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Exhibition Review: *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance.* Mystetskiy Arsenal. Kyiv, Ukraine: May 3–June 6, 2021

Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance. Mystetskiy Arsenal. Kyiv, Ukraine: May 3–June 6, 2021.

In a complementary video posted on the website of the exhibition *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance*[1], which presented a wide array of contemporary art practices from Belarus at Kyiv's Mystetskyi Arsenal, artist Ales Pushkin arrives in the venue pushing a red-wheeled cart loaded with horse manure. The content of the cart was a gift to President Alexander Lukashenko, the autocratic leader of Belarus, who has, over the course of his twenty-six-year rule, impeded the country's democratic development by rewriting the state's constitution to ensure his prolonged presidency, jailing his opponents, and falsifying presidential elections. In the video, Pushkin drops the manure on the gallery floor, places a poster with Lukashenko's portrait smeared with red paint on the top and pierces the poster with a pitchfork. The piece, which resembles a mock crime scene, is thus installed, and the artist leaves the venue satisfied. This work is reminiscent

IMAGE 1. Installation view of *A Present for the President* (2021) by Ales Pushkin at Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv; photograph by Maria Belyaeva; courtesy www.gazeta.ua.

1. The exhibition's website is https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/evere-day-art-solidarity-resistance. A full 3D tour is available on the website's main page.

IMAGE 2. Still from *A Present for the President* (1999) by Ales Pushkin; courtesy IREX/ProMedia.

of the live performance *A Present for the President*, which was staged by Pushkin in front of the Presidential Palace in Minsk in 1999 and resulted in his arrest and criminal charges. The repetition (now in a form of sculptural work) transfers the old occurrence into a new political reality of today's Belarus, whose citizens have, since the summer of 2020, organized a strong and peaceful movement to protest the rigged presidential elections and the unjust treatment of the protestors.

The landmark performance of Pushkin, who was tragically alone in his fight against the regime twenty-two years ago,[2] has been echoed in numerous creative acts of resistance

2. Since 1988, Ales Pushkin has staged numerous protest actions in Belarus, for which he has often been arrested and faced criminal charges. On March 31, 2021, he was arrested for painting and exhibiting a portrait of a Belarusian, anti-Soviet nationalist from the World War II–era in a gallery in Hrodna. Since then, he has remained in jail

unfolding in Belarus: solidarity chains, marches, silent performances, street choirs, dances, posters, and murals, as well as hacking and cyber-activities. These acts have been intertwined with the repetitious use of the previous archives, accumulated since the late 1980s, when Belarus's bid for independence began. The 2020 uprising reenacted the almost forgotten past battles for democracy (in 2010–11, 2006, and 1988–89), culminating in a construction of a collective political body[3] and its robust archive of resistance.

As often happens in modern history with every government's attempt to crack down on resistance and erase its archive, its "lustful, repetitious and messy imagination"[4] is reactivated by newcomers' bodies, from a place dislocated in time, but envisioned and enacted today. On August 12, 2020, Belarusian protestors embodied the archive in a human chain that extended from the Kurapaty woods on the outskirts of Minsk—where an execution and burial site with remains of the victims of Stalin's repressions was discovered in 1988—to the city's Akrestin Detention Center, where many protestors were held and tortured for the three days prior. The archive has been manifested in a prominent return of the historic white-and-red Belarusian flag and "Pahonia,"[5] the traditional national coat of arms of Belarusians, which was adopted by the protestors as a sign of their national dignity. Both the flag and "Pahonia" were put on display—in their many reincarnations— at numerous demonstrations prompting the regime to impose more sanctions against the nation's old symbolism.[6] New repressive measures were undertaken, as well, against traditional Belarusian "vyshyvanka," an embroidered white-and-red peasant attire that over the past decade has become a national consumer product in a global act of national branding.[7] In the summer of 2020, these items entered an archive of resistance when "vyshyvanka" became the most revered clothing style worn by the protestors.

