

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

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**Abstract**

Since the fraudulent presidential elections of 9 August 2020, the Republic of Belarus has become a battleground between the women-led democratic opposition forces and the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenka. Current forms of political oppression in Belarus make open public protest dangerous. This exhibition report highlights safer ways to express dissent in a dictatorial society by grounding it in the textile arts, collective labor, and participatory practices. “The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns” is a permanent digital exhibition that I curated in 2022 hosted by the University of Michigan Library. The exhibition features 12 textile projects created by professional female artists from Belarus, including the works of Rufina Bazlova, Masha Maroz, Varvara Sudnik, Anna Bundeleva, Nasta Vasiuchenka, Lesia Pcholka, Vasilisa Palianina, Dasha Sazanovich, Yuliya Tsviatkova and Da(r)sha Golova. The exhibition explores how Craftivism, a global trend in contemporary art associated with political activism, correlates with the artists’ perceptions of the country’s textile heritage. The purpose of this report is to introduce individual artists, their voices and projects. It is grouped into three distinct, albeit overlapping, categories: 1) individual craftivist strategies in Belarusian protest embroideries; 2) collective craftivist embroidery practices; and 3) traditional textile patterns in other media. Galvanized by the protests of 2020–2021, political artists’ embroideries and ornamental graphics emerged as a protest ritual of a new kind, igniting a powerful process of cultural heritage revitalization, and documenting the events of the protests, working with such themes as feminism, female labor, memory, and trauma.

**Introduction (1)**

Since the fraudulent presidential elections of 9 August 2020, Belarus as a country has become a battleground between 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 Tsikhanouskaya, the independent candidate who likely won the election, heading a 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 prosecuted based on politically motivated charges and went through the country’s

penal system, while 1,077 political prisoners are still awaiting release. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have left the country, but no reliable data exist on 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 [Chatham House 2021]. This struggle for democracy in Belarus has been exacerbated by the loss of the country's autonomy and the ongoing Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Since winter 2021, Belarusian territory has effectively been occupied by Russian forces and, with cooperation from the Belarusian military, is being used as a launchpad to attack Ukraine [Sullivan 2022].

It is also crucial to note that these events are occurring without the consent of Belarusian citizens, who are deprived of secure methods of expressing their dissent. They now find themselves under two oppressive regimes: the illegitimate rule of Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenka and that of the Russian armed forces.

This report introduces an exhibit that addresses a safer and creative means to express dissent in a dictatorial society through textile arts, collective labor, and participatory communicative practices. "The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns" is a digital exhibit displayed by the University of Michigan Library. It includes 12 textile projects created by professional women artists from Belarus since the beginning of anti-government protests in August 2020. (2) As I wrote in the materials accompanying the exhibit:

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 from institutional art hierarchies [Razor 2022].

While not all artists are familiar with the term and do not identify their work in this way, from an outsider art critic perspective, Belarusian protest embroideries appear to fit the large global art movement, Craftivism. This term 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 textile 'craft' often excluded 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, craftivism became known through publication of the article “Крестик не для крестика” [A Cross-stitch Is Not for an X] [Kyky 2011] and several workshops hosted in 2017 and 2018 by Makeout, the LGBTQ platform. The well-known Ukrainian art group *Shvemy* organized a lecture on craftivism and a workshop focused on working with clothes, texts, and images during its 2017 visit to Minsk [Makeout 2017]. Additionally, Makeout held a workshop titled “Free the Nipple” [2018], which featured nipple embroidery on clothing. During the so-called protest year, 2020–2021, another artist from Minsk, Lesia Pcholka, organized multiple craftivist workshops under the title “Embroidery Practices.” In February 2021 another craftivist event was held, a workshop organized by a curator from Moldova, Sofia Tokar [2021], which included works by Belarusian artists.

Background: Embroidery in Belarusian contemporary art



*Image 1. Cemra, Spadchyna (2019). Fragment of a triptych. Embroidered home-spun Belarusian dress with elements of graffiti. Hrodna, Belarus.*

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” [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 COVID-19 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 politically isolated country without a well-developed infrastructure for contemporary art, a similar trend is clear: during the protests of

2020-2021, a significant number of Belarusian contemporary artists turned to textiles and traditional folklore. The embroidery medium had been used in Belarusian contemporary art previously, but not widely. For example, one may cite Alexei Lunev's project *Shit-Clouds* (2009-2010), elements of embroidery in Zhanna Gladko's exhibition *Inciting Force* (2012), Olia Sosnovskaya's project *Of Our Women, a Two-channel video installation* (2015), and Vasilisa Palianina and Anna Bundeleva's artist embroideries [Razor and Bazlova 2021]. An evaluation of the use of embroidery within the broader context of post-Soviet contemporary art in Belarus reveals that this particular appeal to nationhood is relatively new and has emerged only within the past few years, as exemplified by the triptych titled *Spadchina* [Heritage] (2019) by the Hrodna-based artist Daria Semchuk, who works under the alias Cemra [darkness] (see Image 1). The impetus behind her work is to raise awareness and to confront the loss of Belarus' cultural heritage [Razor and Bazlova 2021].

