

"SEXY, STRAIGHT AND UNISEX"

Kiryl is young, super energetic, and open to new challenges. He is the organiser of the "Unisex" parties. At these unique events you can meet "everyone" – from young skaters and "it" girls, through alternative theatre actors and artists, to queer figures. Some wear costumes, some are half-naked, some have a style that is more "à la Berlin."

We record the conversation in Kiryl's car. He has also agreed to a photo shoot, and, in order to show me more than just the centre of Minsk, he takes me on a trip outside the city. We have to hide in the bushes, because – as he claims – if the police (and we have seen an official-looking motorboat) saw that we are taking pictures of him in the nude, we'd be in serious trouble.

Karol Radziszewski: How did you come up with the idea of the "Unisex" parties?

Kiryl Kalbasnikau: We started half a year ago. First it was my project with artist Aliona Haiduk, and the name was "MixTape." The idea was to invite friends and to have non-professional DJ sets, to play music we liked just for our circle, and to gradually invite more and more people. The first party was a success, so we decided to continue in a more commercial way, by selling tickets, because it's really a lot of work to prepare it. Then I came up with the idea that we should do some parties with special concepts or themes, and one of the MixTape parties was named "Unisex," so I took the name for my project from that. When I started to work on my own, I wanted to concentrate more on sexual identities and to promote gender equality. I believe it doesn't matter how you look, or

who you love or sleep with. And we collaborated with a couple of queer festivals, like Meta Queer Film Festival—it was a pretty massive party. We had a cool costumes. Beside Minsk, we hosted parties in Brest and Vitebsk. The plan was to also do them in Hrodna (Grodno), but there was a problem with finding a place. Some people, when they hear about that kind of concept, they don't want to collaborate. People don't like queer; you never know what to expect.

KR: And how do your friends react to the fact that you are a straight guy organizing queer parties?

KK: Oh, my friends enjoy these parties!

KR: But aren't they surprised that you are organizing them?

KK: Some of them are. I mean, they are not all from artistic circles, some of them are programmers or web designers, so first of all they were surprised that I was organizing parties at all, and then

by the way that I organize them. (laughs) But they love it, aside from some guys from my hometown who visited once and felt uncomfortable. I remember; I was naked and wearing this transparent medical uniform, the one that doctors use for surgeries. So when the wind blew in a particular way, my ass was visible. (laughs)

KR: I remember a few photographers at your party, including myself—is it safe to take photos?

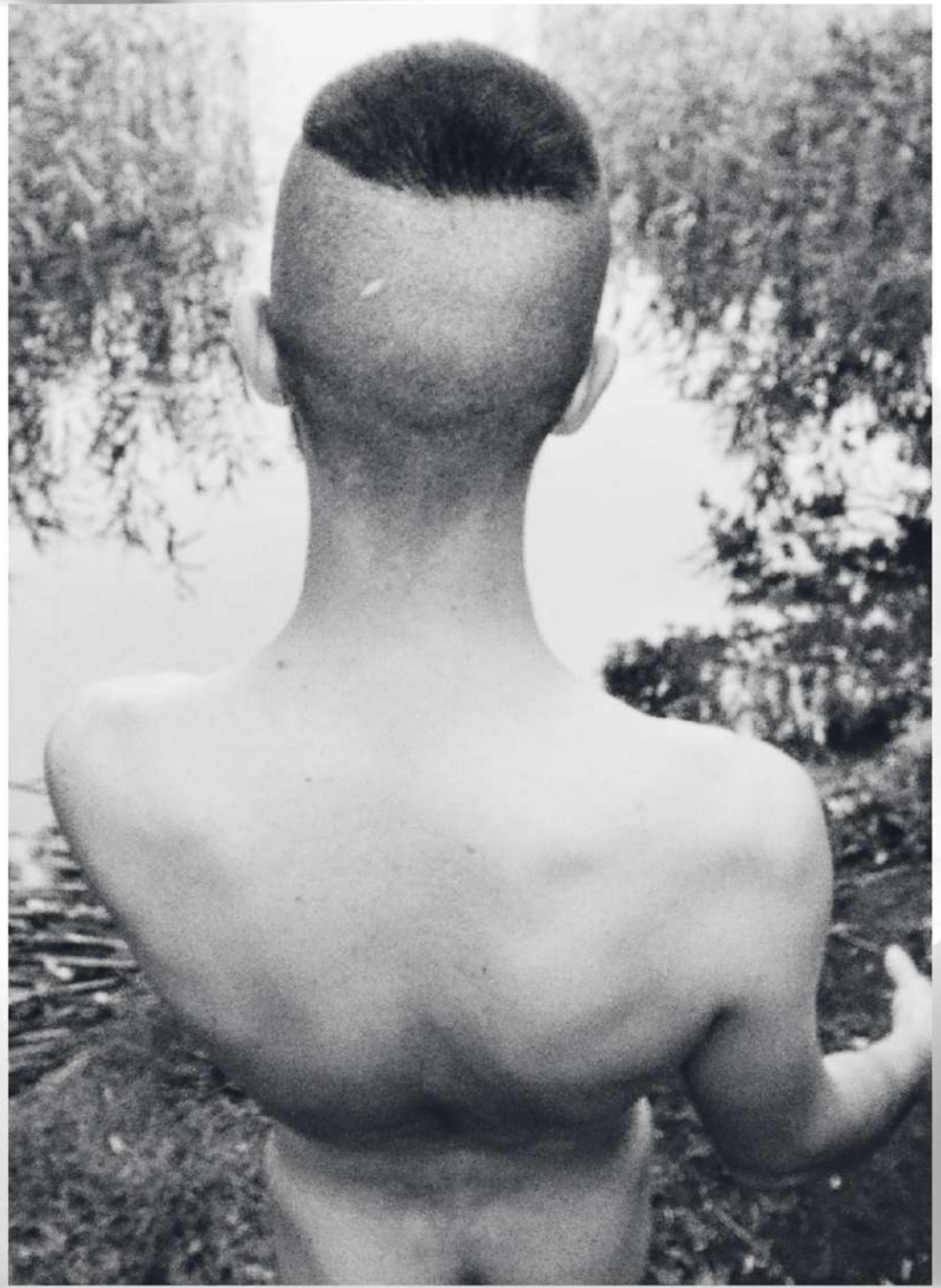
KK: In Belarus at the moment it is different, much better than in Russia. The government doesn't pay that much attention to the subculture now. They probably only focus on punks and nationalists. But when you are doing weird stuff and dressing up at a party, they just don't get it. And we are not that visible; it's a rather niche initiative, not present in the mainstream media. We print our invitations in Belarusian, not Russian, so the po-