Curated by a team of Belarusian artists and curators—Aleksei Borisionok, Andrei Dureika, Marina Naprushkina, Sergey Shabohin, Antonina Stebur, and Maxim Tyminko—the exhibition *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance* intended to capture a moment in the archive of Belarusian resistance, when it produced "a moving, mourning, organizing, exhausting, refusing, celebrating together"[8] phenomenon, whose nature appeared

awaiting trial. On April 6, 2021, seven Belarusian human rights organizations recognized Pushkin as a political prisoner in their joint statement: http://spring96.org/en/news/102800.

3. Tania Arcimovich, "When Language Fails: In the Margins of a Diary," *tranzit.at*, (June 2021), http://at.tranzit.org/en/news/0/2021-06-30/when-language-fails-in-the-margins-of-a-diary.

4. Gregory Sholette, "Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology: The City of (Dis)order Versus the People's Archive," *Art Journal Open* (January 2012), http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=2395.

5. "The Pahonia" is a coat of arms of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and a traditional national symbol of Belarus. It was a short-lived state coat of arms of the Belarusian People's Republic, created in 1918, and of the Republic of Belarus from 1991 to 1995. It was removed from the state heraldic by Lukashenko's administration in 1995.

6. On March 1, 2021, Belarus enacted a new amendment to the law "Against Extremism," which entails administrative responsibility for hanging the "unsanctioned" white-and-red flag—a symbol of the Belarusian National Republic—on private balconies and building facades.

7. Elena Gapova, "Things to Have for a Belarusian: Rebranding the Nation Via Online Participation," *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 17 (2017): 47–71.

8. Olia Sosnovskaya, "Future Perfect Continuous," *Ding Magazine*. Quoted from the exhibition booklet, 6, and available at https://dingdingding.org/issue-3/future-perfect-continuous.

impossible to determine. The curators' commitment to reproduce the protest's horizontal structure, as well as its spontaneous dynamics, resulted in a sprawling, decentralized show spanning the 43,055 square feet of the Mystetskyi Arsenal. The exhibition perfectly mapped connections among discrete incidents, articulated emotions, and influences that triggered events, produced consequences, and generated a common cause. A continuous flow of video documentations, photography, prison drawings, handmade and printed posters, mixed media installations, paintings, sculptural objects, diagrams, and info-graphics documenting and articulating multitudes created a new temporality, in which "every day" (the protest's slogan and the exhibition's token word) appeared as the eternal "today."

Pertinent to the idea of the archive were Marina Naprushkina's installation *Platform* (2007/21), a replica of a red pedestal in the shape of steps used by government officials during public events to demonstrate their solidarity with people (in the gallery, it was available for "occupation" by visitors during the public hours); Zakhar Kudin's (1986–2019) series of paintings, *Open Canvas* (or *ZhES-Art*, 2017[9]), in which the artist trans-ferred the squares in pastel colors that state workers paint over graffiti on the surfaces of public buildings to his own canvases, the result resembling modernist abstract paintings. The same technologies of covering up or erasing "the people's archive" were explored in Sergey Shabohin's work *Social Marble: The Rise of Civil Society in Belarus* (2020). In this multimedia installation, printed documents pertaining to the protest are plastered on a wall, which is covered with a marbleized plastic film—a reference to the material used by Belarusian authorities to cover up illegal graffiti on actual Soviet-era marble. Aliaxey Talstou's video *Observing Solidarity* (2020) was filmed with a camera pointing at the 1979 high relief entitled *Solidarity*—a site-specific Soviet sculpture created by Anatol

IMAGE 3. Installation view of *Platform* (2009/2021) by Marina Naprushkina at Mystetskyi Arsenal; photograph by Maria Belyaeva; courtesy www.gazeta.ua.

9. "Zhes-Art" refers to the "zhilishchniye sluzhbi," municipal services responsible for the maintenance of public buildings.

