Twinkling Networks, Invisible Ties: On the Unofficial Contacts of Byelorussian Artists in the 1980s

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This article presents the first results of research on the unofficial contacts between Byelorussian artists and those from former USSR republics and from neighboring countries in the 1980s. In this period marked by perestroika, the contacts between USSR republics multiplied—indeed, official travel for the purpose of “sharing experiences” date from this very time. At the same time, unofficial art increased its visibility, something that was inspiring and frightening at the same time. The article will deal with Estonian and Polish lines of contacts, which could be seen as the example of the logic and tactics involved in the networks of the era.

This article does not pretend to be exhaustive or to decrypt all existing unofficial contacts, but it can be seen as the first step in gathering information about the period and analyzing the existing networking strategies: the entrance on the art market and in the “international” art context, the first residencies of Byelorussian artists in Poland, the practical issues of the transportation of canvases across borders and the acquisition of Byelorussian artists’ works by collectors. We want to understand the tactics: How did artists establish professional contacts outside their country at a time when the art
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field was controlled by the Union of Artists\(^1\) and by exhibition committees (granting the right to some artists to be present in the public zone of visibility and excluding others)? Therefore, the issue of Byelorussian artists emigrating will not be analyzed here; instead, we will explore the unofficial practices of defining the space of liberty in the context of governmental regulation of the art field.

We think that there was a certain “implicit contract” (which obviously did not really exist) concerning the division between the official and the unofficial. The unofficial art of this time was not prohibited as such, but was displaced into the zone of silence and could only exist through apartment exhibitions, displays of work in basement ateliers and country house\(^2\) performances. At the very moment it tried to enter the zone of visibility, it became problematic.\(^3\) This implicit contract presupposed the abandonment of the right to talk publicly or to admit publicly the existence of another art, the main danger of which did not consist in political engagement but in the possibility of another existence. The avant-garde seemed to be frightful because of the very alternative to the discourse existing outside the official one.

The Certeau\(^4\) distinction between tactics and strategies could be useful for us to realize the modes of functioning of the unofficial Byelorussian artists in times of socialist realism:

I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats . . . can be managed.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Artists’ unions were created in the 1930s in the former USSR republics emboldening the Soviet artists and art historians to assure “socialistically” and ideologically correct art, asserting the patriotic values of “proletarian internationalism.”

\(^2\) We have in mind the artistic tandem of Igor Kashkurevich and Ludmila Rusova, who realized their initiation in the contemporary art in their country house.

\(^3\) For instance, the first “public” exhibition of unofficial artists was organized in the 1980s in the open air close to the Svisloch River on the eve of the Minsk city celebration. Artists exhibited their canvases along the quay. The Ja. Kupaly Park close to the river was soon flooded by the police, policemen tried to throw the artists’ works into the river and then began to “arrest the canvases,” in order to transport them to the Yanka Kupala Museum, close to the area, which no one was allowed to enter.


\(^5\) Ibid., 36.
The power strategies are consequently functioning in the delimited space of visibility through the structured groups (unions), organized according to certain (bureaucratic) practices of five-year plans, reporting procedures, those of official authorization and other similar ones, which are reproduced. We can probably affirm that in the 1980s and earlier, the visible space of power was structured through the union of artists, the Commission of the Ministry of Culture giving permission to take the work of art out of the country and the routine exhibitions of official (visible) artists organized in the big exhibition halls.

Certeau continues: “In contrast to a strategy . . . a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. . . . The space of a tactic is the space of the other.” And then later: “It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them.” Consequently, tactics, as the art of the weak, are not the planned actions of the resistance and consist of measurable actions representing the sort of reactions to the delimitation of liberty space by the power strategies: the twinkling networks, exhibitions in apartments and basements, several canvases transported on the same stretcher and others we will try to describe in this article. The difficulty of collecting materials concerning the unofficial contacts of Byelorussian artists of this time and making it readable consists in the fact that these networking tactics were meant to be invisible and unstructured, they were occasional and disseminated, fragmentally remembered and unsystematically reproduced by the main actors.

We should also denote a terminological problem. Several terms used by researchers, even those that are quite vague, attempt to describe the very confrontation of the art we are writing about with the official art (socialist realism). One of the terms is quite obvious—unofficial art. This term describes the antinomy official/unofficial. Official art, or socialist realism, was a priori the art supported by the government agencies, occupying the zone of visibility. Unofficial art in this case meant the art made by the artists who did not belong to the Artists’ Union and existed in parallel to the official art field.

The confrontation of official and unofficial art did not mean the focus of the latter on political engagement or the promise of social engagement. On
the contrary: in the Byelorussian case, unofficial art insistently pretended to be indifferent to politics, it was a case of persistent denial of all things political, which was present in the unofficial art in the form of absence and exclusion. However, this kind of self-exclusion from the field of politics can be seen as quite symptomatic and can be judged as a political gesture itself. Furthermore, we presuppose that this exclusion of all things political continued in the unofficial art in the form of absence or in the form of traces of the recent presence.

