

# New Europe College Black Sea Link Program Yearbook 2010-2011, 2011-2012



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# THE VISA DENIAL CASE: CONTEMPORARY ART IN BELARUS, MOLDOVA, AND UKRAINE BETWEEN POLITICAL EMANCIPATION AND INTERNALIZATION OF COLONIAL GAZE

## Introduction

The position of the contemporary art from Central and Eastern Europe in the global art world can be metaphorically described through the art work of Sándor Pinczehelyi called “Almost 30 Years 1973-2002” (Hungary).<sup>1</sup> The first part of it was produced in 1973. It represents the self portrait of a young man holding the hammer and the sickle in front of his face. His two hands are strictly crossed in front of his chest and his face is framed by the symbols of communist ideology. Analyzing this work in 1988, Lorand Hegyi came to the conclusion that artist “abolishes the symbol – by means of tautology – as he makes the abstract concept a concrete object ... Tautology completes the process of defetishization: the sickle is nothing else than an ordinary sickle, the hammer is nothing else than an ordinary hammer” (Hegyí 1988).<sup>2</sup> Meaningless, according to Hegyi, the materiality of those two objects changed its symbolic meaning after the great geo-political transformation of Europe in the 1990s. In the second part of Pinczehelyi’s work, realized in 2002, we can see the artist himself, considerably older, with his hands crossed in the same gesture. Nevertheless, there are no objects in his hands. Now the hammer and the sickle are still present there only as ideologies, denoting that these objects-symbols (or their absence) still hold the capacity to shape the identity of the subject from a particular geographical location. In Eastern Europe his/her everyday condition of living as well as evaluation of his/her activities and even the freedom of movement (between countries) are determined by the socialist history of the region, its contemporary colonial position of the Second World in the global capitalist economy and post-colonial prejudices of the Western external gaze.

During the past twenty years a great number of Western publications, research projects, and exhibitions are concerned with art and identity from Eastern Europe. These include: "East Art Map" by the Slovenian group IRWIN, series of books by Piotr Piotrowski, "spike Art Guide East. A Briefing on Contemporary Art and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe", "Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this?: 7 episodes in (ex)changing Europe"; a number of "Former West" conferences; exhibitions like "Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe" (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1995), "After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe" (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999), "The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West. From the 1960s to the Present" (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2000), "Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe" (MUMOK, Vienna, 2009), "Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe" (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2010), and, the most remarkable in the context of my research, "Progressive Nostalgia" curated by Viktor Misiano (Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prator, Italy, 2007) and "Ostalgia" curated by Massmilano Gioni (The New Museum, New York, 2011).

The main aims of these projects can differ: the re-evaluation of the art historical canon; the inclusion of relatively unknown works by artists from the former Eastern bloc into the global art world; the consideration of the fate of the post-socialist space and artistic production within it; or – and this will be the hidden agenda – continuous exoticizing of the Eastern European "Other". Ostalgia trend in the institutionalized contemporary art not just "offers a fascinating look back", as Susan Snodgrass (2011) stated it, but also represents the contemporary Western gaze on Eastern Europe as a unique bearer of socialist tradition, as a space where the remains of great utopias still can be found, mixed together with memories about the brutality of totalitarian regimes and traumas of transitional processes.

This approach creates a problematic position for the artists from the region – in order to work with their own reality, its past and the present, they should keep in mind the possible interpretations along Ostalgia ideological lines that would be insensitive to the particularities of local contexts. Such a warning is even more crucial for artists from post-soviet countries where the possibilities of production of contemporary art are limited due to the underdeveloped institutional system and the constant shortage in exhibition spaces and funding. Participation in international

projects often constitutes the only opportunity to proceed with professional career for Ukrainian, Moldovan or Belarusian artists.

The new geographical division should be considered here. The vast majority of the above-mentioned projects explored art from ex-socialist countries that were integrated to the European Union (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania), the countries of former Yugoslavia, and, sometimes, Russia. Historical trajectories and the contemporary context of other post-soviet republics remain to be less known to the international art world while current symbolic division between “West” and “East” moves to the EU border. It is significant that the biggest interest towards art from the post-soviet space comes now from “former East” countries already integrated to the EU. As I was told by Marta Dziewanska, curator in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Warsaw, who is currently preparing a research project about contemporary art in Russia and other post-soviet republics, this interest is based on the recognition of power structures of intellectual and artistic production designed to maintain symbolic hierarchy between European countries. Recent exhibitions dedicated to the art of Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova include “ЯКЩО / ЕСЛИ / IF” curated by Ekaterina Degot (PERMM Museum of Contemporary Art, Russia, 2010), “Opening the Door? Belarusian Art Today” curated by Kęstutis Kuizinas (Center for Contemporary Art, Vilnius, Lithuania, 2010 – 2011), “Journey to the East” curated by Monika Szewczyk (Galeria Arsenal in Białystok, Poland and Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2011), and “Sound of Silence: Art During Dictatorship” curated by Olga Kopenkina (The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, 2012). Most of the above mentioned projects were designed to represent the art of a particular country for a foreign audience. But on the contrary, the “Journey to the East” was aimed to promote empathy, mutual communication and understanding within the region instead of separation and exotization of post-soviet Others:

Perhaps the value of The Journey to the East is not in prescribing new models for interaction based on love rather than of capitalist competition, but in producing a space where in some instances (though not at all levels) these models can be performed, articulated, and made visible. But I believe that this can be recognized only by one who also makes the effort to take part in the chain of perception, interpretation, subjective examination and transformation of the material presented. (Babij, 2011)

The curatorial approach to the “Journey to the East” bears resemblance to Piotr Piotrowsky’s idea of “frame”, critical attitude towards art that gives possibility to recognize shades of meaning thorough the analysis of a context. By “framing” art in Eastern Europe, Piotrowsky means to take into consideration cultural policy of power authorities, local art traditions and myth, not to mention political, social, gender regimes etc. Discussing the impossibility of understanding Ilya Kabakov’s installations without the consideration of a specific soviet type of communal dwelling – “komunalka”, Piotrowsky notes: “if we’ll succeed to capture the relationship of text/context, we’ll understand the true meaning of the work of art that is so different from “Western art idioms” imposed on it” (Piotrowsky 1998). In other words, “framing” is a possibility of creation of autonomous space of reference that will be historically correct and independent from the ideology of effortless borrowing and repetition of “central” intellectual fashions by European “peripheries”. This strategy is crucial for the analysis of Eastern European art in the context of its continuous colonization and commercialization by Western contemporary art system.