IMAGE 4. Still from *Observing Solidarity* (2020) by Aliaxey Talstou; courtesy the author.

Arcimovich and Anatol Jaskin on a building's façade in Minsk's center—while the protesting masses were passing by. All four works turn the hegemonic archive and archiving techniques (along with de-archiving) into a tool for highly individualized and ungoverned constructions, signaling a broader change in the archive's underlying social and cultural structures.

What the curators did well was view current political events in Belarus not as a national crisis, but as a rupture, a split from the country's own repressive patterns of history. When we speak of the period between August 2020 and February 2021, we speak of an unprecedented social dynamic, when different political parties and social forces—whose identities intersect "conservative ethnonationalism and anticommunism with democratic aspirations"[10]—were united in one goal: to end the autocracy and restore national dignity, along with the democratic process. But how can an attempt to represent such a complicated dynamic produce any lasting effect in the era of representational crisis, when billions of images and hundreds of thousand hours of YouTube videos are uploaded to the internet every minute? Nicholas Mirzoeff defines this phenomenon as "a symptomatic response to the experience of rupture and the crisis of the representation principle. . . . What people are trying to create are not just images but a *just* image of their own situation" (emphasis added).[11] Indeed, photographs and videos of the current protests scattered throughout the exhibition created a glut of overlapping visual references to the protests. Some of them aimed to provide a sense of continuity between the past and present. For example, Sergey Kozhemyakin's photographic series *Black and White. Subjective reports from the 1990s* was a powerful reminder that the

10. Nelly Bekus, "Echo of 1989? Protest Imaginaries and Identity Dilemmas in Belarus," *Slavic Review* (May 2021): 4–14, https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.25.

11. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, ed. Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 12.
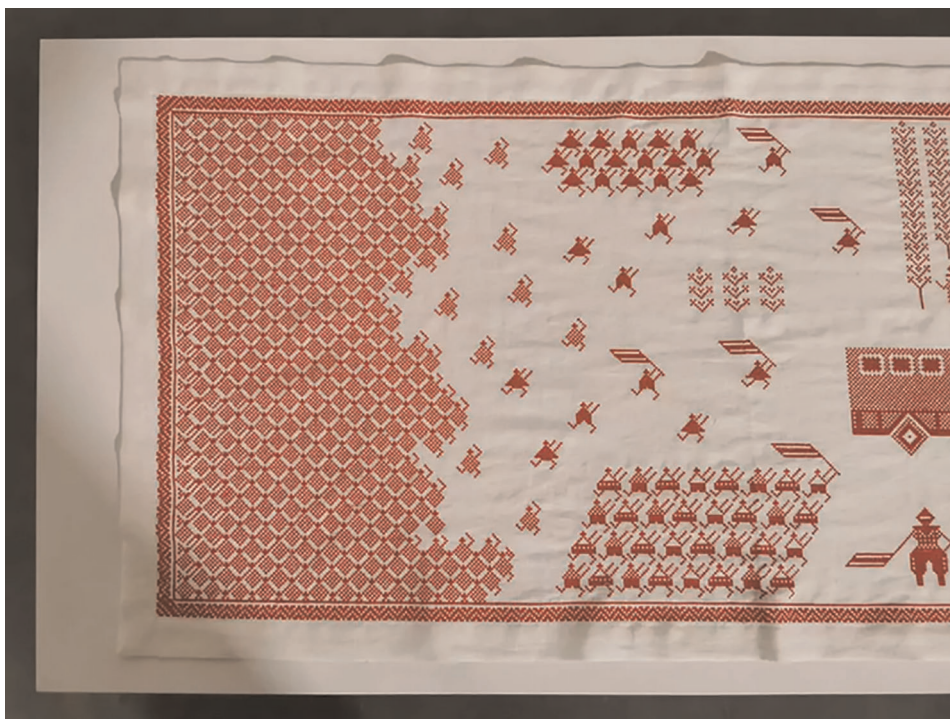
IMAGE 5. Fragment of the installation *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* (2020–21) by Rufina Bazlova at Mystetskyi Arsenal; courtesy www.supportyourart.com.
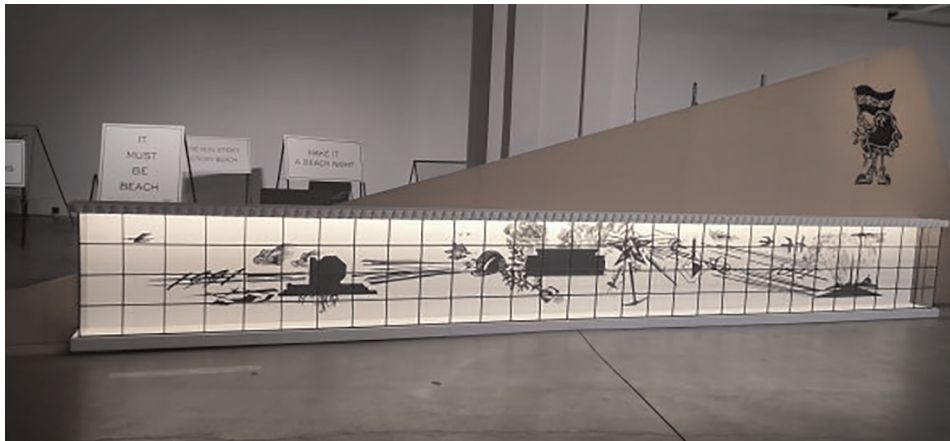

