

## **An interview with Mikhail Borozna, Rector of Belarusian State Academy of Arts, artist, curator**

### **History**

***Let's begin by talking about how Belarus participated in the 54th Venice Biennale. Mr. Borozna, you were curator of the exhibited project KODEX. What was the story behind it? How did the idea of participation in the Biennale appear?***

Representatives of Belarusian underground art scene have been dreaming about it for very long time, since the Soviet era. I remember this idea was in the air in 70s and 80s. It was largely discussed within the local art scene.

Very few know that Belarusian artists have already participated in this event before 2012.

***Do you refer to the situation when a foreign curator was invited to work on Belarusian project?***

No. I mean the Soviet pavilion. The artwork of Mikhail Savitski was one among others exhibited there. It was the end of 50s. This fact is mentioned in one of monographs dedicated to his art (published around 1970s). I remember this very well. The USSR pavilion somehow is not well known, but it was there. It means Belarus first officially exhibited on the 52nd Venice Biennale. Enzo Fornaro, an Italian curator, wanted to exhibit mostly paintings: Andrey Zadorin, Valeriy Shkarubo, Igor Tishin, Israel Basov... Objects of Vladimir Tsesler and Sergey Voichenko were there too. It was the first time Belarus got a mention in catalogues. Bringing more precision into this question, I have to say the movement towards Venice Biennale started much earlier.

Before this attempt in 2005 requests on necessity of participation of Belarusian artists in Venice Biennale have been filed. Your obedient servant was the one preparing those requests for then-Minister of Culture, Vladimir Matveichuk. We even had some negotiations. Then Belarusian Embassy in Italy got involved in the process and a list of authors to be exhibited in the pavilion was prepared.

***How can you evaluate the work of Enzo Fornaro?***

It is hard to me to evaluate his work. The only thing I can say is that I see it more as presentation rather than a project. All in all, I am not going to discuss actions of the Ministry of Culture and why it has taken that particular decision to choose an international curator. There were certain circumstances at the moment. However in 2012 by order of the Minister of Culture I was chosen to be a curator. We managed to get a large and highly experienced team together and the project worked out.

### **The team and the concept**

***Please, tell us more about the team that worked on the Belarusian project.***

My group: Alexander Zinkevich (director of the Palace of Arts), Yekaterina Kenigsberg who is curator with experience in organizing international projects. She was also an intern at the Dokumenta in Kassel. We also had sculptor Pavel Voinitsky, Natalia Sharangovich, who is an art historian and director of the Museum of contemporary visual art. Natalia also was Commissioner of the Belarusian pavilion. I also additionally invited Mikhail Shikov, who is a designer and architect, to take part in the project. There was also a team of volunteers.

***How did you come up with the concept and how did you select artists?***

After ILLUMInations motto was announced I thoroughly studied publications of Bice Curiger who was curator of the main exhibition. ILLUMInations can be understood as "initiate", "consecrate", "learn" and many other meanings could be found there too... I was reflecting on all that and Dante came

into my mind. This is how I discovered the idea of first illustrated publications, French miniature painting, the notion of Kodex meaning the foundation of a book, a repository for text.

This option seemed the most successful to me since it could be related to history of Belarusian art. And one of the most important characteristics of Belarusian art is “graphicness” (не уверена в правильном переводе «графичности»). We know about Belarusian graphic art that dates back to XVI century; XIX and XX centuries could be seen as golden age of Belarusian graphic art. Kodex as a repository for text with all possible and impossible meanings of this notion resonates with the motto of Ms. Curiger. You know which variants of texts we’ve got. I invited Yuri Alisieovich to join our team. He is an artist who operates with lines as if they were text or calligraphy. Victor Petrov was invited to create pictorial text, colors and also text as action, performance. A project by Denis Skvortsov combines animation and cinema. This was actually a student project that Denis updated for the exhibition. And, of course, “The Last Supper” by Artur Klinov, straw sculpture that represent brightness and emptiness of this world. That was a strong message indeed. We shouldn’t forget about plastic sculpture of Konstantin Kostiuhenko too.

It was important for me to present the qualities of artists at the exhibition. That’s why I took the risk to represent Belarus with various artists.