Going back to the particular context of three countries selected for this study I would like to use another artistic work as a metaphor, which can help understanding contemporary reality of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. It is a performance by the Ukrainian activist Alexander Volodarsky. In September 2010 he had himself tattooed with “No Europe for you here” (Figure 1.), a phrase said to him by a Ukrainian investigation officer as a response to his demand for a lawyer (Volodarsky was prosecuted for public protest actions in 2009). “The Not-Europe place” (but also “not Asia” and “not Russia”) is a neat new name for countries in Eastern Europe that didn’t manage to enter the European Union and played the role of exotic post-soviet neighbors, mostly unknown for the general public in the West. But this “The Not-Europe place” is also a self definition, in which “Europe” represents the ideal of democracy, lawfulness and human rights (however contested by consequences of recent economic crisis), while the reality of the native country is defined by hypocrisy, brutality or instability of political regime and social order.

While artists like Volodarsky literary embody borders (both political and symbolical) and their influence on lives of people, the same challenges of the new geopolitical position are acknowledged by local intellectuals in the context of border studies. The intellectual trend that has been popular for the last twenty years in humanities (history first of all, but also



geography, sociology, political sciences, social and cultural anthropology) was developed on the basis of “frontier theory” by Frederic Jackson Turner. Frontier is a moving and dynamic space between “civilization” and “barbarians” that can play crucial role in the history of some country (USA in Turner’s analysis). Nevertheless, Turner’s approach had been highly criticized for the inherent colonialism; it gave an impetus to the concept of borderland useful in studies of unclear, heterogeneous, hybrid reality of territories that were on the margins of big geopolitical formations. According to Volodymyr Kravchenko, concept of borderland allows to avoid analysis of Ukrainian history from the point of view of binary system East-West (Kravchenko 2011: 56). On the other hand, the borderland discourse with emphasis on multicultural specificity was criticized for the exoticizing of periphery, imagining borderlands and peripheries as bearers of past, traditions and identities that are lost in “centers”.

Tomasz Zarycki puts a question how discourse of borderlands in Central Eastern Europe works for the benefit of intellectuals discovering and praising it, through the celebration of multiculturalism that often does not exist anymore (the neat example of such an approach can be find in the intellectual community connected with the “*І*” magazine in Ukraine; praising the multicultural past of city of Lviv is accompanied by the complete ignorance of current xenophobic tendencies in the region). According to the historian, (intellectual as well as political) elites aim to present themselves as the main agents of change and are not willing to recognize the crucial role of external factors. They constantly reject colonial analysis because it can uncover the vulnerability and the marginality of their own position of dependence on “centers” (Zarycki 2011: 89). The borderland status serves as a compensatory strategy creating an illusion of the unique symbolic capital of a periphery: “it looks like Belarusian art has a chance to play on the aspirations of the West to expand Western cultural horizons. It tends to establish itself as a metaphysical border area, which has the meaning of some additional, but necessary articulation of the modern world order” (Kopenkina 1998). Such an approach is mostly welcomed, as it can be seen in exhibitions about the East listed above. The raising of uniqueness of peripheries can be used in the politics of refusal of responsibility for colonial exploitation, as a strategy of masking power inequalities. Beside these intellectual and curatorial ideological veils, art projects from borderland countries – and Volodarsky’s performance is just one among many other examples – resist colonization, embodying

social problems of the Second World that cannot be consumed as a mere “uniqueness of periphery”.

The power dynamics of center-periphery interdependence posits Eastern Europe not as a separate “Other” reality to the West – its condition is a direct result of the colonial capitalist system of contemporary world. In the art critical discourse, it was recently discussed by Agata Pyzik: “We must be honest with ourselves: socialism was not an isolated Eastern phenomenon. We can find remnants of socialist policies everywhere in Europe, and this is perhaps what makes the subsequent nostalgia universal. ... What we need is a bold look into the present, at how capitalism abuses both East and West” (Pyzik 2011). Artistic works from the region (interpreted through the proper contextualized “frame”) propose a possibility for such a bold look as they are mirroring historical processes at the same time that they are contributing to them.

## **1. Politics of everyday life. Production of art in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine**

After the fall of Soviet Union the whole way of life in the countries of the former socialist bloc was changed. New nation-states have been building their own national projects, political regimes, economic systems and gender orders during the permanent changes of the last twenty years. Spheres so remote from each other (at the first sight) such as art and politics are interconnected on the basis of such a common social context. In post-soviet countries with “spectacle” democracies, hypocrisy of media, outdated educational systems, and ideologically corrupted intellectual discourses (neoliberalism and nationalism should be listed first of all) real politics (as a radical way of naming, analyzing and challenging dominant power structures) can appear in marginalized cultural fields like critical and non-commercial contemporary art.