From the beginning of the protests in August 2020, traditional folklore became one vehicle for articulating protesters' feelings, be it folk song performances or the use of traditional Belarusian bagpipes during rallies. The increased volume of production and dissemination of traditional textile designs in the digital sphere belongs to the same category. In the events surrounding the 2020 election, Belarusians used many different types of textiles, including embroidery, to signify their Belarusianness at a time when visual communication was an important tool [LaVey 2021]. Even though embroideries occupy a relatively marginal place in the entirety of the protest corpus, their 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 Radio Svaboda*, *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 launched the "Tomorrow Is Every Day" project, in which over ten artists offered their sketches to create a joint canvas-embroidery about the August events in Minsk. On November 5, another event titled "Embroidery Practices," an online workshop on craftivism by the Minsk artist Lesia Pcholka, took place. Pcholka's larger project deals with researching family archives and embroidering women's maiden names onto their archival portraits. Collages by the German-based Belarusian political artist Marina Naprushkina, which started as a part of "Tomorrow Is Every Day" and were then disseminated on Facebook, stand apart somewhat. She combines popular slogans in Belarusian with archival blueprints made by her father who had been a Soviet era architect; additionally, she does this all on the immediately recognizable backdrop of school notebooks. Other subsequent protest embroideries include works by Anna Bundeleva, Varvara Sudnik, Nasta Vasjuchenka, Daria Sazanovich, Vasilisa Palianina, Masha Maroz, and Da(r)sha Golova. As we can see, an entire community of Belarusian

embroiderers has emerged from among the county's artists, galvanized by the protests, who are documenting these events and working with themes such as feminism, female labor, memory, and trauma.

### Notes on Methodology

In order to better understand the protest embroideries and their creators, I gathered embroidery files posted by Belarusian artists on Instagram and Facebook, interviewed the artists, and created a classification system. My research has revealed three distinct, albeit overlapping categories or storylines: 1) individual craftivist strategies of Belarusian protest embroideries; 2) collective craftivist embroidery practices; and 3) representations of traditional textile patterns in other media. I restricted my study to established professional women artists and excluded anonymous work posted online. The first storyline, "Individual Craftivist Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries," explores the limits of applying the framework of Craftivism as a socially engaged movement to the works of Anna Bundeleva, Varvara Sudnik, and Nasta Vasjuchenka. The second storyline, "Collective Craftivist Embroidery Practices," considers the collective aspects of protest embroideries, such as the "Tomorrow Is Every Day" project, Lesia Pcholka's "Embroidery Practices" workshop, and two more recent works: "*Zastolle*" [Feast] created by Dasha Sazanovich and Yuliya Tsviatkova, and Vasilisa Palianina's collective tapestry. The third and final storyline, "Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums," provides a glimpse into how artists are reworking traditional textile and embroidery ornaments in various media, and the identities they channel. This section includes protest-related works by Marina Naprushkina, Masha Maroz, Da(r)sha Golova, and Rufina Bazlova. While interviewing the artists, I asked three consistent questions: 1) What was the impact of the protests on your work? 2) How do you relate to the Craftivism movement, and do you associate your work with it? 3) How does your work relate to Belarusian folk heritage and what does it mean to you? Whenever possible, I also indicate whether the artists consider their embroidery and textile work intrinsic or extrinsic to their main body of work. In addition, it is essential to note that these communities are still a newly emerging phenomenon. Parallel developments took place on several platforms, and through the process of interviewing for this report, some artists learned about the work of others.

### Story 1: Individual Strategies of Belarusian Protest Embroideries

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



Image 2. Anna Bundeleva, *I/We Olga Khizhinkova* (2020).  
Embroidered Tights. Vilnius, Lithuania.

follow the growing interest in fiber arts in international contemporary art. The following group of artists is represented by Vilnius-based Anna Bundeleva, Minsk-based Nasta Vasiuchenka, and a recent exile from Belarus, Varvara Sudnik.

