition network Telegram channel NEXTA. On the one hand, it is an attempt to continually intimidate the current “yabat’kas”, and on the other, to give people hope that someone will pay for the lawlessness and violence later: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Similar notions of building a new state, in which everything that was considered good during the regime will be overthrown, are very popular. Such strong and stilted promises to create “everything in reverse” are reminiscent of waiting for the Second Coming of the Messiah: “When Jesus comes again, he will judge the nations and separate the righteous from the wicked”³⁰. A question arises who will be the Christ and the judge? And what about those who do not share the universal faith, such as Kuzmich?

By now everyone can see what a lamentable state the economy, health service, and human rights in Belarus have been brought to. While accepting that bold and radical changes will be needed, I cannot imagine another regime which will be founded against the previous one. Martyrs will become saints not because they did good, but because they began to address evil. I realise that, from a political point of view, such radical changes will certainly not happen any time soon, and no one can predict the consequences of this confrontation, but the gradually forming ideology, in my opinion, is already hampering artistic expression.

When Kuzmich was on the side of the protesters, he was spoken of as a hero and martyr, even though he himself does not like to talk about what happened to him at Okrestino. He has often pointed out that he is not an activist, but an actionist, the fundamental difference being that he does not have a specific goal: he does not demand anything, he just presents the problem. He treats the August events as a coherent artistic work but is aware that hardly anyone reads his manifestos and that the perception of his art is very superficial. A bare bottom and a hard-on at the exhibition opening, the Nazi greeting against the backdrop of a burning cross, and a heroic march in the front of a crowd of protesters is a collective portrait of Kuzmich in popular culture. Following his 2021 action critical of the protests, this list has expanded to include accusations of cynicism, a mockery of the struggle for independence and the artist’s worthless attempt, in a classic sense, to draw attention to himself with yet another disgraceful action.

On Valentine’s Day, 14 February 2021, the artist released the short film *Ja pratestuju (I Protest)*³¹, in which he acted as director and cinematographer. The main character is a little girl, portrayed by an adult

» 30 Mt 25, 31–46.

» 31 Alexei Kuzmich, *Я пратэстую*. 2021. Францыя/Чернагорыя, 14.02.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjyzTzYQ42s> (16.02.2023).

actress. The entire video is a collage of the child's moods, her whimsical and happy moments. When the little girl is sad, she cries and protests, stomping her feet because she was not given a red-and-white mask and flag, she cannot access the swing, which is closed, just like her country. When she spots a Russian flag, she becomes hysterical and demands that it be taken down. The operator explains that it is not the flag of Russia, but the child refuses to listen and, in a naïve tone, states that Russia is bad. In moments of optimism, she shouts "Belarus is alive" and sings an opposition song titled *Pagonia (The Vytis)*. In the playground, she sees a symbol resembling Lukashenko's moustache and starts tapping on the structure because she no longer likes the playground. When she wins the battle against the playground, she proudly shouts "Belarus is alive". Her behaviour is "programmed" to different impulses, which are non-negotiable and follow a primitive division between good and bad.

This shift in mood simulates the emotional swing of Belarusians during the protests: every small victory (even over an impersonal wall, marked with a red-white flag) brings great joy and belief in the victory of "good over evil". Yet the successive aggressive responses of the authorities were surprising and outrageous, and people felt defenceless against the regime. The August events of 2020 came as a surprise to most. Many of those who had not been politically active before did not remember the 2010 protests and the events held under the opposition colours after the earlier presidential elections. They had never encountered such fierce violence by the uniformed services, although the conduct of the police was a consequence of prolonged "brainwashing" and years of regime propaganda. It was a shock, yet it was bound to materialise sooner or later.

Under these extreme conditions, critical, rational thinking was replaced by raw emotion, an uncompromising attitude that people value in times of total lawlessness. The division between good and evil, simplifications and contrasting symbols help people grow accustomed to what is going on around them. Without this critical thinking, we would return to childhood, naivety and blind faith, just like the girl in *I Protest*. Towards the end of the film, the girl asks God and Grandpa Frost for Lukashenko's death, an expression of infantile faith in miracles. In Belarus, after 26 years of widespread reconciliation with the situation, this newly regained faith has grown very strong. The author considers this a sign of naivety because he finds faith to be a kind of fantasy and a transfer of responsibility for one's own life to higher powers, rather than a way of analysing reality.

The film also shows scenes of clandestine masturbation with an electric toothbrush, first during a speech by Lukashenko and later by Svetlana Tikhanouskaya. The filmmaker thus expressed the view that even if most people hate Lukashenko, "he is still the core, a sexual symbol [Kuzmich

often uses references to biology, sexology and behaviourism in his work], around which everything revolves. Everyone masturbates at the sight of him: someone with fondness, and others with hatred and swearwords”³². The fact that the film’s protagonist, after brushing her teeth with toothpaste in the colours of the opposition flag, changes the type of pornography from the president’s speeches to those of the opposition president, highlights the hypocrisy of those who switched to the “side of good” when they realised that it was convenient and, most importantly, fashionable.