Similar but at the same time specific cultural and political situation in each of listed countries influence art and provoke performative discussions over crucial social problems that can take resembling visual forms. The authors of “Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism” (2003) show how the same political symbols (hammer and sickle, red stars, famous images of Lenin, Marx, Mao) were simultaneously juxtaposed with McDonalds or Coca-Cola in art of such

distant countries as Russia, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and China in the second half of the 20th century:

These countries share very similar problems, such as rising unemployment, a crisis of values, a loss of identity, commercialization, nationalistic ideas, and a resurgence of sympathy for the former political system, but they also share something else. At the historical point that marks the beginning of their transition to capitalism, these countries also possessed a similar cultural and ideological legacy. From this legacy there emerged similar kinds of artistic endeavors. These were not limited to the officially imposed and often officially sanctioned Socialist Realism, although they were frequently strongly related to it. During the late socialist period, such endeavors emanated spontaneously, and often with no visible connection. (Erjavec 2003: 3)

There are some thematic motifs frequently addressed by different artists in contemporary art of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine during the last twenty years: the hypocrisy of politics and media, core symbols of national identity and collective memory, poverty and illegal labor, gender models etc. These motifs can be read as new *topoi* in the art of the region. Like the *topoi* of “the Creation Myth” or “the Flood” reappear in the early texts of different civilizations, some specific topics are frequently addressed in the art of countries with similar political and social regimes. The metaphor of “*topos*” is borrowed from the literary discourse where it was developed by Ernst Robert Curtius (“European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages”, 1948) and Joseph Campbell (“The Hero With A Thousand Faces”, 1949). *Topos* means first of all a unifying idea that is a recurrent element in literary or artistic work; in the context of contemporary art I conceptualize *topos* as a semantic net, which consist of ideas, images, sounds, or other elements linked by association. For example, in “the Visa denial case” *topos* that will be thoroughly discussed in the last part of this paper I analyze projects that use passports and visas as main visual tools and are dedicated thematically to national identity and citizenship, to the connection between borders and personal freedom in the era of global capitalism and colonial hierarchy between countries.

It should be noted that the main vectors of the upward career mobility between Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Moldavian artists are West (Europe) / East (Russia). Therefore artists from neighboring countries know a little about work of each other; striking similarities in their agendas cannot be read as repetition or borrowing. The detailed analysis of circumstances

of artistic production and its interconnections with political regimes and intellectual discourses in the selected countries is crucial for the understanding of the main topoi in the art of the region. The results of this analysis will constitute the properly contextualized interpretational “frame” for the art works discussed under the topoi classification in the second part of this paper.

### **1.1. Soros centers for contemporary art in Eastern Europe: liberalization and neoliberalization of cultural production**

It is believed that “contemporary art” as a specific type of art production was imported to Eastern Europe in the early 1990s as part of the “normalization” of post-socialist societies, altogether with “free elections” and non-governmental organizations. The main agents for its introduction were centers of contemporary art (CCA) founded by George Soros. These centers formed a new professional art network in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics and gave a strong boost to the development of local art scenes. One of the main objectives of the Centers has been “de-indoctrination”, the release of the cultural production from total ideological, political and economic control of socialist state. Their institutional logic was influenced by ideas of Karl Popper, whose book “The Open Society and Its Enemies” gave the name to the Foundation of George Soros. According to the theory of Karl Popper, “impersonal institutions” indirectly influence cultural contexts and they fit much better to the idea of democracy. These centers proposed to replace the previous socialist model of total state support and control with the neoliberal model in which dynamics of artistic production is influenced by commercial market and art institutions that are controlled by the depersonalized figures of collectors, art managers and curators.<sup>3</sup>

During 1990s Soros centers were the main intermediaries between Western art world and local art scenes, organizing international exhibitions, offering educational possibilities and financial support for artists and curators. Their role is often acknowledged by artists as crucial for the beginning of their international careers. In Ukraine CCA existed in Odessa (1996 – 2000) and Kyiv (1993 – 1999, gradually losing financial support of Soros Foundation till the closure in 2008; its legacy and archives were transmitted to the Foundation Center of Contemporary art). In Moldova CCA functioned from 1996 till 1999 (later its agenda was continued by new organization KSA:K), and in Belarus, Soros Foundation

existed until its banishment by Lukashenko's regime (1993 – 1997). Abundant institutional support allowed artists, which were previously associated with (marginalized) opposition to Socialist Realism, to become well-known and to legitimize their own art strategies through a relevant critical discourse. Another result of the activity of Soros centers was "Soros Realism" – "*soft and subtle* uniformization and standardization of Postmodernist pluralism and multiculturalism as a criterion of enlightened political Liberalism that has to be realized by European societies at the turn of the century" (Šuvaković 2002).

Simultaneously with the activity of Soros centers, overall "perestroika" of cultural field occurred. There were a number of interrelated processes: the collapse of the system of ideological control and state support for arts; the erosion of the principles of Socialist Realism; the discovery of diversity of world art; the search for national roots in art; the rediscovery of forbidden names, events, and historical art styles. Historical ideas of modernism from the beginning of the 20th century received a new life and a false status of the newest tendencies in art. Soros centers were the only ones providing institutional support to art practices experimenting with new media (photo, video, installation, performance). Other experimental initiatives from the early 1990s were closed or switched over to more profitable types of art production (design, salon paintings) in the total absence of public support.

With all that generous encouragement from Soros centers and the developing connections with the global art world and art market, contemporary art (as experimental and intellectual art practice) for a long time remained on a marginal position in the local art context of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. In 1995, the Ukrainian artist Alexandr Roitburd commented on this new marginality:

Old artistic nomenclature embraced the yesterday's ideological and aesthetical opponents from the national-modernist side, appropriated its ideology and made it serve the nomenclature's structures. The demand for the optimistic, positive and intelligible art was brought back to life. Everything came back. "Us" and "them" got back, too. Them – cultural establishment and us – the underground, marginal and homeless of the modern culture. ... They appear in public in the glory of legitimate treasurers of the real folk roots, the carriers of spiritual values and space energy. It is much more understandable than our torments of dumbness, tragic energy and brutality, ready-mades and simulacra. We break our foreheads trying to break the stereotypes and give new dynamics to genesis.

