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> **The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns**

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The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns

Curated by Sasha Razor

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Introduction

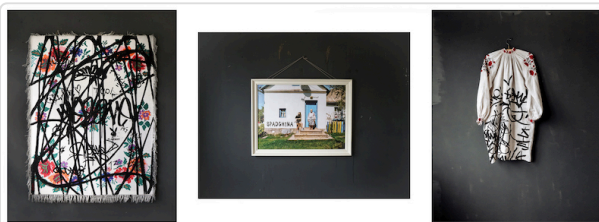
The curatorial team and artists involved in this digital exhibition condemn the unprovoked and unjustified military assault on Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which started on 24 February 2022.

In the wake of the women-led uprising of 2020, Belarusian women artists have responded to the ongoing challenges of the past year and a half with a substantial corpus of protest embroidery and textile-inspired mixed media artworks, drawing their inspiration from recent trends in Western contemporary art but also grounding their practice in the nation's rich folk heritage. These participatory embroidery practices have provided safe avenues for women to express their political views in the face of protest eradication, total oppression and a community recomposed by mass emigration from the country. Now, the sociopolitical crisis that began during Belarus's failed revolution of 2020 has been further exacerbated by occupying Russian troops, who use Belarusian territory as the launching pad for military aggression against Ukraine.

The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns is the first major exhibition to bring together twelve textile projects from Belarus, uniting such movements as craftivism and cyberfeminism alongside traditional textile arts. The title polemically alludes to the seminal work by Belarusian philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich entitled "The Code of Absence: Basics of the Belarusian Mentality" (2007), the foundational text explaining the difficulties in articulating Belarusian ethnic identity. Contrary to the concept of "I do not exist," which is widespread among predominantly male Belarusian intellectuals, this exhibition designates lines of presence through what are often described as "traditional women's practices" or textile "craft" often excluded from institutional art hierarchies. Moreover, our curatorial intention is to break the traditional discursive bond between textiles and the study of ethnic nationalism in the region by focusing on women's voices and labor, and expanding the discussion to include a spectrum of civic identities in Belarus. In this context, the code is not only what is commonly referred to as the textile code of Belarusian

cultural heritage, but also the painstaking process of coding diverse civic society in Belarus, and the multiple interconnections between textiles and their representation in digital media.

The exhibition is organized in three sections: Craftivist strategies of Belarusian protest embroidery, Collective embroidery practices, and Traditional textile patterns in mixed media. Its aims include articulating protest messages, documenting the events of the revolution, processing news and emotions collectively, embracing traditional folk culture in the midst of social upheavals, and reflecting on the realities of life under authoritarian regimes. The latter category encompasses a variety of social and gender experiences, including those of women. Curatorial selections span the experiences of millennials and Generation Z across geographical boundaries and reflect the recent migrations of endangered cultural workers and artists from Belarus. This is the first time this group of artists is featured in a digital exhibition dedicated exclusively to textile art.



Textiles in Belarusian Contemporary Art Before, During, and After the Protests

There has been a trend in contemporary art towards the use of textiles and folk art forms for at least..

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Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries

Can all protest embroidery created in Belarus be classified as craftivist, and what does craftivism have to do with this..

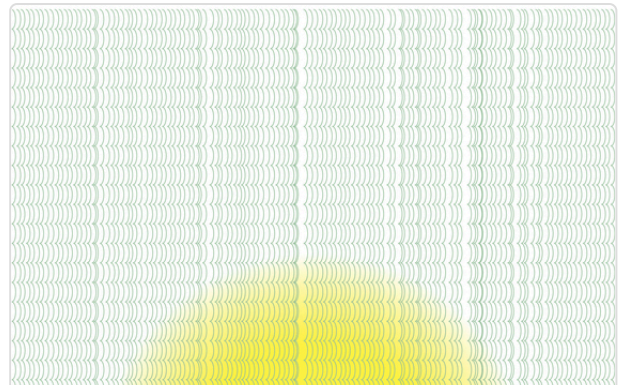
(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/craftivist-strategies)



Collective Embroidery Practices

The kind of coordinated collective action that became a feature of the Belarusian protest requires a high level of organization...

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Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums

By incorporating folklore, craftivism, after-school art education, formal art education and contemporary art practices, textile works explored various identities and..

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Artists Biographies

Rufina Bazlova (b. 1990 in Hrodna, Belarus) is a Prague-based Belarusian artist who works in illustration, comics, art books, puppet..

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Textiles in Belarusian Contemporary Art Before, During, and After the Protests

There has been a trend in contemporary art towards the use of textiles and folk art forms for at least the last five years. The Ukrainian art critic Alisa Lozhkina described the 2017 Venice Biennale as “dominated by textiles of all types and shapes -- threads, carpets, fabric installations, knitting, weaving, felting, patchwork” [Lozhkina 2017]. She further asks: “What is it? The realm of the victorious Yin energy? Femininity without feminism? Boudoir art, or a handicrafts club for bored housewives?” [Lozhkina 2017]. In the following half-decade, the trend continued to develop across the globe, while textile DIY practices gained even more relevance during the pandemic. A review of the New Museum Triennial 2021, for example, noted the “return of folklore

and crafts, adding to these an even greater sense of retreat from anything too in-your-face or definite, maybe in reaction to an over-crowded, hyper-mediated culture" [Davis 2021].

In Belarus, a country isolated politically on the map of the world, the embroidery medium has been rediscovered only recently as "a powerful national icon and a political tool [Gapova 2017]. In contemporary art, it has been used before, but not widely. For example, one can mention Alexei Lunev's project *Shit-Clouds* (2009-2010), elements of embroidery in Zhanna Gladko's exhibition *Inciting Force* (2012), Olya Sosnovskaya's project *Of Our Women, a Two-channel video installation* (2015), or Vasilisa Palianina and Anna Bundeleva's artist embroideries [Razor and Bazlova 2021]. Evaluating the use of embroidery and protest textiles within the broader context of post-Soviet contemporary art in Belarus reveals that the particular appeal to nationhood is relatively new and emerged only within the past couple of years, as exemplified by the triptych titled *Spadchyna* [Heritage] (2019) by the Hrodna-based artist Daria Semchuk, who works under the alias *Cemra* (darkness in Belarusian). The impetus behind her work was to raise awareness of the loss of Belarus' cultural heritage and to confront it [Chrysalis Mag 2021].



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Cemra, from *Spadchyna* (2019). Hrodna, Belarus. Accessed from Instagram.

The *Spadchyna* triptych features a traditional homespun dress and a homespun embroidered blanket with elements of graffiti by Hrodna-based artist *Cemra*. The artwork was first presented at the Autumn Salon: New Names program in the Art-Belarus gallery, April 9–13, 2019. The title, in Belarusian, means "heritage," articulating a critical message directed at the

disappearance of traditional culture in Belarus. The show spurred a public discussion about the artist's right to vandalize authentic artifacts, even though one such artifact shown in the exhibition was found in the dumpster.

Since the fraudulent presidential elections of August 9, 2020, Belarus as a country has become a battleground between the women-led democratic opposition forces and the violent authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenka. The Belarusian political system currently operates as a dual government, with Sviatlana Tsikahnouskaya, the independent candidate who likely won the election, heading the government in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, and Lukashenka, who continues to usurp power in Belarus. According to the Belarus Freedom Forum [2022], from August 2020 to March 2022, 40,000 Belarusians were persecuted based on politically motivated charges and went through the country's penitentiary system, while 1,077 political prisoners are still waiting for their release. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians left the country but no reliable data exists to estimate the numbers of those who have emigrated. Belarusian society remains divided between the 39 percent who support Lukashenka and the 49 percent who actively oppose his regime [Astapenya 2021]. This struggle for democracy in Belarus is exacerbated by the loss of the country's autonomy and the ongoing war in the region. Since winter 2021, Belarusian territory has effectively been occupied by the Russian military and is being used as a launchpad to attack Ukraine, with cooperation from the Belarusian military [Sullivan 2022].

From the beginning of the protests in August 2020, folklore has been a vehicle for articulating the protesters' feelings, be it folk song performances or the use of traditional Belarusian bagpipes during the rallies. Some of these protest performances were consciously orchestrated by folklorists themselves. For example, the singing circle that met for one week in front of the Kupalausky theater was organized by folk musician and ethnographer Siarhei Douhushau [Douhushau 2021]. At the same time, other protest performances were more spontaneous and can be viewed, albeit with a certain amount of caution, as reflexes of folk rituals long gone. Consider this rally procession that took place on August 14, 2020, when students from the Department of Architecture at the Belarusian National Technical University carried a large stretch of white fabric across the *Praspekt Nezalezhnasti* [Gulin 2021]. Those familiar with traditional Belarusian textile rituals

immediately recognize this as the ancient East Slavic protection ritual known as *abydzionnik* towel in Belarus. A group of women wove this type of ritual towel whenever the community felt threatened by epidemics, draughts or wars. Producing the towel had to take place from dusk to dawn or from dawn to dusk. Further, the ritual involved carrying this towel around the village and holding it across the road so that the villagers could go under it. Towels were finally displayed on crosses by the roadside or donated to the church [Labacheuskaia 2002; Gapova2006]. *Abydzionnik* rituals last occurred in Belarus during the Second World War [Labacheuskaia 2002]. In Spring 2020, the Student Ethnography Society reenacted it in connection with the pandemic [Svajksta 2020]. This exhibition uses the *abydzionnik* ritual rather loosely as a metaphor for protest cultural production in Belarus during 2020–2021, where the artist's labor was performed in groups and displayed online across the globe to raise awareness of the protesters' plight.



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"Procession of students from the Belarusian National Technical University on 14 August 2020."
Minsk, Belarus. Photos from the personal archive of Mikhail Gulin

Five days after the fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus, students from the Department of Architecture at the Belarusian National Technical University appeared at a protest march carrying a long stretch of white fabric across *Praspekt Nezalezhnasti* in Minsk. This photo shows the protesters marching past the infamous KGB building in the center of the city. The performance symbolizes the idea of solidarity chains, a strategy developed by the Belarusian protesters, where people lined up in the streets to voice their disapproval. Additionally, carrying this cloth across town is typologically similar to the ancient Slavic protection ritual of the *abydzionnik* towel, featuring a group of women carrying a long strip of homespun cloth around their village.



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"*Abydzionnik* towel from village Kortynitsa." Bialynichy district, Mahiliouskaia voblasts, Belarus (c.1943). From Volha Labacheuskaia's collection.

The *abydzionnik* towel is an ancient East Slavic protection ritual in which a group of women weaves a long strip of cloth thought to protect their community from epidemics, droughts, and wars. It had to be produced collectively between dusk and dawn, or from dawn to dusk. Women then

carried their towels around the village and held them across the road, with villagers passing under them. These towels were later displayed on roadside crosses or donated to the church. These rituals last occurred during the Second World War, but in Spring 2020, the *abydzionnik* was revived by the Student Ethnography Society.

For a long time, textiles as a medium occupied the bottom rung of the art hierarchy and were included by art historians in a separate section of decorative and applied arts. In Western art, the rehabilitation of textiles as a medium occurred in the 1970s and was connected with the work of Second-wave feminists, who began to actively use traditional women's crafts in their works. In Belarusian contemporary art, due to the general weakness of the art scene and its institutions, textiles began to appear only in 2009-2010. Their emergence was associated with a growing interest in the West, the rise of a new generation of artists, the democratization of exhibition platforms and the proliferation of social networks. At the same time, the generally accepted Western term craftivism, a word that combines craft and activism, is popular in Belarus in rather narrow circles. Only a small percentage use this term, while the majority of artists working with political textiles do not associate themselves with this art movement. Despite the rapidly growing volume of works related to textile arts, this medium still remains outside the scope of attention of Belarusian curators who specialize in contemporary art. This group exhibition-archive is the first of its kind for Belarus.

