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Marina Naprushkina

Birds with the people / Птушки з народа́м

Is birdsong an act of solidarity resistance? Despite the poetic form of this question, it carries an inherently political background. On February the 9th 2022, several weeks before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian regime liquidated the NGO "Ahova Ptushak Batkaushchyn" (Protection of Homeland Birds), an ecological organisation that had been active for almost a quarter of a century. One of the reasons for the organisation's closure was their use of the expression **Birds with the people**¹ on social media during the time of the protest movement, the slogan now serving also as the title for this exhibition. Unfortunately, the liquidation of this somewhat innocuous NGO was not an isolated incident, today in Belarus, about 1.000 non-governmental organisations are in the process of forced liquidation.

Marina Naprushkina's exhibition *Birds with the People* is a complex, multi-layered history of the Belarusian revolution and the enduring social solidarity movement that began in 2020 and continues through to the present day. The work functions as a narrative of the practices of repression and violence carried out by the Belarusian regime not only at the level of disciplinary institutions but also permeating the fabric of everyday practice, taking place through systems of reproductive politics, forced labour, and consumption. Through the feminist lens and decolonial practice, Marina Naprushkina situates the history of Belarusian resistance in a global context.

It's not by chance that the exhibition is centred around the liquidation of the organisation "Protection of Homeland Birds". At this point the personal, professional, and political aspects converge for an artist active within activist movements both here in Germany and in Belarus. For Marina, art imagines itself not through representation but through non-heroic, infrastructural work.

In other words, *Birds with the People* is an experience of solidarity and cooperation between human and non-human agents in the face of violence, while the mechanisms of repression and **resourcification**² are pitted against this solidarity. Marina's exhibition begins with the closure of NGOs and cultural institutions at a time in which Belarus is holding one of the highest proportions of political prisoners in the world. In other words, the exhibition unfolds in a situation that can be described in the artist's own words, "when there is no song and no hope, but the song is there". And indeed, the first room features "**Painted Carpets**" [**Maliavanka**]³ adorned with lines from Belarusian folk songs. These songs are non-heroic but rather embedded in the everyday **practices of caring**⁴, as, for instance, words from "**Kalykhanka**"⁵ (eng: Lullaby). The utilisation of folk songs here seems to be a practice of decolonisation, not only because it opposes modern forms of knowledge but also because it breaks down the opposition between humans and nature in the face of violence. The lines from the song "Rechanka" (Dear River): "Oh, rechanka, rechanka, why aren't you full," which when placed in a contemporary context, suggest that the river was drained as a result of heavy

melioration carried out in the Belarusian territories during the Soviet era. Such practices have led to the desertification of tens of thousands of hectares of land within Belarus.

Both the painted carpets and posters in the neighbouring hall, with the hands of women during numerous protest actions and chains of solidarity, speak of the fundamental fragility of human being, their corporeality and vulnerability, as well as the necessity of building horizontal **networks of care** ⁴ to continue not only protest actions but also the existence of communities.

The front side of the painted carpets underscores the traditional 'Maliavanka' representing an invisible, often female, nameless, and underpaid form of labour. It is simultaneously one of the few ways of expression of political imagination for residents of rural Belarusian villages, who were often illiterate and could therefore not leave memories in the form of diary entries or books. This simultaneous **shape-shifting** ⁶ and constant retention of contradictions are distinctive features of Marina Naprushkina's work on various levels. For example, the **herbs** ⁷ ornamented on the "maliavanka" have medicinal properties, but can also be poisonous and cause harm. ⁸

The painted carpets are traditionally a naive genre (**Alena Kish** ⁹), into which Marina Naprushkina incorporates elements of avant-garde art (**UNOVIS** ¹⁰). Despite the fact that avant-garde art is often perceived as an emancipatory practice associated with the reorganisation of new life and thought, in Marina Naprushkina's works, supremacist compositions become **typical architectural projects** ¹¹ of repressive institutions, such as schools or prisons, where the formation of a subject of submission takes place through disciplinary bodily practices.