They feel easier in the new stagnation regime. They raise the inertia of their thinking to the rank of a national tradition and push it as it stands under the protection of the state ideological violence machine revived by them. (Roitburd 2009)<sup>4</sup>

The new status quo was largely supported by a state whose cultural politics during the 1990s was inert and eclectic, it focused on the preservation of old soviet-style cultural institutions (museums, Artistic Unions etc.) while the art educational system and its academic curriculum was left almost untouched by contemporary theoretical debates (and often with optional courses on art history of the 20th century). Contemporary art gained a suspect status for a significant part of the artistic community as well as for the broad public; even in intellectual circles, conservative aesthetical taste was combined with a consumerist and superficial approach towards art. These processes were common in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine although various social, political, and economic reasons caused local particularities in the new institutional organization of cultural sphere.

### **1.2. Ukraine. “Try to find another cow”**

Ukraine, as a big country with a relatively liberal political regime, has a dynamic and diversified institutional landscape in the contemporary art field now. However, in the middle of 2000s there was a sluggish stagnation described by Jerzhy Onuch as: “Milk the cow as long as you can. But then do not try to feed the cow, but try to find another cow” (Onuch 2007 : 12). The ex-director of Kyiv CCA used this metaphor to explain the common attitude of artists who used to have full support from some institutions (soviet-style ones or Soros centers) and were not able to run independent initiatives when generous financial sources were absent (it should be noted that an art market was not an option to Ukrainian artists to support themselves until the very recent times).

After the decline of the Soros-funded Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv in the mid 2000s, the status of the most significant institution in the contemporary art field passed to the PinchukArtCentre (PAC), which opened its luxurious gallery in the center of Kyiv in 2006. PAC is independently financed by the billionaire collector Viktor Pinchuk and serves as a tool to support the public image of its owner on the international scale. It has dominated the public perception of contemporary art in Ukraine due to its

huge financial resources and extensive PR. PAC popularizes spectacular contemporary art with low level of intellectual discussion and promotes a consuming and entertaining attitude towards art among the public. Pinchuk's impressive enterprise created the encouraging background to other private initiatives by the Ukrainian wealthy ("I<sup>3</sup>" – grant program for arts from Rinat Akhmetov's Foundation for Development of Ukraine, Foundation IZOLYATSIA - cultural project). There are also a few private galleries dedicated to contemporary art, established in 1990s and 2000s in Kyiv: Karas Gallery (1995), Collection Gallery (2006), Ya Gallery (2007), Tsekh Gallery (2005) and others. From various regional initiatives the most well known are Dzyga (Lviv, since 1993), activities of SOSka group and the Municipal Art Gallery in Kharkiv, the Center of Youth Initiatives "Totem" in Kherson.<sup>5</sup> After a long period of ignorance, the Ukrainian state paid some attention to the contemporary art by establishing in 2010 the state funded Mystecky Arsenal. In May 2012 this institution is going to conduct Arsenele – the first Ukrainian biennial of contemporary art. At the beginning of 2010s, a few historical exhibitions dedicated to the art of 1990s and 2000s took place in state museums. Contemporary art is more often addressed in the mass media (nevertheless, the professional level of journalistic comments remains quite low) and there are a few influential art-critical magazines (Korydor, Art Ukraine and others).

This short account about the institutional system of contemporary art in Ukraine can seem reassuring, meantime the artistic community still struggles with a number of problems among which commercialization and low intellectual quality of art are the most crucial. State funded and private institutions give preference to a dozen of well-known authors from the older generation (the so-called "1987 generation") who had secured their careers already and sometimes prefer to reproduce almost decorative works in their own recognizable manner. Younger artists (called "generation 2004" because of the appearance on the art scene simultaneously with mass civic protests known as "Orange revolution")<sup>6</sup> bring political consciousness and bold social critic to the art discourse. Their radical critical activities are supported by a small number of institutions – Foundation Center for Contemporary Art, Visual Culture Research Center and by artists themselves, through artist-run spaces (SOSka gallery, LabGarage) and communal projects like HudRada – a group of Ukrainian artists, architects, translators and political activists, which acts as a collective curator.<sup>7</sup>

Critical contemporary art is rarely discussed in intellectual circles that are not directly connected to its production. Representatives of other disciplines persistently reduce art to “aesthetic proposition” to protect themselves and society from the potentially dangerous knowledge that the intuitive nature of art may hold (Žmijewski 2011). Examples of such a fear can be found in acts of censorship – closures of exhibitions “Kyiv artistic encounter: New Art from Poland, Ukraine and Russia” at the Ukrainian House (1995), “New History” at the Kharkov Art Museum (2009), and the recent closure of “Ukrainian body” exhibition in the Visual Culture Research Center of National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy by the president of NaUKMA Serhiy Kvit himself (February 2012).

### **1.3. Belarus. ArtPartisan versus ArtActivist**

At the first sight there is no contemporary art scene in Belarus. In the country that is ruled by “the last dictator in Europe” there are no institutional conditions for training a new generation of artists and curators, neither the conditions for their work (in Belarus all institutions of civil society including NGOs and independent media are under strict state surveillance). The situation was reflected by Aleksei Lunev in his work “Nothing here” (Black Market series, 2009), and by Alexander Komarov in “No news from Belarus”, 2010 (Figures 2, 3). Paradoxically enough, these works were introduced at the moment when Belorussian contemporary art achieved certain historical continuity – but rather in a form of smoldering guerrilla warfare than officially recognized history that is represented in museums.

