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11 The Nonidentity Problem in Contemporary Belarusian Art

Tatsiana Zhurauliova

In 2016, Belarusian artist Antonina Slobodchikova (b. 1979) participated in Michał Jachula's exhibition project, *Daily and Religious Rituals*, that took place in Białystok, Poland. She contributed a two-channel video titled *The Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes (Golos Zemle. Prah k Prah)* (Figure 11.1). Simultaneously broadcasted on two screens, the work shows the artist against the background of a dilapidated house burying a pig's tongue (screen 1), while a group of kindergarteners work on a crafts project at their desks (screen 2). The children's lively conversation and multi-directional movements on the one screen produce a stark contrast with the solemnity and silence of the action that unfolds on the other. The latter video starts with the image of Slobodchikova, dressed in black, presenting a pig's tongue to the viewer on a round reflective tray. She then goes through the motions of silently digging a shallow hole. The action unfolds in front of a one-story brick house, its dilapidated front wall featuring two closed doors and walled-up windows, which in their symmetry tightly frame the figure of the artist. At one point the camera angle shifts and allows the space behind the house to enter the frame. We see a road and an apartment building in the distance, an inclusion that locates the performance within an urban environment. As the pig's tongue is placed in the ground, the camera zooms in and focuses on the hole, which is covered by a piece of glass. The artist is then joined by her ten-year-old daughter; at the same time, the second screen goes dark. The camera—and by implication, the viewer—pauses on the faces of the artist and her daughter while they silently observe the tongue through the transparent barrier. The video ends with dry leaves and dirt being placed on top of the glass, gradually obscuring the view of the buried object (Figure 11.2).

In a recent interview, Slobodchikova described her initial concept for the work as follows: “when we are in an environment of totalizing control [...] the artist muffles (*zaglushaet*) himself, buries his voice, deprives himself of his right to speak (*lishaet sebia prava golosa*), because this voice is not needed by anyone, he is forbidden to speak.”¹ There are two important aspects to this statement. First, Slobodchikova's phrase “*lishaet sebia prava golosa*” serves as a useful elaboration on the English title of the video: *The Vote to the Ground*, since the Russian word “*golos*” can be translated both as “a voice” and “a vote.” Thus, the symbolical surrender of one's voice in the context of the work is understood in explicitly political terms, as a surrender of one's political agency. Second, what is striking about Slobodchikova's statement is the active role assigned to the artist in the process of surrendering her right to speak. In her view, when faced with both indifference and repression, the artist often chooses to respond by self-silencing, which results in the alienation of the self from the collective



Figure 11.1 Antonina Slobodchikova, frame from *The Vote to the Ground*, 2012. *Ashes to Ashes* (*Golos Zemle. Prub k Prabu*), 2012. Two-channel video, cinematographer Tanya Haurylchyk. Photograph © Tanya Haurylchyk.



Figure 11.2 Antonina Slobodchikova, frame from *The Vote to the Ground*, 2012. *Ashes to Ashes* (*Golos Zemle. Prub k Prabu*), 2012. Two-channel video, cinematographer Tanya Haurylchyk. Photograph © Tanya Haurylchyk.

body. The negative political implications of this choice appear to be in conflict with Slobodchikova's other works and statements from the same period, where she assigns silence with affirmative and healing qualities. For example, in her 2016 project entitled *Complete Silence*, the artist offers a definition of silence "as a state of complete acceptance of the given" and elaborates on its ability to foster an interpersonal understanding and build connections between individuals within the social sphere.² In fact, when compared to the artist's initial concept, *The Vote to the Ground* presents a more complex understanding of silence. In the video, silence operates both as a symptom of self-alienation, enacted through the symbolic act of surrendering one's voice, and as a generative force, a communicative space that exists outside of the semantic burden of language.

