



By **Camilla Canocchi**

Often known as ‘Europe’s last dictatorship’, Belarus rarely makes the headlines other than for restrictive measures introduced by the government or [attacks on press freedom](#) . For all its mystery, Belarus isn’t a country that springs to mind when talking about contemporary art, but a new art gallery is working on representing and promoting Belarusian artists, not only in Belarus but the rest of Europe.

Under a new name and with a new space which opened last October in the centre of Belarus’ capital, Minsk, [Ÿ](#) , which was founded in 2004 as Podzemka, is probably the only non-governmental art gallery in the country where contemporary Belarusian artists can exhibit their work and gain profile.

“For young contemporary artists it is currently almost impossible to find a space in Belarus where to showcase their work,” explains Ÿ’s artistic director Anna Chistoserdova.

In fact Minsk has around five commercial, state-backed galleries where the only type of art that can be found comprises traditional paintings and sculptures. The government’s lack of interest in contemporary art is also confirmed by the fact that Belarus only featured at the [Venice Biennale](#) contemporary art event in 2005, and even then only unofficially.

As a result, Chistoserdova and her team helped organise the 'Independent Belarusian Pavilion of 53rd Venice Biennale' in Minsk last year, in order to initiate talks about Belarus' possible participation at the official event in 2011.



Its name, Ÿ, is a letter found exclusively in the Belarusian language, and is symbolic of Belarusian culture. Similarly, the language used in the exhibition's written material is Belarusian, even though the vast majority of the people speak Russian.

"We think it's important to bring back people's attention to Belarusian culture and language," explains Chistoserdova.

Among the many activities at the gallery, there is also 'Start', a programme designed to discover new artists, who are not only offered a space to exhibit their work but also given help with sponsors, international residencies and competitions.

"Start is an important part of our work," says Chistoserdova. "Thanks to this programme the circle of artists in the gallery has gradually been growing. At the moment we have 16 resident artists."

Ÿ's collaborations with other European cultural organisations and artists are also a significant part of the gallery's activity, and at least every three months it holds an exhibition of an artist from another European state. Since the beginning of this year there have been two exhibitions featuring foreign artists – State of Mind, a media installation by two Swedish artists focused on the issues relating the gay community in Russia, and another exhibition featuring the works of an Estonian artist.

Belarusian art steps out of the shadows

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