***How did you come up with the list of participating artists? Did you have any additional candidates?***

We had many. Even at the moment of submitting the first proposal to the Ministry of Culture. I kept my notebook from this project and there are more than 150 candidates...

***... Of those who can represent Belarus?***

Not only Belarus. Forgive me for being a bit selfish, but my idea and Belarus, of course. I didn’t even consider the opportunity to invite foreign artists though it is always possible. Still, compared to other exhibitions, the Venice Biennale has its specificity – national pavilions. I felt it is important to exhibit Belarusian artists in national pavilion. Maybe around 8 years ago I would exhibit photo-artists, but it didn’t work out in this particular case. We don’t have enough financial resources to rent out a large pavilion. Belarus has never used budgets this large. Maybe it is going to happen one day. I have no doubt it is going to happen but at that moment we had other financial opportunities.

## **Public Reaction**

***How can you evaluate this particular experience of participating in an international forum? How did the public react to the Belarusian project?***

I don’t consider it as a project, comparing to my first experience. It wasn’t just an exhibition decorated by “XX Century”, a conceptual project by Tsesler & Voichenko. In this case artists together with curator co-created the whole story. I consider it as a positive experience.

Another important detail is the location of the pavilion, right on the territory of Arsenale. It is a strong indicator; since the pavilions are dispersed all over the city and only the most active and potent are located within Arsenale and Giardini. Belarusian pavilion was located within Arsenale and it is already a great achievement.

The quality of organization was at its highest level. The Commissioner with her assistant managed to cope with all goals. We didn’t violate any condition of participation at the Venice Biennale. All packages were shipped on time. The information for catalogues was submitted on given deadlines. On December 1, 2010 all information, illustrations and curator’s text were submitted to the Board of Directors. The team didn’t have any negative feedback on organizational issues. I believe we managed to destroy the myth of Belarus being unable to organize an event on such a large international scale. We did it. We didn’t lose anyone. We didn’t damage any exhibit items. Sculpture

of Konstantin Kostiuchenko served as a visual landmark of Belarusian pavilion. His artwork was visible from any point of the Arsenale square and the public could see something interesting is happening here. The exhibition was of big interest.

I have to mention there was a large number of artworks articulating Christian values at the 54-th Biennale. To my opinion the keynote event of the Biennale was the showcase of Tintoretto's "Last Supper". The work of Leonardo da Vinci is located in Milan. Figuratively speaking, Belarusians got involved in this peculiar dialogue. Artur Klinov artwork "Last Supper" was sort of placed in between Tintoretto and Leonardo da Vinci. It represented temporality and variability of this subject. Each Belarusian artwork had lots of imagery, openness, sensitivity and intention for an open dialogue.

***And what did the professional community say?***

Italian Academies expressed a lot of interest to our work. We still keep albums and publications with signatures of those with whom we met. We are still getting many letters from participants of the Biennale and experts. The process is still going. We see that our text from the main catalogue is being quoted a lot. Polish experts were so interested in our project they even made a visit to Belaurus. Unfortunately I was on a business trip and couldn't meet them.

***The feedback from Belarusian artists was largely controversial. What do you think about that?***

I think it is normal. I hear this kind of feedback all the time but there were different comments. I cannot know all the details of who said what. I know some people pursued purely commercial interest and took the fact of participation in the Biennale as a strategic necessity to present oneself on the art-market. I stood for non-profit ideas and didn't plan to sell these artworks, didn't pretend to be its author or owner e t.c.

***There was feedback of different kind: the choice of exhibition site wasn't perfect, there was not smart architectural solution for the pavilion, and the pavilion was closed during the forum...***

It is a pity I didn't have a chance to discuss the issues related to the pavilion. There were some discussions on that matter but I couldn't participate. Nobody was interested to make an interview with the curator about the outcomes of participation in the Biennale. However, we faced the same situation in 2003 when the exhibition of Belarusian artists took place in Pierre Cardin Center in Paris. Pierre Cardin himself supported Belarusian artists by placing the original paintings of Mark Shagal from his collection together with other artworks. At that moment we've heard lots of criticism and no one noted what has really happened.