In the events surrounding the 2020 election, Belarusians used many different types of textiles, including embroidery as a way to signify their Belarusianness at a time where visual communication was an important tool [LaVey 2021]. Collecting our material during a phase of mass repression in Belarus, we primarily thought of embroidery as material artifacts of the protest movement. These artifacts are situated at the intersection of manual and machine labor, of physical objects and their representation in the digital sphere. One of the peculiarities of dealing with the digital landscape during mass repression is the vulnerability of digital information. During the Fall and Winter of 2020 and 2021, Belarusian protesters often had to delete political posts from their social media profiles or their entire accounts. Instagram played an archival role during this time, while other initiatives could not keep up with the growing volume of cultural production and—except for one specially created platform, *cultprotest.me*—stopped their

work during the protests. In our selection, we worked with the largest Belarusian protest web archive, Chrysalis Mag (<https://chrysalismag.by/>), which exists in parallel with Instagram, supplementing past editorial selections by viewing individual accounts and conducting interviews with artists. This exhibition included several works that the artists had in their archives but were afraid to display online. It also includes embroideries that were created in parallel with the process of working on the exhibition. Some of the artists wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Even though embroidery occupies a relatively marginal place in the entirety of the protest corpus, its dissemination online has a symbolic impact. This medium captured the public imagination in the first days following the elections, when artwork from the Instagram account of Prague-based Belarusian artist Rufina Bazlova made the rounds on social media and across a diverse spectrum of media outlets, including *Radio Prague International*, *Die Welt*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Belarusian-language *Radio Liberty*, *Meduza*, *The Moscow Times*, the Russian version of *Republic*, the *Calvert Journal*, and *Global Voices*, among others. Since August 2020, the idea of political embroidery has been actively implemented on several art platforms simultaneously. From August 20 to 26, Ÿ Gallery (the contemporary art exhibition space in Minsk that closed its doors in October 2020), launched the #TomorrowIsEveryDay project, in which more than ten artists offered their sketches to create a joint canvas-embroidery about the August events in the capital.

On 5 November 2020, another event titled *Embroidery Practices*, an online workshop on craftivism by Minsk artist Lesia Pcholka, took place. Pcholka's larger project deals with researching family archives and embroidering women's maiden names on their archival portraits. The collages of Germany-based Belarusian political artist Marina Naprushkina, which started as a part of #TomorrowIsEveryDay, stand somewhat apart. Published on Facebook, her work combines popular slogans in Belarusian with architectural blueprints made by her father, who was a Soviet architect; additionally, she does this all on the backdrop of school notebooks. Other protest embroidery that followed include works by Anna Bundeleva, Varvara Sudnik, Nasta Vasiuchenka, Daria Sazanovich, Vasilisa Palianina, Masha Maroz and Daria Golova. Galvanized by the protests, an entire community of Belarusian embroiderers has emerged among the country's artists, documenting the

events that took place, and working with such themes as feminism, memory and trauma. Whereas the dissemination of commercial ethnic patterns and consumer activism works to harness the idea of a nation, contemporary art activism tends to engage with additional referential frames, problematizing these narratives. Today, in an era of rapid loss of data and destruction of archival information in the region, protest textiles continue to serve a mnemonic function, organizing communities through their participation in protest rituals, documenting and working through political trauma through group participatory practices.



Next Section (/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/craftivist-strategies)

Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries

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Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries

Can all protest embroidery created in Belarus be classified as craftivist, and what does craftivism have to do with this corpus? Craftivism was coined in 2003 by the American author Betsy Greer as a way to combine craft and activism. “Craftivism is a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper & your quest for justice more infinite” [Greer 2007]. Her website encourages people to use their artistic talents in order to improve the world by expressing their opinions and supporting their causes. “Instead of being a number in a march or mass protest, craftivists apply their creativity toward making a difference one person at a time” [Greer 2007]. While craftivists use

many different techniques, knitting and embroidery are among the most popular. In addition to addressing social and political matters, craftivists are closely linked with Third-wave feminist movements. In Belarus, awareness of craftivism rose from an article titled *A cross-Stitch is not for an X* [Krestik ne dlia krestika] [Kyky 2011] and several workshops hosted by Makeout, the LGBTQ platform, in 2017 and 2018. The well-known Ukrainian art group *Shvemy* organized a lecture on craftivism and a workshop focused on working with clothes, texts, and images during their 2017 visit to Minsk [Makeout 2017]. Additionally, Makeout held a workshop titled *Free The Nipple* [2018], which featured nipples embroidered on clothing. During the protest year, 2020–2021, Pcholka organized multiple craftivist workshops under the title *Embroidery Practices*. In February 2021 another craftivist event which included works by Belarusian artists was held, a workshop organized by a curator from Moldova, Sofia Tokar [2021]. At the same time, because the term itself did not gain a wide audience in Belarus, we can only discuss individual cases and strategies of craftivism. Artists born and raised both in Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus converge as they reimagine the traditional crafts that formed the core of their art education and follow the growing interest in fiber arts in international contemporary art.

Anna Bundeleva is an artist and designer whose textile exhibitions, such as *Action Postponed* and *Tabula rasa* gained popularity in 2018. The artist considers textiles, fabric, and canvas as an untouched, tactile space and she chose this particular media due to its complexity and mobility and in spite of the stereotype that embroidery is a form of therapy or meditation, she enjoys its laborious, intense and concentrated nature [Bundeleva 2021]. Bundeleva did not design her two exhibitions in a craftivist vein, but instead avoided "framing [her] projects in *isms*," and was unaware of the craftivism movement until recently [Bundeleva 2021]. Meanwhile, the artist used craftivist strategies to reflect on the nature of art and its genre hierarchy, as in the work entitled *Da, eto normal'noe iskusstvo* [Yes, this is Normal Art] (2018).



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Anna Bundeleva, Yes, This is Normal Art (2018). Embroidered doily. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CNmnl24HqNg/%20>).

An embroidered doily from Anna Bundeleva's exhibition *Action Postponed*, which took place at the 1+1=1 workshop led by Mikhail Gulin and Antonina Slobodchikova on May 26, 2018. She became one of the first Belarusian artists to turn to cross-stitch embroidery in her work.

If Bundeleva's initial questioning of the genre hierarchy implied a socio-political connotation, then with the onset of the protests in Belarus, the artist began to make explicit political statements. Consider her embroidered tights for the Belarusian beauty queen and model Olga Khizhinkova, who was imprisoned for 42 days in November and December of 2020.

Embroidering with white threads on black tights the phrase "I am/We are Khizhinkova" was Bundeleva's way of showing support. Among Bundeleva's other works, there is a video performance of embroidery on a medical mask in protest against the murder of Raman Bandarenka. The author removes three masks, each representing Bandarenka's blood as having zero percent alcohol: zero ppm, zero 0/000, and zero. It should also be noted that both works are posted in Bundeleva's personal Instagram account, and are not in her creative portfolio. Therefore, they are perceived as a civil initiative. Her art, according to the artist, "has been on pause from the beginning of the protests" [Bundeleva 2021].



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Anna Bundeleva. *I/We are Olga Khizhinkova*. (2020)

Vilnius, Lithuania

Olga Khizhinkova is a Belarusian beauty queen who was arrested at one of the women's marches in November 2020 and spent 42 days in prison. Belarusian retail spaces reacted to Khizhinkova's arrest by covering her face on all packages of Conte tights, where she was featured as a model. Embroidering the phrase "I am/We are Khizhinkova" in white threads on black tights and posting it on Instagram was Bundeleva's way of showing support.



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Anna Bundeleva, *Zero Percent* (2020). Embroidered mask / Political performance / action.
Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CII-jtEndRF/%20>).

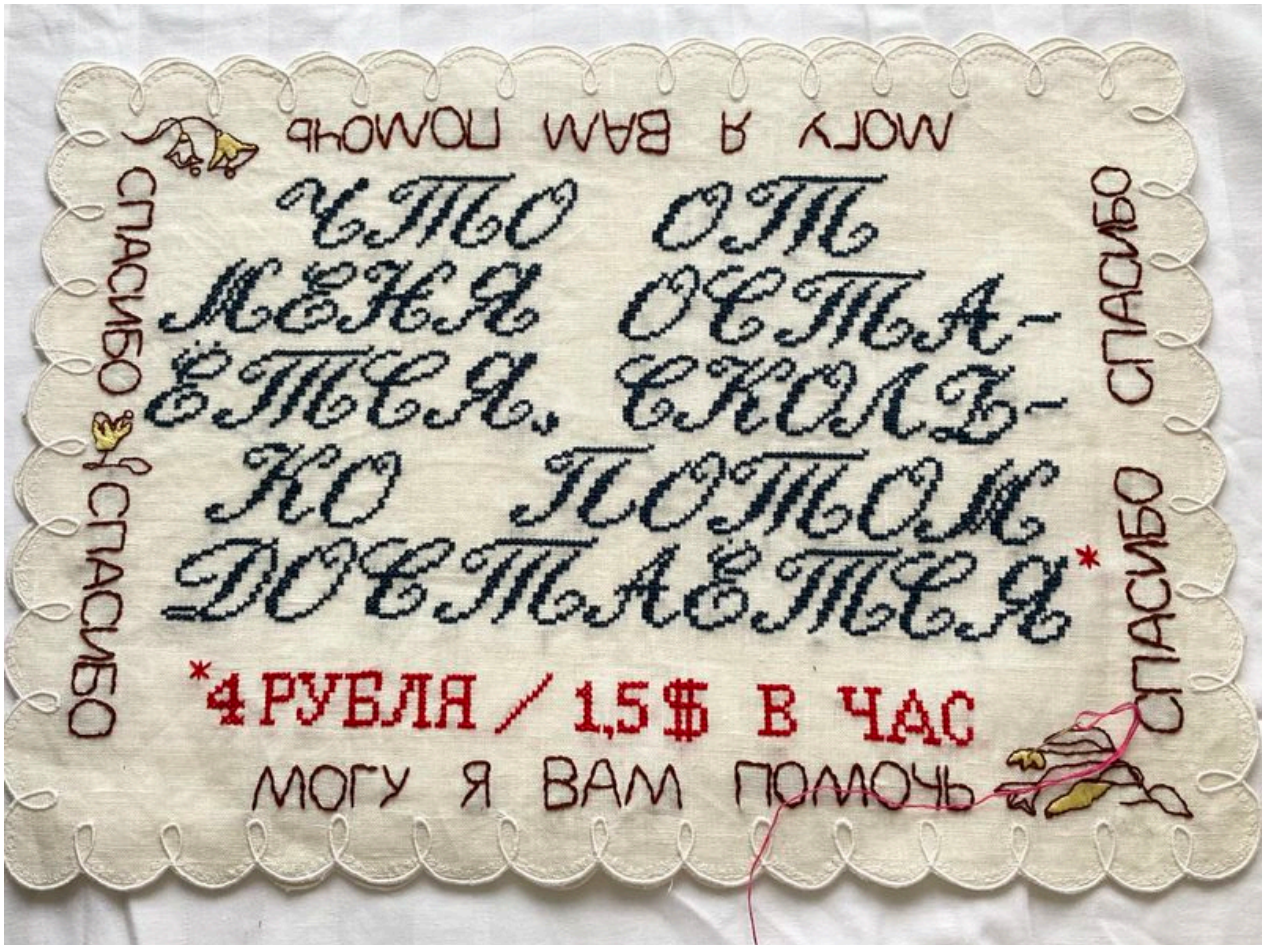
This is a screenshot from artist Anna Bundeleva's performance. Wearing three medical masks, she removes two of them, displaying three different ways to say "zero percent": *Zero percent*, *Zero %*, and *0%*. "Zero percent" became another symbol of dissent in Belarus after the murder of Raman Bandarenka, a 31-year-old artist and teacher. On Nov. 12, 2020, Bandarenka was beaten and arrested in the courtyard of his home. He appeared in a hospital emergency room later that night, where he died the following day. According to official reports, Bandarenka got into a drunken brawl and was rescued by the police, who called for an ambulance. Bandarenka's emergency room doctor rejected this claim in an interview, stating his blood alcohol level was 0.0 percent.

In contrast to Bundeleva, who posits a clear distinction between explicit embroidered political statements and her art, our next artist, Varvara Sudnik, relies on craftivist strategies without separating her art from politics. In doing so, Sudnik's artworks combine folklore and craftivism, working with the theme of fear within a society traumatized by political repressions and massive human rights abuses. She began working with textiles in February 2021 after attending Sofia Tokar's craftivism workshop. Her work with textiles is described as follows:

"Aside from being fascinated by fabric, its creases, and tactility, I also appreciate the need to focus and slow down. It was the most accessible material to me, so I chose textiles first. As a medium for artwork, embroidery is still underrated, in my opinion. In spite of this, I have mastered it, and I appreciate the contribution of so many women who have and are still doing it, to the development of embroidery" [Sudnik 2021].