Anna Bundeleva is an artist and designer known for textile exhibitions that gained popularity in 2018, including “Action Postponed” and “Tabula Rasa.” The artist articulates her view of the medium as following:

Текстиль, канву, полотно я рассматриваю с точки зрения чистого листа — нетронутого, тактильного пространства. Выбрала именно этот медиум из-за его сложности, подвижности, из-за трудозатратного, напряженного, сосредоточенного характера работы с ним вопреки тезисам о вышивании, как терапии или медитации

[I view textile, canvas, or fabric as a *tabula rasa* inhabiting an untouched, tactile space. I chose this particular medium due to its complexity and mobility, its laborious, intense, and concentrated nature, and in spite of the stereotype that embroidery is a form of therapy or meditation] [Bundeleva 2021].

Bundeleva did not design her two exhibitions in a craftivist vein. In fact, she claims that she was not familiar with this art movement:

С термином «крафтивизм», признаюсь честно, почти не знакома. Никогда не стремилась обрамить свои проекты «измами»,

придерживаться или блюсти рамки какого-нибудь художественного направления в искусстве

[I have to admit that I am not entirely familiar with the term Craftivism. I have never strived to frame my projects in *isms*, to stick to or adhere to the framework of a specific art movement] [Bundeleva 2021].

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 Conte advertising model, Olga Khizhinkova, who was imprisoned for 42 days between November and December 2020 (see Image 2). Embroidering the phrase “I am/We are Khizhinkova” in white threads on black tights was Bundeleva’s way to show support. It should also be noted that this work is posted on Bundeleva’s personal Instagram account and is not in her creative portfolio. Therefore, it is perceived by the author herself as a civil initiative. Her art, according to Bundeleva, “has been on pause from the beginning of the protests” [Bundeleva 2021].



*Image 3. Varvara Sudnik, Horned Goat (2021). Embroidered duvet and lace. Minsk, Belarus.*

Varvara Sudnik is a queer artist who relies on craftivist strategies without separating her art from politics. In doing so, Sudnik’s artworks combine traditional folklore and craftivism, working with the theme of fear in a society traumatized by political repression and significant human rights abuse. She began

working with textiles in February 2021 after attending a Craftivism workshop taught by Sofia Tokar, a curator from Moldova. The artist describes her work in textiles as follows, “Я впадаю в трепет от ткани, ее сминания и тактильности, ценю необходимость сосредоточиться и замедлиться” [I am fascinated by fabric, its creases and tactility, and appreciate the need to focus and slow down] [Sudnik 2021].

Since fabric was the most accessible material for Sudnik, she chose textiles as a medium for her artwork and mastered 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. Her latest work, however, focuses on the domestic political situation through the theme of fear (see Image 3). The author interprets fear, an intense emotion that dominates civil society, through the children’s finger-game ritual *каза рогатая* [horned goat]. This is a traditional Russian finger game in which an adult folds their fingers to make a goat-like figure and points at a child, saying, “Идет коза рогатая за малыми ребятами, забодает, забодает, забодает” [There is a horned goat who comes for the little ones: she butts, she butts and she butts]. Embroidering these words on a Soviet-style mini-duvet cover, the artist estranges the emotion of fear and reduces it to a game. According to the artist, Belarusian folk heritage plays a crucial role in her work, “Эта связь очень поглощающая, она дает мне понимание того кто я и как я впитываю людей, которые были здесь до меня” [This connection is very consuming. It gives me an understanding of who I am and how I absorb the people who were here before me] [Sudnik 2021].

Nasta Vasiuchenka is a designer who approaches Belarusian folk narratives in a more direct manner that utilizes craftivist concepts. After receiving an art education at the Belarusian State Academy of Arts, Vasiuchenka became known in 2017 for a collection inspired by the Radziwill family (3) and Baroque style mixed with streetwear that she designed for the Belarusian clothing line Mark Formelle. (4) Vasiuchenka’s protest work also combines casual style, minimalism, and historical elements. Her Kanva line features 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 (see Image 4). In addition to its more recognizable allusion to the international pacifist slogan, this work references a specific protest action in the country. Vasiuchenka’s portfolio on Behance, an online platform showcasing creative work, includes images from the Kamarousky market, the site of the well-known protest by women in white that took place on





*Image 4. Nasta Vasiuchenka, Flower Power (2020). Cotton T-shirt and beadwork. Minski, Belarus.*

12 August 2020. (5) Vasiuchenka's interest in folk heritage began during her studies at the academy and took in a new, therapeutic turn during the protests:

У нас были целые семестры, летние практики, посвященные народному костюму. [...] В нем живет наш культурный код. А без своей культуры нам не идентифицироваться, не быть нацией. Я стараюсь продвигать культуру через костюм, моду. [...] Уровень тревожности нашего болота побудил искать новые техники и средства художественной выразительности.

