

“I ALREADY REALIZED THAT IT IS A BREACH.” - KIRILL DIOMCHEV:

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Institutional criticism in Belarus

Beginning in the second half of the 90s, institutional critique became an important part of practice and discourse in the field of contemporary Belarusian art. Just as in the western context, this type of criticism moved to dispel the myth that art institutions functioned as “art temple”, spiritual, metaphysical places. Through this criticism, art institutions were deconstructed as social institutions, which promoted the institutions specific ideological, political, economic interests

In the Western-European context, institutional criticism often analyzed art institutions, revealing their function within the art market, collector networks, and collecting with big capital; however, in Belarus, criticism focused primarily on **criticizing state institutions** foremost. One of the few examples is an exhibition *Balance*. Given the Circumstances that criticized private institutions in Belarus. According to the exhibition, which took place at gallery Ÿ in 2012, “Balance is an example of local criticism aimed at both the ideology and art institution.”¹ However, this exhibition was designed to show the behind the scenes of gallery life and included bureaucratic and accounting analysis, rather than just criticizing private institutions and their function within the logic of capitalist relations.

The criticism coming from the Belarusian art scene has had a strict focus on state institutions because of several peculiarities within the local context. Firstly, there is no private infrastructure for contemporary art within the country. Additionally, there are no big private funds to support artists, no independent educational institutions that could train art critics, artists, curators, etc. At different times, there were several galleries for contemporary art; however, nowadays there are only two private institutions that are focused on contemporary art, those are gallery Ÿ in Minsk and gallery KX in Brest. In light of this, any private initiative related to the creation of new platforms or art projects is perceived in a more positive or neutral way and is regarded as a form of resistance to the state institutions. As for the latter, state institutions economically and symbolically appear to be successors of the late Soviet governance system with some superficial updates. As Sergey Shabohin justly noted in his lecture:

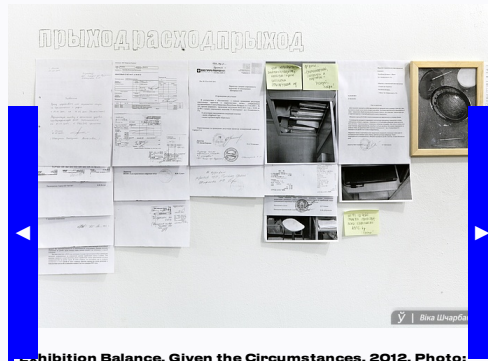
[the] system of cultural politics in Belarus mechanically remained after the dissolution of the USSR having adopted all the key diseases: verticality of rule with the minister at the top, obeying directly the will of the state ideology, and administrative centralization with the distribution of budgets and instructions through the ministry. As a result, it generated super-bureaucracy and stagnation, censorship and punitive tools.²

The desire to appeal the status quo of the given art institution has been a necessary **gesture for public display**, a gesture that has arisen from the lack of cooperation between the artist and the state institution. One such paradigmatic example in the Belarusian art scene was a festival called the Academy of Arts, Academy of Life (1997) by Andrei Dureika. At the festival Texts organized by the Academy of Arts, Dureika, without permission, created a work where he wrote “Academy of Arts” on a wall of the Academy, and made a note “Academy of Life” on the dumpsters near that wall. As a comment to the work, the artist points out that “the contrast of a perfect text and the residual reality uncovers the existing drama.”³ However, at the same time this work can be considered a gesture symbolizing the refusal of cooperation with any state institutions of Belarus, a final breach.

A different gesture can be observed in the works *And There is Nothing Left* (2009) by Sergey Shabohin, where the artist makes a series of collages, virtually breaking and closing four central places in Minsk that are somehow connected to contemporary art. On the front of the Museum of Modern Fine Art in particular, a rent notice

is vulnerable to economic pressures and addresses the fact that the state gives scraps, or leftovers rather than a real budget because of these pressures. It's interesting that in 2019 a half of the Museum of Modern Fine Art was given away to become a wine shop/bar.

Though the series was shown publicly, Shabohin's gesture remains a safe one because it stays in the domain of the imaginary.



Exhibition Balance. Given the Circumstances, 2012. Photo: Victoria Shcherbakova, source: <http://ygallery.by>

The situation changed a bit in 2011-2012, primarily due to a peculiar **activist revolution in the Belarusian art scene**. In 2012, as a response to a “decorative” Triennial of contemporary art that was organized by the government, the group New Movement self-organizes and invades the exhibition itself to present a competing program. Its manifesto ultimately promulgates the division between contemporary art and state institutions. The manifesto presents such statements as “You, the bureaucrats of art, declared yourselves the only legitimate representatives of art!”⁴ or “Genuine politics and art are beyond [the] state program!”⁵, “We are against cooperation with authoritarian institutions! We don’t serve state demands!”⁶ Though New Movement’s action generated a lot of discussion within the art community, the state institution never responded to it. In this way, each of the systems – the contemporary art field and state institutions – holds its own.