Belarus benefited a little from the activities of Soros Foundation (which was expelled from the country in 1997) and other Western foundations. Institutional history of the contemporary art in independent Belarus is very short: the period of liberalization in 1991 – 1995; the whole generation of artists emigrated abroad at the end of 1990s<sup>8</sup>; closure of the European Humanitarian University in 2004 (the university continued its activities in Lithuania in 2005 serving as a main site of education and communication for Belorussian intellectuals); the performance festival “Novinki” (since 1999); the emergence of the legendary Pozdemka Gallery (2004 – 2009); the opening of the independent center for contemporary art “Ÿ” gallery in 2009.

There is a significant difference between Belorussian art of the second half of 1990s, the first half of 2000s and late 2000s. It can be grasped



through names of the only two magazines dedicated to contemporary art in Belarus: “pARTizan” (since 2002) and “ArtActivist” (since 2011). Partisan identity of Belorussian art was addressed by different authors as “the essence of the artistic experience of the Belorussian territory, based on the strategy of guerrilla movements” (Kopenkina 1998). Cultural guerrilla was represented in art projects by Ihor Tishyn “Slight partisan movement”, “Partisan’s gallery” (1990s), Mikhail Gulin’s action “Ich bin kein Partisan” (2008), “Movable Partisan’s boutique” by Artur Klinov (since 2004). Idea of the artist as partisan was more radically realized in the public demarches of performer Ales Pushkin.

Artur Klinov (who is also the editor of “pARTizan” magazine) explains that Belorussian contemporary art is the community of authors in the total absence of the art scene. In order to survive, the Belorussian artist should become “partisan” by fulfilling different functions such as curator, manager, loader, and seller by him/herself in the country where cultural stagnation is advantageous for the totalitarian state (Klinov 2011). Despite the absence of an open conflict, guerrilla always implies resistance to the oppressive regime and dominant ideology. Contemporary art in Belarus reflects repressed political activity which also has a form of partisan movement (one of the most popular oppositional web-sites is called “Belarus partisan”).

The political efficacy of art was highlighted by Sergey Shabohin. The artist decided to start “ArtActivist” internet magazine after brutal police repressions against peaceful demonstrations that followed the presidential election (December 19, 2010). He considers intellectual activity as a form of civil activism: “we inserted our main message into the very name of the project. Belorussian artist today, in our opinion, should not proceed with “guerrilla struggle” but take a proactive stance. We must act” (Artimovich 2011). Younger generation of artists apply “art-activism” for the deconstruction of the ideology of the Belorussian state (Marina Naprushkina) and for direct actions in public space (art group “Lipovyi tsvet”).

Public “art-activism” is physically dangerous in contemporary Belarus (Ales Pushkin was arrested a few times for his performances; members of “Lipovyi tsvet” art group are hiding from the police). Making critical art in Belarus demands personal courage and civil selflessness unparalleled in the Western art world; radical art gestures cannot be commercialized due to the absence of the institutional art system. There is a significant intersection between oppositional intellectual circles (“New Europe”

magazine, "Gender route" project) and contemporary art milieu as well as artists and intellectuals who share the same problems in the absence of public scene, civil society and democracy. They are trying to invent new non-partisan strategies; nevertheless guerrilla tactics will still be relevant in the coming years (Shabohin 2011).

#### **1.4. Moldova. Art in the Kiosk**

There is the specific topos in the contemporary art of the Republic of Moldova that is not repeated in art of other countries. Works by Iurie Cibotaru "Shepherds on the Moon" (2000), "Moldovan cosmonaut" by Igor Shcherbina (2003), and the curatorial proposal by Stefan Rusu "UFO convention" reflect the fact that Moldovan variant of contemporary art still hasn't been recognized inside the country. Artists ironically compare art with a paranormal phenomenon that remains alien to Moldovan context and continues to exist for some mysterious reasons.

The artistic community went through a heterogeneous process of transformation altogether with Moldovan society. After the first innovative impulses in the late 1980s there have been a period marked by the activation of a new generation of visual artists. Innovative processes in art were promoted by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art established in Chisinau in 1996. CCA supported many local and international projects and influenced spreading of new media art (video art, video installation, performance) previously non-existent in Moldova (Esanu 1998). As the only institution for contemporary art in 1990s, CCA couldn't compensate for the lack of art critics, theorists and art historians. The absence of proper critical discourse resulted in the questionable quality of art: "to be finally able to experiment on all levels, initially seemed more important for Moldovan artists than to gather information and knowledge on a theoretical level... in the everyday art scene the opinion asserted itself that creative processes were an "unconscious synthesis"... that in reality was nothing more than unconscious imitation of Western art" (Dragneva 2004: 125).

Limited institutional support resulted in the "natural selection" that decreased the number of Moldovan artist working with the experimental and critical art to a dozen figures. Today there are just two institutions promoting contemporary art: KSA:K – an institution that succeeded the Soros CCA, and the Moldova Young Artists Association Oberliht (both initiated at the beginning of 2000s). The last is supporting the "Art hotel" exhibition space, the "Postbox" magazine and the Chiosc project. Chiosc

(Romanian word for “kiosk”) is a functional replica of a socialist apartment situated in a square in the historic center of the city of Chisinau. It is exposed to the public as a platform for presentations and cultural events. There are no commercial galleries dealing with contemporary art, and the state has been showing complete ignorance towards it for the past twenty years.

In the absence of exhibiting possibilities (KSA:K doesn't have its own space and “Art hotel” works occasionally), Moldovan artists developed some surviving strategies, including orientation towards performance and research based art in public spaces, mutual support and promotion. Cooperation with Western art institution and exhibiting abroad are the main possibilities for the professional development of artists, that is why the liberal rhetoric of cultural management dominates artistic discourse. It is slightly counterbalanced by the narrative of “Rezistența” web forum connected with political left-wing groups (Esanu 2011). Art activism in Moldova takes shape of informational, educational and communicational initiatives like Oberlist mailing list by Association Oberliht or Artploshadka project founded by the artist Tatiana Fiodorova.

