

Mind the gap. Towards the reconsideration of art history in Belarus
by *Lena* *Prents*

The post-1945 art history of Belarus can be recounted as a history both advanced and filled with humanism. This account tells us of difficult times, pervaded with disasters for the whole nation, and of how it proved possible to overcome them successfully. In this perception, outstanding works of art are listed, as is a series of well-known artists, though very rarely do women artists feature in the enumeration. It is thus that the main publications on national art history available in the state book stores are conceived. However, this narrative has recently been complemented, or corrected, as the respective publications emphasize. The tale now told is one of the 'return' to international stardom in Belarusian art history. In that light, Chaim Sutin is 'ours', as well as Ferdynand Ruszczyk, Władysław Strzemiński and, first and foremost, Chagall.

It seems to me just as important to make a sketch, a cartogram of various blind spots. Awareness of these blanks would help in understanding the development of art, exhibition practice, art criticism and art history in Belarus. The blind spots should be considered against the background of the country's historical and political development and, to that end, it is worth looking back over a period of at least a hundred years.

Over the centuries, Belarus was part of various political state formations; Lithuanian, Polish and Russian. The Belarusian nation state is a product of the early twentieth century. Cultural studies and ethnographic practice influenced its formation and the determination of its borders in 1919. It was not one of the many religions present in this multicultural region which was the constitutive component of the nation state of Belarus, but the language. With the newly formed state established, work on constructing the country's own art history narrative could begin.

The art scene from statehood to World War II

In 1919, Marc Chagall established a folk art school in his home city of Vitebsk, which was part of Russia until 1924. He was followed by Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Nikolai Suetin, Ilia Chashnik, Vera Ermolaeva and Anna Kagan, who founded the UNOVIS art association, defined by Karl Schögl as a highly productive "Laboratory of the Modern Age". Malevich transformed the folk art school into a center of Suprematism. It was to exist for just three years.



From left to right; standing: Ivan Chervinko, Kazimir Malevich, Yefim Rayak , Anna Kagan, Nikolai Suetin, Lev Yudin, Yevgenia Magaril; seated: Mikhail Veksler, Vera Ermolaeva, Ilya Chashnik, Lazar Khidekel.

During the years that followed, the struggle against formalism began and the Stalinist repressions were launched. We have little knowledge about them to date, since the archives are still closed.

Prior to the nineteen nineties, UNOVIS and the work of the teachers and students of the folk art school were not part of official Soviet art history. If the art of the avant-garde was mentioned at all, then it was as an aberration that needed to be overcome. The curriculum for the education of artists in Belarus after the Second World War had no connection to it. As was the case throughout the Soviet Union, Stalinism in Belarus signified a disruption that strongly influenced and hindered the development of art.

Apart from that brief episode of the avant-garde, we still know little about the art scene in Belarus prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The Belarusian public has slowly become more familiar with individual artistic positions, which have only been studied in recent years. However, owing to the lack of translations, they are unknown internationally. One

example of this is the artist-visionary Yazep Drasdovich, who is known locally as a “Belarusian Leonardo da Vinci”.



Yazep Drazdovich: Tryviež (Triple-Tower). Panoramic View of a Town on the Moon, 1932-1933. Source: drazdovich.by

By the nineteen thirties, he was already enthused about the cosmos, presenting his notions of life in the universe in his pictures. He painted *Life on Mars* and *Life on the Moon*, he created a detailed design for a spaceship and, in 1931, he published a book on astronomy. He died in 1954, destitute and unknown.

Our knowledge of the life and work of the artists in Belarus during the Great Patriotic War is also scant. Their collaboration with the German occupiers has been subject to no more than partial research; it has either been handed down orally or not explored at all. Most of the propaganda posters issued by the German occupiers were, of course, created by local artists and their design is not of the highest quality.