Поэтому моя одежда, то, что я произвожу сейчас,

приобрела медитативный и терапевтический характер. Это много вышивки и ручной работы для успокоения нервной системы и для отражения эмоций здесь и сейчас

[We had whole semesters and summer internships devoted to folk costumes [...] our cultural code lives in traditional 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. [...] As protests broke out, the level of anxiety in 'our swamp' drove me to explore new techniques and means of artistic expression. [...] Embroidery and handicraft help me calm my nervous system, relax, and process my emotions here and now] [Vasiuchenka 2021].

In regard to craftivism, the author did not know the term but acknowledged its relevance to her current situation, “Если под творческой сублимацией принимать каравтивизм, то да, это, чем я занимаюсь последний непростой год” [If you accept a creative sublimation for craftivism, then this is exactly what I am doing in this difficult last year] [Vasiuchenka 2021].

Even though only Varvara Sudnik explicitly attributes her work to craftivism as an art movement, all three artists appear to apply certain craftivist strategies. They add a distinctly regional dimension to the global movement by either drawing on Belarussian traditional folklore or responding to traumatic experiences in the region.

### Story 2: Collective Embroidery Practices

The second group of textiles emphasizes the participatory aspect of textile work, which is characteristic of both protest movements and embroidery as a process. Group embroideries function as protest rituals and as a way unite communities. Artists and artworks presented in this section include Lesia Pcholka, a recent refugee to Poland; *#заўтракожныдзень* [Tomorrow Is Every Day], a project developed by the famous Minsk *Ў* gallery; *ДЮ* (DY), a multimedia artist-duo based in Bremen; and a collective embroidery initiative realized by Minsk-based artist Vasilisa Palianina.



Image 5. Lesia Pcholka, *Maiden Name* (2018/2020). Mixed media. Sourced from Zoom workshop.

Lesia Pcholka organized the workshop “Embroidery Practices.” She is an artist, art manager, and instructor who began 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. Pcholka’s embroidery project *Maiden Names* (2018) (see Image 5) (6) was exhibited at the *Крыльях халона* [Wings of a Serf] gallery in Brest as part of the collective exhibition *Mother Matter*. It aims to restore the names of women, often

several generations living under one roof who have 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]. 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 re-establish these lost genealogies [Pcholka 2021]. The artist’s red thread and cross-stitch connect these names to traditional folk embroideries. Additionally, the cross is reminiscent of how illiterate people used to sign their names before the October Revolution. According to Pcholka, the cross also symbolizes the glaring absence of family archives that many Belarusian families have experienced [Pcholka 2021]. Designed to oppose the patriarchy, Pcholka’s “Embroidery Practices” workshop also coincided with mass protests led by women in her country. As part of this event, participants embroidered and discussed critical social issues. This series is not currently available for public access and remains a work-in-progress. While organizing these events, the artist was aware of the historical link between radical activism and needlecrafts throughout the history of women’s suffrage. According to Pcholka, the communicative component of this ongoing group project amplified the voices of the embroiderers [Pcholka 2021].

*#заЎтракожныдзень* [Tomorrow Is Every Day] ran concurrently with “Embroidery Practices.” The renowned Minsk *Ў* gallery launched this project in August 2020 and promoted it with this hashtag on social media. From 2009 to 2020, this gallery has been one of the country’s leading platforms for the promotion of contemporary art. The collective embroidery project was one of the last in the gallery’s existence. (7) The idea for “Tomorrow Is Every Day” was conceived by artist and curator Marina Naprushkina, curator Lena Prenz (both Berlin-based), and the *Ў* gallery’s Minsk-based co-founders Anna Chistoserdova and Valentina Kiseleva. Both Chistoserdova and Kiseleva have recently emigrated to Germany. The gallery’s Facebook and Instagram announced the project as follows:



Image 6. Anonymous, *Tomorrow is Every Day* (2020). Communal documentary embroidery. Minsk, Belarus. Photographer: Viktoryia Kharytonava.

[...] больш за дзесяць мастакоў і мастачак прапанавалі свае эскізы для сумеснага стварэння рукатворнага дакументальнага палатна-вышыванкі, у якім можа прыняць удзел кожны з вас! Акрамя таго, што мы разам з вамі ставарем буйны твор мастацтва, працэс вышывання - вельмі добрая тэрапія і медытацыя, каб перажыць і асэнсаваць усё тое, што нас кранае

[...more than ten artists have proposed 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 excellent therapy and meditation that helps us to live through and process everything that touches us] [Ÿ Gallery 2020].