The political and artistic stakes of *The Vote to the Ground* are better understood when considered in relation to the work's immediate social and intellectual context and, in particular, to the persistent use of silence as a symbolic and representational trope in contemporary Belarusian culture. In order to address the multivalent role of silence in Slobodchikova's work, this essay focuses on its three specific conceptualizations: the muffling of societal apathy; silence as political protest; and the negational rhetoric of what anthropologist Serguei A. Oushakine defines as "apophatic nationalism"—a line of post-colonial thinking in contemporary Belarusian intellectual

discourse that emphasizes the productive capacity of negation, rejection, and absence.³ I conclude my discussion with an analysis of Slobodchikova's work through the lens of the nonidentity problem, a philosophical paradox developed within the field of population ethics. Applied to the Belarusian context, the nonidentity problem offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which *The Vote to the Ground* builds on silence's topical significance, while also exploring its generative and communicative potential.

Slobodchikova's video was created as a direct response to the events that occurred in October 2012 during the international project *Going Public. On the Difficulty of a Public Statement*. Initiated by the Goethe-Institut Lithuania, the project involved a number of events and workshops that took place in Germany, Lithuania, Belarus, and the Kaliningrad region. Within the framework of *Going Public*, a series of performances and interventions were scheduled throughout Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Slobodchikova's proposed contribution included an action, during which she and artists from other participating countries would bury a pig's tongue to represent symbolically the difficulty of artistic expression within the public sphere. However, the action was never realized. Slobodchikova's husband and fellow artist, Mikhail Gulin (b. 1977), who was also involved in the project, was arrested earlier in the day while performing his work *Personal Monument* (Figure 11.3). Reflecting on the events of that day, Slobodchikova noted in an interview that following the arrest, her action "lost its topicality, although in fact its topicality became so much stronger."⁴ She returned to the idea four years later in *The Vote to the Ground*, but now the work revealed an important shift in her understanding of the role of artistic expression in Belarusian society. In this respect, the particular details inherent in the conflict around *Personal Monument* offer insight into the development of Slobodchikova's work.



Figure 11.3 Mikhail Gulin, *Personal Monument*, 2012. Photograph © Mikhail Gulin.

Personal Monument was conceived as an intervention into an urban environment, with four geometric modules (three pink cubes and a yellow parallelepiped) being moved through the city and temporarily installed at different locations in varied formal arrangements. During the intervention, the modules were transported by Gulin and his assistants between four major squares in Minsk: Yakub Kolas, Kalinin, Lenin, and October. When the group arrived at October Square, the site of the Presidential Residence, Gulin and his assistants were detained by representatives of the special police unit (OMON). They were transported to a holding cell, where they spent several hours before being charged with “resisting arrest.” Following a trial, the artist was cleared of these charges, but nonetheless had lost his teaching position at the Belarusian National Technical University.⁵ The modules used in the intervention remained in police custody and were never returned.⁶

The state’s reaction to the intervention was not completely surprising given that October Square had been one of the main sites of protests following the presidential elections of 2006 and 2010. Directed against Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, the protests questioned the legitimacy of his re-election for the third and fourth consecutive terms. *Personal Monument* brought to the fore the codified nature of public space in the nation’s capital. The moment Gulin and his mobile sculpture stepped onto the symbolically charged ground of the square, the artistic gesture of actively engaging the city’s built environment became perceived as a threat, a violation of an unwritten social order.