Sudnik, who generally adheres to a craftivist philosophy, is very cautious when it comes to political statements due to the harsh political climate in the country. In the artist's work done outside of Belarus, e.g. her *Work Shifts 2/2* series, she does not shun direct references to labor rights. She describes her embroidered doilies as "an expression of humility and acceptance of the status quo" [Soroka, Grebennikova, Sudnik and Mon 2021]. Produced in Belarus, Sudnik's latest work, however, is more introspective as it focuses on the domestic political situation through the theme of fear. The author interprets fear, an intense emotion that dominates civil society, as a child finger game ritual titled '*Koza rogataia*' [Horned goat], embroidered on a

Soviet-style miniduvet cover. Commenting on social fear through a text enjoyed by children in East Slavic and Russophone families, the artist estranges this emotion and reduces it to a game.



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Varvara Sudnik, *2/2 Work Shifts* (2021). Embroidered doily. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Secondary Archive (<https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/varvara-sudnik/%20>).

Work Shifts 2/2 (2021) series is dedicated to labor rights and the precarity of workers in Belarus. The artist describes her embroidered synthetic doilies as an expression of humility and acceptance of the status quo, underscored by the labor-intensive process of embroidery. The inscription on the doily translates as follows: "What will remain after I am gone, how much of it will go to me. 4 roubles/\$1.5 an hour. Can I help you. Thank you Thank you."



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Varvara Sudnik, *2/2 Work Shifts* (2021). Embroidered doily.

Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Secondary Archive

(Minsk,%20Belarus%20https%3A//secondaryarchive.org/artists/varvara-sudnik/).

This duvet is cross-stitched with the words from a children's tale about a goat who attacks misbehaving children. The text reads: "There is a horned goat who comes for the little ones: he butts, he butts and he butts." Contemporary conditions in Belarus make it difficult to make political statements directly, and so craftivists carry it out allegorically, using examples from folklore.

Another work by Sudnik, a ribbon displayed against the backdrop of a rug, is familiar to generations of schoolchildren since Soviet times. The embroidered inscription "Of course, this is naive" can be read as

programmatically for the artist, who describes herself as a “simpleton from a small town and a humble family background” [Soroka, Grebennikova, Sudnik and Mon 2021]. However, starting from 2020, Belarusians have also associated ribbons with protest rituals, namely makeshift flags made out of white and red ribbons. People tie them to fences to express their discontent and support the protests, and the artist's utterance here works on multiple levels, both as a marker of her provincial identity and as a critical statement about the protest tactics.

According to the artist, Belarusian folk heritage plays a crucial role in her work:

"Sometimes [folklore] scares me, like a dark forest, sometimes I feel like it is blooming inside of me. It takes hold of me and makes me breathless, enchants, and leads me. This connection is very profound. It gives me an understanding of who I am and how I channel the people who were here before me" [Sudnik 2021].



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Varvara Sudnik, *Of course, this is naive* (2021). Embroidered ribbon. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Secondary Archive (<https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/varvara-sudnik/>).

The embroidered message on a synthetic ribbon — *Of course, this is naive* — connotes several meanings, most obviously sifted from the anthropology of Soviet-era nostalgia, as reflected in the material of ribbon used by schoolgirls in Belarus and the use of the Soviet-era rug in the background. However, starting from 2020, Belarusians have also associated ribbons with protest rituals, namely makeshift flags made out of white and red ribbons. People tie them to fences to express their discontent with the regime and support the protest, and the artist's utterance here works on multiple levels, both as a marker of her provincial identity and as a critical statement about the protest tactics.

By contrast with Sudnik's contextual engagement with children's folklore, Minsk-based designer Nasta Vasiuchenka approaches Belarusian folk narratives in a more direct manner that utilize craftivist concepts. After receiving an art education at the Belarusian State Academy of Arts, Vasiuchenka became known in 2017 for a collection of clothes inspired by the Radziwill family and Baroque style mixed with streetwear designed for popular Belarusian label Mark Formelle [Belarus Fashion Week 2018]. Similarly, Vasiuchenka's protest work combines casual style, minimalism and historical elements. Her Kanva label combines archival images of village women, straw earrings, necklaces and kerchiefs. During the protests, Vasiuchenka designed a T-shirt with the iconic inscription *Flower Power* embroidered with beads in national colors. In addition to its more recognizable allusion to the international pacifist slogan, this work references the specific protest action in the country. Vasiuchenka's portfolio on Behance includes images from the Kamarouskii market, the site of the famous action of women in white that took place on 12 August 2020.

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exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9794?exhibit=272&page=3518)

Nasta Vasiuchenka, *Flower Power* (2020). Cotton T-shirt and beadwork. Minsk, Belarus.

Accessed from Behance (<https://www.behance.net/gallery/104285711/FREE-Belarus%20>).

A hand-beaded shirt, inspired by the nonviolent protest actions of Belarusian women, references a slogan used during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a symbol of nonviolent action by the hippie subculture. In August 2020, flowers became a symbol of the peaceful protest in Belarus, while the

location of the photoshoot, Kamarousky market in Minsk, is well-known as the site of the first massive protest actions organized and led by the Women in White Telegram channel.

If the artist's T-shirts remediate an international pacifist slogan in a local context, then her embroidered scarves which she calls *kupalki*, or songkerchiefs, are uniquely Belarusian products. According to Vasiuchenka, embroidered statements on kerchiefs appeared at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as a result of the development of literacy and education among peasants [Vasiuchenka 2021]. Before designing kerchiefs with folk songs, the artist made another series with quotes from Belarusian prose writer Uladzimir Karatkevich. Among this dissident author's most prominent works is *Kalasy pad siarpom tvaim* [The Ear of Rye Under Thy Sickle] (1968)—a novel he wrote about the January Uprising of 1863-1864. A reference to the uprising reflects Vasiuchenka's commitment to bringing culture to the masses [Vasiuchenka 2021] by echoing the contemporary situation in Belarus.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9797?exhibit=272&page=3518)
Nasta Vasiuchenka, *The Ear of Rye Under Thy Sickle* (2021). Embroidery on cotton. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Behance (<https://www.behance.net/gallery/109542579/kalasy-pad-sjarpom-tvam%20>).

The Ear of Rye Under Thy Sickle is a Kanva label series featuring quotes from Uladzimir Karatkevich, the preeminent Belarusian prose writer. *The Ear of Rye Under Thy Sickle* [Kalasy pad siarpom tvaim] (1968) is a novel narrating the events of the January Uprising of 1863-1864. The reference to the uprising reflects Vasiuchenka's commitment to bringing Belarusian culture to the masses by echoing the contemporary situation in Belarus. The kerchief inscription on the photograph says: "Every person carries their sky with themselves."

Vasiuchenka's interest in folk heritage began in 2016, during her studies at the academy, where, in her words, "there were whole semesters and summer practices devoted to folk costumes," [Vasiuchenka 2021].

Vasiuchenka explains that "our cultural code lives in folklore. Without our culture, we can't identify ourselves; we can't be a nation. So I strive to promote culture through costume, fashion and ethnic music" [Vasiuchenka 2021].

In addition, her song-kerchiefs are linked to August 2020's *Speuny skhod* [singing circle], an event at the Kupalausky theater in Minsk organized by Siarhei Douhushau exemplifying folklore in resistance:

"After Pavel Latushko resigned from his position as the director of the Kupalausky theater, and the entire troupe followed him, I began gathering my *Speuny skhod* near the theater building. We met daily at noon to sing. This was when the [Belarusian State] Philharmonic, the orchestra, and the choir, came out on the streets, too, and this was a parallel process. I chose the song repertoire based on the mood and my feeling at the time. At first, we sang the summer songs that were lyrical, philosophical, and feminine. Then there were famous songs, such as "Oj rechanka rechanka," because everyone knew them and sang with great pleasure. These gatherings lasted for nine days and ended with the riot police showing up on the last day of August" [Douhushau 2021].

Similarly to music, a healing aspect is integral to Vasiuchenka's art as well. "As protests broke out, the level of anxiety in 'our swamp' drove me to explore new techniques and means of artistic expression. As a result, my clothes have taken on a therapeutic and meditative quality. Embroidery and handicraft help me calm my nervous system, relax, and process my

emotions here and now" [Vasiuchenka 2021]. The artist did not know the term craftivism, but acknowledged that "if you accept a creative sublimation for craftivism, then this is exactly what [she] is doing in this difficult last year" [Vasiuchenka 2021].



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9799?exhibit=272&page=3518)
Nasta Vasiuchenka, *For the Darkness of the Night my Eyes are Bright* (2021). Embroidery on nylon. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Behance (<https://www.behance.net/gallery/123670761/240421-VS-300421%20>).

Kupalki, embroidered kerchiefs from Nasta Vasiuchenka, are literally song-kerchiefs, a unique artistic fusion of dress and music folklore carried out in a minimalist key. Embroidered statements on kerchiefs appeared at the turn of the 20th century, as a result of the development of literacy and education among peasants. The embroidered inscription features a line from a traditional Belarusian folk song: "For the darkness of the night, my eyes are bright."



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Textiles in Belarusian Contemporary Art Before, During, and After the Protests



Next Section (/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/collective-embroidery)

Collective Embroidery Practices

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Collective Embroidery Practices

The kind of coordinated collective action that became a feature of the Belarusian protest requires a high level of organization. Among protest textiles, giant white-red-white flags are suitable examples. Such flags were first seen in Hrodna in the first week of the protests, and then in Minsk and the diasporas (15). Recent corpora of political embroidery are no exception. In the early phase of the protests, group embroidery was used to ensure the cohesion of the art community. A year later, similar projects continue to serve as an accessible and safe participatory practice, allowing individuals to work through their trauma. How many collective embroidery projects are known today? In addition to a series of workshops on craftivism by Pcholka and the “Tomorrow Is Every Day” collective, there are two more projects: 1.)

A joint work by artists Daria Sazanovich and Yuliya Tsviatkova and 2.) collective embroidery presented by artist Vasilisa Palianina. In addition, one more group embroidery project is yet to be implemented: Rufina Bazlova in Prague plans to stitch together a quilt with portraits of political prisoners that would be embroidered collectively.

Pcholka is an artist, art manager and instructor. She started the VEHA initiative to preserve the visual history of Belarus. On 23 January 2021, the artist was detained in Minsk for picketing and left the country upon her release from jail. Since April 2021, Pcholka has been dividing her time among various art residencies abroad. Her textile work started with VEHA's project titled *Nailepchy bok* [Best Side], a study of family photographs against woven backgrounds that was carried out through the lens of history, ethnography, and visual studies:

I was able to gain a better understanding of why women made rugs, why they chose certain ornaments, and what rituals accompanied their actions. Weaving was used for household items, interiors, and rituals. Embroidery was not as popular (which differs significantly from Ukraine, where embroidery rapidly became part of consumer culture and is a lot more popular than in Belarus). When women embroider, they communicate a lot, while weaving is primarily an individual, creative work. Therefore, it has less general information exchange, and more of a practical knowledge exchange [Pcholka 2021].

Pcholka's embroidery project *Maiden Name* (2018) was exhibited at the *Krylia kholopa* [Wings of a Serf] gallery in Brest as a part of the collective exhibition *Mother Matter*. It aims to restore the names of women, often several generations, living under one roof, but under different surnames:

When getting married, a woman traditionally assumes the husband's surname, thus respecting the new family. However, a change of the surname not only means a new status and symbolizes the rejection of a part of one's own life [Pcholka 2021].