lice could be suspicious that it is something nationalistic, but then when they go through the text they are probably super confused and not treating it as something political, not in the obvious way. The next party will be on the topic of eco terrorism. We are going to show "Fuck For Forest." Have you heard about this documentary?

KR: Yes, my friend Michal directed it. (laughs)
KK: Here in Belarus we used to steal stuff, you know, from European culture (laughs) so I haven't asked him. But it's on the web and we are using it in a non-commercial way, so I hope it's fine. (laughs) It's perfect for us as it deals with sex, non-profit actions, and ecology. The main goal of my project is to open

people's minds, and I think this movie will shock most of the audience. Here we don't even talk about porn, so it will be even more strange to hear about porn as a political, sociological project. Society is so conservative. I don't know how it is with the guys, I never tried to pick them up, but with the girls, they are always playing hard to get; they never seem to just let go and have some fun. Sexual relationships in Belarus are under a lot of pressure because of governmental propaganda and media, which are also under government control - they don't work on developing society, they work on preserving, maintaining the existing order in everything. Like in the USSR there was a saying that there is no sex here. And in Belarus if you just look around, the only thing you can see connected to sex, on the street, is a billboard saying: "You're playing Russian roulette if you're having sex







without a condom." By the way, the previous topic of our party was "condoms". But it was for a different reason; it was just an occasional word that came to our mind, and we liked how it would be working with this warm, dark, and cozy feeling.

We're trying to work with the LG-BTQ+ topic because nobody else does.

And it's also interesting that there are activists, other organizations, and independent media that are working on this topic, but with a narrow focus on LG-BTQ+ inter-community communications. They are talking about us, straight people, only as a kind of opposition to them. And that always surprises me. But this autumn they invited me, as a straight guy who is engaged in LGBTQ+ rights movement, to throw some parties for them. But for me it's not just LGBTQ+ rights, it's common rights.

Why do we have to separate or segregate this part of society? I like the concept of minorities. It's denying the idea of a huge, unified body of society, which is characterized by common decisions, and one common goal, and one way of behavior, or common likes and dislikes. Most of them don't see me as a real ally because I'm straight. It's just my personal feeling, and I'm not saying

that all of them are like that. I understand that they have the right, because it's a group that was oppressed for centuries in all societies, including in Western Europe. And especially here, where recently a gay guy was killed during a fight because of his sexuality, when he decided to stand up for himself after being called a faggot. Of course, it shows that they are in danger, but I think it doesn't give them the right to interact with all straight people in an aggressive or prejudiced way.

KR: You really have this feeling?