## **2. “The Visa denial case” and other topoi in contemporary art in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine**

The above mentioned similarities and differences in political regimes and cultural production could be tracked down through the analysis of art works. My research was concentrated on the “political and socio-critical art” in the understanding of Martha Rosler (2010), or, as it was recently described by Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan: “critical art” as “a testimony on today's social reality and its traumas” (Lanko 2012). On the basis of content and discourse analysis of the contemporary art field in the region,<sup>9</sup> I identified main topoi that address similar thematic motives and use resembling means of expression. Further in this paper I will briefly overview “the Politician” and “the Checkered bag” topoi, discussing only the most significant projects within each topos. I will concentrate more on “the Visa denial case” topos as the most relevant to the problematic of art in the post-socialist and post-colonial context discussed in the first part of this text<sup>10</sup>.

## 2.1. "The Politician"

"The Politician" topos reflects public politics in selected countries. After the fall of Soviet Union power processes are perceived here as a sphere alienated from influence of ordinary citizens. That is why there are much more projects depicting famous politicians than projects addressing public participation in politics or mass struggle.

In the recent history of Ukraine, the year 2004 represents the symbolic turn in the political and social development of the former soviet republic. The event known as "the Orange revolution" was a moment of spontaneous expression of popular will against mass falsifications during the presidential election. Extensive use of mass-media and political branding turned heroes and anti-heroes of the Orange revolution into pop-stars whose faces could be reproduced on souvenirs. Reflecting this trend Aleksander Roytburd ironically depicted Victor Yuschenko (ex-president of Ukraine) and Yulia Tymoshenko (ex-prime minister) in a few paintings. In his "Tango" series (2005 – 2006, Figure 4) Yuschenko and Tymoshenko are dancing in different romantic settings. Highlighting the isolation of dancers from their surroundings, the artist presents the separation between reality and politics in Ukraine and the stage character of Ukrainian democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Belorussian artist Marina Naprushkina in the "Office for Anti-Propaganda" (since 2007) depicts the only one figure in the politics of her native country – Alexander Lukashenko, the President. In the installation at the "Opening the Door? Belorussian Art Today" exhibition in Vilnius (2010, Figure 5), the artist showed the result of years of work on the collection and archiving of the original material of state propaganda. Her project discovers an outstanding example of how a modern dictatorship is maintained.

In the art of Moldova there are no contemporary politicians depicted by artists. Instead, some heroes from the Soviet pantheon are addressed frequently. In a performance and film by Stefan Rusu "Cold mind, clean hands & hot heart" (2000) the famous slogan by Felix Dzerzhinsky (the chef of NKVD in 1920s) is literary realized. In the video of the same author "Brezhnev likes Mamaliga & Mamaliga Likes Brezhnev" (2001), that is the reinterpretation of Joseph Beuys' performance "I like America & America likes me", the artist performs cooking of mamaliga by the old recipe of Brezhnev's cook. Leonid Brezhnev (addressed also in Veaceslav Druta's video "Portrait of L.I. Brezhnev", 2002) was the Party First Secretary in the Soviet Republic of Moldova in the early 1950s, before becoming the

General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1964. The popularity of the Soviet history can be explained by the crucial role that Soviet politics played in the creation of the Republic of Moldova as a separate state unit. Consequences of that policy still define the identity of the country.

## 2.2. “The Checkered bag”

Under “the Checkered bag” topos I place art projects that use checkered bags or other objects addressing trade and commerce in their visual structure. Thematically they are dedicated to the processes of economic and symbolic exchange in society and between countries.

In “Mamaliga” action by Ghenadie Popescu (2008, Moldova) artist carried a model of traditional Moldovan polenta weighing 150 kilos from Chisinau to Iasi<sup>12</sup>. He was dressed in a costume made from the material of checkered bags. A big shopping bag with specific pattern is a well known object in post-soviet countries. It is used in shopping trips but also by villagers who are bringing products from their households to sell on markets in big cities. By using this recognizable material, Popescu accepted the identity of a small trader, which is the identity of an economic marginal in a marginalized region.

The same material was used in a few projects by Ukrainian artists Sergiy Petlyuk and Oleksiy Khoroshko. In “10 meters” (2009, Warsaw; 2010, Kyiv) they created an artificial corridor with walls covered by checkered fabric. The entrance was decorated with the Emblem of the European Union. At its end, the corridor was more narrow and the passage became less comfortable. The artists explain that a checkered bag is not only an attribute of a particular social group; for them it is also a symbol of relationship between Ukraine and its European neighbors. The progressing narrowness of the artificial corridor reflects the unequal and repressive character of this relationship.

In the “Barter” video by Kharkiv, the artists from the based art collective SOSka exchange reproductions of art works (including some of the contemporary art market’s best-selling authors) for vegetables in a small village in eastern Ukraine. Artists address a huge distance between contemporary art as a complicated intellectual practice and the general public in Ukraine. In this bartering video the value (the price) of art works diminished in the context of basic needs and hard labor of villagers. These issues were addressed a bit differently by Artur Klinov in his project

“Movable Partisan’s boutique” (since 2004). Commenting on the “partisan” identity of Belorussian citizen in general and the Belorussian artist in particular, Klinov created a fake shop where the whole variety of trashy goods from post-soviet space could be bought. These projects can obtain different meanings depending on the context of their presentation – in Western art institution they can be read as a play with stereotypes about the post-soviet East; presented in Belarus or Ukraine they raise questions about the nature and value of contemporary art itself.