At the same time, these supremacist compositions interrupt and disrupt the smooth naive narrative, turning it into an unsettling tale at the centre of which lies an analysis of the exploitation of female labour through practices of coercion and systemic oppression. The theme of the economic exploitation of **vulnerable bodies** ¹² is one of the most important subjects of analysis for Marina Naprushkina as an artist, feminist, and activist. At the heart of the poetically framed lines of colonisation, violence, and repression lie highly specific economic relations, which are not only played out within Belarus but are also inscribed within global systems of production and consumption. In the works presented at the exhibition, Marina explores the forced labour of female inmates at the **correctional colonies** ¹³, particularly Gomel Correctional Colony No. 4, where many female political prisoners are held. In this colony, many of the inmates engage in sewing. The products they are compelled to make, working 10-12 hours a day often without days off, are intertwined with economic, political, and ideological components. In this colony, they sew uniforms for Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel who carry out violence against detainees and are a key support for the regime, hockey uniforms—a favourite sport of Lukashenko, and **vyshyvankas** ¹⁴, traditional outfits for which individuals can be detained if caught wearing in public that are nonetheless produced and sold to foreigners. Besides these, the colony produces everyday items such as bedding, blankets, and pillows, which means that the forced labour of inmates is, on one hand, invisible, and on the other hand, integrated into everyday life. Many of the products created by inmates are exported, not only to Russia but also to Europe and China. It is known that one of the Belarusian subcontractors for IKEA utilises the labour of inmates, including political prisoners, making this exploitation a part of the global economy. It is in this sense that forced prison labour is entrenched into everyday aspects of life.

Examining the system of violence and practices of resistance through a feminist lens, Marina uses her work to emphasise that it is the body that becomes the battlefield. These bodies are shaped through disciplinary practices, they grow tired, wear out, but at the same time, it is precisely the body and collective solidarity bodily practices that resist and build infrastructures of care that sustain communities, overcoming the

atomisation of society. These bodies are depicted not only in Marina's video works and photomurals but also in the manifesto "I Want a **Woman President**"¹⁵, which is located in the final hall. This manifesto references Zoe Leonard's famous work "I Want a President" (1992), and this paraphrase disrupts the understanding of the Belarusian revolution solely as national resistance and places it in a global, contemporary context where vulnerable bodies around the world manifest to be both visible and represented. In contrast to Zoe Leonard's text printed on paper, Marina Narbut's work, made on fabric, required physical effort from the artist to write the manifesto text, where voice, body, and text are intertwined with each other.

The exhibition *Birds with the People* is structured in a reverse sequence: from today's events, the viewer is taken back to the beginning of the protests. However, strangely, this retrospective movement doesn't necessarily evoke nostalgia for the past when one could sing not just lines from a song, but the entire song. Time here becomes non-linear and transforms into a structure that can be described as **Future Perfect Continuous**¹⁶, meaning an event that didn't just start in the past and continues up to the present but, despite repression, has its horizon in the future. In this context, Marina Naprushkina's Manifesto is not an artefact of the past but a configuration of the future, signifying that there is a song, and there is hope.

Antonina Stebur

Lexicon

1. **Birds with the People** is a slogan adopted by the Belarusian environmental organisation "Protection of Homeland Birds" during the revolution in support and solidarity with the protesters. The slogan refers to the well-known protest phrase "Police with the People", which has been used in Belarusian protests since the 2000s to call on law enforcement officials to side with the demonstrators. Birds with the People also serves as a symbol of resistance against Lukashenko's authoritarian regime. Additionally, it highlights the widespread use of repressive tactics by such regimes, spanning from political to private spheres, and affecting various sub-actors including people and natural agents. The Ministry of Justice in Belarus dissolved the organisation "Protection of Homeland Birds" on the 9th February 2022 due to their use of the slogan "Birds with the People". The Ministry cited that such appeals "grossly violate public order".

"Birds with the People" highlights the closure and forced liquidation of nearly 1,000 NGOs by the Belarusian regime, placing many Belarusian communities in a vulnerable situation. For instance, the shutdown of NGOs dealing with domestic violence has resulted in a surge in domestic violence cases, leaving victims without support or assistance.

2. **Resourcification** is a technique used in colonial dependencies that label relationships to space and people as territory and resources and integrated them into an extractive economic system. An instance of this process is land reclamation - the draining of swamps to convert these areas into agricultural land, which was prevalent in Belarus during the Soviet era, particularly during the 1960s and 70s. Approximately 64% of all bogs were destroyed, consequently disrupting the ecosystems of the country's regions. This caused large scale desertification, the destruction of rivers and lakes, and loss of entire populations of flora and fauna. It is noteworthy that Belarus is characterised by colonial entanglements, with intersecting lines of colonial dependencies. For instance, the potato is a crucial crop in Belarus, covering nearly 60% of the country's cultivated land. The introduction of the potato to Belarus was a consequence of colonial expansion, and it played a significant role in shaping the country's resourcification policy.