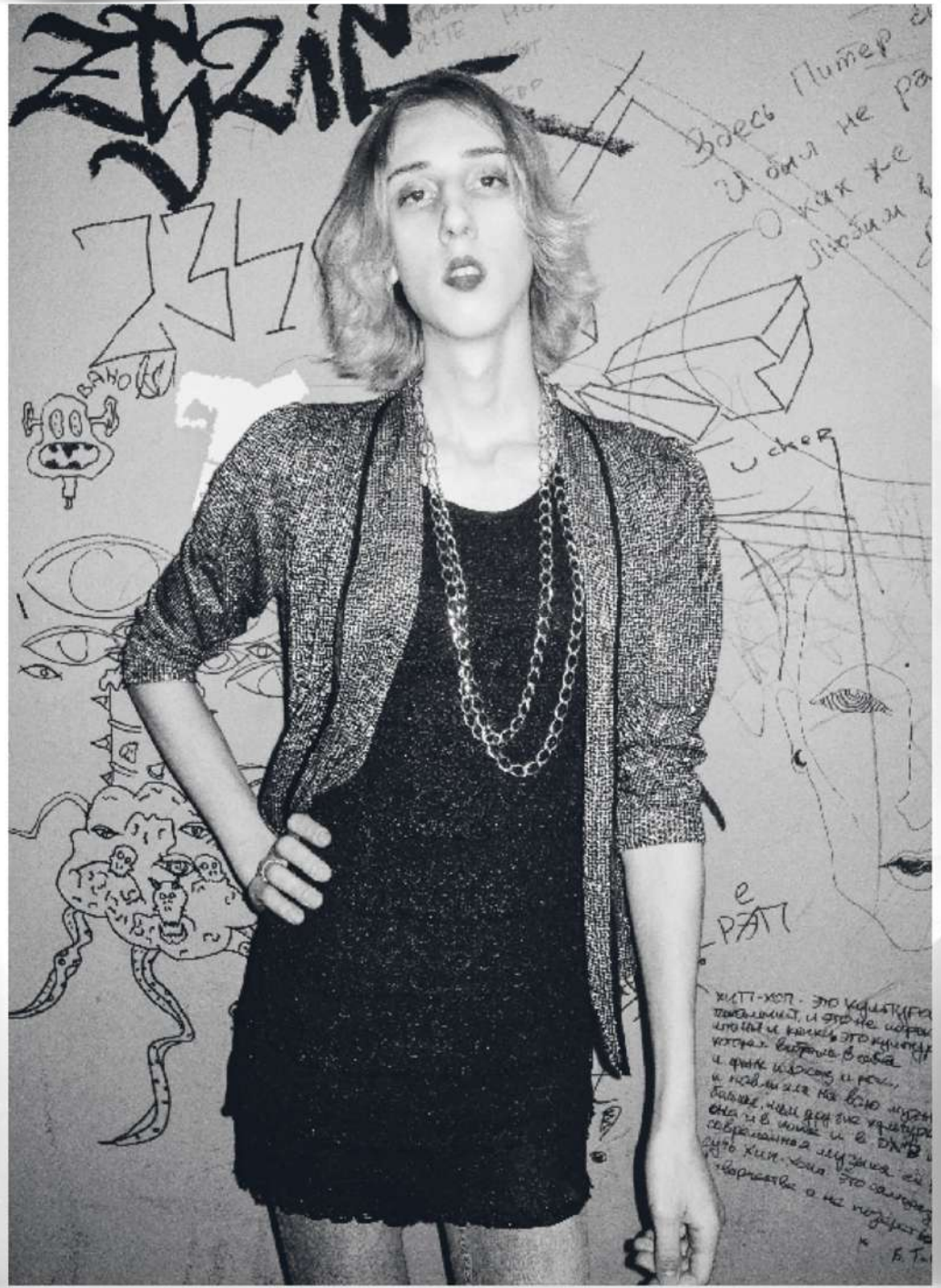
KK: It's not even about me, I just see how they communicate with other people. It's the problem with a small, closed community that is afraid to build new connections. And my "Unisex" party project is definitely about working with all small groups together. It's not a gay party, it's not a straight party either, it's not about opposition, it's about