The same thing is happening now. Yes, there were technological limitations we couldn't overcome. According to our designs sculptures of Artur Klinov had to be elevated to 6 meters height. Despite the sculpture has gone through sanitation and fire-protection, we had to meet the restrictive measures due to security issues. Unfortunately, the project was exhibited not in a way we wanted it to be. There were some restrictions we couldn't violate.

I don't think there were problems with accessibility of the exhibition. You know, one can come at 8 am and say there are no people. Again, if one comes late in the evening the pavilion is full of people. It is important to find a qualitative compromise in such a situation and be objective. I don't want to make excuses. Some artists might be agry with me because I didn't invite them to participate in the project though it is a right of curator to choose who is invited and who is not. I know some countries announce a competition but there's also "documenta" in Kassel where one person selects what is going to be exhibited on 600 hectares area. This is one of the responsibilities and I had to select a certain number of artists too.

**Official vs non-official art**

***Do you see a division between official and non-official art today?***

No. Official art just died one month after the Chernobyl disaster. This is my personal opinion. It just became grotesque.

***Official art?***

I mean themes of socialist realism, socialist competition e t.c. After Chernobyl it all lost its meaning. I remember 1986-1987 very well; I remember my personal feelings, my attitude to the world, to art. I remember what happened to people, to their families and I remember those rehousings, phobia, and sicknesses...

What people now say about official art is all fairytales, it all died at that time. Some people criticize the Academy of Art today; they criticize us for teaching academic art and realism instead of giving students the opportunity to freely express themselves. But there's an example of our physically handicapped alumni who solely painted one church in Belarusian village. Can such art be labeled official? Do you know if the State has given him brushes and paint? No, nothing.

***What I mean is there are different institutions. There is also official art that is being supported by...***

Dusseldorf Academy of Arts is a state institution and no one is asking questions about that fact. Belarusian Academy of Arts is also a state institution, but some people are having problems with that. We are not getting funds from other countries; our budget is what we get from the State and what we earn. We independently cover most of the expenses.

***At least the official art is getting some support. There is a number of galleries and museums where it is exhibited...***

Yes, the Academy of Arts has its own gallery and I don't see anything negative in that. The Academy supports the gallery. Why can't we exhibit student projects there? We don't exhibit their work in the National Art Museum. The press rarely covers these exhibitions. Why can't we use our own venue to promote young artists? What is the difference between us and the «Ў» gallery? Artists they exhibit are not spoiled by the attention of the National Art Museum.

***Could you please elaborate on how you understand the contemporary art? How could you define it?***

Honestly speaking, I don't know. I'm trying to answer that question from 1996. That's when I organized a first conceptual project "Texts" here, in the Academy. This was the time when Artur Klinov first exhibited his suitcases. Those well-known artworks of Igor Kashkurevitch were first exhibited here too. Since then I am asking myself the "contemporary art" question and keep looking for an answer. I also read a lot, not only Peter Weibel but other authors too. And I have to admit I don't like this notion. Once I've found a 1957 research paper on contemporary art of those days and it came to my mind that each decade people call their artistic practices "contemporary art". Pierre Cardin idea is a good example in this light. When we were doing the exhibition of Belarusian art in his Center he suggested to title it not "Contemporary art in Belarus" but "Work of artists in contemporary Belarus". One can understand it as art reflecting a particular period of time. Are senior artists contemporary in this context? I think this is the most interesting question just because 1970s and 1980s were times of exploring historical practices. It was when Belarusian artists actively reflected on the XX century art history.

Let's take Nikolai Seleschuk as an example... If he was born in France, he could become very well known on international art-scene. Salvador Dali album, published here in Belarus in 1972 influenced him so much he created his own artistic language and became leading Belarusian surrealist. Yong Igor Kashkurevich was quoting Joseph Beuys in such a way that distinctions started to blur. Igor Kashkurevich, Liudmila Rusova are those who influenced the local scene a lot. There are the people

who made an important input into promoting and developing Belarusian art. Now, looking at artworks of these artists students can say: "Here is see paraphrasing of Beuys, here Uecker is being quoted and here we can see young Boltanski". But it is so important to find oneself. Now Belarusian art is in a situation where it can find itself and we are in this situation because of going through the Biennale and getting an invaluable experience. I remember how one art critic called our graphic artist Valery Slavuk 'Belarusian Durer'. On the one side it is great to know your work is being acknowledged but on the other side... Thanks God Slavuk is Slavuk today and no one is comparing him with anyone. He has gone through this search too.