I had a problem with this interpretation of the division of “sexual and political” preferences in Belarusian society and entered another polemic with Alexei:

M.P.: Most people have never actively supported Lukashenko, and I wouldn’t say that most protesters have undergone a radical transformation: from glamorising Lukashenko to favouring Tikhonouskaya. With regard to sexuality, one could say that most people simply allowed ideological public masturbation, i.e. examples of worship of Lukashenko’s supporters such as kitschy concerts, billboards, pathetic texts, and bureaucrats’ speeches. People were indifferent, experiencing “sexual stagnation”, and now they have come to see new heroes.

A.K.: You have nailed the issue of stagnation and sexuality. Everyone got involved in politics and started masturbating in front of leaders, creating new idols. Three groups stand out here: “strugglers” (the object of excitement - Tikhonouskaya and the opposition), “yabat’kas” and conformists (a-sexual); sometimes they masturbate, depending on the political agenda, here and there, and then they don’t do it at all, because it serves their mercantile interests. And the fourth group, which has recently begun to emerge, are those who take no side and prefer real sex to porn; real sex is revolution. They condemn both sides (ridicule, hatred), are in favour of change, but they understand that they are being deceived and fed with fiction. In general, however, there is still the hypocrisy of the asexual stagnation of most of the population, who used to accept Lukashenko or were not distinguished by their civic activism, but quickly became “strugglers” when it became mainstream in August.

It is interesting to note that the glamorization of Tikhonouskaya shown through masturbation during her speech is present in memes and this is deemed funny and acceptable, which of course cannot be said about the reception of Kuzmich’s work.

» 32 From the correspondence with the artist [author’s archives].

In *I Protest*, the author shows the image of a naïve protester, an adult-child. It is worth emphasising here that naivety is not the same as stupidity. The portrayal of the protesters as a bunch of dumb unemployed persons has been dealt with by Russian television, where Tigran Keosajan hosts the satirical-political program *International Pilorama*, which has little to do with logical thinking and constructive criticism. In episodes starting on 5 September 2020, the hired actress impersonated a “typical Belarusian female protester” who went to the streets because she had no money and did not work anywhere herself. She took part in protest against Lukashenko because there was no protest against “small boobs”³³. The reaction to such commentary from the state television of a neighbouring country was much broader than the publicity accompanying the work of a conceptual artist unknown to anyone. Keosajan’s film on YouTube has collected around 10,000 dislikes.

The similarity between the two stories on the nature of the Belarusian protest is only superficial. The infantile nature of a generation of people who have lived under an authoritarian regime for 26 years is not a shocking thing, but the attempt to portray as idiots those who demand freedom (by whatever means available) shows the lack of creativity of Russian propaganda.

* * *

Kuzmich’s work is located firmly on the margins of contemporary art. It is sharp, radical and critical. Each work is the result of lengthy research and deliberation, which I became aware of through numerous conversations with the artist. Hence, his works can be compared to thoughtful analytical statements. Critical artists, however, represent only a small part of the overall creative “boom” of the 2020 protest.

It is hard to predict how the situation will evolve and how the new policy in Belarus will unfold. Certainly, after the enthusiasm and belief in the best have cooled down, there will be time for a rational rethinking of what has happened. Again, priorities and authorities will change, erstwhile heroes will turn into enemies, and their proud images will no longer enter the portfolio of illustrators. The only thing that will remain unchanged is that there will be critics, there will be intellectuals and there will be artists like Alexei Kuzmich, who will create conceptual art in a small circle, not expecting that it will one day be widely accepted. ●

» 33 6 Международная пилорама, 5 сентября 2020 года, 05.09.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cl2-T5dn-Fo> (16.02.2023).

Abstract

The subject of the article is the specifics and political context of conceptual art in Belarus. The main research issue is the political actions of two Belarusian artists before and after the 2020 protests in Belarus: Ales Pushkin and Alexei Kuzmich. The article consists of two parts. The first discusses the conditions under which Belarusian conceptual art was formed: the political regime, censorship of art, and techniques for subordinating art to state ideology. The second discusses examples of political actions by two artists: the old-generation actionist Ales Pushkin, and the young artist Alexei Kuzmich. The second part consists of subsections in which each of these actions is described in detail. As part of this research, interviews were conducted with Alexei Kuzmich. These interviews with the artist and the materials he provided became a helpful element in understanding and interpreting his works. The article concludes with a summary in which the author talks about the marginal position of conceptual art compared to other traditional art forms associated with the 2020 Belarusian protests.

Keywords:

Belarus, protest, actionism, political, Alexei Kuzmich, Ales Pushkin

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ISSN 1232-6682

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Stworzenie anglojęzycznej wersji publikacji –
płatne ze środków Ministerstwa Edukacji i Nauki
na podstawie umowy nr RCN/SP/0363/2021/1
stanowiących pomoc przyznaną w ramach programu
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ISSN 1232-6682