A contributing factor to this forceful state response to *Personal Monument* was its reliance on abstract forms that elude singular interpretation. The blank surfaces of the geometric modules and their nondescriptive colors produce a mutable signifier, one that invites a multiplicity of meanings. This semantic open-endedness stands in stark contrast to the direct expressive language of commercial displays, advertising, and national symbols, which dominate the visual landscape of the Belarusian urban environment. The use of abstraction also marks a departure from Gulin’s earlier work within public space. Over the last ten years, the artist had staged several actions, which aimed to solicit an interaction, to provoke a conversation or a reaction from the passersby. But, as the documentation for his projects demonstrates, his actions often ran up against an emphatic indifference, an active refusal of onlookers to react or engage with what appears to be different or out of place. For example, his 2011 project *Norka* (*A Little Hole*) directly responded to this trend, reflecting on what the artist calls a societal “conservation” (*konservatsiia*)—an all-permeating societal apathy, informed by a formless sense of worry and fear.⁷ For *Norka*, Gulin produced a large portable object, reminiscent of a molehill, that was carried by a team of assistants through the streets, parks, and squares of Minsk. Throughout the action, the artist spent some time in the molehill himself, looking out to engage the onlookers. He also invited a number of people who noticed the action to climb into the object. With the exception of a couple of children, only one woman took the artist up on his offer, climbing into the molehill and using it as a platform to detail her current difficult family situation. In its form, *Norka* suggests a destructive undercurrent—moles are widespread in Belarus and are considered to be an agricultural pest, producing an invisible network of tunnels in the soil that undermines plants’ roots and compromises the stability of the ground surface. This implication of disruption, however, is undercut in the video documenting the action by the failure to solicit a reaction. By frequently using wide shots of *Norka* installed in an empty urban landscape, the artist appears to embrace

this failure, foregrounding instead the guarded silence that almost tangibly surrounds the object.

This same silence permeates the video documentation of the public reaction—or lack of it—to *Personal Monument*, recorded before the confrontation with the representatives of the state. According to Gulin, with this work, he was not looking to solicit public interaction; rather, he was interested in seeing his portable sculpture in context in order to create a visual dialogue between the modules' abstract forms and the city's built environment.⁸ Despite the stated intention of the artist, the specificity of place (October Square) and the open-endedness of the abstract visual language triggered a reaction to *Personal Monument* by the state. Much like *Norka*, *Personal Monument*, however, failed to solicit public attention, even in the aftermath of Gulin's arrest. In his account of the events entitled "No One Cares about the Artist," Gulin notes the lack of immediate response on the part of the *Going Public* organizers, as well as the prevailing silence of the artistic community, and the general public more broadly.⁹ It appears that *Personal Monument* ultimately failed to pierce the shield of societal apathy despite—or perhaps, because of—its perilous recognition by the authorities.

This failure is emblematic of contemporary Belarusian society. Discussing societal apathy in Belarus, philosopher Olga Shparaga attributes Lukashenko's staying power to his government's ideological emphasis on social stability, understood as an absence of conflict. She defines the state program as "the profitable opposition of the Belarusian model of democracy to both the European and Russian models" and thus as "a formation without essence."¹⁰ In this respect, the government platform can remain vague and elusive since it is always defined as the contrary, always in opposition to the contested nature of the democratic process elsewhere. Furthermore, it is in the name of stability that the authorities are able to methodically suppress political opposition and swiftly eradicate any public display of social discontent. In Shparaga's view, by perpetuating the idea of stability as an absence of antagonism, the Belarusian government conditions societal apathy and thus ensures its own all-permeating control.

According to the work of Belarusian artist Sergey Shabohin (b. 1984), this process is compounded by the authorities' ability to mobilize a formless sense of worry (*trevoga*) in the population, cultivating it through the discursive multiplication of objects of fear. In his ongoing project *Practices of Subordination*, Shabohin methodically analyzes mechanisms of power, both in Belarus and more generally. Since 2010, the artist has been collecting a variety of objects, images, and textual fragments that within his archive serve as anchors for narratives of intimidation and state interference in the everyday life of its citizens.¹¹ These materials include such objects as the image of a foul-smelling drainpipe, a photograph of a sticky note with the words "I am afraid more. Dad.," and an account of a person returning home to find their chair standing on the table—a sign of someone else having been to the apartment (the photograph of the chair is accompanied by the text: "This is how THEY remind us of themselves") (Figure 11.4). Influenced by Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of power, Shabohin's project aims to make legible the mechanisms through which the state maintains totalizing control of daily life.¹² The seemingly infinite multiplication of materials presented within the ongoing project highlights both the persistence of the disciplinarian pressure and the simultaneous numbing of individual agency, with the continuously generated feeling of fear translating into a permanent state of paralyzing anxiety. Considered against this background, an action such as the forceful



Figure 11.4 Sergey Shabohin, *Practices of Subordination*, 2011. Y Gallery pavilion: *She Cannot Say Heaven*, the main program of the festival *Artvilnius'11*, Lithuanian Art Gallerists' Association, Vilnius, Lithuania. Photograph © Sergey Shabohin.

suppression of *Personal Monument* quickly loses its topicality, disappearing into an already oversaturated field of daily subordination.