Propaganda poster, 1943 (?), source:

It is thought that there were also artists who created portraits and other works commissioned by Wehrmacht officers. This collaboration was no obstacle to the post-war careers of the graphic designers and artists concerned. The Great Patriotic War, with its millions of victims, its partisans, its resistance and the victory of the Belarusian people is an issue which remains laden with taboos to this day. Contemporary artists who approach history critically and interrogatively risk scandal at the very least and sometimes even prosecution. A case in point here is Andrei Liankevich, who took photos of members of a society of collectors of old war uniforms for his *Double Heroes* series.



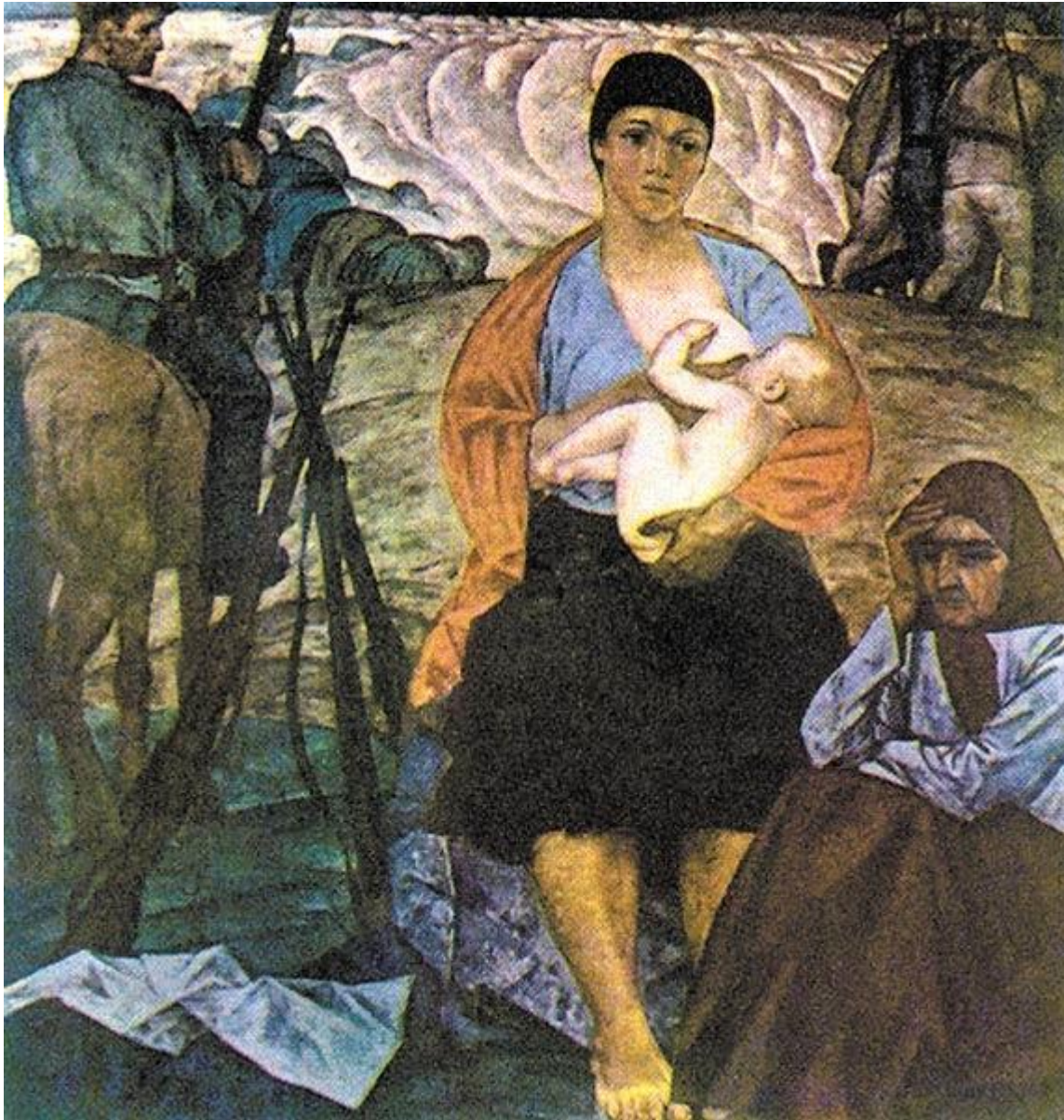
Andrei Liankevich: Double Heroes, 2012, at the West of East exhibition, Y Gallery for Contemporary Art, Minsk. Photo: Andrei Liankevich.

