

The not-so-tender flowers: Dakh Daughters between art and politics

When asked about their politics, Vlad Troitsky, the director and manager of *Dakh Daughters Band* (the project is a part of independent Ukrainian Centre of Contemporary Art *Dakh*), replied that “we do not struggle *against* something, we struggle *for* something: for love, freedom, and art.”

The free play of self-expression, irony, and creativity reigns supreme in their art. And while it is almost irresistible to read into their production *Roses* the idea that roses in question are flowers of Donbas withering in war (and the viewer, is of course, free to do so), its first production predates the onset of military conflict in Ukraine.

The contradiction is suggested in the name of the program itself: roses, having both thorns and flowers. The DD (*Dakh Daughters*) present a fascinating combination of ethnic themes, punk, cabaret aesthetics, frivolity, seriousness, aggression, and vulnerability. They wear costumes that exhibit a combination of innocence and sensuality. The DD are, as it were, universal artists: they write their own music and lyrics, sing, dance, change musical instruments freely, and move from genre to genre with ease. Their interests and inspirations range from cabaret and folklore to Ukrainian and world literature, verbatim, and avant-garde aesthetics generally.

They also roam freely across the literary canon picking and mixing bit of poetry as they like, even when they seem to have little in common: the poems of Mikhailo Semenenko *Avtoportret* and *Segodnia*, Shakespeare’s sonnet 35, folk songs, Mikola Vingranovsky’s and Charles Bukowski’s poetry, and “Hamlet-Machine” of Heiner Muller are all combined in one performance. The DD also throw video in the mixture: Donbas’s miners, trains packed with refugees, crucifixion, Bosch’s paintings add to the mesmerizing complexity of the multi-layer performance and penetrate the language barrier that might separate the viewer from the performers.

They are also unmistakably Ukrainian borrowing from the manner in which folk songs are performed and adopting their lyrics, playing on trembitas (a kind of alpine horn), and using the texts of Ukrainian poets.

Brilliant as they are, the DD owe much of their success abroad to the expectations of the critiques. The optics of a liberal artist critique tempt him or her to uncover emancipatory potential of “independent”, “underground”, or “subversive” art (and, unsurprisingly, s/he usually succeeds). There is a lot of that in the DD, just enough to make them the darlings of good-thinking Western journalists, critiques, and Eastern Europe analysts. To make it absolutely clear, there is a lot of genuine art in their work besides this resonance with an image of dissident artists.

Do the artists themselves consider their work political? After the performance, Vlad Troitsky stated that he doesn’t like politics because “it is always connected with war”. However, the

regional context and the events of the recent years forcefully press a political agenda on the collective. Their performances on the Maidan square in Kyiv and the political connotations of Roses, as well as their song *Viz'mi* (after a poem by Serhii Zhadan) put them alongside such political artists as Pussy Riot, Belarus Free Theatre, or Petr Pavlensky. And yet, the DD is also more than that: it's an art, a freak cabaret, a good music. It is about joy – the joy of living, making music, enjoying yourself. Their art is performative in the sense that it's power lies not only in the meaning of what they do, but in the force with which they make the utterance, in the act itself.