The term avant-garde is problematic, too. The unofficial Byelorussian art of this time is considered as a certain continuation of the Soviet avant-garde tradition of the 1920s (or as an extension of the formal tradition). We can also acknowledge the rushed and fragmentary appropriation of the European avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements. The migration between the modern art movements—a certain negligence toward the conceptual core of these movements and an obsession with the formal experiments associated with modernism—was important. In the official/unofficial art opposition, the latter was mostly based on the stylistic antagonism with socialist realism. This confrontation could be based on the ideology of pure art (resistance to the perception of art as a force having a huge impact on the general course of the struggle), or in the philosophy of the so-called inner immigration of artists (their deliberate self-exclusion from the social and cultural public life). With some reservation we could say that avant-garde art was all the art that was not socialist realism, and represented therefore the eclectic mix of modernist artistic movements.

We will begin with the Estonian line of contacts, which is associated with the Estonian curator and fine art expert, Ninel Ziterova, who was particularly interested in underground art in the former USSR republics.

Ziterova worked in the Kardiorg Museum in Tallinn and was in contact with Ukrainian artists, one of whom, Petro Gulin, introduced her to Walera Martynchik.7 At the beginning of the 1980s, the underground movements were spreading in Belarus, and Martynchik invited Ziterova to visit Minsk to see what was going on there and to visit unofficial artists’ studios. Consequently, the idea emerged to organize an exhibition in the Estonian city of

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7 Walera Martynchik was born in Belarus in 1948; after his studies at Minsk College of Fine Art, he created the dissident group Forma in 1987 (Kirillov, Khachevich, Martynchik, Zabavchik, Petrov and Malyshevski). The visual protest of the group took an apolitical form, the path of “inner immigration, away from the outer life, in all its roughness, stagnation, danger and banal simplification.” Since 1990, he has lived in London.
Kohtla-Järve. Sergey Lapsha, Vitaly Rozhkov, Igor Kashkurevich, Viktor Petrov, Walera Martynchik, Konstantin Goretskii, and Olga Sazykina (with her works of art and those of Gennady Khatskevich) took the train and went to organize one of their first exhibitions in a public space. The Informal Art exhibition took place in Kohtla-Järve in 1986. “It was quite a nervous time, ‘unofficial artists’ were not really prepared to become visible suddenly, it was a strange ambiguous desire to finally become public, which was associated with the strong fear of public criticism or the simple recognition of one’s own vulnerability to not being accepted. But, anyway, it was so inspiring! I remember we lived in the same tiny apartment, all of us, forced to sleep like sardines in a can, but it was some kind of amazing too,” said Olga Sazykina, one of the participants of these events.

After the exhibition, Ziterova visited Belarus several times and was invited to the exhibition of the art group “Form”; she also visited several artists’
studios and bought some works of Chernobrisov, who was an important figure for the young unofficial artists of the time and was seen as a spiritual leader. He had, for instance, a list of St. Petersburg art collectors and galleries that he gave to young unofficial Byelorussian artists going to the city. This is how the young artists of the time realized their artistic entrance in St. Petersburg and sometimes found collectors willing to buy their works.

Ziterova organized the avant-garde art festival in 1988 in Narva, Estonia, in which avant-garde artists from the former USSR republics of Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Georgia and others took part. “We spent five days there. ‘Novye dikie’ presented their video, ‘Mitki’ were getting drunk, Kashkurevich presented his performances in the woods, Vladimir Lappo, Vitaly Rozhkov, Igor Zabavchik, Viktor Petrov, Valery Martynchik, Andrey Belov, Ludmila Rusova, Igor Kashkurevich and Olga Sazykina presented their works during the exhibitions. It was a good occasion to get out of the silence zone and to create a kind of unofficial art network with informal artists,” said Olga Sazykina of the festival. During one of his performances, Kashkurevich and others got under the tarpaulin pretending to swim there as if they were in the water and then reappeared and announced the performance title “The Loneliness of the Individual in the Crowd.”

The name of Ziterova is associated with the exhibitions in Krakow, too. Chernobrisov had several contacts with the Krakow Catholic Foundation, which aimed to open a small gallery in the central Catholic church to organize some exhibitions there. Some Byelorussian unofficial artists (Grigoriy Ivanov, Matvey Basov, Olga Sazykina and Igor Malyshevskij) took the opportunity to organize several exhibitions there.

As far as we can see, the accidental nature of unofficial artistic contacts led to the dissemination of art exhibition practices which could have some visible aftereffects consisting in the enlargement of networks or a certain interchange with, or entrance into, the art market. Several exhibitions were significant because they offered artists the experience of becoming public, but they remained nonetheless isolated actions.