### **2.3. “The Visa denial case”**

In “the Visa denial case” topos I analyze projects that use passports and visas as main visual objects and are dedicated thematically to national identity and citizenship, to the connection between borders and personal freedom in the era of global capitalism and colonial hierarchy between countries. Majority of projects discussed below are based on the personal experience of artists. These are stories about unrealized journeys, tiresome hours of waiting at embassies, humiliating interviews, and visa refusals – everyday bodily experiences that marks one’s national origin and position of that geographical location in the First-Second-Third world system.

The very necessity to apply for a visa and to prove trustworthiness is conceptualized by artists as traumatizing experience. Alevtina Kakhidze’s documentation of her persistent attempt to obtain a visa to visit a friend in Australia entitled “Invitation to Australia, or The Museum of One History” (2002) was organized as a museum of the refusal. The story is told through all letters and documents directed to the Embassy, and answers. The artist was asked to prove her intention to go back to Ukraine – and her marriage status, education at the Academy of art, and her patriotism appeared to be not reliable enough. By telling this story in the public space Kakhidze made visible the Glass Curtain that replaced the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe – opened to financial capital but locked for ordinary people.

Problematic political context of Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova make contextualized reading of the work of art necessarily, as well as “the veiled criticality of art under repressive regimes, generally manifesting as allegory or symbolism, needs no explanation for those who share that repression, but audiences outside that policed universe will need a study guide” (Rosler 2010). The recent political history has such a guide needed for the reading of Aleksander Komarov’s art book “35 gr” (2005). Komarov tells a typical story for the whole generation of Belorussian artists who were

obliged to work abroad and finally to emigrate when political climate in Belarus became too oppressive. During 1990s Komarov's passport collected enormous amount of visas, reflecting the recent history of the region. The book has epigraph on the first page "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others". Others pages are copies of Komarov's original passport with explanation about history of passport as a document, visas types, costs and procedures, including exit visas necessary to go out from Belarus and the notion of "propiska" – an official address documented in a passport. It is not just about (complicated) travels to the West – it is also a story about the establishment of dictatorship in Belarus. In the accompanying essay Nelly Bekus discusses her own experience: "that was how I came to understand that visas are not merely formal stamps in a passport: they are a special field of human life, and exert a powerful influence over it. They are elaborate obstacle course that separates the desire (or need) to go somewhere from possibility (or the right, if you like) to do so" (Bekus 2005: 45). Discussing the new condition of citizens in the "border zone" who became suspicious to authorities on the both sides of a border exactly because they wish to abandon their "place". Komarov and Bekus made a statement that "place has now become a necessary additional indicator of one's economic and political status. The country on one's passport cover, its image, and its international geopolitical status now determine the extent of an individual's freedom, the human right to travel, and the number of visas in their passport" (Bekus 2005: 46). Another type of emigration was addressed by Antanina Slabodchikava ("9 month, 22 days", 2011, Figure 6). The artist presented her own passport surrounded by plastic flowers in funeral style. Slabodchikava got her passport during "golden times" (the short period of liberalization in Belarus in 1991 – 1995) that's why it had national emblem with hunting pursuit on it. When Lukashenko came to power in 1994 this emblem had been prohibited and slightly modified, the soviet emblem had been introduced as a symbol of the new authoritarian regime. Visual organization of Slabodchikava work resembles the children's game "secrets", in which some nice objects (flowers, fruits, beads etc.) are temporarily buried in glass boxes for the sake of pleasure of rediscovering them. The work tells personal story of loss and "inner emigration", in which freedom exist only as unrealistic dream. Hunting pursuit functions here as a symbol of hidden expectations that keep guerrilla warfare in Belarus cultural and political life still alive. While one national emblem is the symbol of a lost dream about democracy, another one can represent almost unlimited freedom,

at least freedom to travel. Pavel Braila highlighted it in his performance “Welcome to EU” (Moldova, 2009),<sup>13</sup> in which he proposed to paint the ring with 12 stars (the emblem of the European Union) on real passports of everyone who wanted to participate.

A visa refusal is a moment in the personal history when “big political issues” intrude one’s private life and force one to analyze own position without any illusions. After the series of visa denials when he couldn’t attend his own exhibitions in Germany, the Ukrainian artist Mykola Ridnyi came to the German Embassy in Kyiv and lied down on a pavement showing the vain hope to get a permission to enter to the EU (“Lie down and wait”, 2006, Figure 7). Artist was arrested by the Embassy security service. For the Ukrainian critic this action was a demonstration of “helplessness in the face of the existing system of prohibitions and restrictions aimed against Ukrainian citizens for the sake of political and economic well-being of Europe” (Krivencova 2008). The same action got different interpretation from the Western point of view: “act of laying down in a public path, and his subsequent arrest, interrogation and threats of forced hard labor highlight the stale taste of brute power that has remained all these years after the Soviet pullout” (Foumberg 2008). The very core of the action – existing colonial relations between countries was ignored for the sake of the imagined remains of exoticized socialist brutality.

Tatiana Fiodorova showed almost the inseparable bonding between the artist and her country in the action “I go or I want to London or Are you afraid of me?”,<sup>14</sup> which had been performed after she was denied a visa by British Embassy (and, as well as Ridnyi, couldn’t attend her own exhibition). Fiodorova painted her body in black and had a walk in Chisinau stressing symbolic “blackness” of her own country as a country of illegal workers, black market and trafficking. She used typical checkered bag to paint the EU emblem with a ring of golden stars on it. Later she carried this bag marking her Eastern European identity to Brussels, Paris, Krakow, Bucharest, and Amsterdam (Figure 8, 9). She described her approach as “sometimes I feel like a slave. For me, these bags are a symbol of post-Soviet space, a symbol of transition, mobility, while on the other hand a symbolic wall between East and West, the barriers, the frontiers, the borders that refused my effort to get to London” (Pintilie 2011). By painting her body, Fiodorova also accepted the marginal position of African emigrants inside her own country (she experienced discriminative attitude from her fellow citizens while being black) however she did not acknowledge this in texts and interviews about her performance. That



is the limit of making art based on personal experience and traumas – problematic position of the own context is discussed by artists along the lines of colonial dependency from the West, while discrimination and xenophobia inside their own countries are not addressed.