It’s another thing when an artist creates demands (visibly or not) in which the state bureaucracy has to respond and reply to him or her and in the process, uncovering the conservative elements, nontransparent, and nonfunctioning rules of its organization. An example of such a process can be seen in Aliaxey Talstou’s legal proceedings in 2017, when he demanded that the Centre for Contemporary Arts provide the list and prices of all the artworks that the Centre had bought during the last three years and to reveal the committee team that made the choice. As it was an official letter, the state institution had to react. Unlike the previous examples, Talstou transformed the institution itself into a battlefield: he made a request that prompted an official, bureaucratic reaction. And this reaction revealed how the institution worked, thereby exposing its inherent logic.

To provoke such a reaction, an artist has two strategies. The first one – which was used by Aliaxey Talstou – is to address an institution not as an artist, but as a citizen of the Republic of Belarus. Though in their reply, the state institution wanted to frame Talstou’s request as an art action and therefore lower or reduce the magnitude of the request itself and to move the request into a manageable space. However, the request made by a citizen called for an insightful and specific answer. In other words, being an external agent, Talstou exercises his civil rights and forgoes what he knows or may assume about how an institution functions. And this position in particular, in a sense nominally-simple, gives him the opportunity not to just to create propositions for how the institution functions, but to allow it itself demonstrate and reveal the mechanisms of how it works.

The second strategy, which can force an institution to react would be to take a risk. An artist makes demands that can somehow endanger an institution’s stability. This is not about a specific threat, this threat is connected rather with the perspective of the employees of this institution. Such reactive (in terms of request for a response) example of institutional criticism can be a work by Kirill Diomchev, which he presented in February 2019 at Vitebsk Art Museum.

A classic example of institutional critique

The exhibition Nevidivizm by Kirill Diomchev, which he displayed in Vitebsk, Belarus, started as a classic example of

internship in Sweden, and the Vitebsk exhibition was important to him for several reasons.

Firstly, the exhibition was an individual gesture that broke with pictorial and sculpture traditions and marked a transition to performative practices, which have always been present in Diomchev's work in one way or another. For example, within the exhibition *Names*, Kirill presented a performance *135 Hours*, where he was tied to bed for the whole period of the exhibition.

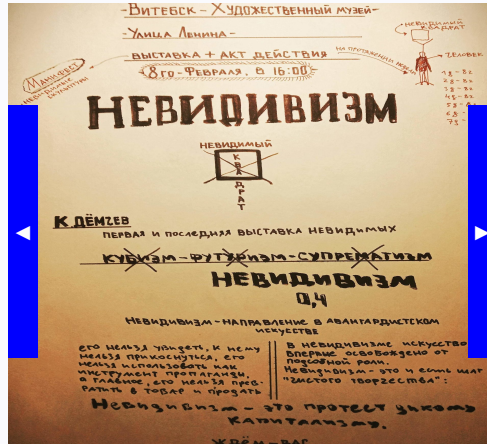
Secondly, the exhibition escaped the old ghosts of avant-garde artists who lived and worked in Vitebsk in the 1920s. Not without reason an addendum to the exhibition title is a phrase "Nevidivizm as the last stage of Suprematism development." To understand why Kirill's criticism is focused exactly on the avant-garde movement of Suprematism – relations of the state institutions to Suprematism to be precise – it is necessary to make a backwards journey into the history of contemporary art in Vitebsk. In the 1980s, the association "Square" appeared in Vitebsk. Its aim was to return to the avant-garde concepts and Malevich's ideas – particularly within the field of Vitebsk art. Square followers accomplished great work by bringing back names from Art History related to Vitebsk of the 1920s: they worked in the archives, communicated with Malevich's daughter Una, found Yehuda Pen's grave [a major figure of the Jewish Renaissance in Russian and Belarusian art at the beginning of 20th century], reconstructed fronts of the buildings made by UNOVIS followers. In other words, they returned erased names to the history of the city. For the 1980-90s, it was truly significant work. Nevertheless, already in the 2000s this discourse is appropriated by state institutions, for which dissimilar artists like Chagall and Malevich turned out to be representatives of the same, consolidated history, and whose names are seen as merely stakes for state culture politics and nothing more. In other words, the bureaucrats are not interested in understanding the conceptual complexities of the artists of the 20s because for them the artists are just tourists attractors to the popular International Festival for the Arts in Vitebsk, "Slavianski Bazaar". The pinnacle of state sanctioned appropriation of the Chagall-Malevich discourse is epitomized in the opening of the Museum of History of the Vitebsk People's Art School. Within the art community it is known as the Museum of UNOVIS; it was first opened in 2016 just for bureaucrats from the capital of Minsk, but was closed the next day for restoration and only re-opened in 2018. The museum, which functions just as a decorative facade for the city and displays the interiors of the industrial and financial bourgeoisie of the city, Marc Chagall's work, and the work of UNOVIS, an avant-garde initiative, at the same time functions as an exhibition space for the artists who follow the UNOVIS traditions. In that regard, Kirill's exhibition is a criticism of the mummification of the avant-garde ideas, as well as a display of how this Chagall-Malevich discourse, existing in the domain of cultural bureaucracy, transforms into a facade that only decorates. In one of the conversations, Kirill says, "I wanted to show that there's no need in over emphasizing Malevich or Chagall. If you really care about them, you have to make new art, and not to over emphasizing and build a big cemetery."⁷