After the exhibitions, Ziterova had the idea of organizing a large exhibition of Byelorussian unofficial artists entitled “With God in the Heart”; to this end, she bought the works of Goretsky, Sazykina, Chernobrisov and others for the Kardiorg Museum. For some unknown reasons, the exhibi-
tion did not take place and the works of art were probably left in the museum. Recent attempts to find the works have proved fruitless, and this seems to be the general problem of the unofficial art practices—the impossibility of tracing the path of the migration of works of art and the definite loss of some of these works.

Another line of unofficial Byelorussian artists’ contacts with their colleagues from the former USSR republics and neighboring countries is that of Polish contacts, which we explored earlier with the description of the Krakow exhibitions. They date from the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when it became possible to buy a three-day ticket (putiovka) from the labor unions. Some artists had relatives living in Poland and could travel freely to Poland. Sazykina and Khatskevich used this opportunity to show the handmade catalogs of Byelorussian artists’ exhibitions to owners of the galleries they stumbled across in Poland. This is how they found the gallery Napiórkowskiej w restauracji Pod Krokodylem, where the curator Katarzyna Napierkowska was working. She was more than interested in the works of art presented in the prospectus and was aware of the fact that the opening of the borders would be associated with the growing interest in the unofficial art of the former USSR republics. After a while, she went to Belarus to select the artists whose work she wanted to buy for the gallery. She was essentially interested in discovering the works of art that could be sold. In 1990, Katarzyna organized the first Byelorussian exhibition in Poland, where the diplomatic world community was largely presented. The works of Plesanov, Malishevsky, Sazykina and Khatskevich were sold. There was TV coverage of the exhibition opening, and the story of the difficulties of the unofficial Byelorussian artists becoming public was told.

In 1991, the Belart exhibition of unofficial Byelorussian artists was organized in a deserted factory situated in the center of Warsaw. The exhibition was curated by the young curator from the Centre for Contemporary Art of Ujazdowski Castle. Works of art unofficially transported by train and by car

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15 One of the curious signs of the time was the double life lead by unofficial artists. They combined underground artistic activities with official employment that gave them access to the materials and/or workplaces they needed to create their art, such as a job in a factory where glass painting was done, or access to basement ateliers, obtained from the housing department in exchange for creating decorative works for official celebrations.

16 Andrei Plesanov was born in 1948 in Minsk. He graduated from the Byelorussian Arts Academy in 1980. He is one of the most significant collectors of unofficial Byelorussian art and owns the largest collection of it. He has organized several exhibitions of Byelorussian unofficial artists inside and outside the country.
were then randomly placed all over—on the walls, in the windows, on the floor, on the technical equipment. Because the exhibition breached certain organizational regulations, some problems arose. But Byelorussian artists recall this event as having been very inspiring and having given them the opportunity to meet German and Polish artists and curators.

The practice of canvas transportation could actually be seen as one of the punctual tactics of unofficial art resistance. There were strict rules concerning the export of works of art, and artists had to seek the permission of the Commission of the Ministry of Culture to take their work out of the country. To get this permission, they had to provide several documents, prove their authorship, pay the export duty and sign papers obliging them to bring their work back into the country. Moreover, it was not possible to take more than five pieces of work abroad. This is how certain techniques were invented, such as stretching several canvases over the same frame or hiding finished works underneath an unused canvas. Therefore, artists actually took unused canvases with them in order to create outside the country.

The curious practice of artistic journeys abroad, which could be compared with present-day artistic residencies, was becoming quite frequent during this
time. This practice could also be seen as a reaction to the restrictions on artists’ freedoms within the country. Byelorussian artists thus made arrangements with gallery owners or people willing to buy works of art for their collections. Gallery owners or potential buyers provided artists with a place to live and work for one to two weeks in exchange for a few pieces created by the artists during the journey. The crew of six to seven artists lived in the same apartment, working in the night and visiting the galleries where they left their works during the day. The galleries were everywhere—every hotel had a little gallery and gallery owners were glad to have Byelorussian artists’ work to sell or to include in their own collections. Katarzyna Napierkowska received unofficial Byelorussian artists in her cottage. The artists worked there and eventually left their work to be sold. Thus, contacts with galleries were established, exhibitions were organized and the laws of the art market were discovered. It is worthwhile to point out that dozens of works of art were lost in these circumstances, and we have no choice but see this as a one of the inevitable consequences of the fragmentary and accidental character of unofficial artistic practices.

Thus, the research carried out on the unofficial contacts of Byelorussian artists with artists and curators from the former USSR republics and neighboring countries in the period from the 1980s to the mid-1990s portrays the latter as fragmentary, particularly based on personal liaisons or accidental practices of gallery owners looking for art. Being undocumented, these contacts are mythologized by the main actors, and should be carefully verified. Further, it would also be preferable to try to trace the path of the migration of works of art lost during this time.

The lines of contacts explored in this article are not exhaustive and could be developed and completed (with the St. Petersburg and Moscow networks, for instance). The question concerning the development of these practices and especially of those traces in the actual situation in the Byelorussian art scene, with its rather symptomatic division between official and unofficial art, and the obligatory institutional regulations of the art field, remains open for further research.