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The Belarusian Protests: A Spectacle of Aesthetic Resistance

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Introduction

In August 2020, crowds of Belarusians peacefully took over Minsk through massive, color coordinated waves to demonstrate their dismay with the government after obvious election fraud. The protests persisted, challenging official public order for hundreds of days, until the freezing winter months. Journalists, participants and passersby captured the visual spectacle with cameras and smartphones and then circulated the images around countless international media platforms to show the world the beautiful, audacious and collective disruption of the violently guarded public order. This embodied and unified agency reinterpreted outdated ideological categories and replenished stale public spaces with promises of new, auspicious meaning. The inspiring spectacle grew out of and became immortalized within digital realms. Despite its political failure, the artful protests succeeded in reviving and strengthening national identity by bringing Belarusian citizens together in a way that collectively and peacefully illuminated the defunct ideological strategies of the regime and thus offered new, aesthetically potent expressions of revived Belarusian identity.

In this thesis, I argue that the 2020 Belarusian protests exemplify a collective and aesthetic restructuring of the authoritarian, patriarchal order. In many of the protests, this was done by undermining the rigid patriarchal ideology of Alexander Lukashenka's regime. Lukashena was elected into office in 1994, at a time the country was experiencing political and economic turbulence in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. He remained the dictator of the country for the next 26 years. In 2020, Belarus underwent the largest political uprising in the history of the nation. The new government inherited many political and ideological practices from the Soviet Union. Lukashenka presented himself as the patriarch of the country. However, in the 2020 elections he was rivaled and defeated by Sviatlana Tskikhakovskaya who ran as

president in place of her incarcerated husband Sergei Tsikhanovski. He had been thrown into jail alongside two other opponents after threatening Lukashekna's rule. Tskikhakovskaya won; the elections were falsified. This undermined the legitimacy of the official Belarusian state and exemplified the hypocrisy of the government in the eyes of many citizens which resulted in massive protests. They went on for many months. It was often the case that many of the protesters utilized their femininity, relying on aesthetic and sensorial elements to complicate the symbolic categories on which the regime was built. Moreover, these acts of resistance were collective and relied on social media and technology to organize and distribute images and videos of the protests. They were effectively commodified through photographs and consumed within virtual platforms all over the world via both prominent media companies and personal social media use as awareness of the dire situation spread internationally.

The 2020 Belarusian protests must be discussed despite the immediate and tragic political implications of the violent silencing which halted the uprising. These protests embodied the revival of Belarusian personhood beyond the ideological confines of the regime in a way that demands to be addressed theoretically. The Belarusian protestors acted as creative and political agents by engaging in a collective performance of political dissent. I argue that many elements within the protests functioned as an art spectacle. In this paper, I bridge ongoing conversations in anthropology, media studies, art history and Belarusian studies to critically engage with Belarusian experiences. Belarus has recently been referred to as the "last European dictatorship" by Western historians (Lewis, 2019). The firm control of the Lukashenka administration has in fact kept the nation's economic and social order within an ideological grasp as if history had

never ended. [1] Lukashenka continues to fervently defend the Soviet legacy that mandates economic control over Belarusian industry and infrastructure, which prioritizes manufacturing and agriculture instead of investment into the development of the lucrative Internet Technology sphere. The controlled economy struggles to continue its model as a welfare-state for Belarusian citizens due to a lack of economic growth. Defunct modes of governance are violently enforced in Lukashenko's continued attempt to hold on to power.

Although Lukashenka's reign had been repeatedly challenged by small-scale oppositional movements, which he effectively silenced, the majority of Belarusian citizens remained politically passive. The silence of Belarusian people collectively broke again following August 9th of 2020 after the results of a falsified election were revealed. That night, groups of angry, disillusioned Belarusians poured into the streets. After months of being forced to suffer through a coronavirus public-health catastrophe, observe the incarceration of valid candidates, and finally witness the brazen announcement of botched elections, Belarusian citizens publicly expressed their discontent. These acts of defiance were met with brutal militant violence at the hands of the state in hopes of scaring the resistance back into expected order and locking "dissidents" away. Although Lukashenka succeeded in violently crushing the opposition, simply dismissing the protests as a political failure underestimates the symbolic implications of this event. I argue below that the 2020 Belarusian protests exemplified acts of contemporary decolonization through the participation in a collective act of performance art.