So what is the contemporary art in Belarus? I would say it is the kind of art that is universalist. I remember taking part in the 8th Baltic Triennial of International Art together with Arthur Klinov. During a talk with Tobias Berger who was curator I asked him a question: "How did you select 21 participants of the Triennale after travelling all over the world?" He said: "Your art is understandable without translation". Universalism is when laws of universality are taken into account. The locality of art is also important. I don't mean one needs to reproduce notable signs. I am talking about certain rhythm, qualities typical to our mentality. This is the kind of art I see as contemporary in first decades of the XXI century.

***You mentioned Valery Slavuk, Nikolai Seleschuk... Whom else could you call a contemporary artist?***

I would mention those 5 artists who took part in the Kodex project in Venice. Secondly, I respect the art of Vasily Vasiliev. I wouldn't say there are many people of this kind. There are many people among graduates of the Belarusian Academy of Arts who work within the field of contemporary art.

***And among international artists?***

Christian Boltanski, Thomas Ruff. But these are my personal preferences.

Are there some galleries and curators that you really like?

Weibel of course. I am interested in almost every gallery, but galleries have different goals related to commerce. I prefer visiting large exhibitions. This is a good way to find out interesting artists without digging the press and catalogues.

**Academia**

***Mr. Borozna, you have described contemporary art as universalist but there is also the "here and now" concept in contemporary art. This is when artists react to social issues, address the current moment, critical situation, actualize public opinion on sexual minorities, and reflect on economic crisis... Does the Academy develop and support this line of thinking?***

Art reflects on everything that is around it in any case. I have the only copy of Ferdynand Ruszczyc "Nearby the church" in Belarus. It is hard to overestimate the role he played in shaping the active artistic environment in Lithuania and Poland. He was one of the brightest representatives of "Young Poland", professor of the School of Arts in Warsaw, head of the Landscape Painting department in Krakow Academy of Arts, Beaux Art professor at the University of Stefan Batory in Vilnius. Ferdynand always reflected on social issues but mostly painted clouds. One won't find representations of social problems in his paintings.

What were other issues you mentioned? Public relation to sexual minorities, economic crisis? It could all be done in various ways that depend on artist position and worldview. I wouldn't say the Academy advocates for this kind of poster art but I personally love and collect posters. I have to emphasize there are many other examples. By painting the clouds one can say more about the freedom that one who writes slogans on a fence.

You know, our graduates have various career trajectories. We educate them but life is where they have to take decisions independently. One of our goals is to give our students tools and knowledge, prepare them to contact with real life. It is for them to decide how to react on its challenges. One can do it in a straightforward and childish way or choose another option. We all know artworks of Jean-Francois Millet were of small size but his paintings influenced the art in a significant way. This is the reason why I don't think art has to lead to slogans and statements.

Socialist realism to my opinion was a manifestation of this kind of reaction. Artists were asked to reflect on social reality and they were "representing" it. Combiners with slogans, Stalinist feasts, artificial issue of peace that existed in socialist realism, all that I reject. At the same time there were many talented people working at that time: Tarkovsky, Chukhrai, Korzhev... Soviet cinema is where many decent works can be found. Where one can find statements, straightforward reaction to social issues... There is no interest. That is why it wouldn't be curious if someone from contemporary artists will reflect in the same way on economic crisis or issues of sexual minorities. Artists are not meant to act in a certain way.

***I understand your point. Being rector of Belarusian State Academy of Arts what kind of school you aspire to create?***

The best one. Individually I can't pretend on a special role of absolute creator of something special. One always has to estimate his abilities and the most important thing is the force of teamwork. Our team is made of various people.

***Do they share your position?***

Some rely to ideas of actual art and some support other viewpoints. Here is (Mr. Borozna points on two paintings in his office) the model of today's Academy. Combining the incompatible, this is what many Academies of the world are trying to achieve. It is happening in Belarus as well.