3. **Maliavanka, also known as "Painted Carpets"**, is a folk art phenomenon that became popular in Belarusian villages between the late 19th century and mid-20th century. The intricate details of the pattern are applied to a homemade linen cloth (170x210 cm) which is then sewn in two parts and dyed black. The ornamental border consisted of a complex floral and natural design that is either hand-drawn or made using stencils. The central part of the Maliavanka is devoted to the plot section. In their artwork, artists from the general populace depict both ordinary scenes from everyday life and the enchanting, fantastical world of fairy tales and legends.

4. **Care, and the politicisation of care** are crucial political practices in describing the uniqueness of the Belarusian revolution, as stated by researchers Olga Shparaga, Andrei Vozianau, Antonina Stebur, and others. In a context of instability, fragility in citizens' existence, and prevalent violence and repression, care takes on a central role as a political message and programme. A range of caring practices exist, including sisterhood and support in prison, data security and safety for pre-violent communities, and sabotage. These practices have established grassroots infrastructures of care with technological backing. For instance, ByChange provides employment assistance to individuals who have lost their jobs due to political views and actions. Probono.by operates a 24-hour call centre connecting victims with the necessary initiative or specialist. Belarusian Hajun collects data on the movement of Russian troops and military activity in Belarus, aiding the Ukrainian side in the conflict. The primary benefit of such compassionate practices is that, from a political perspective, they offer novel means for arranging and consolidating communities.

5. **Kalykhanka** is a traditional lullaby often sung by mothers to soothe their children. They serve as a means of preserving cultural knowledge and traditions, as well as aiding in the development of communication skills. Lullabies exemplify non-modern epistemological forms of communication and learning. Unlike nationalistic or heroic hymns, these songs establish connections between communities and the natural world. Kalykhanka's poetic lines, "The birds' voices have ceased," establish a correlation between human life and other non-human entities, demonstrating their interconnection, entanglement, and shared experiences.

6. **Shape-shifting** is an ability to transform from one state to another, along with the capacity to hold contradictions arising from unstable forms where things are not what they appear at first sight. Shape-shifting is a prominent trait of Belarusian culture demonstrated at various levels, ranging from mythological to philosophical concepts. For instance, the narrative of Usiaslau the Sorcerer, a Polotsk prince who had the ability to turn into a wolf, is evidence of his sagacity. In 'The Eternal Way', Ignat Abdziralovich presents a philosophical approach to the Belarusian identity, which he describes as a malleable and evolving "pouring form." The identity is in constant transformation and development, allowing for flexibility and adaptability.

7. **Herbs** are a significant feature of Painted Carpets [Maliavanka] ornamentation. Not only do they serve a decorative purpose, but they also act as important protective amulets within the house. These ritualistic practices highly prioritise the use of herbs. Within Belarusian village culture, herbs hold an integral role, associated with both medicinal and magical practices performed by female whisperers, *znaharka* (means – sorceresses). Herbs possess a multidirectional force of nature. Certain herbs, such as plantain and nettle, have curative properties, while others, such as field creeper (Latin: *Convolvulus arvensis*), can be toxic. The latter is a perennial herbaceous plant belonging to the Convolvulaceae family, characterised by a creeping branching rhizome and a curly stem.

8. **Stone**: Large stones, relics of glacial movements, dot the Belarusian landscape, contributing to its distinct topography. These stones are not just silent witnesses of the past; they carry stories and histories within them. Acknowledging their cultural value, Belarus established a unique "The Museum of Stones", an initiative of the Academy of Sciences during the late Soviet period. Secondly, the stone has a shape-shifting symbolic meaning. It refers to protest dynamics and the famous phrase formulated in early Soviet history: "Stone is a weapon of the proletariat" adding a contemporary layer to this symbolism, Julia Cimafiejeva, a Belarusian poet, explores the metaphorical significance of stone in 'The Stone of Fear'. In this poem, the stone embodies intergenerational experiences of fear — stories of repression and the burden of history. Cimafiejeva poignantly articulates this through the imagery of a stone holding an uncomfortable legacy, a silent yet potent carrier of untold stories and unexpressed emotions: "The stone has no mouth, unable to either scream or speak."