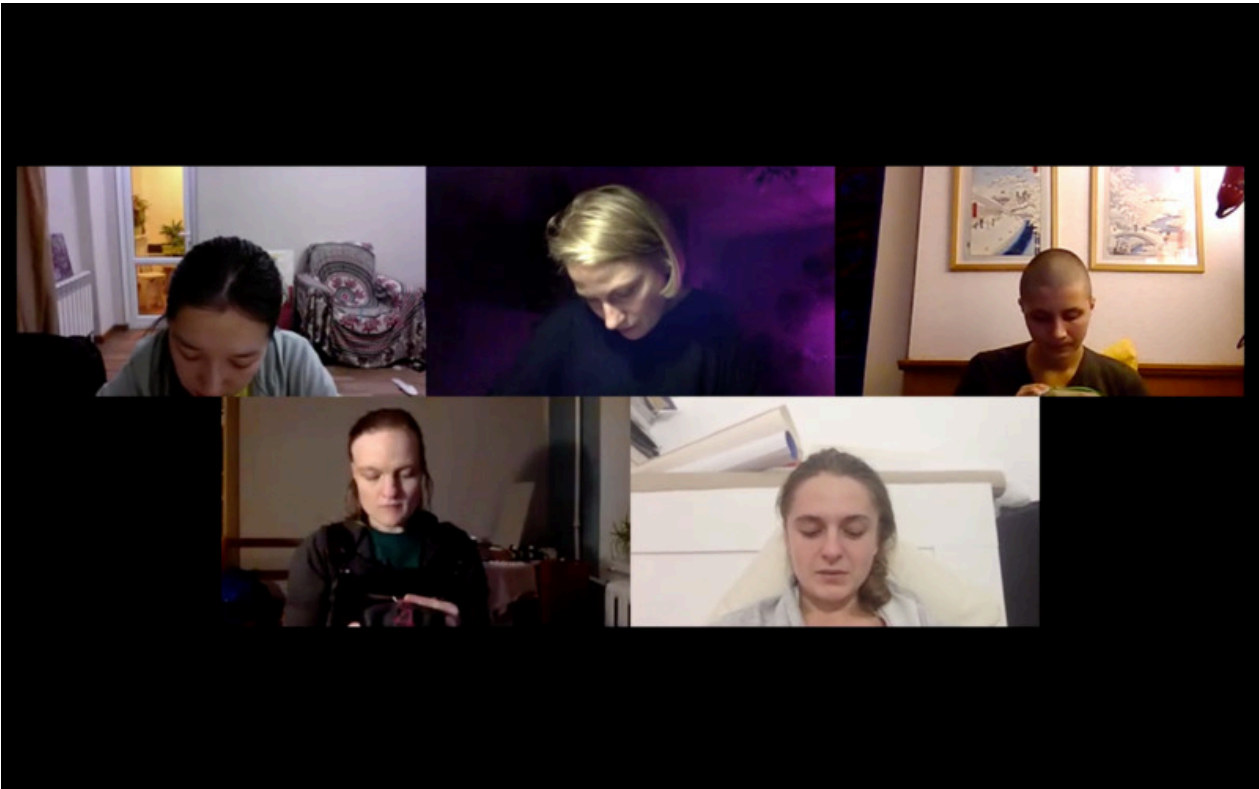


(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9801?exhibit=272&page=3520)

Lesia Pcholka, *Maiden Name* (2018/2020). Mixed media. Sourced from an online workshop.

Pcholka's embroidery project *Maiden Names'* (2018) was exhibited at the *Krylia kholopa* [Wings of a Serf] gallery in Brest as a part of the collective exhibition *Mother Matter*. It aims to restore the names of women, often several generations living under one roof, but under different surnames. By embroidering women's maiden names in red thread on their archival images, the artist reestablishes the lost genealogies.

By researching social memory and family photos, the artist noted that there was little information about women in response to this problem. She then decided to embroider their maiden names on archival images to reestablish these lost genealogies [Pcholka 2021]. The artist's red thread and cross-stitch connects these names to traditional folk embroideries. Additionally, the cross symbol is reminiscent of how illiterate people used to sign their names before the Russian Revolution. According to the artist, the cross also symbolizes the glaring absence of family archives in many Belarusian families [Pcholka 2021].



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9803?exhibit=272&page=3520)

Lesia Pcholka. *Maiden Names* (2018). Minsk, Belarus.

A screenshot from *Embroidery Practices* workshop conducted by Lesia Pcholka online and offline from 2020 onwards. While the process in these workshops is more important than the product, the communicative component of this ongoing group project amplifies the voices of the embroiderers from across the post-Soviet region and allows them to discuss pressing socio-political concerns.

Maiden Names became the starting point for a series of workshops that Pcholka conducted online and offline under the title *Embroidery Practices*. Directed against the patriarchal system, this workshop coincided with mass protests led by women in Belarus. As part of this event, participants embroidered and discussed critical social issues. This series is currently not in public view and remains a work-in-progress:

The work from *Embroidery Practices* is not online. In this series, the process and what the participants said is more important than the final product. Each of us embroidered something of our own, and together we talked about political and social problems. These meetings were not directly related to the protests [Pcholka 2021].

While organizing these events, the artist was aware of the historical link between radical activism and needlecrafts throughout the history of women's suffrage [Pcholka 2021]. According to Pcholka, the communicative component of this ongoing group project amplified the voices of the embroiderers. Another Belarusian project entitled *Tomorrow is every day* ran concurrently with *Embroidery Practices*. The famous Minsk Ў gallery launched this project in August 2020 and promoted it with #заЎтракожныдзень on social media. In the years from 2009 to 2020, this gallery became one of the country's leading platforms for promoting contemporary art. The collective embroidery project was one of the last in the gallery's existence. One of the gallery's co-founders, Sasha Vasilevich, was already in jail at the time.

The idea for *Tomorrow is every day* was created by artist and curator Marina Naprushkina, curator Lena Prenz (both Berlin-based), and the Minsk-based Anna Chistoserdova Valentina Kiselyova, the Ў Gallery's co-founders. The gallery's Facebook and Instagram announced the project as follows:

"We are continuing with #заЎтракожныдзень, a project that takes place in real-time! More than ten artists have proposed their sketches for the joint creation of the hand-made documentary embroidered canvas, and each of you can participate in its creation! Besides the fact that we will create a large work of art together, the process of embroidery represents an excellent therapy and meditation that helps us to live through and process everything that touches us" [Ў Gallery 2020].

It is noteworthy that although the traditional for some regions of Belarus red-white-black palette was used to create this collective artwork, the embroiderers used a variety of stitching techniques, not just the cross-stitch. Furthermore, the item description avoids the term craftivism altogether but highlights the project's therapeutic component. As the hashtag's name suggests, there is no beginning or end when inside an event, and for it to succeed, the collective action must continue every day. This idea was later reused in the most prominent Belarusian political art exhibition in Mystetskyi Arsenal (26 March 26–6 June 2021, Kyiv, Ukraine), under the title *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance*. Even though the artists of its sketches preferred to stay anonymous, the exhibition curators felt that it was too

risky to take this artwork out of the country. As of today, the artwork remains unfinished, safely stored in Belarus, waiting for its time in the daylight.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9806?exhibit=272&page=3520)

Anonymous, *Tomorrow is Every Day* (2020). Communal documentary embroidery. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEaKNx-HQtf/%20>).

Tomorrow Is Every Day [#zaUtrakozhnydzen'] is an anonymous group needlework project started by the Ÿ Gallery of Contemporary Art in Minsk as a sort of communal art therapy project, where anyone was welcome to stop by and contribute. This closeup highlights the use of Belarus's traditional embroidery material, linen and red thread, and Belarus's women in white with flowers. The fragment depicts the Women in White's very first action, when they appeared in front of the Kamarouskii market in Minsk on Aug. 12, 2020. The embroidered inscription says: "Kamarousky Market / Welcome." Photographer: Viktoryia Kharytonava.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9804?exhibit=272&page=3520)

Anonymous, *Tomorrow is Every Day* (2020). Communal documentary embroidery. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEHim19nOVM/%20>). (https://www.instagram.com/p/CEHim19nOVM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

A second design from *Tomorrow Is Every Day* is based on an image of a choir singing *God Almighty* [Mahutny Bozha] on the steps of the National Philharmonic on Aug. 13, 2020, in protest against the police brutality of the preceding days. The lyrics were written by the poet, playwright, and translator Natallia Arseneva in 1943 and set to music by Mikola Ravenski in 1947, shortly thereafter becoming the anthem of the post-war Belarusian immigration. Arseneva was a displaced person who ended up in New York. Banned by the Lukashenka regime, her *God Almighty* is revered today as the country's spiritual anthem. The embroidered inscription says: "My voice was stolen." Photographer: Viktoryia Kharytonava.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9808?exhibit=272&page=3520)
ДЮ (DY), *Zastolle* (2021). Embroidery performance. Bremen, Germany.

ДЮ (DY) is a multimedia artist-duo of Belarus-born artists Daria Sazanovich and Yuliya Tsviatkova. The *Zastolle* project is a reflection and documentation of social and political processes in Belarus. The work refers to the traditional Slavic feast, which is “attended” by various representatives of the Belarusian society from repressed students to the police. Communication is represented in the form of visual symbols sewn into the fabric. The primitive crafts aesthetic of the textile piece resonates with a desperate state of inability to counteract violence. The *Zastolle* performance took place at the Bremen-based platform aRaum on September 23–29, 2021.

Sazanovich is an artist, designer, and illustrator, and Tsviatkova is a visual artist working in video and textiles. Both artists are from Belarus and live and work in Bremen, Germany. As the events in Belarus were unfolding, she would get together with her friend, artist Tsviatkova, to talk about the news and embroider stories that captured their attention. One such story is about how one of the protest leaders, Maria Kalesnikava, tore her passport when the regime tried to deport her in September 2020. According to Sazanovich, she does not frame her work as craftivism, even though she is familiar with this term. As a digital artist, she does not want to confine herself to a rather specific and narrow movement [Sazanovich 2021].

The inspiration for the project comes from the extracurricular art education she received as a child in her hometown of Babruysk:

"I always liked to do things with my own hands. From childhood, I went to all sorts of classes on handicrafts because my mother was the head of the after-school education program. So I ended up doing a lot of crafts with straw and the so-called 'applied arts'" [Sazanovich 2021].

And although Sazanovich's embroidery does not visually reference the traditional canon, she feels a connection with folk culture not only via her training but also because one of her female ancestors was a folk whisperer. The artist is currently writing her master thesis on witches in modern culture entitled "How and why I would like to become a witch" [Sazanovich 2021].



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9810?exhibit=272&page=3520)
 ДЮ (DY), "Fragment of *Zastolle*." (2021). Embroidery performance. Bremen, Germany.

This fragment of the *Zastolle* performance features some of the most recognizable symbols of the Belarusian protests of 2020. The torn passport is a direct reference to the brave action of Belarusian female political leader Maria Kolesnikova, who tore her passport after being kidnapped and taken to the Ukrainian border in September 2020. The blue hand is an allusion to a

saying by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenka, who famously quipped that he was not going to hold onto power with his blue fingers, a common side effect of a medical condition known as peripheral cyanosis.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9811?exhibit=272&page=3520)
 Vasilisa Palianina, *Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die* (2020-2021). Canvas, Threads, Photo print (70 x 157, 5"). Collective embroidery. Minsk, Belarus.

Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die (2020-2021) is Vasilisa Palianina's group embroidery project that was unveiled to the public at the exhibition *When Shapes Become Shadows* (2021), curated by Ilona Dergach. The exhibition took place in Krynki, Poland, on August 27, 2021. In the current political environment of Belarus, the medium of embroidery speaks to the advent of the collective female subject in the protest movement of Summer-Fall 2020. In this four-meter canvas, artist Vasilisa Palianina humorously explores the imaginary agrarian myth that holds that Belarus was born from the potato root and cultivated as the embodiment of the patient peasant class. The project's participants include the following individuals: Mariam Astryam, Sasha Dorskaya, Sashen Galerik, Kristina Brukshpyn, Polina Siriska, Katerina Ignashevich, Anna Kruk, Ulyana Dulkina, Tatiana Karpacheva, Masha Maroz, Ira J, Tasha Katsuba, and Aleksandra Osipovich. Curator Ilona Dergach describes collective embroidery labor as a form of group trance and psychotherapy.

Vasilisa Palianina is a Belarusian artist who works across various media, including graphics, installation, performance, and experimental techniques. The artist's connection to folk culture resides in the very idea of embroidery as a medium. Palianina made a name for herself for her work with sexuality

and taboo. Since the beginning of the protests, these themes remained important to her, but they began to intertwine or were supplanted by reflection on the ongoing protests. According to the artist, "when the protests started, [her] degree of civic awareness and personal involvement in the development of [her] own country increased," which resulted in a massive embroidered tableau she made in Minsk, with various artists stopping by her studio to participate [Palianina 2021]. When it comes to folklore, Palianina stressed that "heritage is a vital part of human culture. This is what forms our inner core, and its strength depends on how we relate to our heritage. Embroidery and textiles reference the origins of the folk language and are energetically compelling statements." The artist does not use the term craftivism but attests that her work can easily be situated within this movement [Palianina 2021].