In contrast to Shabohin's *Practices of Subordination*, Slobodchikova's *The Vote to the Ground* reduces content. Even within the work, the visual and auditory saturation associated with screen 2 underscores silence and visual blankness of the other screen. Prioritized over direct expression, silence suggests a multiplicity of meanings, functioning simultaneously as a symptom of fear and as a means of resistance to the discursive mechanisms of power. Slobodchikova's video reflects the artist's broader interest in exploring the notions of trauma and the alienation of the self. In particular, it encourages a psychoanalytical reading of its visual and symbolic apparatus by evoking themes of death, anxiety, and of the psychic split. At the same time, the work remains firmly grounded in its immediate social and political context by maintaining the specificity of its personal and discursive references. Produced four years after Gulin's arrest, *The Vote to the Ground* reads as a gesture of surrender and as a mourning of the impossibility of free and public artistic expression. Yet, it also harnesses the constructive connotations of silence in Belarusian social discourse and explores its communicative potential as a semantic space uncorrupted by language and ideological coda.

Visually, *The Vote to the Ground* fosters a sense of secrecy and intimacy with the viewer. The framing of the video on screen 1 forms a shallow space in front of the seemingly uninhabited house, its walled-off windows and closed doors compounding the claustrophobic effect. The dilapidated nature of the structure and the unkempt space around it create a sense of trespassing, and the resulting feeling of illicitness binds the viewer to the artist. Similarly, the frequent use of close-up frames on both screens produces a sense of physical and emotional proximity to the action. In addition, the prominent role of reflective surfaces, such as those of the tray and of the glass covering, interferes with the legibility of objects on each screen. In this respect, the attentive faces of the artist and her young daughter, as they look to the ground at the end of the video, function as a directive for the viewer—following them, we are compelled to look closely, to examine the sight that is made harder and harder to discern.

Slobodchikova has said that *The Vote to the Ground*, as well as some of her other works, are influenced by the children's game known as "secrets" (*sekretiki*), which was popular in the former Soviet Union. The "secrets" were arrangements of found materials that would be buried in a shallow hole with the goal of preserving their composition from natural degradation and vandalism by other children searching for materials to make their own "secrets." A typical "secret" usually included three layers, starting with a reflective liner to cover the bottom of the hole, such as a piece of foil. The next layer was the filler—a variety of organic and inorganic matter, chosen for its visual attractiveness or perceived value (such as its rarity, difficulty of acquiring, or subjective value). Finally, the composition was overlaid with a protective layer—usually a piece of broken glass. In fact, in *The Vote to the Ground*, screen 2 documents the kindergarteners fashioning "secrets," while their game is echoed by the solemn ritual of Slobodchikova burying the pig's tongue on screen 1. Anthropologist Svetlana Adonieva has noted that the game of "secrets" relied on the existence of the other—a trusted friend to whom the "secret" was revealed.¹³ In Slobodchikova's work, the viewer becomes that trusted other, becoming privy to the "secret" within.

The work also draws on the notion of fragility and disappearance integral to the practice of "secrets." In the game, the glass screen serves both as protection for the matter within, and also as a barrier between the "secret" and the child who produced it. As

the “secret” is unearthed again and again (either to be shown to a friend or checked for signs of destruction by other children), the passage of time becomes visible in the deterioration of matter under the glass. Informed by this *memento mori* aspect of the game, Slobodchikova’s work articulates the transparent barrier as the mechanism of alienation and, given the symbolic implications of the work, self-alienation of the artist. By being placed into the ground, the tongue enters the realm of the other; it becomes subject to natural decomposition. The glass cover, placed over the hole, carries with it the anticipation of inevitable degradation. Yet, as the camera turns downward towards the hole in *The Vote to the Ground*, the viewer’s eyes are met with the thickness of reflections on the surface, which obscure the object underneath. Gradually, the tongue becomes less and less discernible as dry leaves are placed on top of the glass surface.