Thirdly, Kirill shows the affliction not only of a state institution, but of the Vitebsk art field in general that favors big names and famous works of art. Vitebsk museums don't possess collections of masterpieces, and in the Museum of UNOVIS there's not a single work by Malevich, El Lissitzky, or Vera Ermolaeva. This absence identifies universal nostalgia for the past and the lost legacy. Kirill Diomchev's exhibition consisted mainly of invisible works: the exhibition was literally scattered with empty frames that were the only remnants of the works once exhibited at different times at the Vitebsk Regional Museum, but now were literally discarded because they were deemed useless. Among the discarded works were works from unknown artists and those who made it into the great canon of Soviet and Russian pictorial art: e.g., a frame from Levitan's work. In the corner Kirill placed an invisible work by Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, recreating its original display in the red corner on exhibition 0.10 in 1915-1916.

When regarding Kirill Diomchev's gesture it is important not to take it as just an ironic comment. The thing is that Kirill gives us a binary image. At first, he shows how the Great Art Museum in Vitebsk is a place desirable for bureaucrats of culture and at the same time for the Vitebsk art field. He considers and critic both faces of the museum: firstly the museum as a tourist attraction and secondly as a place still for art professionals to enter into the art historical canon, thus gaining legitimation. Kirill presents an invisible plan of a perfect museum, which could work for both the bureaucrats and the art community; though this image is not in the reality: it appears dimly and, we imagine it.

Furthermore, the artist resets the space. On the day of the exhibition opening, Kirill approaches an "invisible Black Square" (the main symbol of art which everybody in Vitebsk desires to see) and stops in front of it. The next day he repeats the same procedure, but

What does that mean? On the one hand, if you imagine that the Black Square is in this corner than Kirill is just a regular viewer who approaches it to take a good look at something that for Vitebsk can be described as the masterpiece of masterpieces. On the other hand, if you recall that there's no Square in the corner, Kirill just stands in the corner. Kirill remembers this standing in the corner in this manner, "You stand there naked. Children used to be punished this way, when they had their trousers taken off and were put in a corner. Then guests come, and you stand there without any clothes in the corner. They used to do this back in the day. And it's really humiliating."⁸



Exhibition Nevidivizm by Kirill Diomchev, Vitebsk, 2019.
Photo provided by Kirill Diomchev

In other words, he reveals the position of an artist, who is at the same time guilty and has to resign before the great affair, great masterpieces, and great names, before the institutions that allow the artist to display in that city. Kirill says, "I feel sorry for the artists, who cooperates with such institutions. Artists, especially those of the older generation, trust them [the institution], and bring their works. But they are just being used as a checkmark, and it doesn't matter if an artist dies tomorrow, they'll find another one – they don't care."⁹

Institutional criticism comes from the institution itself

It's interesting that the exhibition – that started generally as an innocent statement, received its critical measure in the first place due to the actions of the institution itself. Kirill recorded himself naked standing before the imaginary Black Square. In under an hour, one by one the museum employees started to make phone calls to Kirill asking and requesting that these photos be deleted from social media.

Conversation between O. Okunevich, superintendent of the Art Museum in Vitebsk, and Kirill Diomchev: "Kirill, why are you posting pictures of yourself naked in our museum on social media?"¹⁰

The museum employees evaluated this gesture as a potential threat to their institution and within an hour phoned the artist five times. Among those who phoned were museum attendants, a research associate, and the superintendent of the museum. Thanks to this series of calls, we can trace how the pressure to save face and be conservative develops within the institution.

It is evident that the people phoning Kiril modulate between two poles. Each person who phoned him used the phrase, "I understand it all, but..." Each of them plays two roles: an educated, advanced, tolerant person, open to experimentation by the individual. The second role is a person speaking on behalf of the institution.