It is noteworthy that, although the traditional red-white-black palette was used to create this collective artwork, the embroiderers used a variety of stitching techniques, not just cross-stitch. Furthermore, this description avoids the term craftivism altogether but highlights the project's therapeutic component. As the hashtag suggests, there is no beginning or end when inside an event, and for it to succeed, collective action must continue every day. This idea was later reused in the most prominent Belarusian political art exhibit “*Кожны дзень. Мастацтва*.”

*Салідарнасць. Супраціў*” [Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance] in the Mystetskyi Arsenal (26 March–6 June 2021 in Kyiv, Ukraine). (8) The fragment represented in Image 6 depicts the Women in White’s very first protest, when they appeared in front of the Kamarousky market in Minsk on 12 August 2020. The embroidered inscription says: “*Камароўскі рынак. Сардэчна запрашаем*” [Kamarousky Market. Welcome.] To date, the artwork remains unfinished and lacks proper documentation, not unlike the protests themselves.

*ДЮ* (DY) is a multimedia artist-duo of Belarus-born artists Daria Sazanovich and Yuliya Tsviatkova. Daria Sazanovich is an artist, designer, and illustrator who studies and works in Bremen. As the events in Belarus were unfolding, they would meet to talk about the news and embroider stories that has captured their attention. The *Zastolle* project reflects and documents social and political processes in Belarus. The work refers to a traditional 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 *Zastolle* performance took place at the Bremen-based platform aRaum on 23–29 September 2021. One such story (see Image 7) tells how a protest leader, Maria Kalesnikava, tore up her passport when the regime tried to deport her in September 2020. (9) According to Daria 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



*Image 7. ДЮ (DY), Fragment of Zastolle (2021).  
Embroidery performance. Bremen, Germany.*

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 Bobruisk, “Всегда нравилось что-то делать своими руками, с детства ходила во все кружки, мама была начальницей внешкольного образования, и я много занималась соломкой и ДПИ” [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]. Although Sazanovich’s embroidery does not visually reference traditional textiles, she feels a connection with traditional folk culture not only via her training but also because one of her female ancestors was a whisperer, a word for folk healers in the region known to treat their patients with prayers and spells. In

2021, the artist created a multi-media installation about witches in contemporary culture entitled “How and Why I Would Like to Become a Witch,” consisting of four spells reflecting her “artistic research tackling different forms of oppression against women” [Sazanovich 2021]. (10)

Vasilisa Palianina claims that her connection to folk culture resides in the medium of embroidery itself. Palianina made a name for herself with her work on sexuality and taboo violations. Since the beginning of the protests, these themes remained important to her, but they began to intertwine with or were supplanted by reflection on the ongoing protests: “С началом протестов возросла моя степень гражданской осознанности и личной включенности в развитие собственной страны” [When the protests started, [her] degree of civic awareness and personal involvement in the development of my own country increased] [Palianina 2021]. This process resulted in “*А кожны, хто верыць у Мяне, не памрэ ніколі*” [Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die] (2020-2021). She created this massive, embroidered tableau in Minsk in collaboration with various artists who visited her studio (see Image 8). (11) When it comes to traditional folklore, Palianina stresses the following:



Image 8 Vasilisa Palianina, fragment of *Whosoever Liveth and Believeth in Me Shall Never Die* (2020-2021). Canvas, Threads, Photo print. Collective embroidery. Minsk, Belarus.

Наследие — очень важная часть культуры человека. Это то, что формирует наш внутренний стержень и его сила зависит от отношения с наследием. Текстиль и вышивка, как отсылки к

истокам фольклорного языка — энергетически очень мощное высказывание

[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 refer to the origins of folk language and are energetically compelling statements] [Palianina 2021].

The artist does not use the term craftivism but notes that her work could easily be situated within this movement [Palianina 2021]. Additionally, she emphasizes that the very medium of embroidery, with its lengthy process, provides the necessary distance for reflection:

То, что с беларусами произошло и происходит сейчас - очень важный и болезненный процесс взросления, который даст свои плоды в будущем. Пока проживаешь стрессовое состояние, сложно отойти в сторону и оценить ситуация беспристрастно. Это касается и творчества, и отношения к событиям в целом

[What has happened to Belarusians and is happening now in the country is a critical and painful process of growing up that 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 artwork was unveiled to the public in a group exhibition titled “*Калі формы становяцца стаўленнем*,” [When Forms Became Attitude] curated by Ilona Dergach at the Fundacja Villa Sokrates in Krynki, Poland in September 2021. (11)

The second group of textiles presents examples of craftivism as participatory collective labor. Two of these projects, Lesia Pcholka’s “Embroidery Practices” workshop and the “Tomorrow Is Every Day” community embroidery project, remain works-in-progress. These collective embroideries stage a protest ritual and ensure community cohesion through collective labor and communication. Even when the appearance of these embroideries does not necessarily convey a folk ethos, their medium functions as a message and contextually denotes a connection to Belarusian heritage.