It is important to note that it is the working of the camera, its angle and focus, that produces the mirroring effect on the glass, obscuring the tongue underneath. The glass surface, mediated through the cinematic apparatus, functions akin to the screen in Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the term. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan describes a fundamental split between the eye, as the subject’s faculty to see, and the gaze, as that which is directed at the subject from outside: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”¹⁴ Within this split, he proposes the notion of the screen as a protective mechanism: “Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.”¹⁵ Along similar lines, in *The Vote to the Ground*, the reflection on the glass captured by the camera functions as the screen that both blinds the viewer to the object beneath and protects her from its gaze.

The notion of the screen as a protective mechanism occupies an important role in Slobodchikova’s artistic practice. Encouraging a psychoanalytical reading of her work, the artist often evokes the concept of the screen as a response to the feeling of formless anxiety, which she characterizes as “the totalizing fear.”¹⁶ For example, she describes the concept for her 2012 installation *Yano Tut (It is Here)* in terms of an omnipresent feeling of fear: “It is everywhere; you wake up, you fall asleep—it is always with you.”¹⁷ For this installation, the space of the gallery was divided into two rooms. The first room was framed by large alphabetic skeletons of phrases “Es ist da”/ “Yano tut” (“It is here” in German and Belarusian), covered with artificial black flowers (Figure 11.5). Between the sculptural forms of the text, a video of identical textual skeletons being burned in a snowy field was projected onto the gallery wall. In the second room, the words “here” and “it” populated numerous collages, displayed in a crowded arrangement on one of the walls in the exhibition (Plate 14). Written, scratched, and painted on the multi-media surfaces of each collaged board, the words overlaid a variety of popular imagery chosen by the artist: fragments cut out from advertisements, architectural details and individual portraits found in history books, definitions of words and phrases from dictionaries, pieces of commercial wrapping, nostalgic depictions of rural landscapes, etc. In an interview, Slobodchikova described the collages as stand-ins for individual narratives of self:

Each board is a worldview, an individual ideology. Some of us cover (*prikryvaiut*) ourselves up with religion, understand our life through it and exist within the system of religious signs [...]. To some degree, each board exists as an icon of a person who found some kind of cover (*prikrytie*) from the fear of death, of the inevitable, of what could happen to you.¹⁸



Figure 11.5 Antonina Slobodchikova, *Yano Tut (It is Here)*, 2012. Y Gallery, Minsk, Belarus. Photograph © Viktoriya Kharitonova.

The artist's description brings to mind Lacan's notion of the screen, understood as an accumulation of cultural codes, in which the self is constructed from the preexisting cultural material in response to the threat of the external gaze.¹⁹ For Slobodchikova, this threat is death, its invisible yet constant presence that permeates all aspects of one's life.

The Vote to the Ground can then be seen as performing a traumatic encounter with one's own death, mapped onto the animal's tongue. As the tongue is placed in the ground, the reflection on the glass cover acquires a dual role: it both obscures what is underneath and marks its very spot. In the blankness of the reflective surface, the viewer is confronted with a series of psychologically charged oppositions—living versus dead, human versus animal, subject versus object. The latter split carries in itself not only psychic, but also social ramifications, an aspect that inevitably relates *The Vote to the Ground* back to the specific circumstances of its creation. Informed by a dual act of suppression (Gulin's arrest and Slobodchikova's consequent inability to realize her action within the *Going Public* project), the work focuses on the question of artistic agency. How can an artist respond to the pressures of external threats and internalized fears? In *The Vote to the Ground*, the answer figures as silence, performed both as an absence of speech and as a semantic open-endedness of the blank reflective surface.