IMAGE 6. Installation view of *Weak Horizon* (2021) by Uladzimir Hramovich at Mystetskyi Arsenal; photograph by Maria Belyaeva; courtesy www.gazeta.ua.

current protest is "a new 1989,"[12] referencing the large-scale pro-democracy rallies that occurred from 1989 to 1996, after the declaration of Belarus's independence. But photography—a habitual form of protest representation—seemed to yield its central role to

12. Nelly Bekus, "Echo of 1989?"

more traditional, even archaic, artistic genres, which took on a new meaning in a time of rupture. That was evident in *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* (2020–21)[13] by Prague-based Belarusian artist Rufina Bazlova, who visualized the protest's pivotal moments in the machine-made embroidery embedded in a piece of textile, which was spread on a podium like a tablecloth. As original as they are media-driven, Bazlova's cross-stitched images construct the protest's mythology "from below," countering the lies of the official narrative, in accordance with folk genres. The ungoverned nature of "the people's archive" was brilliantly captured in Uladzimir Hramovich's work *Weak Horizon* (2020), made in collaboration with the Soviet-school graphic artist Genadziy Grak. A strip of graphic images floats on a white surface of a glass and metal architectural structure—a miniature replica of the Soviet-era Minsk exhibition pavilion VDNH, which was demolished in 2016 to make way for a new real estate development—mapping the thirty-year history of Belarusian independence (1991–2021) in a graphic style reminiscent of a children's book illustration, freed from ideological constraints.

Reflections on uprisings and revolutions are usually separated from actual events by the time distance required to process them. For example, *Stay with Me*, the 2017 group exhibition in Istanbul, Turkey, dedicated to the Gezi Park protest that took place in the city in 2014, shared the memories of the struggle—specifically, the moments of people standing together, side by side, to protect a small park that was being threatened by developers. As one of its curators stated, "This [exhibition] was not just remembering what was long gone, but rather an attempt to keep it alive through physical documentation."[14] On the contrary, *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance* was driven by a sense of urgency to preserve the energies of the protest, crashed by the machinery of a police state, by tracing it in artistic work, as well as to sustain hope and solidarity by restaging collective production and community in a process of exhibition-making.