### Story 3: Representation of Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Media

The third group of artworks illustrates how craftivist textile works are represented symbolically in other media, from felt-tip pen drawing to silkscreen printing and vector graphics. Artists participating in this work include Berlin-based Marina Naprushkina, Minsk-based Masha Maroz, Amsterdam-based Da(r)sha Golova, and Prague-based Rufina Bazlova.



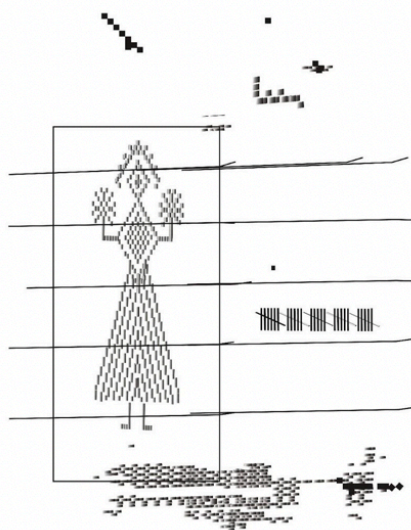


*Image 9. Marina Naprushkina, Solidarity is Our Weapon (2020). Paper and felt-tip pen. Berlin, Germany.*

Marina Naprushkina is a Belarusian-German feminist artist and activist who works with video, performance, drawings, installations, and text. In August and September 2020, Naprushkina came to Minsk, where she launched “Tomorrow Is Every Day” at Ź gallery. Additionally, she created a series of posters with references to embroidery on school notebooks, writing slogans in Belarusian with a red felt-tip pen: “Далучайся! Забастоўка! Салідарнасць наша зброя.” [Join us! Strike! Solidarity is Our Weapon.] (13) 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 in Vienna, Austria), and “Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance” at the Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv, Ukraine. She explains her work as follows:

I am showing exercise books that I also used when I was a child. These are official school notebooks. And I chose some slogans from the street, which I had 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 [observed across Belarus after the fraudulent election] 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]. (14)

“Solidarity is Our Weapon” (see Image 9) includes a drawing of a carpet factory in Brest built in 1958-1960 that refers to the country's textile industry. School notebooks and factories are unmistakably channeling Soviet Belarusian identity and industrial labor as opposed to the artisanal production modality of the pre-revolutionary era.



*Image 10. Masha Maroz, Selfie-Time (2020). Digital artwork. Minsk, Belarus.*

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 role as “a mediator, a bridge, between the symbolic world of [the]

ancestors and a modern world” [Polevikova and Maroz 2021]. (15) She is especially inspired by Belarusian Polesia, the region located in the Southwestern part of the Eastern-European lowlands, because her family comes from there, and it is where she was born [Dergach and Maroz 2020]. “The Long Way Home,” the artist’s first solo exhibition, took place on 26 June 2020, in Nekrasova 3, one of the state galleries in Minsk. The exhibition content became the artist’s protest against the official narrative of Belarusianness put forth by the Lukashenka regime: “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].

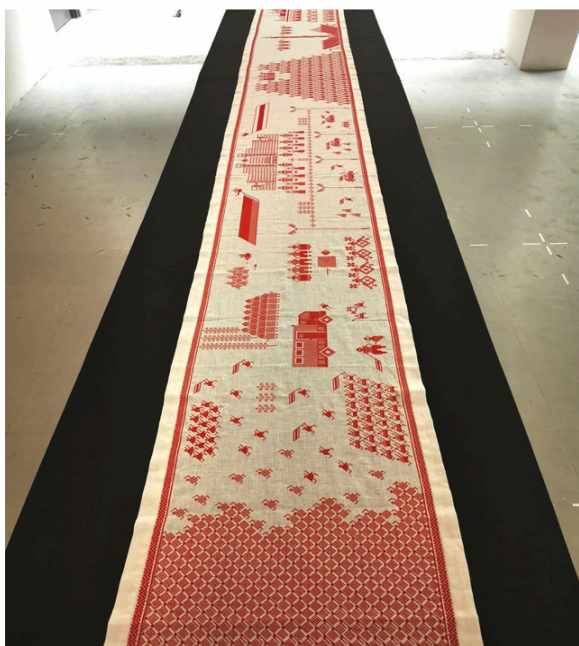
Maroz, on the contrary, experiments with “social, ideological, visual norms of modern Belarus for the preservation of folk culture” [Polevikova and Maroz 2021]. Tradition, according to Maroz, is of central importance as a method of channeling information that is vital to society. By combining handwoven rugs and authentic Polesian interior design with computer graphics, the artist closes the gap between codes, the material of everyday culture and the digital, through ceremonial, multilayered space [Polevikova and Maroz 2021]. Immediately after the presidential elections on 9 August 2020, Maroz took her exhibition down in a gesture of a protest against state violence [Dergach and Maroz 2020]. Earlier in July, the digital work in Image 10, featuring a 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 *puntWG* from 27 July to 1 August 2021 in Amsterdam).