9. **Alena Kish** (1889 or 1896 - 1949) was a renowned self-taught artist, widely recognized for her work as a Maliavanka artist. Her oeuvre showcased bright, ornate motifs and fantastical elements, with three primary motifs standing out: *In the Garden of Eden*, *Letter to a Beloved*, and *Virgin on the Waters*. Scholars have drawn a connection between the content of Kish's art, her personal biography, and the themes of 'woman's share' and the pursuit of a 'paradise'. Like many other Maliavanka artists, Alena had no fixed abode. She travelled from village to village, accepting orders to paint carpets for which the compensation mostly comprised of food and accommodation. Unable to sustain herself through her creativity, Alena Kish declined to conform to the traditional gender expectations of her society and ultimately chose to end her life due to lack of means of subsistence. Kish's artwork received recognition only in the 1990s, long after her demise.

Despite being a self-taught artist, she was not acknowledged by the USSR as an artist since she was not a part of the Union of Artists. As a result, Kish could not pursue official work and ran the risk of facing criminal charges of social parasitism (tuneyadstvo). In 2015, the Belarusian government reintroduced the Soviet law on tuneyadstvo, which included a tax for those who were considered 'social parasites'.

10. **UNOVIS** (abbreviation "The Champions of the New Art") was an avant-garde art association and educational institution founded in Vitebsk in 1920 and operational until 1922. Vera Ermolaeva was the director of UNOVIS, and Kazimir Malevich, Lazar Khidekel, Anna Kogan, El Lissitzky, **Jewgenija Magaril** and others were its founders and participants. The school's fundamental concept was to "overthrow the old world of art." Thanks to UNOVIS members, architecture, books, industrial attire, everyday objects, urban organisation, and interiors underwent revolutionary changes. They transformed the physical world, creating a fresh living space that remains in use today. UNOVIS adopted Kazimir Malevich's Black Square as their emblem.

11. **Mass Housing or Typical Architectural Projects** refer to the creation of identical designs for buildings, structures, facilities, and other products intended for serial cheap construction or production. Planning resulted in what were often virtually indistinguishable city blocks being constructed across numerous countries, cities, and districts. Thus, the renowned architect Dmitry Zadorin described Minsk's "unrecognisable individuality" due to the ubiquitous housing type M-464. Apart from residential buildings, there is a widespread deployment of standard architectural blueprints for secondary schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, correctional institutions and prisons. These constructions embody various forms of disciplinary practices of power, leading to the formation of atomised, violence-tolerant, and disconnected individual and collective bodies. Furthermore, the architectural plans of secondary schools hold significance in the political realm due to the frequency of polling stations being located on campus grounds. In the year 2020, schools were the site of the initial arrests and protests, in response to the electoral fraud occurring during the pre-presidential elections in these converted polling stations.

12. **Fragile bodies.** During the active phase of protests in Belarus, non-violent resistance was predominantly organised through a bodily presence, including women's solidarity chains, mass gatherings, walks, and neighbourhood activism. The conceptualisation of the protest subject as essentially corporeal also constituted the axis of confrontation: the violent repressive machinery against vulnerable bodies. Since 2020, more than 2% of the entire adult population of Belarus has been detained, imprisoned, beaten and subjected to torture. In her prison diary, LGDTQ+ activist Vika Biran highlights a non-heroic, non-hierarchical, and decentred approach to protesting, stating "We are alive and fragile." However, the fragility of the protesters' bodies was not only linked to the experience of violence but the envisioning of fragility and vulnerability as a fundamentally political characteristic was linked to the construction of collective practices of support that comprehended bodily experience and bodily memory as an experience of shared care.

13. **Correctional Colonies.** Today, Belarus is leading Europe in terms of its prisoner population and ranks among the world's top five countries for political prisoners, along with China, Egypt, and Turkey among others. Belarus has a total of 16 correctional colonies categorised into general, enhanced and strict regime facilities where political prisoners tend to be held. It should be noted that the prison system in Belarus differs significantly from that of Europe. The Belarusian system of imprisonment was primarily developed during the Soviet era and is characterised by key aspects such as collectivism, militarism and correction through labour. These features have remained unchanged to this day. Under Belarusian law, prisoners are obligated to work and failure to comply may result in further disciplinary action, which can include extended imprisonment. The working conditions are comparable to slavery, with inmates expected to work 40-hour weeks for low wages without labour contracts. Additionally, they are often required to undertake additional landscaping

or cleaning duties without pay, while production norms remain high and wages are incredibly low. In Belarusian penal colonies, the communist ideology of 'labour re-education' is combined with the capitalist motive to gain profit by utilising practically unpaid labour. The Department of Correctional Colonies under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus administers 15 enterprises, 4 branches, and 9 off-budget workshops. The inmates are mainly involved in metal and woodwork, garment and shoe making, agriculture, and industrial activities.