In the series, Liankevich shows how the modern Belarusian identity is built on the Soviet identity, and how the heroic victory in the Great Patriotic War is, without a doubt, exploited in order to create that identity. The work was presented at the *West of East* exhibition at the Y Gallery for Contemporary Art in 2012 and, despite the elucidations of his work and the educational program which accompanied the exhibition, Liankevich came under attack from outraged exhibition-goers.

Post-1945

After the years of reconstruction which followed the Second World War, the University of Arts was founded in Minsk in 1953. Most of the teaching staff had received a classic, academic education and shared the principles of Socialist Realism. The ideological indoctrination carried out by the Communist Party was ubiquitous. Nonetheless, some slight deviation from the postulated thematic optimism was still tolerated, as were similarly minor departures from the style of realistic representation; indeed, they could even be highly rewarded. Thus Mikhail Savitsky's *The Partisan Madonna* was shown at the Union exhibition in Moscow in 1967 and was then purchased by Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery. The issue of the Great Patriotic War was understandably important and thematically compliant with requirements; however, Savitsky

also made reference to Modernism or, more precisely, to Modernist artists who were closely affiliated to communism, such as Italy's Renato Guttuso or Mexico's Diego Riviera, for instance.



Mikhail Savitsky: The Partisan Madonna, 1967.

In cases involving a radical renunciation of ideological issues and realism, the artists were excluded from exhibitions, which equated to a public non-existence; Israel Basov serves as an example here.



Israel Basov: The Rhythm of the City, 1974.

Art criticism agitated against Modernism and, as a result, the public was afforded the opportunity of learning about it indirectly. Campaigns against the artists filled the media, with accusations of distorting history, misrepresenting reality and formalism being leveled against them. Marc Chagall was decried as a traitor; as late as the nineteen eighties, the press entered into a debate as to whether or not he deserved an entry in the Great Encyclopedic Dictionary of the BSSR. As an aside, all the artists who had emigrated from Belarus were punished with the same ignorance and lack of perception right up until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Sovietization was extended to all cultural and social areas. In the era of stagnation which held sway from the late nineteen sixties to the early nineteen eighties, the complex issues relating to Belarusian history prior to 1919 were 'sanitized' or concealed and numerous historical

buildings were either destroyed or their architectural qualities were left to fall into decay. In reaction to this policy, the artists deliberately turned to the theme of historical heritage. In paintings and graphic arts alike, historical landscapes were depicted, as were buildings from the past and folk culture artifacts.



Vladimir Basalyga: The Church in Iskaldz. From the Architectural Monuments in Belarus series, 1977 – ongoing.

It is thus that the extreme dissonance between the development of art in Belarus and in the neighboring Soviet republics and socialist countries can be explained. While the *Kollektivnoe deistvie* group of conceptual artists in Moscow was engaging in its performative practices outdoors and extricating itself from the official art scene, and while Edward Krasinski was stretching his line of blue tape through rooms in Poland, it was images of dilapidated castles and rather more rural idylls which were emerging in Belarus. Images which seem, at first, to

be saccharine landscape paintings, were a silent resistance, an attempt to establish a culture of remembrance in the context of the political developments at the time. This is not to say that there may not have been a more pronounced counter-culture; however, if one did exist between 1950 and 1980, then it is no more than episodically known and has not been explored.

From Perestroika to Lukashenka

From the nineteen eighties to the mid-nineteen nineties, the art scene in Belarus experienced a short period of real and tangible momentum; new autonomous artist groups emerged, a great many exhibitions took place at unusual venues, there were numerous trips abroad, and contact and exchanges with colleagues in other countries began to take shape. In 2010, the *Belarusian Avant-Garde. 1980 to 1990* exhibition was held in Minsk. Based primarily on works from a private collection, it gave the movement a name.



