

Curatorial Essay: Olga Kopenkina

Sound of Silence: Art During Dictatorship



Sound of Silence: Art During Dictatorship showcases recent developments in contemporary Belarusian art that have emerged in response to political and economic turmoil, state-initiated mass repressions, and abuse of human rights in Belarus.

For almost two decades Belarus has been described simultaneously as a “unique Eastern European model” and the “last dictatorship in Europe.” In truth, President Lukashenko, who usurped political power in 1994, has refused economic privatization and delivered 17 years of economic and political stagnation

(what the state-loyal media often call “stability”). Lukashenko’s unlimited power over the life of its citizens is sustained by an enormous police force and secret service (still called “KGB” in Belarus). Under Lukashenko, the Belarusian state has turned into a repressive apparatus, exercising total control over the mass media and cultural institutions – something that significantly undermined the nation’s self-determination and its culture. Due to cultural and political isolation, Belarus has become an obscure spot on the world’s map. The art scene, so dynamic in the early 90s, had either dispersed across Europe, or been forced deep underground. Some members of the artists’ community, such as artist Ales Pushkin, have repeatedly been put in jail.

In December 2010, a change took place. Popular protests against blatantly falsified presidential elections shook the country. But Lukashenko’s reaction was immediate and brutal. The protests were suppressed with sadistic violence with more than 600 people arrested, and many others fleeing the country. Over twenty members of the political opposition (mostly young people between 20 and 24) were tried without evidence by state courts, and sentenced to long jail terms. The government also attempted to blunt the impact of a 36 percent devaluation of the currency, placing price controls on food and other basic goods.

The recent political events and looming economic collapse have led to a surge in popular activism and the emergence of grass-roots initiatives. Many of these activists fight state and police brutality by demanding free elections and release of the political prisoners. The culmination of this resistance took place this summer with a series of “silent actions.” Organized by Internet social networks promoting peaceful demonstrations, they encouraged citizens to clap their hands in unison rather than shout slogans or hold signs. Nevertheless, this non-violent dissent led to another wave of police detentions.

Ales Pushkin, *Giji to the President* & other performances, 1999-present.

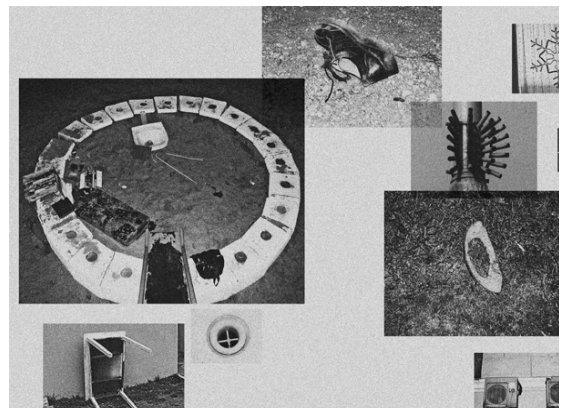
Artists in Belarus and abroad have responded to the fast growing popular protest movement with new works and exhibitions. This summer, at Art-Vilnius11 in Lithuania, a Minsk-based Gallery “Y” was awarded the title “best foreign gallery” for its exhibition *She Can't Say "Heaven,"* which appeared to be a response to the political turmoil. Another courageous expression of political art has been initiated by the artist-run activist website www.antibrainwash.net. It features daily uploads of radical protest posters addressing the political injustice in Belarus. Likewise, Marina Naprushkina's graphic work *Convincing Victory* has become a counter-argument to the state's official media coverage of the confrontation between the government and people.

Sound of Silence consists of recent works by Marina Naprushkina, Project Antibrainwash, Lena Soulkovskaia, Sergey Shabohin, Ales Pushkin, Alexander Komarov, Oleg Yushko, Yauheni Shadko, and group “Fau.”

Belarus-born **Marina Naprushkina**, now based in Berlin, demonstrates the concerns of a generation that grew up under Lukashenko's autocratic rule. Her multi-media project *The Office for Anti-Propaganda* offers a collection of images, slogans and video footage exploring state propaganda and its perpetuation of illusions about “stable society” as the Belarus artist, herself, appears walking the streets of Minsk with the portrait of the President under her arm. Her latest graphic work, *Self-Governing*, uses the format of comic strip as a way to document police violence and government injustice in the aftermath of the December 19, 2010 election protests, and to channel protestors' views and public outrage.

Ales Pushkin lives and works in his native Belarusian village Bobr. His art combines political protest with strong nationalist sentiments. Since the 80s he has taken part in the movement for Belarus' independence (under the slogans of the Belarusian National Front), defending Belarusian historic and cultural heritage from a process of obliteration that began with the Soviet Union and continues today under Lukashenko. In 1999, Pushkin shook public opinion with his audacious performance *Gift to the President*, in which he appears before the Palace of the President of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk with a wheel-barrow loaded with compost. After emptying the barrow in front of the building and presenting the state flag, image of the coat of arms (both are the versions accepted as state official symbols of Belarus under Lukashenko) and portrait of the President soiled in dirt, he pierces the portrait of the President with a pitchfork. This piece along with other staged protests (some of them are dedicated to the soldiers fought for the independence in Belarus as well as in Chechnya) against the state political and cultural institutions has led to his repeated arrest and incarceration for weeks at a time. The exhibition also presents a copy of the Belarusian court's verdict, incriminating Pushkin in “malicious hooliganism.”