The most recent projects<sup>15</sup> connected with visas and citizenship were realized in 2011 in Belarus by the group “Lipovyi tsvet” (“Lime blossom”, but also “Fake color” due to the play of words). Radical actionists direct their protest against conformism of Belorussian society. In the “Orgy of vandalism” video, the protagonist performs pseudo-intellectual talk on the dirty kitchen and afterward engages into the series of brutal and vulgar manipulation through the naked body compared with documentary shots from some public holiday in Belarus. In the middle of the absurdist video, the protagonist burns his passport as a waste and even objects in a hopeless attempt to fight civic inertia. For the Belorussian art critic this is “a statement about a pain made by a person in the condition of absolute suffocation ... “Lipovyi tsvet” appeared in spite of Belorussian society, as a protest against the majority, which now shapes “the Belorussian reality” (Artimovich 2012). In the “Buzz in the bus №23” (public action, video) artist addressed his fellow citizens in a bus and accused them in the felonious civic passivity that had made Lukashenko’s regime possible: “I’m a citizen. And you? What does it mean for you to be citizens?”. Artists themselves explain that they formulate urgent questions, but not conclusions (Kolesnikov 2012). The importance of these questions for the local context is confirmed by the uneasiness of those who are supposed to answer, and by police prosecutions directed against the group.

## Conclusions

Contemporary art in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine exist within heterogeneous process of power relations inside and outside the native countries. It reflects the main problems of everyday life in continuous “attempts to break automatic attitude in thinking about social reality” (Piotrowsky 2007: 212). The interrelation between cultural production and politics in local contexts causes the level of criticality of art, the main issues addressed by artists, the character of theoretical discussion with intellectual circles that are not directly engaged in art production, and ways of communication with the general public.

“The Politician”, “the Checkered bag”, and “the Visa denial case” topoi discussed above reflect political and economical relationships within the countries but also their geopolitical position in the post-socialist and post-colonial context of Eastern Europe. Further research on local topoi should discover art projects addressing national food and/or historical personages and dedicated thematically to national identity; bodily topics in art and the feminist critique of gender regimes; and a more updated topos of political activism.

The critical potential of contemporary art remains ambivalent. “Art activism” (that can gain forms of civic heroism in the context of an authoritarian regime) destroys social anemia and passivity and counteract the preservation of conservative nationalistic discourses. Contemporary art creates challenges to the social “status quo” and contributes to the political emancipation of knowledge production in the region. On the other hand, in the absence (or shortage) of local exhibiting possibilities and public funds, the contemporary art in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine is vulnerable to the pressure of ideological trends and colonial presuppositions of the global art market that readily accepts limited social critique based on personal experiences and traumas of exotic “Others”.

## FIGURES



Figure 1. Alexander Volodarsky. "No Europe for you here", 2010.



Figure 2. Aleksei Lunev. "Nothing here", 2009.



Figure 3. Alexander Komarov. "No news from Belarus", 2010.



Figure 4. Aleksander Roytburd. "Tango", 2005.



Figure 5. Marina Naprushkina. "Office for Anti-Propaganda", 2010.



Figure 6. Antanina Slabodchikava. "9 month, 22 days", 2011.



Figure 7. Mykola Ridnyi. "Lie down and wait", 2006.



Figure 8. Tatiana Fiodorova. "I go or I want to London or Are you afraid of me?", 2010.

## NOTES

- 1 The art work can be seen on <http://overcomings.blogspot.com/2007/11/exhibition-sndor-pinczehelyi.html>
- 2 Quoted by *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*. – p. 32.
- 3 The history of CCA in Eastern Europe is analyzed in details by ESANU O. (2008) and KADAN N. (2009, b).
- 4 The text had been originally written by Roitburd in 1995. It preserved its actuality till recent times and was republished in 2009.
- 5 Detailed description of current art institutions in Ukraine can be found in BABIJ L. (2009).
- 6 I analyzed generational shift in Ukrainian contemporary art in ZLOBINA T. (2010, a).
- 7 Detailed description of activities of HudRada can be found in KADAN N. (2009, a).
- 8 Belarusian art emigrants were filmed in the documental movie by Ehor Surski “Art-repatriation: Belarusian German Artists”, ZHYVKOVA T. (2012).
- 9 I conducted a field research in Belarus during two research trips (March 2010, September 2011) and in Moldova (October 2010, May 2011), including: visiting of exhibitions, discussions, presentations; content analysis of main art magazines; content analysis of archives and libraries in KSA:K (Moldova), “Ÿ” gallery (Belarus), Foundation Center of Contemporary art (Ukraine); expert interviews with Vladimir Us (artist, editor of Postbox magazine, curator of CHIOSK project, Association Oberlist, Moldova), Stefan Rusu and Lilia Dragneva (artists, curators at KSA:K, Moldova), Sergei Shabohin (artist, editor of ArtActivist magazine, Belarus), Valentina Kiselova (curator of “Ÿ” gallery, Belarus). I didn’t make expert interviews with Ukrainian artists and curators due to my long-term experience of participant observation on Ukrainian contemporary art since 2005.
- 10 Other topoi in the critical art of the region were left behind this paper due to its size limits.
- 11 I conducted detailed analysis of “the Politician” topos in Ukrainian contemporary art in ZLOBINA T. (2010, b).
- 12 The art work can be seen on <http://ghenadiepopescu.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/69/>
- 13 The art work can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7eoFEOGqD4>
- 14 The art work can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCC6nXMjUMY>
- 15 The art works can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRp62ERPGds>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRSqD0Y43Hs&feature=related>

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