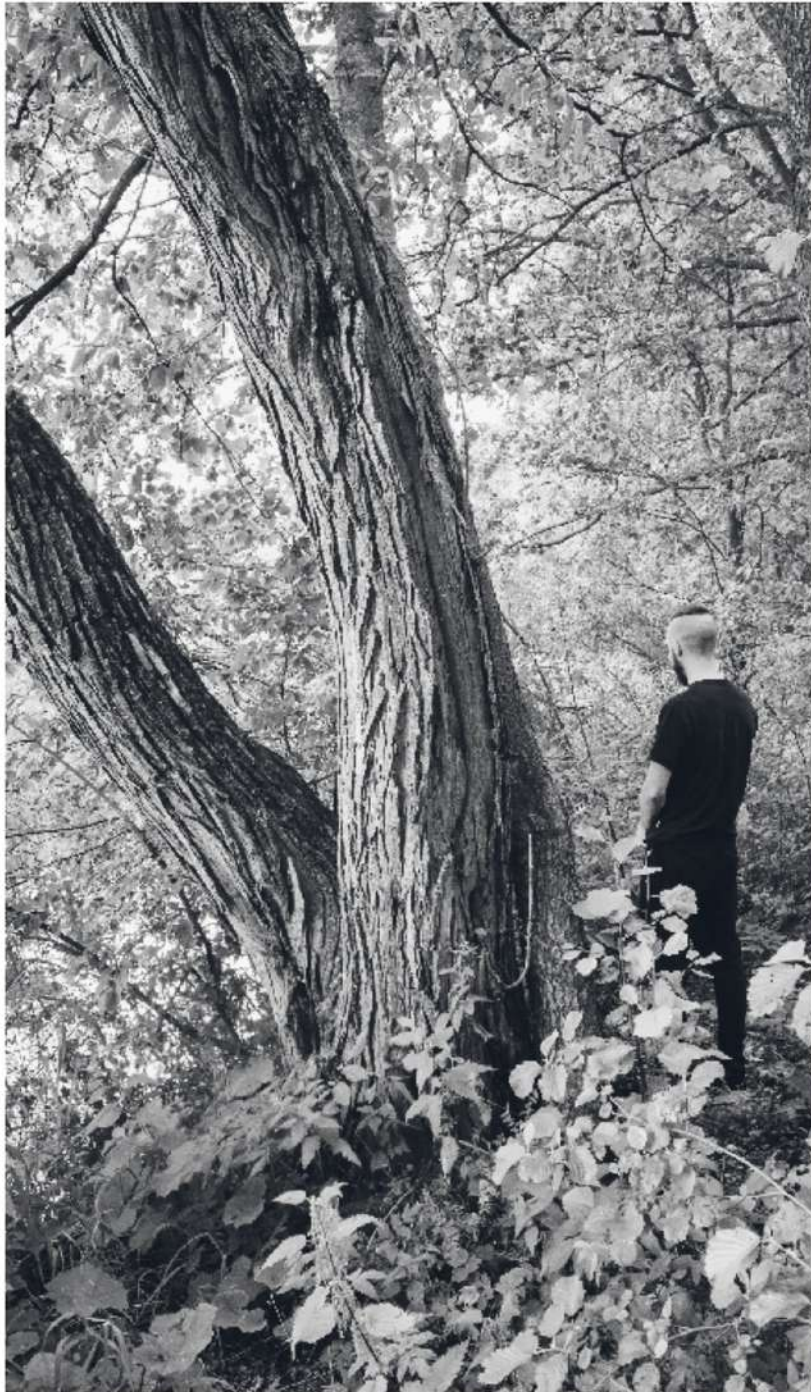




"Unisex" party at "DK" club, 2015







diverse sexualities. You just let your sexual inner self appear and don't care about this oppressive majority, which is widely represented in Belarus.

KR: And the "Unisex" parties are only about music, or are you also expecting some sexual activities during them?

KK: I don't know. I remember one friend had sex at our party and was talking about it with almost everybody, so it was a kind of performance. (laughs) And if guys and girls are dancing topless, nobody minds.

KR: This guy who was dressed in a tiger suit ended up totally naked. (laughs)

KK: Right. (laughs) So I would like to have more activities like that.

KR: And generally I had the feeling that everybody felt really safe and comfortable. So is there any risk?

KK: I mean, the government is trying to control society. Aside from the parties, we are on social media, but we don't advertise more

widely so as to avoid attention from the government. If something is more activist or political, the government will take notice. The opposition in our country is extremely nationalistic, and they use a lot of populist slogans, but they don't have a lot of support - not more than twenty percent. So if they won not much would change, perhaps the flag, yeah, they still think it's important to change it.

KR: I remember when we went outside the club, it was really late night, and there was a line of policemen standing in front of the building, just watching.

KK: The bar where we did the party, "DK", has a bad reputation. The previous owners told me that they had a few raids by the police, with guns, checking everybody's documents and so on. They were trying to find something, they don't like the space. They don't like any expression of freedom. But the economic level of people's life here is

slowly decreasing, so the government will be more careful now. It is only economic prosperity that has allowed Lukashenko to rule the country for so long. Because Belarusians are very practical in that way. Now, when the economy is getting worse and worse, people are more upset. But I personally have never experienced any aggression from the police towards me. I would say that they have some people who do their job well and a huge army of policemen who are ready to beat innocent people at any time.

All photos by Karol Radziszewski