Additionally, the artist emphasizes that the very medium of embroidery, because the process takes so long, provides the necessary distance for reflection, "What has happened to Belarusians and is happening now in the country is a critical and painful process of growing up, which will bear fruit in the future. While we are under so much stress, it is difficult to take a step back and assess the situation in an impartial manner" [Palianina 2021]. The same statement can be extrapolated to the entire protest embroidery corpus. Not all ideas have been implemented or completed, and not enough time has passed to evaluate these projects. At the same time, in the case of group embroidery, the process has a separate value from the product, and participation in it ignites a powerful mechanism of community recomposition. Therefore, it can be argued with a degree of caution that the participatory aspect of textile work and the very popularity of textiles as a medium in Belarusian folk tradition have become a peculiar feature of the Belarusian protest culture.



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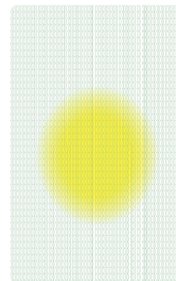
Vasilisa Palianina, fragment of *Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die* (2020-2021). Canvas, Threads, Photo print (70 x 157, 5"), Collective embroidery. Minsk, Belarus.

This particular embroidery fragment of *Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die* (2020-2021) features the following Belarusian language inscription: "Patria, Patriarch, grate these potatoes," -- exploring the homonymic similarity between the Belarusian verb *pateret'* [to grate] with the Latinate variants of the noun *patria*.



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Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries



Next Section (</online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/traditional-textile>)

Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums



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Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums

By incorporating folklore, craftivism, after-school art education, formal art education and contemporary art practices, textile works explored various identities and meanings of the Belarusian protest culture. Symbolic representation of traditional textiles in other mediums exhibits the same dynamic. The works of Masha Maroz, Marina Naprushkina, Da(r)sha Golova, and Rufina Bazlova, illustrate the coexistence of different folds of Belarusian identity: from conventionally Soviet to searching for "authentic" folk roots and using folk motifs in cyber and art activism.

The following project looks at textiles and textile codes. Masha Maroz is a multimedia artist, designer and ethnographer from Minsk who works on collective memory and national identity topics. In 2014, Maroz graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Arts with a degree in costume design. She is the founder and curator of Past Perfect, a platform dedicated to preserving and popularizing Belarusian historical and cultural heritage. Maroz describes her mission as “a mediator, a bridge, between the symbolic world of [the] ancestors and a modern world” [Polevikova and Maroz 2021]. She is especially inspired by Belarusian Polesia because her family comes from this region and she was born there as well [Dergach and Maroz 2020].

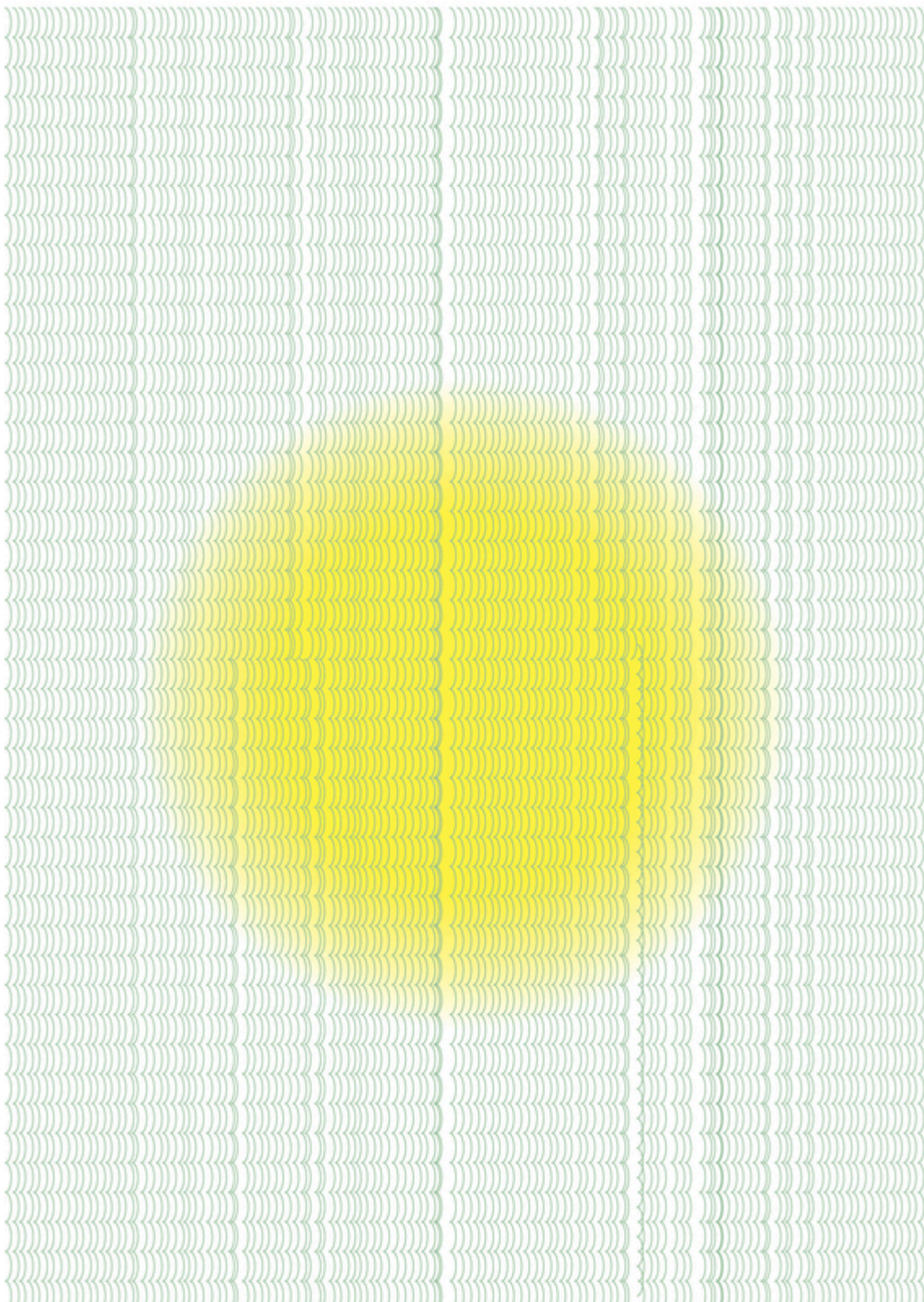
The Long Way Home, the artist's first solo exhibition, took place on 26 June 2020, at the state-run Nekrasova 3, in Minsk. The exhibition content became the artist's protest against the the Lukashenka regime's official narrative of Belarusianness:

"Today, many items associated with Belarusian culture—at least in the government's official narrative—are imported directly from the Soviet era: straw dolls, vodka, and large, state-backed competitions and festivals celebrating everything from milkmaids to tractor drivers" [Polevikova and Maroz 2021].

Maroz, on the contrary, aims to experiment with “social, ideological, visual norms of modern Belarus for the preservation of folk culture” [2021]. Tradition, according to Maroz, is of central importance as a method of channeling information that is vital to society. By combining the handwoven rugs and an authentic Polesia interior with computer graphics, the artist closes the gap between the codes: the material of everyday culture and digital, through the ceremonial, multilayered space. The project installation represented an allusion to the interior of a traditional house in the Polesia region, reflecting not only on the visual component of folk culture but also presenting a sacred knowledge channeled into the attributes of interior decoration and the everyday, materializing the philosophy of home-creation and the organization of the living space.

Immediately after the presidential elections on August 9, 2020, Maroz took her exhibition down in a gesture of a protest against state violence [Derchach and Maroz 2020]. Earlier in July, the following digital work,

featuring the traditional pattern of a female figure behind bars, appeared on her Instagram profile under the title *Selfie-Time*. Some images from this exhibition and those from the Past Perfect archive were later shown in the Netherlands as part of an exhibition titled *Voices of Belarus. Chapter Two: Restoring Connections* (on view at punt WG from 27 July to 1 August 2021, Amsterdam, Netherlands). Another recent exhibition to feature Maroz's artwork from this series is *When Forms Become Attitude*, which opened on August 17 2021 in Krynki Gallery (Krynki, Poland), curated by Ilona Dergach.

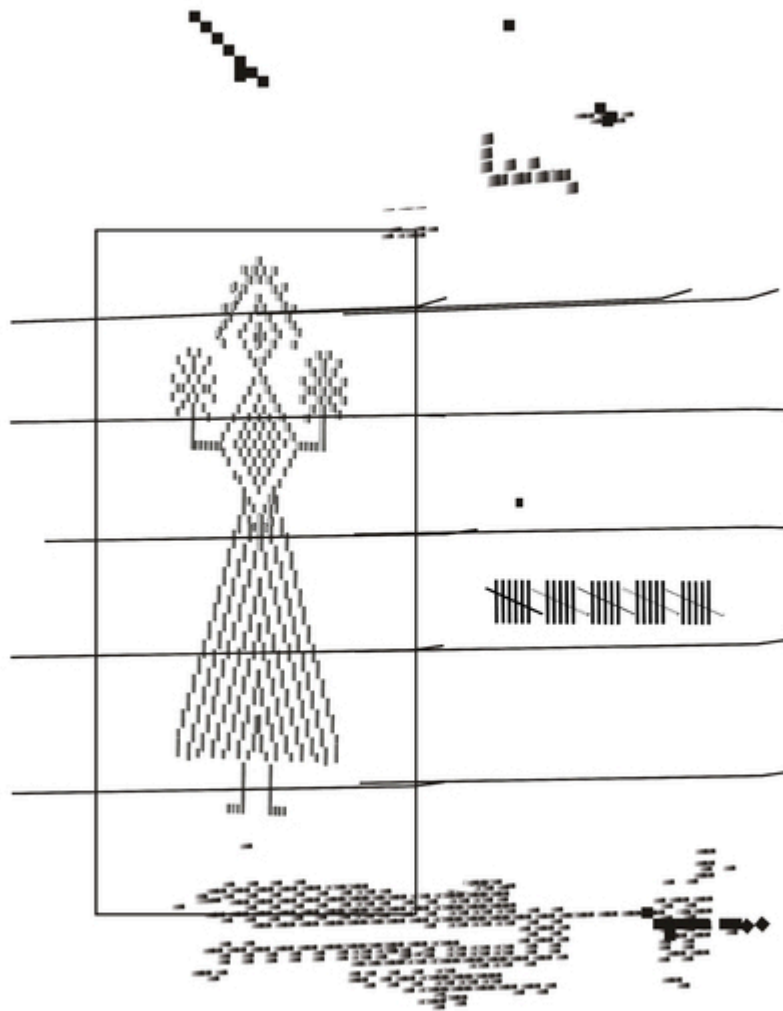


(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9820?exhibit=272&page=3521)

Masha Maroz, *The Sun Will Shine In Our Window*.(2020). Digital artwork. Minsk, Belarus. From the exhibition *The Long Way Home*. Accessed from Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CC3Pg8Xn4sn/>).

This digital artwork is part of a series of three images that form a group meditation and visualization exercise, part of Maroz's 2020 exhibition *The Long Way Home* at the National Center for Contemporary Arts in Minsk in June 2020. The participatory action invited people to come together in the

gallery for an energy-cleansing ritual. The image depicts the sun juxtaposed against a digital textile grid. The title, *The Sun Will Shine In Our Window*, is a reference to a Belarusian publishing group that existed in Saint Petersburg, Russia, from 1906 to 1916. The title of the exhibition, *The Long Way Home*, alludes to the memoirs of prominent Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau (1924–2003).



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Masha Maroz, *Untitled* (2020). Digital artwork. Minsk, Belarus. From the exhibition *The Long Way Home*.

This digital artwork was part of Maroz's 2020 exhibition *The Long Way Home* at the National Center for Contemporary Arts in Minsk, which focused on the influence of social and ideological norms of modern Belarus and specifically the heritage of traditional Belarusian culture and collective memory. The image represents a woman caught up in a digital grid of what appear to be jail bars, while the marks on the right represent the common counting practice of sets of fives.