*Image 11. Da(r)sha Golova, Postcards of Solidarity. (Second Edition) (2021). Screen-printed paper. Amsterdam, Netherlands.*

*Postcards of Solidarity*, another work from the same exhibition, is an ongoing project developed by Amsterdam-based artist and designer Da(r)sha Golova (in collaboration with Masha Maroz, Artemiy Sei, and Sasha Kulak). 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" [Golova et al 2021]. Golova's mail art project (see Image 11) features two editions of 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” [Golova et al 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, i.e., an ornamental code of Belarusian tapestry and embroidery [Golova et al 2021]. All the elements contain crucial information, from the recipient’s name and address to the stamp, the ornamentation, 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” [Golova et al 2021]. There is, however, a functional drawback to the project: exhibit visitors often sign these postcards in foreign languages, and they get through censors at random.



*Image 12. Rufina Bazlova, The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka (2020-2021). Machine embroidery. Prague, Czech Republic.*

Rufina Bazlova, an illustrator, performer, and puppet master who lives and works in Prague, also uses the code of traditional textiles, but combines it with figurative elements, documenting ongoing events in the country via her Instagram account. She began her “History of Belarusian *Vyzhyvanka*” (16) cycle on a night of protests when the country was experiencing an Internet blackout and used

vector graphics to ensure fast production. According to the artist, *Vyzyvanka* is a pun on two words, *vyshyvats'* [to embroider], and *vyzhyvats'* [to survive] [Bazlova 2021]. Her images went viral on Instagram within days and appeared in several major newspapers. Since then, Bazlova's work has appeared in many exhibits and on the covers of several journals and magazines. In addition to her vector graphics, Bazlova produced some physical embroideries and serigraphs. Even though the artist identifies with the craftivist movement and cyberactivism, her choice of medium is inspired by her family tradition: "My grandmother was a Jack (or Jill) of all trades: she sewed, knitted, wove, 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 practiced embroidery during her training as an artist and recognizes its importance in 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 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 narratives of feminism and state violence, which, in her case, appear to be experientially and not theoretically driven. In terms of its content, her artwork also gestures toward diversity. It represents certain social groups, such as women, retirees, or people with disabilities, who have been previously excluded from the political process. By representing these diverse groups and assembling the entirety of her work within one long tapestry (45 cm × 735 cm), Bazlova has created a collective embroidered saga of the Belarusian uprising (see Image 12). This artwork was first exhibited as a part of *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance* exhibition which took place in Kyiv's Mystetskyi Arsenal from 26 March to 8 June 2021. It was later exhibited as a part of *Belarus—Screams of the Silenced* exhibition at Haage's Grey Space in the Middle from 7 August to 18 August 2021.

This third and last group of artworks is concerned with textile ornaments represented symbolically in other media. Ideologically, this corpus represents a spectrum of attitudes towards the idea of Belarusian identity, from the marked Soviet identity in the works of Marina Naprushkina to the search for mythical Polesian roots in the works of Masha Maroz and Da(r)sha Golova, or the articulation of national and civic feelings through the inclusion of marginalized voices in Rufina Bazlova's digital activism.

### Concluding Remarks

This report introduced 12 textile projects that were initiated by Belarusian artists in response to the fraudulent presidential election in 2020. The works are grouped into three sections: 1) individual craftivist strategies of Belarusian protest embroideries; 2) collective craftivist embroidery practices; and 3) traditional textile patterns in other mediums.

From perspective of an art critic, the Belarusian protest embroideries and textile patterns discussed in this report appear to fit the large global art movement called Craftivism, even though some of the artists do not self-consciously embrace the concept. For some of the artists, these projects represented new undertakings; for others, they developed from themes and socio-political concerns that had already constituted parts of their legacies.

