

All muses under one roof

Minsk's Palace of Arts hosts international *Dakh-9* Arts Festival, uniting contemporary art from 11 countries



New artworks created as audience watches, ensuring tremendous success of festival

By Irina Zavadszkaya

I won't describe everything that *Dakh-9* offers to those searching for novel artistic impressions but, its organisers tell us that musicians, performers, poets and artists will be demonstrating their talents until September 20th. The authors are creating contemporary works live in the Palace halls.

Nothing similar has ever taken place in Belarus, although the title of the project unambiguously indicates that this is its ninth occurrence. It originated in 2001, at Berlin's Tacheles Kunsthaus. We can understand (without art historians explaining to us) why tourists from all over the globe adore the event and want to attend this former department store,

turned by the painters into a contemporary arts centre and one of Berlin's major sights.

Ales Rodin (Dzyu), a veteran of our Soviet underground, was the first Belarusian painter to take part at Tacheles; he occupied an entire floor (free of charge) — the very space where Rodin created masterpieces for almost a decade (with a few short absences to his homeland). He worked in full view of spectators, who immediately became faithful fans. Today, Belarusian painters at Tacheles are nothing extraordinary. Unfortunately, many are known there far better than in their homeland...

The initiators and co-ordinators of the festival — Ales Rodin and Dmitry Yurkevich (Mitrich), the leader of *Mechanery Kultury*

— didn't aim to achieve such success; events unfolded naturally.

"I'm not an organiser by nature," asserts Ales. "As far as the organisational side of the event is concerned, Mitrich has done far more. If I made a suggestion, I then had to agree with his alternative!" explains Ales. He refers to their joint project *Victims of Art* — given pride of place at the festival. Artistes, painters and musicians took part. Like Van Gogh's cut ear, the theme is suffering for one's art. It may seem a cliché but the philosophy of Dzyu and Mitrich goes far deeper.

"For me, art is like a Trojan horse in society's pocket," speculates Dmitry. "It's a super-power — inborn in each of us. It lightly sleeps until it's needed, then uncurls and insinu-

ates itself into our lives. This power can turn into anything: the art of politics or philosophy... Audiences — those who consume the work of politicians, artists and poets — can't always endure."

"Consumers are the victims of art, when they feel that they can't live without it," adds Rodin, who looks like a merciless Caesar in his dark toga. The forum includes painters from Belarus, Germany, Poland, Russia, Israel, Ukraine, Norway, the Netherlands, Italy, the USA and Japan, yet guests are not always enamoured of what they see.

The entrance into the Palace of Arts after 17.00 is free. Initially, the members of the Belarusian Union of Artists united in preparing the event at Berlin's Tacheles Arts Centre. They

supposed that it would primarily appeal to young people. However, by multiplying the number of festival days by the ticket price, they found that few students would be able to afford to visit. Accordingly, they began to search for sponsors.

The Palace of Arts has buzzed with a crazy rhythm for the past month, with new talent on show each day. Alongside presentations by alternative artistes, poets and musicians, *Dakh-9* promises online conferencing with scandalous painter Oleg Mavromatti and another performance festival — *Navinki*.

"We're trying to recreate the atmosphere of Tacheles," summarises Mitrich. "We want to show the mood of creativity in which all living things reside."

Historic reconstruction of 'Minsk's Atlantis'

Belarusian art historian, Nadezhda Usova, met us at the traditional holiday of poetry and song in the village of Rakutevshchina (Minsk region). Here, a branch of the Maxim Bogdanovich Literary Museum is operational. Nadezhda is always interested in such events; she has great presence and artistic taste and is fervent in her desire to maintain the spiritual life of the capital. Her creativity suits her position as Deputy Director for Scientific Work at the National Art Museum

Nadezhda, what are your recent discoveries?

We discovered an artist with a globally known name — Chaim Soutine — and found information on his life in Minsk. Michel Kikoïne is another interesting artist, born in Gomel. He attended Vilno art school alongside Soutine and, also, later moved to France. His son, also an artist, lives in France. We are negotiating an exhibition of Kikoïne's work in Minsk. Another artist from Soutine's circle, Sam Zarfin, also lived in Belarus; he moved to France, becoming a mason...

Some might question our right to claim artists who formed their artistic career abroad.

They spent their childhood and younger days here, which is vital to an artist's outlook. All studied in Vilno and passed through the famous Kruger school. We must include them in the 'circle' of Belarusian art.

However, the cultural life of a city embraces not only artists...

You are right. We wish to find the city's 'genos loci' via 19th — early 20th century Minsk architecture. Every house was a masterpiece yet there is little information from those times. We had wonderful Vilensky Railway Station but I have not yet discovered who designed it. We also have no idea who designed the Kazan Mother of God Church, near the railway station. Many facts remain a mystery, since relevant documents are kept in other cities' archives.

Please tell us about some of the legends.

Duke Karol Czapski ruled Minsk. He bought a house from the seemingly humble Gausman family and I wondered why, until I discovered that Gausman was a Polish gentleman and a secretary of Minsk's Assembly of Noblemen. He was a true expert

in archives, had perfect handwriting and could copy any document. Gausman forged family trees and seals for money. This helped him to build a mansion, with a summerhouse in its grounds for entertaining guests. Eventually, his crimes were uncovered, but Gausman defended himself by saying he was a collector and that the seals he kept were ancient. He managed to avoid imprisonment.

His house — later known as 'Czapski's Palace' — became a venue for the nobility to gather; the first session of the Society of Fine Arts Lovers took place there.

Such stories create a city's atmosphere. Eighty years have passed and we are now living in another city, which changes every day. I'm now keen on photography, taking photos of old Minsk courtyards and ordinary houses. I notice that official monuments aren't seen here long. A monument to



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Art historian Nadezhda Usova

Russian Emperor Alexander II stood just 17 years, while a monument to a member of the Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) movement, Girsh Lekker only stood for a couple of years.

I'm now getting to know more about the history of the railway which changed Minsk's fate. I was surprised to learn that a student of Moscow University was appointed its Head. Trains travelled to Warsaw and Paris, via Minsk. You could summon a famous children's doctor from Warsaw to Minsk within just 24 hours by rail. The railway employed many educated people and free tickets were offered to allow attendance at artistic exhibitions in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Warsaw. Meanwhile, innovations were adopted from abroad... Nevertheless, there is much we still don't know about 'Minsk's Atlantis'.

Exciting book forum in focus

Children's literature from 18th-20th century on show at National Library of Belarus

The National Library's Labyrinth Gallery has hosted the *Magic Light of Children's Book* forum, dedicated to the beginning of the new academic year.

The event encompassed the *Modern Children's Book* exhibition, showcasing around 100 new illustrated editions (primarily for pre-schoolers and primary-aged children), as well as interesting editions for young people. The winners of the annual national *Art of Book* contest were also presented: *A Fairy-tale about Ivan the Potter and Tsar the Beast*; *King Stakh's Wild Hunt*; and *ABC Books*.

Guests were able to peruse various children's books printed in Belarus and Russia in the 18th-20th century. Exhibits included 18th century original editions, such as *Child's Reading for the Soul and the Mind* — the first children's magazine, which was published at the university printing shop in Moscow.