Naprushkina is a Belarusian-German feminist artist and activist who works with video, performance, drawings, installations, and text. From August to September 2020, Naprushkina was in Minsk, where she launched *Tomorrow Is Every Day* at Ÿ Gallery. Additionally, she created a series of posters referencing embroidery on school notebooks, writing her slogans in Belarusian with a red felt tip pen: *Strike! Solidarity is Our Weapon*. As soon as the works were completed, they were posted on Facebook, on the artist's page and deposited in the protest art archive cultprotest.me. They were also displayed in two exhibitions: *A Secret Museum of the Workers Movement* hosted by Hoast art gallery (on view 27 February to 3 March 2021, Vienna, Austria) and *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance* at Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv, Ukraine. This is how the artist explains her work:

"I am showing exercise books that I also used when I was a child. These are the official school notebooks. And I chose some slogans from the street, which I heard in Belarus in August and September last year, and combined them with images from factory buildings. My grandfather was an architect, and he built a lot of factories in Belarus. The workers' strikes were one of the most important parts of the protests. For me, it was also personal because I knew these very buildings from my grandfather's drawings. The slogans also gesture at the cross-stitch embroidery technique, which alludes to female work" [Naprushkina 2021].

Solidarity is Our Weapon includes a drawing of a carpet factory in Brest built in 1958-1960 that serves as a reference to the country's textile industry. School notebooks and Soviet-era factories are symbols of Belarusian identity

of the Soviet era and industrial labor as opposed to the artisanal pre-revolutionary production modality.



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Marina Naprushkina, *Join Us!*. (2020). Paper and felt-tip pen. Minsk, Belarus. Accessed from cultprotest.me (<https://cultprotest.me/p/rovYbHTYkYCNSZCjagnC>).

Join us! [Daluchaisia!], part of a series called *Exercise Books*, in which the author has drawn slogans of the resistance in school notebooks with felt-tip pens in the style of cross stitch, thereby inscribing the 2020 protests into Belarusian history.



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Marina Naprushkina, Strike (2020). Paper and felt-tip pen. Berlin, Germany. Accessed from cultprotest.me (<https://cultprotest.me/p/BbMahISg8fjR0PeP8f4n>).

Strike [Zabastovka] is part of a series called *Exercise Books*. It alludes to the all-national strike announced on August 11, 2020.



(/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9819?exhibit=272&page=3521)
Marina Naprushkina, *Solidarity is Our Weapon* (2020). Paper and felt-tip pen. Berlin, Germany.
Accessed from cultprotest.me (<https://cultprotest.me/p/kxJptADj3e9raGewRFxk>).

Solidarity is Our Weapon [Salidarnast nasha zbroia] is part of a series called *Exercise Books*. It juxtaposes letters drawn in red felt tip pen up against the background of a reprographic architectural drawing of a factory by the artist's grandfather, who was a Soviet-era architect.

Postcards of Solidarity is an ongoing project developed by Amsterdam-based artist and designer Da(r)sha Golova (in collaboration with Maroz and Artemiy Sei). Similarly to Maroz's "Long Road Home," it also deals with the question of Belarusian identity. The exhibition's introductory text states that political problems in modern Belarus are directly related to the destruction of the Belarusian ethnic heritage:

"The majority of Belarusians don't know their roots, culture and are ashamed of the Belarusian language, considering it 'peasant-like.' That is one of the reasons why we, as Belarusians, have been asleep as a nation for a long time and are now seeking the process of building and forging a new structure between us as humans, repairing connections between the land and people" [Maroz, Kulak, and Golova 2021].

Golova's ambitious mail art project features 555 postcards from European cities with traditional textile patterns from Polesia printed across them. The patterns come from Maroz's Past Perfect archive. According to the artists, such superimposition of West-European and Polesian images advance the "reparation of liaisons within the family, the reconnaissance of ornamental language, the visualization of the heritage that was never accessible to us, the remembrance of the names of ancestors to restore the way home" [2021]. Each of these cards is addressed to a different political prisoner in Belarus. The creators view these postcards as fragments of a broader message, an ornamental code of Belarusian tapestry and embroidery [2021]. All elements of this project contain crucial information, such as the recipient's name and address, the stamp, the ornament and the place of departure. "Everything is ready for you to activate this--not necessarily verbal--communication by picking one of them and dropping it into the postbox. By doing so, you are delivering hope, a cheerful gesture of awareness, acknowledgment, and support"[2021]. There is, however, a functional drawback to the project: exhibition visitors often sign these postcards in foreign languages, and they get through prison censors at random.

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Da(r)sha Golova, *Postcards of Solidarity* (Second Edition). (2021). Screen-printed paper. Amsterdam, Netherlands.

A scanned selection of postcards destined for Belarusian political prisoners. The project was presented at a number of venues in the Netherlands. The first edition of 260 cards for the *Postcards of Solidarity* project were made together with Masha Maroz and Artemiy Sei, at the group show *Voices Of*

Belarus at the Glass Pavilion in Amsterdam, April 2021. The second edition of 555 cards for the *Postcards of Solidarity* project were made with Masha Maroz and Sasha Kulak, at the group show *Voices of Belarus. Chapter Two: Restoring Connections* at Punt WG, Amsterdam, July 2021 (photographer Sasha Kulak).



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[exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9825?exhibit=272&page=3521](https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/item/9825?exhibit=272&page=3521))

Da(r)sha Golova, "Opening reception of *The Voices of Belarus.*" *Chapter Two: Restoring Connections* (2021). Amsterdam, Netherlands. Photographed by Sasha Kulak.

The second edition of 555 cards for the *Postcards of Solidarity* were made with Masha Maroz and Sasha Kulak, at the group show *Voices of Belarus. Chapter Two: Restoring Connections* at Punt WG, Amsterdam, July 2021 (photographer Sasha Kulak). Image from the opening event with enchanting music performance by Fuensanta Méndez.

If Golova's *Solidarity Postcards* employ textile ornaments to confuse censors and convey a fragmented message, Bazlova's art, on the contrary, is as readable as a comic strip. Bazlova, an illustrator, performer, and puppet master also uses the code of traditional textiles, but combines it with figurative elements, documenting the ongoing events in the country via her Instagram account. She began her *History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* cycle on a night of protests when the country was experiencing an internet blackout and used vector graphics to ensure fast production. Her images went viral on Instagram within days and appeared in several major newspapers. Each tableau of the cycle corresponds to an actual event during the Summer–Winter of 2020. *Vyzhyvanka* is a pun combining two Belarusian words, "embroidery" and "survival." *Vyshyvanka* means "embroidered shirt." *Vyzhyvats'* means "to survive."

A year later, Bazlova's work appeared in many exhibitions and on the covers of several journals and magazines. Besides her vector graphics, Bazlova produced physical embroidery and serigraphs. Even though the artist identifies with the craftivist movement and cyberactivism, her choice of medium, however, is inspired by her family tradition:

"My grandmother was a jack, or jill (!), of all trades: she sewed, knitted, weaved, and did macramé. My mother could do a little less, and the only thing that I was left with is embroidery" [Bazlova 2021].

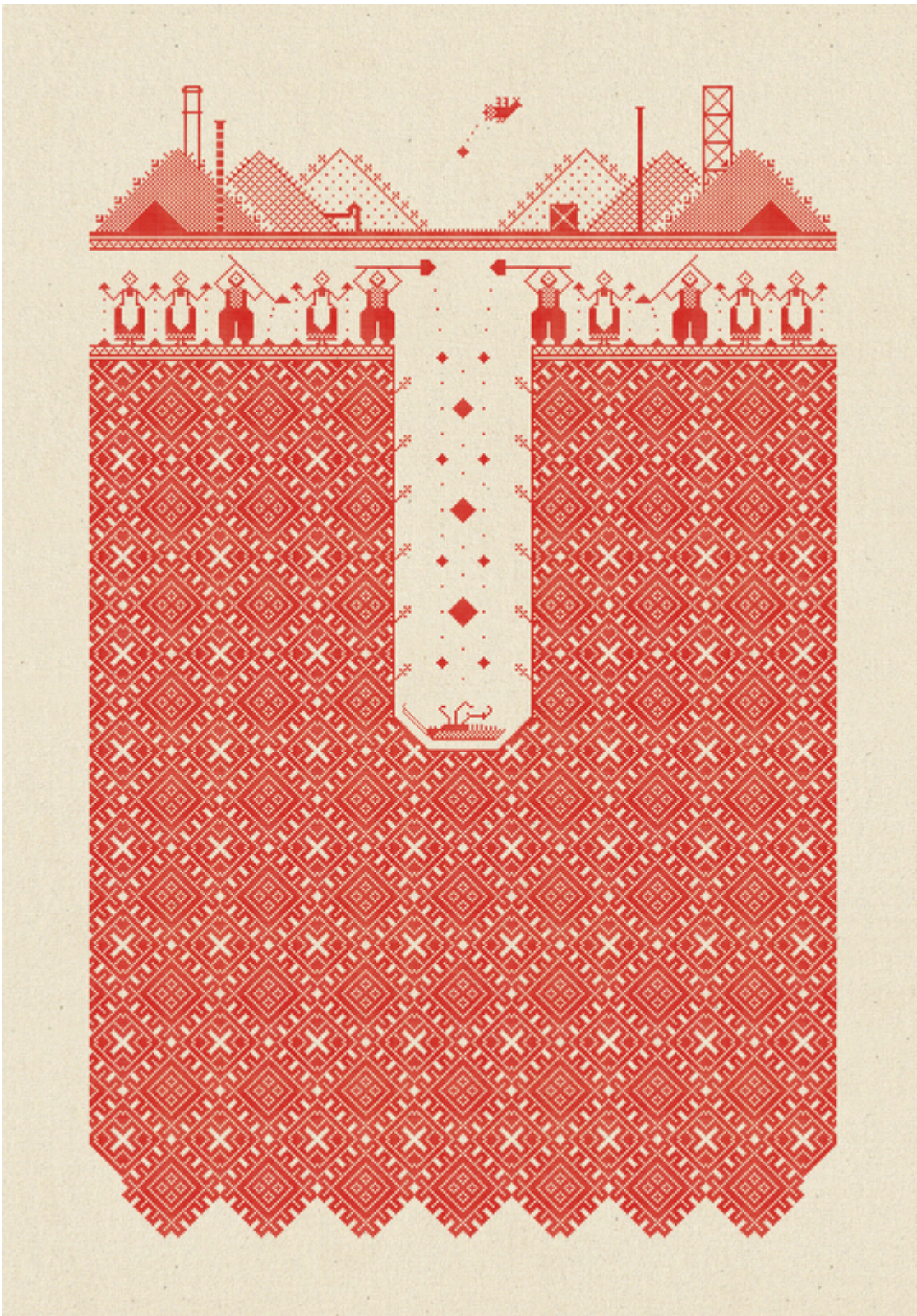
Additionally, Bazlova used embroidery during her training as an artist and recognizes its importance in the traditional culture:

"For a long time, women were taught to neither read nor write. I learned that embroidery could be read as a kind of text. Everything they saw was reflected in their embroideries, which became their form of expression. My white and red motifs come from our folk culture. After all, the events that

are taking place now, can be seen as the formation of the nation. And when such a powerful historical and cultural code depicts current events, it makes an impression on people" [Bazlova 2021.].

On the one hand, Bazlova speaks about "nation" and "people's art" and is set to create "an embroidered epic of the Belarusian Revolution, in which each tableau corresponds to an episode of its recent history" [Bazlova 2021]. But she also engages with the narratives of cyber-feminism opposing state violence, which, in her case, appear to be experientially and not theoretically driven. In terms of its content, her artwork also gestures towards diversity. It represents diverse social groups, such as women, retirees, or people with disabilities, that have been previously excluded from political processes. By representing these groups and assembling the entirety of her work within one long tapestry (17.7x289.3 inches). Bazlova created a collective embroidered saga of the Belarusian uprising. Although the mode of production of this machine embroidery is different from the ritual *abydzionnik* towel, made by the village women and used in protection rituals, the collective ethos of Bazlova's work is reminiscent of this folk form. Whether performed collectively or depicting a collective, these protest textiles carry the traces of a barely recognizable protection ritual from long ago.