Slobodchikova's use of silence in the video and in her description of the work's initial concept situates *The Vote to the Ground* in its immediate cultural context, given the particular resonance of the term in Belarusian intellectual discourse of the last two decades. Most recently, silence has been conceptualized as an act of protest, with a series of silent protests taking place in different Belarusian cities in the spring and summer of 2011. Coordinated through the Russian-language social network VKontakte, the gatherings were characterized by the deliberate and persistent silence

of the protesters, accompanied by periods of clapping. These silent expressions of discontent were suppressed by the authorities, leading to arrests and forceful dispersal of participants. Nonetheless, the strategy found wide resonance in cultural discourse, with the concept of silence as an expression of personal agency echoing across different media. For example, the exhibition of contemporary Belarusian art that took place in 2012 at the EFA (Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) Project Space in New York was entitled *Sound of Silence: New Art Strategies and Tactics of Belarusian Artists*. Curated by Olga Kopenkina, the exhibition explored the theme of silence as a state of existence anchored in both suppression and protest.²⁰ In addition to referencing the silent protests, the title of the exhibition evoked a project that would be familiar to an international audience—the play *Zone of Silence*, produced by the Belarus Free Theatre.²¹ Established in 2005, the theatre troupe currently exists in exile due to its explicitly anti-government stance. One of its best-known productions, *Zone of Silence*, first opened in Belarus in 2008, and has since been performed on a number of international stages, including New York’s La MaMa Theatre in 2011.

In his analysis of *Zone of Silence*, Oushakine notes the ways in which its portrayal of contemporary Belarusian society plays into an international audience’s expectations about life under “the last dictatorship of Europe.”²² At the same time, he finds the performance emblematic of the broader impulse in Belarusian culture that envisions the present in terms of absences, silences, and erasures. Oushakine proposes the term “apophatic nationalism,” which he defines as an emphasis on “the constructive aspects of negation, rejection, and withdrawal through which Belarusian nationalists express their arguments and shape their communities.”²³ His analysis includes writings by several key figures of the so-called Adradzhenne or the national Rebirth, a cultural and intellectual movement that lasted from approximately the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Influenced by postcolonial theory, writers of the Rebirth characterized the postcommunist condition in Belarus as a lack or absence of a coherent national identity, destroyed by the periods of political, cultural, and linguistic domination. These authors conceptualized the process of decolonization as a “war in the name of the stolen past”—a process of reclaiming some sort of intrinsic national or ethnic Belarusian identity that is conceived of as having existed before the period of Soviet colonization.²⁴

Oushakine also explores the legacy of the Rebirth’s nationalist rhetoric through the work of one of its most prominent critics, Belarusian writer Ihar Babkou (b. 1964). For the latter, a search for a coherent historical narrative results in the loss of the sense of the present. According to Babkou,

The Belarusian transculturalism thereby is above all a worldview of cultural abnormality, which is subjectively experienced as an inferiority complex, as a specific cultural trauma—a trauma of the absence of a strong, homogenous, national cultural space. Cultural absence becomes a permanent metaphor of the modern Belarusian reality and ultimately leads to the substitution of the reality itself in the cultural system—substituted by the ideal of a normal, happy, but so far unattainable future.²⁵

He instead proposes an understanding of Belarusian transculturalism as a method for “recognizing and reading the present, which in the past three or four centuries has remained unnamed, despite existing as a silent condition of most cultural practices.”²⁶

He describes this present as the experience of the borderland—an inherently dynamic, contradictory, and often conflicted field of cultural production. In this respect, his writings exemplify what Oushakine terms as “the constructive aspects of negation, rejection, and withdrawal.” For Babkou, the refusal to name or to define the terms of the Belarusian transcultural configuration functions as a generative site of ontological nomadism.²⁷