Yes, it is an experiment and even if it fails I could say it worked well in time perspective. In rector's office you can see an artwork in realist tradition and a painting by artist who studied in Austria during one year. All this coexists not only in my office but also in my mind. I like these two artworks despite they are different. This is why the personality of artist is what matters to me the most. If I am attracted by artist's personality I like his art.

In fact I generalize things now. To understand many artosts one has to grow personally and professionally. I think many people like "Sunflowers" of Can Vogh or paintings of Shishkin, Aivasovskiy. I doubt there are people who will put an artwork of Joseph Beuys or Rodchenko in a bedroom... Well, if someone will do it than his knowledge about Rodchenko has come to a level where it is part of this person's life. That is why knowing about Roman Zaslunov whose professional growth occurred right in front of me, and knowing about Ferdynand Ruszczic who talked about freedom without saying this word are of crucial importance to me.

***What paradigm of thinking do you offer to students in this light?***

I remember how Vladimir Konan answered this question: "It all depends on hermeneutics". Coming back to second part of our interview, one of the problems of Belarusian art is how often it is quoted, how well it is known. Seleschuk, Skripnichenko, they reflected on historical events and their artworks, their way of thinking was special.

I have visited "La Revolution Surrealiste" at the Centre Pompidoux in 2002. My feelings about the exhibition were controversial; at the end of the exhibition one feels quite suppressed. There's too much of intentional physical violation. At this moment Nikolai Seleschuk with his representations of utopian Belarus comes to mind. Belarus with dreamlike houses, with characters (though he has artworks from "Portugal" series)... Belarusian surrealism seems different and dreamy in his perspective. Slavuk has the same vision. His scary witches are still kind. Considering the universalist perception, these characters belong to this locality.

Chernobyl disaster influenced Belarusians a lot. Time after Chernobyl was marked by deeper interest of people in their personal life rather than in surrounding social world. I am still “running around” your question on whether it is necessary to reflect on social issues directly. I remember the time when people were afraid of drinking milk, opened small windows. I remember that well. This was the time when art wasn’t needed, football wasn’t needed, hockey, drying up of the Aral lake. At the times of “perestroika” everybody cared about the lake but after the explosion Belarusians lost interest in everything. That was because something scary happened very close. The question of super-human disappeared from the field of art. Radiation can reach you anywhere, behind every wall. No one, not even a Batman can help. This is why Belarusians have changed. The literature has changed a lot too... I remember these feelings; they are still in minds of my generation.

***Your opinion is quite unusual since many relate changes in thinking with collapse of the Soviet Union and with independence of Belarus...***

As an artist I have a different prism to look at the world and it is not Google-like. Maybe the situation will settle. New generation doesn’t remember that; my daughter doesn’t remember what happened to her. It is possible young people will look at things in a different way. I am afraid we will again be in a situation that I consider the main Belarusian problem when superficial dominates over what’s inside. I wouldn’t like to see that coming. I would rather recommend students not to study art magazines but find themselves. Maybe learn more about the art of artillery, collect a herbarium, read Belarusian classic literature. Students need to find their place in the world and not look around too much.

***Does the notion of “citizenship” matter when it comes to artists?***

Yes it does. I believe these are mental characteristics. I wouldn’t suggest painting patterns on forehead but it could also be art. On 50th Venice biennale Ukrainian team worked with this particular idea of locality. If I am not mistaken their project was called “Post-Chernobyl generation”.

***Mr. Borozna, how would you translate the name of the Academy into English, taken its teaching methodology into account? Fine art? Contemporary art? High art? Actual art?***

I wouldn’t make that attempt since I prefer a conservative take on things. We all know German academy of arts Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Its name doesn’t have the “fine art” thing. It is just Kunstakademie. I would keep the same attitude to Belarusian State Academy.

***How do you see the evolution of Belarusian contemporary art?***

I have no doubt it is evolving and going towards an interesting future. Many things are being done for that. Not only it is my personal involvement, not only it is Academy but the society, the debate.