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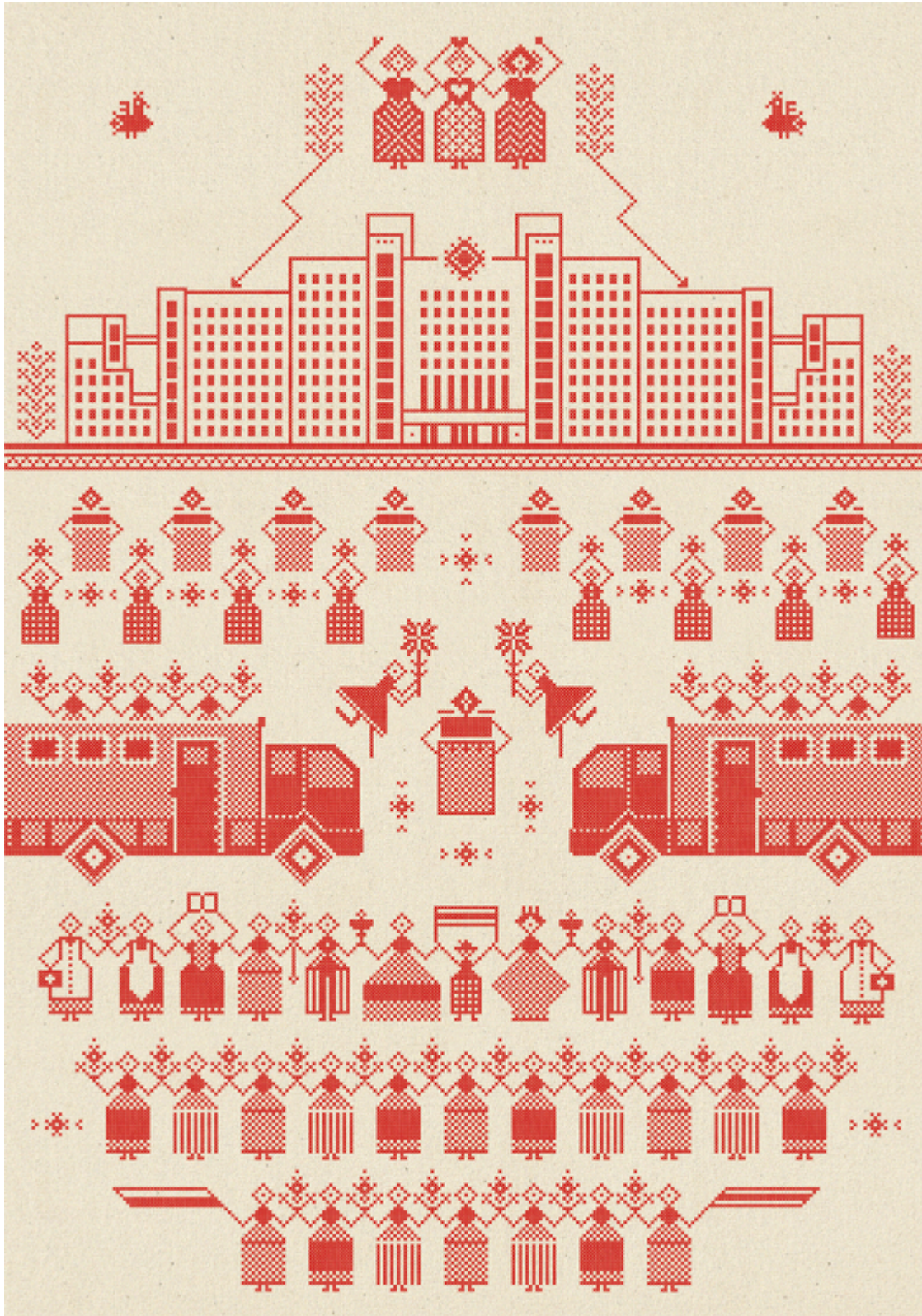


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Rufina Bazlova, *Solidarity with Salihorsk*. (2020). Vector Graphics (39.3" x 27.5"). Prague, Czech Republic.

A piece from Rufina Bazlova's series entitled *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* uses the traditional folk embroidery medium to depict the ongoing peaceful protests in Belarus, the artist's home country. Based in the city of Salihorsk in the southern Minsk region, the Belaruskali Factory

specializes in the production of potash. Its workers went on strike during the first days of the revolution, thus halting the mining. In the picture, they are burying a cockroach—a metaphor for Aliaksandr Lukashenka used by blogger Siarhei Tsikhanousky in his election campaign. Tsikhanousky also made a slipper (the folk weapon for killing cockroaches) a symbol of his campaign.

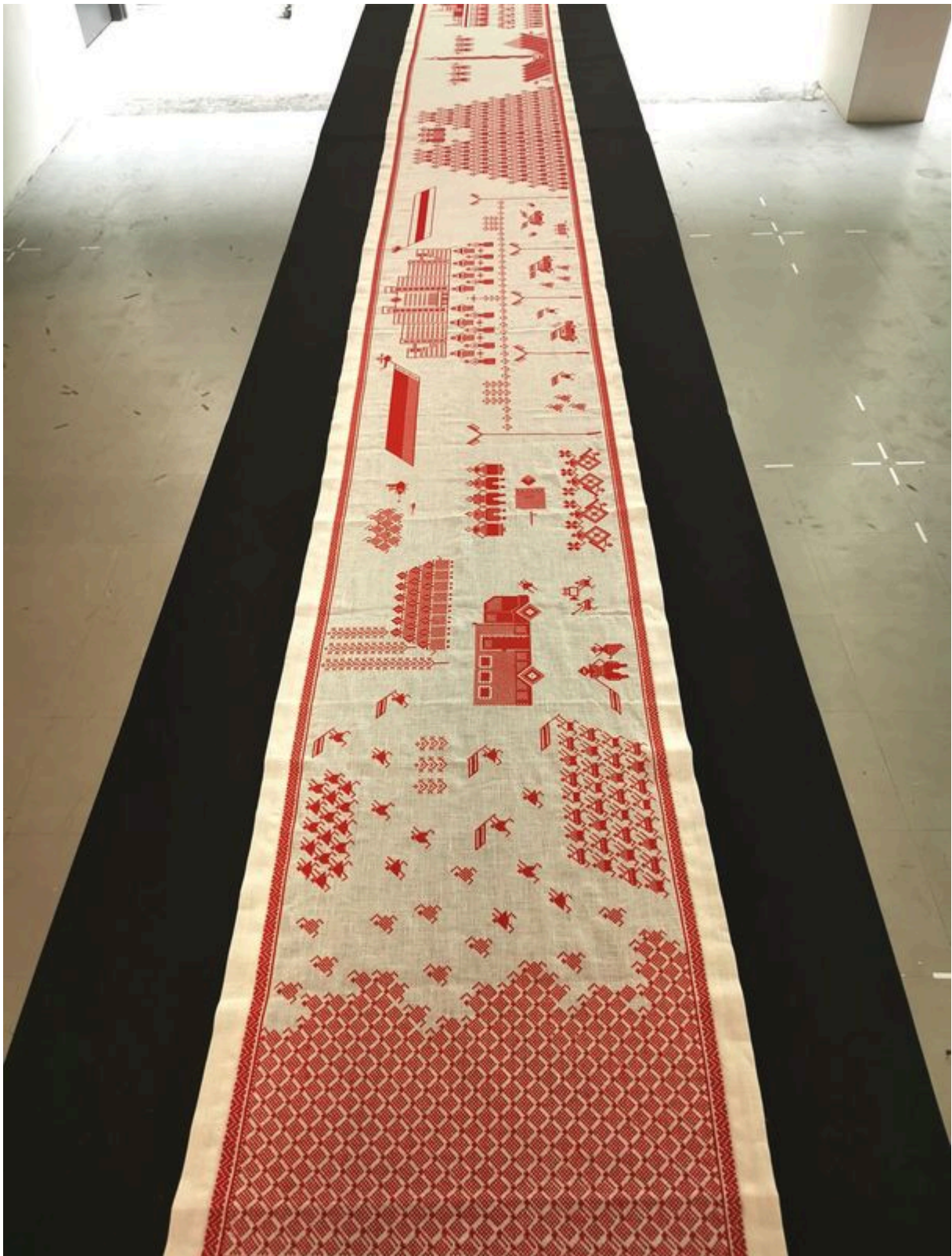


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Rufina Bazlova, *The Female Solidarity*. (2020). Vector Graphics (39.3" x 27.5"). Prague, Czech Republic.

This second piece from Rufina Bazlova's series entitled *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* depicts women-led protests in Belarus. On August 12, 2020, Belarusian women spontaneously took to the streets in large numbers calling for an end to state violence, forming solidarity chains and gathering across the country. Self-organizing in Telegram chats, they chose to dress in white, the traditional color of women's suffrage. Hence, the Women in White movement was born. From August to October 2020, Belarusian women continued to participate in weekly Saturday marches, clashing with the police and breaking through police lines. All in all, there were four Saturday marches: the "Women's Grand March for Freedom" on August 29; "The Loudest March. Women March for Women" on September 12; "The March of Sparkles" on September 19, which resulted in 400 detentions; and the "Démarche against Political Repressions" that took place on October 10. With the escalation of police violence against women, these massive marches subsided, while smaller decentralized forms of protest persisted.

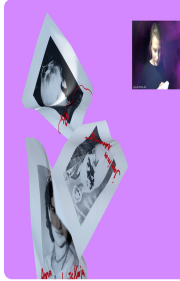


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Rufina Bazlova, *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* (2020–2021). Machine embroidery (17.7" x 289.3"). Prague, Czech Republic.

This machine embroidery combines and unites the body of digital artwork made by Rufina Bazlova in her cycle *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka* (2020–2021). Each tableau corresponds to an actual event during the Summer–Winter of 2020. This artwork was first exhibited as a part of the

Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance exhibition which took place in Kyiv's Mystetskyi Arsenal from March 26–June 8, 2021. It was later exhibited as a part of *Belarus--Screams of the Silenced* exhibition at Haage's Grey Space in the Middle from August 7–August 18, 2021.



Previous Section (</online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/collective-embroidery>)

Collective Embroidery Practices



Next Section (</online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence/artists-biographies>)

Artists Biographies

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Artists Biographies

Rufina Bazlova (b. 1990 in Hrodna, Belarus) is a Prague-based Belarusian artist who works in illustration, comics, art books, puppet making, scenography, performance, and costume design. Bazlova gained an international profile for her series *The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka*, which uses the traditional folk embroidery medium to depict the ongoing peaceful protests in Belarus, her home country. Additionally, the artist is also known as the author of the fully embroidered comic book *Ženokol* (Feminnature), which explores the themes of feminism present in folk traditions. Another of her graphic series, *Sametová Plzeň 1989*, depicts the events of the Velvet Revolution in the Czech town of Plzeň. Bazlova holds an undergraduate degree in stage design from the theater department of the

Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU) and an MFA in illustration and graphic design from the Ladislav Sutnar Faculty of Design and Art at the University of West Bohemia. Together with her colleagues from DAMU, she founded a creative group of puppeteers called *Sled' Pod Kožichem* (Herring Under a Fur Coat). Their play *RAW* was nominated for the Greenhorn Award at the prestigious Figura Theatre Festival in Baden, Switzerland in 2020.

Anna Bundeleva (b. 1986 in Minsk, Belarus) graduated from Belarusian State University in 2009 where she studied art and design. She chose to work with textiles in appreciation of the labor intensity and concentration that the medium requires. Anna treats textiles as a *tabula rasa*, an untouched tactile space in her artistic practice. Anna's 2018 exhibition titled *Native Hill* [Rodny sklon] that opened at the National Center of Contemporary Arts dealt with the questions of family, genus, and familial relationships. Her other exhibitions, *Action Postponed* (2018) and *Tabula rasa* (2019) took place at the *1+1=1* studio space. After the government crackdown on the protests in 2020, Anna's family relocated to Vilnius, Lithuania for safety reasons.

Cemra is the artistic alias of Darya Siamchuk (b. 1990 in Hrodna, Belarus) who works in the genre of conceptual art, reflecting on the problems of modern society and looking for the most vivid and emotional ways to express them in visual media. *Cemra* means "darkness" in Belarusian, and the artist chose this name because most of her works reflect the dark side of humanity. Cemra has participated in several significant exhibition projects in Belarus. In 2019, she became the winner of the *Autumn Salon* with Belgazprombank. In 2020, her first solo exhibition took place in the Art-Belarus art gallery in Minsk, and in 2021, her second personal exhibition was held at the A&V Art Gallery, Minsk. From 2021, the artist has been displaced twice, first to Ukraine, where she fled from the Belarusian regime, and then to Poland, after the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war.

ДЮ (DY) is a multimedia artist-duo of Belarus-born artists Daria Sazanovich and Yuliya Tsviatkova. Daria Sazanovich (b.1990 in Babruysk, Belarus) is a multimedia artist better known by her nickname sheeborshee. After graduating from the European Humanities University in Vilnius in 2016 with a degree in visual design and media, Daria moved to Germany to undertake a master's degree in digital media at the University of the Arts in Bremen.