It is this notion of silence as a refusal to name the specific terms of identity that makes Babkou’s writing resonate with Slobodchikova’s *The Vote to the Ground*. In her video, the artist is similarly concerned with “recognizing and reading the present,” rather than defining it in terms of a particular past or imagined future. This interpretation may appear somewhat paradoxical given the resonance of the work’s symbolic imagery with the specific circumstances of its conception. However, the contradiction can be productively explored through the theoretical framework of the so-called “nonidentity problem.” Sometimes referred to as the “paradox of future individuals,” the nonidentity problem was formulated within the field of population ethics in the late 1970s and early 1980s independently by Derek Parfit, Thomas Schwartz, and Robert M. Adams.²⁸ A sustained investigation into the relationship between identity and existence, the nonidentity problem concerns cases in which an individual appears to be wronged by an action that is the condition of his or her own worthwhile existence. As a philosophical line of thought, it arises from the tension between the plausibility of certain general claims and the implausibility of certain specific conclusions that seem to follow from them.²⁹ Although usually considered in relation to future-directed cases, if applied to the contemporary Belarus, the nonidentity problem could be postulated through the following set of contradictory claims:

1. The Soviet past wronged contemporary Belarusians.
2. If the Soviet past wronged contemporary Belarusians, the way it wronged them was by harming them.
3. The only way the Soviet past could have harmed contemporary Belarusians is by making them worse off than they otherwise would have been.
4. The Soviet past did not make contemporary Belarusians worse off than they otherwise would have been.

The underlying logic of this formulation assumes that a particular cause or event that appears to be the source of some future people’s hardship is in fact not the case, since it did not make these persons worse off than they would have been otherwise. There are two implicit premises here: the first suggests that in the absence of this particular cause or event, a different set of future persons would have been born; the second hypothesizes that existence is always worthwhile and is preferable to nonexistence. Thus, persons who experience hardship due to a particular event or cause in the past exist in part due to that very event occurring or cause existing, while their existence, even if flawed, is preferable to not existing at all. There are a number of solutions that have been proposed to this problem, all of which focus on different parts of the argument, whether it is the question of the definitions of harm or the very issue of existence as being always preferable to nonexistence.³⁰

My goal here is not to contribute to the body of work on possible solutions to the nonidentity problem; rather, I propose to consider the parameters of the nonidentity problem as a framework for understanding the specificity of the contemporary

Belarusian political, social, and cultural contexts. If applied to the Belarusian case, the conditional cause within the problem can be continuously reformulated without the problem as a whole losing its valence. Thus, the causal term “the Soviet past” can be substituted for “the collapse of the Soviet Union,” or “the absorption into the Russian Empire” from a more distant historical past, or “the (re)lection of Lukashenko” from a more recent period. In fact, the project of naming one or numerous conditional causes has been a key aspect of Belarusian political discourse since the late 1980s. For instance, some of the causal terms mentioned above figure prominently in the postcolonial/postcommunist thinking of the Rebirth and inform the rhetoric of the “apophatic nationalism” described by Oushakine. However, when formulated as part of the nonidentity problem, the historical narratives of distant and recent pasts become subsumed by the question of the present. Considered through the theoretical lens of the paradox, Belarusian contemporary society can be examined beyond the terms of who or what afflicted contemporary Belarusians with harm, instead shifting the emphasis onto the notion of their worthwhile existence. The resulting theoretical reorientation hinges on the question of agency, offering an alternative to the narratives of victimhood inherent in the image of Belarus as a “zone of silence,” presented in some of the Rebirth writings or the Free Belarus Theatre play.

I want to suggest that it is a similar concept of agency that informs *The Vote to the Ground*. The artist’s silence functions as a semantic pause, while the screen of the reflective glass marks the spot of a deeply felt personal experience. Symbolically represented by the pig’s tongue, it remains there: it may be shed away, but in a way that reflects back onto the subject, holding her in its object-gaze. At the same time, it is not just the artist and the viewer who look down in silence; Slobodchikova also includes her then ten-year-old daughter. Given the work’s personal resonance as a reflection on the suppression of *Personal Monument*, the inclusion builds a temporal link, probing the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. As the child looks down, her eyes—figured as ours—are met with the thickness of the blank reflection. Is she worse off now than she otherwise would have been? And yet, her figure represents the other side of the paradox: as a subject, would she exist otherwise?