The first group, represented by the works of Anna Bundeleva, Varvara Sudnik, and Nasta Vasjuchenka, relies on individual craftivist strategies. In two cases out of three, the artists assigned intrinsic value to the themes of trauma and therapy in their works. The second group of textiles focuses on collective participatory work, characteristic of both the protest movements and embroidery as a process. Two examples surveyed in this report, Lesia Pcholka's "Embroidery Practices" workshop and the "Tomorrow Is Every Day" community embroidery project, remain works-in-progress. The function of these collective embroideries is to stage a protest ritual and ensure community cohesion. Even when the appearance of these embroideries does not necessarily convey a folk ethos, the medium functions as a message and contextually denotes Belarusianness. The third group of artworks involves textile ornamentation represented symbolically in other mediums, from felt-tip pen drawing to silkscreen printing and vector graphics. Ideologically, this corpus represents a spectrum of attitudes towards the idea of Belarusian identity and gestures towards inclusion and community recomposing necessitated by or following mass incarceration and migration from the country.

The artists and their works described in this exhibit report inhabit a wide ideological spectrum, from the perceived belief that folk embroidered patterns represent the code of the nation, as is the case with Masha Maroz and Da(r)sha Golova's work, to completely disdaining the nationalist discourse while showing respect to the country's textile heritage. The exhibit claims 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" [Razor 2022]. This claim is buttressed by several factors. First and foremost, a number of the artworks represented redirect the spotlight away from the product and focus on the process of its creation, emphasizing collective labor. Secondly, alongside the ethnic Belarusian identities showcased, these artworks engrave new identities of diverse social, not ethnic, groups, e.g., victims of the Lukashenka regime or political prisoners in the narrative of the Belarusian uprising. Finally, when they are posted online, these artworks, whether hand-made, machine-made, or vector graphics, enter the realm of digital activism, the purpose of which is not an abstract notion of nation-building, but rather a more concrete and direct political action. The

displacement of Belarus's young political artists in exile and their participation in international art residencies may eventually open a new, transnational chapter in Belarusian art textiles and create new discourses reflecting processes of community recomposition.

## NOTES

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their timely critical input in developing this exhibition report; members of the curatorial team, Aristide LaVey and Kendra Eaton; Dr. Irina Aristarkhova and the University of Michigan librarians for their assistance in hosting this digital exhibition, as well as all embroiderers and activists who agreed to be interviewed for this project and shared their work, talent, and aspirations.

2 The exhibit may be viewed at <https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence>.

3 The Radziwill family is a powerful magnate clan originating from the Great Duchy of Lithuania that resided in Nesvizh castle on the territory of Belarus from the 16<sup>th</sup> century up until 1939.

4 Mark Formelle is a Belarusian line of clothing that was founded in 2009 by Svetlana Siparova and Andrei Serikov (<https://markformelle.by/>).

5 Women in White is a massive female protest movement in Belarus which took place in August-September 2020. The name of the movement dates back to the eponymous Telegram channel that was co-founded by Anastasia Kostyugova and Marina Mentusova. It started with women dressing in white and holding flowers taking to the streets of Minsk and other Belarusian towns. The movement continues to this day featuring an anonymous group of women dressed in white, red, and black clothing performing artistic interventions on the streets of Minsk.

6 Both the title of the project, *Maiden Names*, and its description were provided by the artists in English.

7 One of the gallery's co-founders, Alexander Vasilevich, was already in jail at the time this workshop took place. Vasilevich was arrested in Minsk on 28 July 2020, and was subsequently recognized as a political prisoner. He was released on 4 February 2022. For more on Vasilevich, see Koroleva 2022.

8 For more information about this exhibition, see <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/evere-day-art-solidarity-resistance/>.

9 Maria Kalesnikava is one of the three female leaders of the Belarusian protests who was kidnapped on the streets of Minsk on 6 September 2020 and taken to the border with Ukraine with the intention of expelling her from the country. Kalesnikava famously tore her passport to prevent her deportation and was taken to a detention facility, where she remains to this day. For more about Maria Kalesnikava, see Roth 2021.

10 See the full description of the project here: <https://sheeborshee.com/Why-and-how-do-I-want-to-become-a-witch>.



11 Among the Minsk artists who came to embroider with Palianina are 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.

12 The exhibition title alludes to a historic exhibition by Harald Zeeman, *When Attitudes Become Form*, which was exhibited in 1969 at Kunsthalle Bern.

13 Naprushkina's work can be found at <https://cultprotest.me/>.

14 The original interview text was in English.

15 The original interview was published in English.

16 The original title is in English, while the Belarusian word *vyzhyvanka* in the original language reads as “выжыванка.”

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