The Belarusian Avant-Garde. 1980-1990. *Museum for Modern Art, Minsk, 2010, exhibition poster.*

In fact, many artists made reference to Classic Modernism and the Vitebsk UNOVIS, with the artist Liudmila Rusova and her performance art work, *Kazimir's Resurrection* (1988), being one such instance. Chagall was also rehabilitated during perestroika and, in what was virtually a *volte-face*, rose to the status of a national pop idol.

Although only thirty years have passed since then, it is difficult to reconstruct those events and analyze them now. The exhibitions were often organized quickly and inadequately documented. The scholarly elites in the museums of the former Soviet republics have been completely replaced, making it problematic to obtain information about the Belarusian exhibitions held in them during the nineteen eighties and nineties. If the museums in those republics still hold Belarusian art works from that period in their archives, then they are not presented to the public. Nor was there any international networking with fellow artists, art historians, curators or art critics. Viewed from today's perspective, the naivety and lack of professionalism on the part of the Belarusian actors, inexperienced in market economy, becomes apparent. They were often advised by dubious art dealers and curators, as well.

As far as the international art scene is concerned, Belarus is still non-existent. Independent initiatives which had emerged in the nineteen eighties, the normal process whereby such ventures would become organized and institutionalized never took place after the proclamation of independence in 1991. The Soros Foundation also worked in Belarus for several years but, in contrast to other post-communist countries, its presence in Belarus did not lead to the establishment of a Center for Contemporary Art. In any case, those centers vigorously promoted the emergence of non-state initiatives, as well as an international network of artists and curators.

Moreover, Belarus remained indefinable for Western recipients in geopolitical terms... 'Is it Russia, is it Central Europe, is it East-Central Europe?'... and was not accepted by institutions providing funding for exhibitions and research projects. In the emerging economic logic of funding for art and culture, it was, and still is, difficult to find a section for art from Belarus.

This led to the fact that art from Belarus was not represented in any number of serious, large-scale, high-profile projects which began with a re-positioning of Eastern European art, such as IRWIN's EAST ART MAP for example. In fact, *After the Wall. Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (1999) is the only exception that comes to my mind.

And now?

Contemporary Belarusian art production is not only a *terra incognita*; it is also closely related to the political developments of the past two decades. Belarus has been ruled by the authoritarian President Aleksander Lukashenka for nineteen years now. Those nineteen years have had an ongoing effect on the Belarusian artistic scene. A conservative, traditionalist art concept dominates state art institutions and academy education alike. The infrastructure of

non-commercial and alternative art venues was destroyed, and their development since then has been hampered.

On the other hand, in Belarus today, culture and, above all, art, is the only remaining area of somewhat open expression. It is an area where important socio-political topics can be addressed and discussed in the context of individual art projects. Positions opposing the state's intense ideological pressure can be expressed. Recent years have already featured a considerable number of lectures, workshops, discussions and artist presentations organized by small initiatives.

In this newly forming landscape of young academics and critical thinkers, interest in the blind spots of the country's own art history is rising. It seems that the Soviet era version of art history, which is still published in editions of books that have been no more than negligibly revised and which avoids the gaps by skipping over them, is no longer satisfactory.

A local art history cannot be perceived in polycentric and multi-vocal contexts as long as no one has knowledge of it. The unexplored, the unpublished, the untranslated and the unimpacted via international networks is, *ipso facto*, the non-existent.

Widely available knowledge may also influence the perception of a local art history. No one has to love the Belarusian landscape paintings of the nineteen sixties and seventies, with their storks and churches. Yet, if we know they were created in times of struggles against religion and the destruction of historical architecture and, as such, were gestures of protest, we would no longer see them as nothing more than an expression of local socialist frumpiness. The comparison of official and unofficial art practices under socialism would definitely be enriched by case studies from Belarus.