The Minsk-based artist **Sergey Shabohin** has responded to the current crisis in Belarus with the series of assemblages and installations under the title *Practices of Submission*. Assembled from personal notes, photographs and objects displayed, or pinned to the wall – painted in grey – like a shrine, they address the mixture of fear and frustration – a common state of mind among young people in Belarus who grapple with shattered hopes and grim perspectives for their future after the last election.



Marina Naprushkina, *The Office for Anti-Propaganda*, 2008-11
Sergey Shabohin, *Practices of Submission*, 2010-11

24-year-old Minsk-based **Yauheni Shadko**'s figurative paintings draw from expressionist representations of the body and incorporate journalistic images of protestors and victims of political trials. Shadko's portraits of youths respond to the arrests of the oppositional leaders, unlawful trials and alleged tortures in KGB prisons – events that had shaken the false “stability” of life for Belarusian citizens within the last year.



Antibrainwash.net is an online political poster campaign initiated by a group of Belarusian artists, now living abroad, in the aftermath of the December 19, 2010 events. The website's anonymous contributors produce digital posters, flyers and brochures that can be downloaded from the Internet. These posters provide a counter-argument to Lukashenko's official state propaganda. One of the most popular anti-Lukashenko slogans visualized by the antibrainwash is **ШОС!** - an acronym for the damning expression “Штоб он сдох!” (“Let him die!”), which is directed against the foremost man in power. This expression – which is a play on words upon SOS! implying a call for help and anger all at once – has since evolved into the secret name for the entire protest movement in Belarus since December 2010.

Oleg Yushko, who is based in Dusseldorf, Germany, contributes two works to the exhibition, entitled *Implications*, and *Full Linen Jacket* that reflect on the social and economic landscape of Belarus over the past decade. The title of the latter is a double reference to Stanle Kubrick's 1987 anti-war film *Full Metal Jacket*, and to the key product of the Belarusian econom, linen, a labor-intensive fabric. Thus Yushko's piece becomes a metaphor for a backward-looking manufacturing base surrounded by military force. The artist suggests it can also become a fashion brand.



Monopoly: The Belarusian Edition by the Minsk-based group **FAU** addresses the dominance of economics over both politics and culture. Using the popular capitalist board game as its medium, this version invites participants to assume the roles of the President and other government officials. Winning is accomplished by being more corrupt than other players, distributing Belarusian public property through a system of unlawful contracts and exclusive transactions.

Lena Soulkovskaia was born in Minsk, and now lives and works in Amsterdam. She makes textile works using large pieces of fabric to ultimately visualize the feelings of expatriation. In *I Know a Place*, a longing for “the Belarusian homeland” is disturbed by the image of a government building that ominously looms from a blurred pixelated drawing.



Belarus-born **Alexander Komarov** now lives between Rotterdam and Berlin. His film *Language Lessons* reflects upon the complex history of Belarusian language, including its status and use over the past two decades by citizens and government officials. During the early years of Perestroika, speaking the Belarusian language was a form of resistance to Russian dominance. Belarusian became the official state language in 1990. Five years later the law changed to include two official state languages: Russian and Belarusian. This revision was based on the results of a referendum conducted by the Lukashenko administration. Since then, the choice of using one or the other of these tongues has become something of a declaration regarding one's cultural or political position: from resistance to

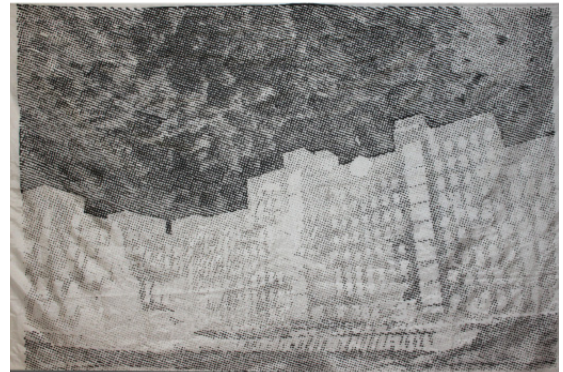
Yauheni Shadko, *Melancholy*, 2011
Project Antibrainwash, *Clap Clap*, 2011
Oleg Yushko, *Full Linen Jacket*, 2011

lifestyle, from nationalism to cosmopolitanism. In his three-part film, Komarov asks Belarusian intellectuals – artists, writers and musicians – to reflect on how the use of the native language in the country has developed during a time of intensive political transformation. Participants include: Tatjana Bembel (art historian), Sergej Hareuski (artist, culture study), Mikhal Anempadystau (designer, poet), Aliaksandar Pamidorau (singer, musician), and Rusia (singer).

On April 11, 2011, a bomb explosion in a Minsk subway killed 15 people and injured more than 200. Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, announced that the main suspect in this terrorist attack, Dmitry Konovalov, was connected to two other unsolved crimes: the explosions on September 2005 in Vitebsk and on July 2008 in Minsk. The Belarusian police force arrested Konovalov along with his friend Vladislav Kovalyov. On November 30, 2011, the Minsk court conducted a hearing favoring the prosecution’s argument and issued a death sentence by firing squad for both men. This trial is widely considered controversial because the court’s verdict is dubious.

On December 19, 2011, Mogilyov-based artist Denis Limonov sent a letter to the Attorney General of Belarus on behalf of the activist art group “Lime Blossom,” who claimed responsibility for the explosions, forcing a delay in the suspects’ sentence, and a reopening of the investigation. *Sound of Silence* presents the original text of this letter and its translated version.

Sound of Silence: Art During Dictatorship is on view from January 27 through March 10, 2012 at EFA Project Space, a Program of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts.



Oleg Yushko, from the series *Implications*, 2002-07

Lena Soulkovskaia, *I Know a Place*, 2011

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