Notes

- 1 Antonina Slobodchikova, interview with the author, Minsk, July 31, 2018.
- 2 Slobodchikova, interview; “Imena otkryvaiut unikal’nuuu vystavku o belarusakh,” Imena Media Platform and Fund, last modified May 6, 2017, <https://imenamag.by/posts/art-proekt-imena>.
- 3 Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus,” *Qui Parle* 26, no. 2 (December 2017): 423–490.
- 4 Slobodchikova, interview.
- 5 Aleksei Tolstov, “Politicheskoe v iskusstve Belarusi desiatykh,” *Moscow Art Magazine* 101 (2017), accessed September 11, 2018, <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/55/article/1128>
- 6 Mikhail Gulin, “Do khudozhnika nikomu net dela,” interview by Ilona Dergach, *Art Aktivist*, published October 21, 2012, <http://artaktivist.org/mixail-gulin-%E2%80%9Cdo-khudozhnika-nikomu-net-dela%E2%80%9D/>.
- 7 Mikhail Gulin, “Norka,” Artist Youtube Channel, published November 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kN-ZOPtBfWk&t=211s>.
- 8 Mikhail Gulin, “Do khudozhnika nikomu net dela.”
- 9 Ibid.

- 10 Olga Shparaga, "Otchuzhdennoe obschestvo v tsentre Evropy," *Art Aktivist*, published June 1, 2011, <http://artaktivist.org/otchuzhdennoe-obshestvo-v-centre-evropy/>.
- 11 Tolstov, "Politicheskoe v iskusstve."
- 12 Lena Prents, "Sergey Shabohin: Archive-Museum-Laboratory," Artist Website, Sergey Shabohin, accessed September 11, 2018, <http://shabohin.com/a-m-l/>.
- 13 Svetlana Adonieva, "Igra v 'sekreteki,'" in *SSSR: territoria ljubvi*, ed. Nataliia Borisova et al. (Moscow: Novoe izd-vo, 2008), 208–223.
- 14 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY; London: W.W. Norton, 1981), 72.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 16 Slobodchikova, interview.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Although the meaning of the term remains somewhat elusive within the body of Lacan's work, the notion of the screen has been widely used in the field of visual studies. Here, I am drawing on the formulation by Hal Foster, who interprets Lacan's screen as "the cultural reserve," that which can be called "the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture." Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 140.
- 20 Olga Shparaga, "Sound of Silence," *Art Aktivist*, published March 22, 2013, <http://artaktivist.org/english/sound-of-silence-new-art-strategies-and-tactics-of-belarusian-artists/>. It should be noted that neither Slobodchikova nor Gulin took part in the exhibition. It did, however, include an installation of Shabohin's *Practices of Subordination*.
- 21 The play had a brief yet widely publicized run in New York in 2011. See, for example, Ben Brantley, "Dynamic Drama, Limited Means" *New York Times*, April 19, 2011, C1.
- 22 Oushakine, "How to Grow," 428.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 435–437.
- 24 Aliaksandar Lukashuk, "Bliskavitsa u dyamentse," in *Belaruskaia Atliantyda: Reali i mify eurapeiskai natsii*, ed. Viachaslau Rakitski (Place: Radyio Svabodnaia Europa/Radyio Svaboda, 2006), n.p., quoted in Oushakine, "How to Grow," 431.
- 25 Ihar Babkou, "Etyka pamezhzha," in *Karaleustva Belarus: Vytlumachenni ruinau* (Minsk: Lohvinau, 2005), n.p.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 For a discussion of Babkou's work as an example of "apophatic nationalism," see Oushakine, "How to Grow," 465–474.
- 28 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 359; Thomas Schwartz, "Obligations to Posterity," in *Obligations to Future Generations*, eds. R. Sikora and B. Barry (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1978), 3–13; Robert M. Adams, "Existence, Self-interest, and the Problem of Evil," in *Virtue of Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 65–76; and Gregory S. Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1982): 93–112.
- 29 For a comprehensive overview of the paradox, see David Boonin, *The Non-Identity Problem and the Ethics of Future People* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 30 The latter includes David Benatar's provocative book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).