Working as a designer and illustrator for independent media and NGOs, she is most well-known in Belarus as a “socially-engaged illustrator.” In her multimedia projects, she tackles political topics and explores different forms of oppression. Since finishing her degree in Biology, Yuliya Tsviatkova (b. 1990 in Mahileu, Belarus) has been searching for a more liberal form of research, which brought her to art practice. As a visual artist working in video and textiles, she is interested in non-linear storytelling, creating a vortex of repetitions and slow changes. She works with such themes as fear, obsessions, censorship, and the “randomness” of memory. Both artists have met and are based in Bremen, Germany.

Da(r)sha Golova (b. 1990 in Belarus) is a Belarusian artist, stylist, and fashion designer based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She studied Fashion Design and pattern-making at the Istituto Polimoda (2016) in Florence and Fine Arts at the Rietveld Academie (2020) and founded the bi-annual event Textile Initiative which focuses on clothing repair and education around the field of textiles. In 2021 she organized a participatory group show *Voices of Belarus. Chapter Two: Restoring Connections* at the Punt WG, Amsterdam. She has also worked in close collaboration with artist duo *Liminal Vision* as a costume designer for *Sonzai Zone* and *Zhouwei Network*. Currently, Dasha is working at the art residency Hotel Maria Kapel in Hoorn, where she is showing her first solo exhibition, *Choreography of detention. I hear the melody from the swamp*.

Masha Maroz (b. 1991 in Brest, Belarus) is a multidisciplinary artist, designer, and ethnographer from Minsk. After graduating from the Belarusian State Academy of Arts with a degree in costume design, Maroz worked on a number of projects exploring connections between mythology, ritual, collective memory, and escapism. Besides doing costume and stage design for theater and film, the artist founded and curates Past Perfect, a platform dedicated to preserving and popularizing Belarusian historical and cultural heritage. Maroz has participated in one solo and more than 17 group exhibitions. Maroz's 2020 exhibition titled *Long Road Home* took place at the National Center of Contemporary Arts in Minsk. The artist's intention was to “reflect not only on the visual component of folk culture but also to present a sacred knowledge dimension that our ancestors integrated into the attributes of the interior decoration of their houses.”After the post-

election state violence that took place on August 9, 2020, Maroz took her exhibition down to express her protest. The artist currently lives and works in Minsk.

Marina Naprushkina (b. 1981 in Minsk, Belarus) is an artist, feminist, and activist. Her diverse artistic practice includes video, performance, drawings, installation, and text. Naprushkina mostly works outside of institutional spaces, in cooperation with communities and activist organizations. Naprushkina is focusing on creating new formats, structures, and organizations based on self-organization in theory and practice. In 2007, Naprushkina founded the Office for Anti-Propaganda. It concentrates on power structures in nation-states, often making use of nonfiction material such as propaganda issued by governmental institutions. In 2013, Naprushkina founded *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit*, which grew into one of the largest initiatives in Berlin, helping to build up a strong community of people with and without migrant or refugee backgrounds. Naprushkina was awarded the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture (2017) and the Sussmann Artist Award (2015). Naprushkina participated in the Kyiv Biennale (2017), the 7th Berlin Biennale (2011), and the 11th International Istanbul Biennale (2009). Her work has been featured in many prestigious exhibitions across Europe. She currently works as a professor of printmaking at Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee in Berlin (Ludwig-Stiftungsprofessur für Druckgrafik) and professor of painting at Universität der Künste Berlin.

Vasilisa Palianina (b. 1986 in Minsk, Belarus) is a Belarusian artist who works across various media, including graphics, installation, performance, and experimental techniques. After graduating from the Arts Department of Belarusian State University with a specialty in Design in 2009, she participated in a number of prestigious international art residencies, including the scholarship program "Gaude Polonia," in Warsaw, Poland (2019), and the art group "Slavs and Tatars. Picklebar," in Berlin, Germany (2020). Since 2018, Palianina has been a member of the art group *Who Except Us* (a duo with Andrey Anro). The artist took part in three solo and more than twenty group exhibitions, as well as the following art fairs: Blazar Young Art Fair, Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russia (2020) and Viennacontemporary, Vienna, Austria (2020 and 2021). Palianina works with

topics of sexual and gender identity, human and animal source, and social aspects of mythology. Her works are located in numerous private collections in Belarus, Poland, the United States, Austria, Bulgaria, Russia, and Germany.

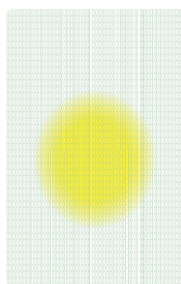
Lesia Pcholka (b. 1989 in Barysau, Belarus) is an artist and arts manager from Belarus who studied social psychology at MIU (Minsk Innovative University), then participated in numerous international educational programs for cultural workers. In her artistic and research practice she works with the themes of memory and everyday life. Pcholka is the leader of the VEHA sociocultural initiative and an instructor at the European College for Liberal Arts in Belarus. Among her significant publications and artworks are *Girls' Night* [Dziavochoy vechar], *The Last Picture* [Aposhni fotazdymak], and *The Best Side* [Nailepshy bok], as well as the new Instagram-based project *Invisible Trauma*. Since the beginning of the protests in 2020, Pcholka has been organizing a series of Embroidery Practices Workshops. On January 23, 2021, the artist was detained in Minsk and left the country upon her release from jail. Since April 2021, Pcholka has been dividing her time among various art residencies abroad. She participated in two solo and more than forty group exhibitions.

Varvara Sudnik (b. 2001 in Stowbtsy, Belarus) is a queer artist from Belarus who relies on her experience outside of the art establishment and institutions and does not separate her art from politics. Her work addresses the topics of exclusion, visibility, gender, labor, and trauma. Sudnik chose the textile medium because she appreciates the need to focus and slow down. Craftivism for Sudnik is a great force that overcomes the audible silence located in the painstaking labor of embroidery via processing of information through fabrics and threads. In 2020, Sudnik participated in a Craftivism workshop organized by Sofia Tokar, where she produced her *2/2 Workhifts* series. Her work appeared at an exhibition titled *Antibodies. Young Art From Belarus* [Antikörper. Junge Kunst aus Belarus] at Westwerk Gallery in Hamburg, Germany.

Tomorrow Is Every Day [#zaUtrakoZhnydzen'] is the Ÿ Gallery collective anonymous protest embroidery project launched in August 2020 and promoted on social media under this hashtag. In the years from 2009 to 2020, the Minsk-based Ÿ Gallery became one of Belarus's leading platforms for the country's contemporary art. This collective embroidery project was

one of the last in the gallery's existence. It fostered the creation of a safe communicative space, in which participants could exchange their ideas about the political situation in the country and channel their feelings into embroidery. It also became a meeting place for those Belarusian citizens who were actively protesting and those who were afraid to take to the streets. The artwork remained unfinished and was stored safely in Belarus. Today, it constitutes a part of the Ambasadakultura archive, an organization launched by two of the former Ÿ Gallery co-founders, Valentina Kiselyova and Anna Chistoserdova.

Nasta Vasiuchenka (b. 1992 in Minsk, Belarus) is a designer who graduated from the costume design program at the Belarusian State Academy of Arts in 2016. Vasiuchenka became known in 2017 for her collection of clothes titled *Contemporary Radzivills* inspired by Baroque styles mixed with streetwear and designed for the prominent Minsk-based Mark Formelle brand. Founded in 2018, Vasiuchenka's Kanva line combines casual style and minimalism with ethnographic and historical elements. The collection was exhibited in the ЯDRO fashion show, which took place at the Belarusian National Art Museum in Minsk and was dedicated to the 130th anniversary of Belarusian artist Iazep Drazdovich. Today, Kanva features archival images of village women, straw earrings, necklaces, and kerchiefs. Vasiuchenka's use of traditional materials is considered one of the hallmarks of her brand. Her mission is to promote Belarusian national culture through fashion. The designer currently lives and works in Minsk.



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**Traditional Textile Patterns
in Other Mediums**



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The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns is co-sponsored by the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design, the UCLA Department of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Languages and Cultures, and *Chrysalis Mag*. The exhibit is curated by Belarusian-American independent scholar and curator Sasha Razor, archival scientist A.M. LaVey (with support from the Art Libraries Society of North America's Wolfgang M. Freitag Internship Award), and research assistant Kendra Eaton (with support from the Imaginative Activism of Digital Citizens grant award).

Acknowledgments and Sponsors

Special thanks go to Irina Aristarkhova, professor at the Stamps School and Digital Studies Institute, members of the Imaginative Activism of Digital Citizens project (Irina Aristarkhova, Fee Christoph and Kendra Eaton), and librarians Jamie Vander Broek, Caitlin Pollock and Brendan Nieuburt for their support of the exhibition. In addition, we would like to thank Elena Gapova, Volha Labacheuskaya, Valentina Kiselyova, Antonina Stebur, Ilona Dergach, and Mikhail Gulin for their assistance and access to archival materials, as well as *Chrysalis Mag* for helping promote this exhibition.

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Textiles in Belarusian Contemporary Art Before, During, and After the Protests



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Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries



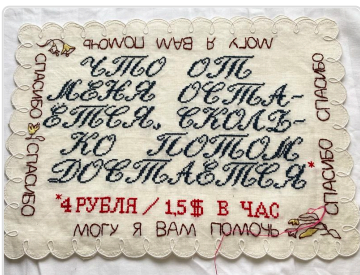
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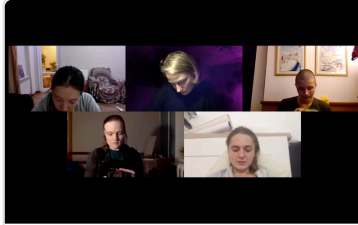
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Collective Embroidery Practices



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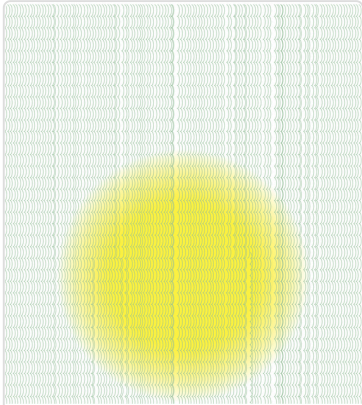
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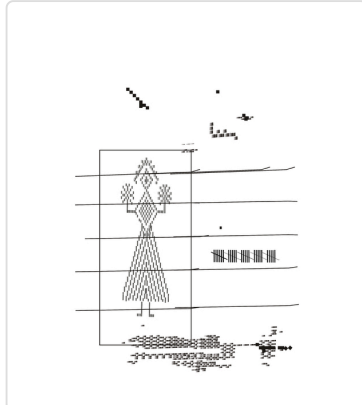
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Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums



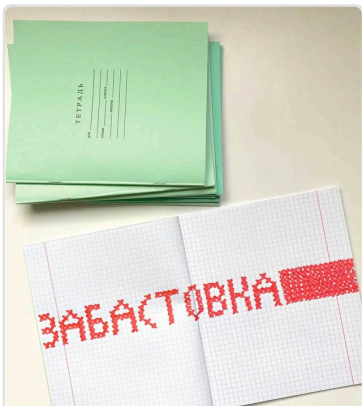
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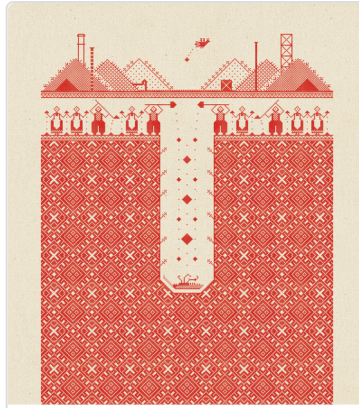


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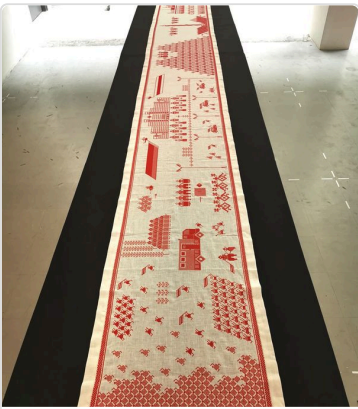
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