Conversation between O. Okunevich, superintendent of the Art Museum in Vitebsk, and Kirill Diomchev: "I am the sort of person who can comprehend both freedom of artistic expression and creativity."¹¹

Conversation between E. Krivenkaya, research associate, and Kirill Diomchev: "I don't mind your actionism,¹² but I work in a state establishment."¹³

When the employees gave these responses, they both try to establish some type of friendship towards Kirill and show they are on his side. However, these introductory sentences eventually function to flout their responsibility by saying that "I'm not responsible for the existing order of things, I'm calling on behalf of the institution."

practically each of the employees and conspires the museum from any threats and uncertainties, and by flouting their responsibility they claim that their comments are not evil or conservative. In reality, the employees see themselves as educated and open to any artistic statements, and rather see the performance of their roles as pure formality. They simultaneously think that their actions of censorship of exhibitions are intolerable, but they must do it for the sake of the institution, which, as they consider, is beyond their personal control. The institutional pushes back to maintain its stability, they seem to say.

This discourse around Kirill's naked image also brings forth the figure of power. As Kirill justly notes, "They [the museum workers] all speak different languages."¹⁴ Obviously, those who called Kirill occupy different positions within a distinct hierarchy of the state museum institution and express their competent power differently. The museum attendant, who is the most vulnerable, calls confused and uses a gentle form of begging for sympathy; the research associate frames the message as a favor: "I'm asking you decently."¹⁵ Surely, the museum superintendent displays the figure of power in the most distinct way. It's interesting that during the twenty-minute talk she does not ask a single question concerning the conceptual framework or ideas behind the work and any effort made by Kirill to try to explain what happened as an art gesture is blocked completely. Technically, the only faux pas Kirill committed is that he didn't inform the administration before about his actions.

Conversation between O. Okunevich, superintendent of the Art Museum in Vitebsk, and Kirill Diomchev: "You've done this illegally – you've done it without my permission."¹⁶

The logic of the institution here goes in two directions. Firstly, they make it clear for Kirill again and again that they did him a favor and he should be thankful.

Conversation between O. Okunevich, superintendent of the Art Museum in Vitebsk, and Kirill Diomchev: "I opened a gate for you to make your exhibition."¹⁷

This brings us to the image of the artist standing in the corner, who should be grateful for any opportunity. The institution, whose main aim is to work with artists and exhibit works of art, moves itself to another level. And secondly, the logic of the institution brings us to another truism: it exists to reproduce itself. Whatever the tastes and ideological views the institution employees have, thanks to the procedure of dissociation, the splitting of the personal and the formal, the museum reproduces itself over and over. Put it another way, self-censorship, which the museum employees present in their comments, does not develop from "bad", "demonic", "illiterate" museum workers who stand against a "good" artist. It's more like self-censorship is generated directly by the museum worker, thereby the procedure of censorship becomes for the employees painless, and the museum reproduces itself.

All of these things are well seen in the arguments presented by the employees who explain why a body cannot be naked in a museum. They use official discursive statements often printed in the media and generated without self-reflection. Such as:

Conversation between O. Okunevich, superintendent of the Art Museum in Vitebsk, and Kirill Diomchev: "It's a state museum, it's not a picture gallery, it's not Europe – it's a classic art museum."¹⁸

And again, as in situation with Aliaxey Talstou, who proceeds as if naively – Kirill acts and speaks as if he lives in another country, as if he has no idea how such institutions operate – forcing the employees of the museum react, reveal the mechanism of operation, their conservative bias, and censorship of the state institutions. Kirill himself comments on his position in such way, "At one point I already realized that it is a breach. But it was important to me to make this project. Although, of course, everyone knows how museums and the system of art institutions work in the country. But for me as for an artist it was important to reveal the operating mechanism of such institutions."¹⁹

1. The project *Balance. Given the Circumstances. was organized by gallery management at gallery Ÿ* <http://ygallery.by/exhibitions/0004738/> ↑

2. S. Shabohtin. "How Not to Cooperate with Art Institutions in Belarus?" <http://fac.kalektar.org/3/> ↑

3. K. Stashkevich and Andrei Dureika: *Intervention Academy of Arts, Academy of Life, 1997*. <http://zbor.kalektar.org/3/> ↑

4. Open letter to group *New Movement*. <http://artaktivist.org/otkrytoe-pismo-gruppe-novoe-dvizhenie/> ↑

5. *Ibid.* ↑

6. *Ibid.* ↑

7. Interview with K. Diomchev. *Personal files of Antonina Stebur, April 2019*. ↑

8. *Ibid.* ↑

9. *Ibid.* ↑

10. Conversation between O. Okunevich and K. Diomchev, February 9, 2019. ↑

11. *Ibid.* ↑

12. Note from the *Editorial Activism in a town* used by O. Okunevich when referring to