Jacques Rancière, in his 2011 book *The Emancipated Spectator*, defines "aesthetic community," essential to a process of political transformation, as a community woven together by artistic practice, which is understood "as the means for producing an effect, and simultaneously, as the reality of that effect."[15] Therefore, Rancière concludes, it is possible to sustain a community through art. A new community is an artistic "dissensual community," which is built on an "aesthetic disconnection"—the production of a new body, new sensorium, and new gaze that disconnects from the continuum between the artistic fabrication and its enjoyment.[16] What this community validates is "free appearance," when there is "no longer any boundary separating what belongs to the realm of art from what belongs to the realm of everyday life."[17] Rancière considers a phenomenon that comes from this "aesthetic disconnection" political aesthetics.

13. "Vyzhyvanka" is a play on the Belarusian words "vyshyvats" ("to embroider") and "vyzhyvats" ("to survive").
14. Isil Egrikavuk, "Maybe, We Will Benefit From Our Neighbour's Good Fortune: An Exhibition on Collectivity, Community, and Dialogue in Turkey," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*, 87.
15. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 59.
16. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 64.
17. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 69.

A new body, new sensorium, new activity of a gaze, according to Rancière, are no longer dependent on cultural institutions and social order, as protesting communities destroy habitual links between art and audience. While protesting the rigged presidential elections, Belarusian citizens of all walks of life disobeyed rules and restrictions by forming aesthetic, collaborative groups around their activities that included decorating buildings and courtyards, painting murals, making flags and signs, even developing a new protest fashion. Law reinforcement and riot police turned into the audience valorizing protestors' works by arresting people for creative expressions. This was reflected in the fact that the most arrests and violent clashes between the protestors and police happened around the so-called "Ploshchad Peremen" (The Square of Changes), the protestors' main hangout. The place, set up in one of Minsk's residential neighborhoods, was meant to commemorate the act of disobedience by two DJs who started, unexpectedly, playing the 1980s cult protest song *We Want Changes!* at the open-air pro-Lukashenko event, two days before the presidential election in August 2020. The makeshift "Square" featured a mural depicting two young men in an iconic protest pose, with their fists raised in solidarity with all those who demanded changes. Unsurprisingly, the place had been frequently visited and vandalized by the riot police and pro-government's forces, who erased the mural and detained residents resisting the erasure.[18]

IMAGE 7. *The Square of Changes in Minsk* (2020) by Yauhen Attsetski; courtesy the author.

18. "The Square of Changes" was a place where the art educator Raman Bandarenka, who defended the "freedom" decorations set up by his neighbors in the building's yard, was kidnapped by pro-government forces and later killed in police custody. His portraits, along with his call "I'm coming out!," posted on social media right before he was murdered, quickly became the most popular imagery and slogan of the protest.

Drawing on the philosophies of Hannah Arendt, Franz Fanon, and Rancière, cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff defines the space of rupture also as a space of appearance.[19] It is "a space of and in abolition democracy," unfolding, changing, devisualizing, where people can "appear to one another," without a mediation of aesthetics that is separated from politics.[20] In the case of Belarus, it is an abolition of the long-lasting autocracy, with its system of visuality "from flags and parades to monuments and museums,"[21] but it is also a rejection of technologies of representation. But is it possible to abolish all images and install darkness on the screen, like Guy Debord did once in his 1952 film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howlings for Sade),[22] an early equivalent of today's blacked-out cover photos on social media profiles? Or, is an image still a game, capable of presenting an action "as the only answer to the evil of the image and the guilt of the spectator?"[23] In this sense, people's willingness to put themselves at risk to be arrested, or even killed during the first—and the most violent—days of the Belarusian protest produced images of actions that were viewed by many artists as a blueprint for production of protest's visuality. In a video of Alexei Kuzmich's performance, staged on the first day of the uprising, the artist is seen directly confronting the squads of heavily armed police testing the ability of his semi-naked, crucifixion-like appearance (with a drawing of a phallus attached to his bare chest) to stop the violence.[24] It is an image of an acting body that

IMAGE 8. Still from *This Poster Might Become the Reason of My Detention* (2020) by Ulyana Nevzorova; video by Polina Maslova.