14. **Vyshyvanka** is a type of embroidered shirt that has been a traditional garment in Belarus for both men and women. Figuratively referred to as embroidery, this traditional Belarusian pattern can be found on various clothing items. The craft of traditional embroidery was mostly done collectively by illiterate women in villages, who would come together during the embroidery process to support each other and share news and knowledge. The craft has historically been considered an oppressed form of labour, given the intensive work required. Vyshyvanka was frequently the sole means of recounting their tale. Embroidery now has a dual connotation with oppression: wearing a vyshyvanka in a public location in Belarus may result in arrest for engaging in solitary protest and participating in extremist activities. In addition, women in the Gomel colony produce embroidered vyshyvankas for traditional folk souvenirs, which are nonetheless offered to foreign colleagues.

15. **Woman President.** On 15th May 2020, following her husband's arrest, homemaker Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya announced her candidacy for president. A month later, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veronika Tsepkala, and Maria Kalesnikava established a joint campaign headquarters. The participation of these women was instrumental in the protests and served as a stark contrast to the patriarchal and authoritarian structure established by Lukashenko over his thirty-year rule. Following the nomination of women to politics, Lukashenko made the claim that a female president could not hold office as "our constitution is not for women". Nevertheless, independent vote counting and election monitoring websites have provided evidence universally acknowledging Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the victor of the 2020 presidential election, further confirming that it was manipulated by Lukashenko. In response to allegations of election fraud and reports of violence and arrests of protesters in various Belarusian cities, citizens have taken to the streets. Additionally, women have played a significant role in the resistance movement, with many involved in the organisation of various forms of protests such as women's marches, solidarity chains, and marches by pensioners. Women are also actively engaged in political initiatives related to care and support. Furthermore, according to Olga Shparaga, a researcher, the key component of the Belarusian revolution is the "Soft Force," which primarily represents a new social unity characterised by the creation and cultivation of social connections - from the introduction of observers at polling stations to the acquaintance of neighbours in the streets.

15. **Future Perfect Continuous** is a term coined by artist and researcher Olya Sosnovskaya during the first months of intense protest actions in Belarus. It denotes the non-linear temporality that characterises revolutionary events, where past, present and future become entangled. As Sosnovskaya points out: "But we also already live in the future-the future that keeps coming but never arrives. A future that stutters in constant anticipation of the post-, of the aftermath." This suggests that the past may sometimes lie ahead of us and that the future can already be named in the present. This temporal loop provides multiple potentialities, fostering the expectation that the approaches tested during the protests - such as alternative economic and social relations and experiences of trust and support - will remain present and achievable in the future.

Marina Naprushkina is an artist, feminist and activist. Her diverse artistic practice includes video, performance, drawing, installation and text. Naprushkina works mainly outside institutional spaces in collaboration with communities and focuses on creating new formats and structures based on self-organisation and intersections in theory and practice. In 2007, she founded the Office for Antipropaganda, a platform for artistic and activist engagement with the image politics of propaganda (in Belarus and beyond), power and violence structures of a nation-state. In 2013, Naprushkina co-founded the New Neighbourhood/Moabit initiative, which aims to create a strong community of people with and without migration and refugee backgrounds. Naprushkina received the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture (2017) and the Sussmann Artist Award (2015). She participated in the Kiev Biennale (2023 and 2017), the 7th Berlin Biennale (2011), the 11th International Istanbul Biennale (2009), among others. Together with Nadira Husain, Naprushkina is part of a professor duo at the Berlin University of the Arts.

Current exhibitions by Marina Naprushkina:

Kiev Biennale 2023, UKR, AU, PL, NL

Das Andere. Re-Imagine the Future, Kunsthaus Graz, AU

Lost in Democracy, ACC Weimar, DE

Birds with the People, PSM, Berlin, DE

Antonina Stebur is a curator, researcher and art critic. She is co-founder of the project #damaudobnayavbytu on gender discrimination in post-Soviet countries and co-founder and curator of antiwarcoalition.art - The International Coalition of Cultural Workers in Solidarity with Ukraine. She is co-curator of the exhibitions "Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance" (Ukraine, 2021), "Names" (Belarus, 2017), "I approached the city I had not yet known" (Ukraine, 2021), "When disturbed, it becomes tangible" (Lithuania, 2023) and others. In 2023, Antonina founded the research laboratory "Grybnitca", which investigates colonial dependencies and decolonial practices in Belarus. She has worked as a guest lecturer at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) and the European Humanities University.