In this light I would like to strengthen the preparation of art historians in our school. We are putting a lot of effort into this direction and we are planning to move forward. Inna Reut, our graduate, is now PhD student in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of Warsaw. Her lecture was in the programme of the last year Venice Biennale although Belarus didn’t take part in the event. We were very pleased by the fact her lecture was announced. I would be happy if art historians who have graduated from the Academy could work with broad range of questions.

***Are you planning to educate curators?***

Yes. We have a problem with that. There is no such faculty in any Belarusian humanitarian university. Of course such professionals are needed and we are thinking about possible ways to educate them. It is problematic to talk about creating such faculty in the Academy. In a given situation we could educate curator within the Faculty of Art History.

***I know EHU (European Humanities University, Vilnius) prepares such professionals...***

But there's no special department, right? There is a very strange point of view that the Academy is a very closed and conservative institution. Our students write papers and theses on different themes related to art. A year ago I reviewed a paper on Ruslan Vashkevich art. There is no need to think that there is a wall between EHU and the Academy (I even taught at the EHU some time ago). Everything is quite transparent. The only thing we need is a platform where interaction between these schools can occur in a more open format. A platform where young specialists could meet and exchange opinions without regard to diploma, profession and school. I hope this could happen without arrogance, snobbery and remarks such as "there's nothing to learn in this stupid Academy". I've heard this kind of opinion... We do really need some kind of platform.

***Do you see a necessity in upgrading the curricula of the Academy?***

For certain it is needed. I might sound conservative but learning languages (это ли имеется в виду под «грамотой»?) and technical skills should remain in the curricula. I see new theories of public space emerging but still technical skills in visual art are as important as in music. I disagree with the opinion that school can take away any artistic idea... Why don't we then say the same about Pavarotti, Rastrapovich, and Spivakov? These people are music artists who have technical skills as well as feelings and emotions. Outside of the Academy artists can work with whatever material. Please, make installations out of dust or ash. But the academic education...

The problem of artistic taste is crucially important for Belarusian society. We don't fully possess this quality, aesthetic feeling has not yet developed or restored in our environment. In this context it is scary if students of the Academy wouldn't have that quality... Thinking about this makes me feel frustrated.

Artist is not someone who just creates a commodity for a fashionable gallery. Artist is a teacher, illuminator, and enlightener... He demonstrates good taste in little things, in the way he is making notes, in his behaviour, in relation to other people.

***If you would like to keep teaching crafts, what do you think should be done with contemporary thinking...?***

Is there any obstacle in developing thinking? To my opinion professors create the learning environment and we had and still have great professors. At a certain time I was largely influenced by Vladimir Konan, Lev Tolbuzin, Eugenia Mironova who knows everything about colors and its semantics... It is no coincidence our well-known artists Tsesler and Voichenko wanted to give their first published album to these people. By doing so they wanted to acknowledge their professors for making a contribution into their artistic becoming. The anatomy at the Academy was taught by Doctor of Medical Science, founder of gerontology in the Soviet Union and we had exams on Latin. I still remember everything just because we had amazing professors. One of them was Mikhail Romaniuk who studied and reconstructed Belarusian national costume and collected a unique archive... The first exhibition of Belarusian national costume took place in Paris. These professionals are unique!

***Don't you think the Academy is now in a situation when the heritage of past decades remains while new directions for development weren't given? Can we say the Academy is now "on hold"?***

I don't think so. Every second professor we have today is a very qualified professional. Besides, looking at modern publications one can see works of contemporary artists together with "old-school" kind of artworks. At the dokumenta in 2011 I saw Richter's work in the fine art style. I am saying this because one shouldn't be very critical to learn technical skills. One shouldn't be skeptical about the opportunity to paint from nature because many Academies cannot offer such courses now. It is quite important to study the human being, to observe, to meet and see. Some western students come to Belarus to get these skills, to learn the figurative method, to learn painting.



Now we are striving to find our place in-between this exceptional mastery and philosophical and conceptual search. In this search I see the main distinctness of Belarusian Academy of Arts that represents local mentality and interest to Belarusian art. It works in such disposition. While I am still rector I wouldn't want to roll off neither to one or another direction.

I will be happy if it works out. If not – time will tell. Still the number of students willing to study at the Academy is pretty high and I don't see any alternative to the Academy in Belarus. Another Academy wasn't created.