19. "What appears is . . . a space of and in abolition, creating the possibility of abolition democracy." Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize, 13.

20. Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," 13.

21. Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," 13.

22. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 86.

23. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 87.

24. Kuzmich's live action was echoed in the tragic death of Alexander Taraikovsky, who, a day later, on August 10, 2020, was killed by a stun grenade during a confrontation with the riot police in Minsk.

demonstrates the very possibility of appearance, while facing a brutal force. Kuzmich's performance echoed Ulyana Nevzorova's happening, in which she turns a lonely subway ride into a manifestation of a protestor's ontological vulnerability: in a video documentation, she appears holding a sign featuring the handwritten text (which is also the performance's title) "This Poster Might Become The Reason of My Detention," while in a subway car. A desire to "devisualize," or to free an appearance from the mediation of controlled images, including those of the current protest, engenders a type of visuality consistent with Rancière's, Fanon's, and Mirzoeff's definitions of aesthetic rupture—essentially, an affirmation of a body's physical (and precarious) appearance. Reduced to immobility, whether by turning themselves into a mock monument, or a train's unmoving passenger, both performers present a glimpse of new yet unseen bodies, those of a new community to come.[25]

However, the exhibition was evidently struggling to strike a balance between the artists' ethical gestures visualizing the protest in solidarity with protestors, and an action of "devisualizing," often shifting toward the former. Besides the protest ephemera, representational genres such as site-specific murals, graffiti-like paintings, and sprawling mixed-media installations dominated the exhibition, not always to its benefit. Some

IMAGE 9.   Fragment of the photography installation *Art of the Regime* (2020) by Lesia Pcholka at Mystetskyi Arsenal; photograph by Lesia Pcholka; courtesy the author.

25. In the curatorial statement, a new community is described as "fragile," linked to the strategy of non-violence.

works, however, explored further practices of "devisualization" by focusing on represen-tations of "the intolerable" (Rancière). In a series of her compelling performances *A Minute of Shouting for Belarus* (2020–21), shown in the exhibition on video, Jana Shostak, a Belarusian-Polish artist and activist, erupts into a scream that lasts for at least two minutes to draw the attention of the governing institutions of the European Union to the plight of the Belarusian citizens prosecuted for their peaceful activism. Although the work's format is still visual, it inserts authority in the voice—a voice of the multi-tude—that displaces the image "in the name of the unrepresentable."[26] Along with Lesia Pcholka's photographs documenting the powerful action *Art of the Regime*—staged by a group of anonymous artists who appeared in front of the state-run Palace of Arts in Minsk, holding Internet images testifying to the violence of Lukashenko's regime—Shostak's work alludes to a complicated "strategic game between images, action and speech"[27]: the images are no longer rendered passive; they unleash the active power they have appropriated.

As Franco "Bifo" Berardi comments, "Building and sustaining solidarity is about reactivating the sentience of the social body . . . reactivating empathy between living organisms. This empathy is the foundation of the solidarity we need today."[28] Despite being composed of individualized productions, the exhibition *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance* thought of collective action, re-staging the proximity and intimacy of collective participation that makes possible the transmission of empathy. A reflection of "the people's archive," whose content is ungoverned and whose meaning is unknown, it restores past knowledge and "remembers the future."[29] ■

Olga Kopenkina is a New York City–based curator and critic. She was a curator at 6th Line gallery in Minsk, Belarus, from 1994 to 1998. In 2012, she organized the exhibition *Sound of Silence: Art During Dictatorship* (Contemporary Art from Belarus) in the EFA Project Space gallery at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York City.

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26. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 86.
27. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 88.
28. David Hugill and Elise Thorburn, "Reactivating the Social Body in Insurrectionary Times: A Dialogue with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi," *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25 (September 2012): 210–20.
29. Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," 13.