[1] Fukayama (1992) argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead to the impossibility of a linear interpretation of history.

The collective solidarity and aesthetic[2] mobilization rose out of dire conditions as a result of multiple crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, the political failure and the authoritarian violence which followed all contributed to a paradigm shift within global political consciousness. In 2020 Massive uprisings followed institutional failure to address the needs of millions all across the world. A theoretical analysis of the Belarusian protests offers insight into the creative and interpretative potential for political resistance that exists in the entanglement of digital and material realities everywhere. Understanding the mechanisms of power and resistance is imperative in a postmodern world where boundaries between art and life, between the digital and the embodied, between the public and the private become increasingly blurred. The elements employed in the 2020-2021 Belarusian protests exemplify the collective and creative agency of Belarusians in a way that offers profound insight into contemporary political resistance in the context of political censorship and authoritarian violence. Such violence remains an increasing threat to individual and collective expression not just in Belarus, but throughout the contemporary world.

In what follows, I will employ three different approaches to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of the Belarusian protests. Section I summarizes the work of historians, sociologists and anthropologists working in Belarusian studies and their discussions of Belarusian identity. Sections II elaborates on the reasoning behind my methodological approaches as well as the limitations and restraints within my research. Sections IV and V are autoethnographic and narrate my personal experiences having lived in Belarus during a shifting and precarious time. I also provide autoethnographic insight and photographic analysis of the construction of public space in Viciebsk and Minsk. The final section of my thesis is dedicated to visual analysis of

[2] In reference to Ranciere's definition of aesthetics which is elaborated on pages 15-20

gendered aesthetics and contains the heart of my argument. Finally, I conclude by expanding on my argument on the greater implications into the roles of the digital realm in constructing contemporary personhood. My work has been made possible by the incredible friendships I have made during my time living in Viciebsk Belarus during my time as an English Teaching Assistant. The connections I have had opened my eyes and expanded my perspective in significant ways.

I A Brief History of Belarusian National Identity

The history of Belarusian cultural and national identity is tragic and multifaceted. Although my thesis does not employ the frameworks of nationalism, it is necessary that I reflect on the existing literature which traces the development of contemporary Belarusian national identity which is symbolically revived during the 2020 protests. The red and white flag carried by the protesters was created in 1918 and holds cultural significance as the original flag of the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) and became a symbol of Belarusian Nationalism. Historian Per Rudling details the birth of Belarusian National identity, which was officiated in the late 19th and early 20th century. The flag was replaced by the red and green flag with embroidery on the side, which remains the official flag today. Though the original BNR flag was readopted following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka returned to the official Soviet flag, indicating his loyalty to the ideological narratives of the USSR. The red and white flag has long symbolized opposition to Lukashena's regime (Rudling, 2014). Historian David Marples details the silencing of Belarusian experiences which did not fit within the official framework of the Soviet Union and the resulting trauma and fear experienced by Belarusians in the aftermath of Russian imperialism and Soviet colonization (Marples, 2012).

Sociologist Nelly Bekus describes two main categories of Belarusian Nationalism symbolized by the two flags: the “official” and the “alternative.” The “official” nationalism was rooted in Soviet ideology and is symbolized by the current red and green flag. It stressed the role of the USSR in the solidification of Belarusian nationalism during the Nationalisms Policy in the early Soviet Union, the first democratic election of Lukashenka, and the heroic contribution of Belarusians in the Soviet defeat of the Nazis. The “alternative " national identity emphasized the history of Belarus within the Grand-Duchy of Lithuania (which dates back to the 13th century), and its connection to European culture and Western civilization (Bekus, 2011). The flag also illuminates the violent history of Russian imperialism and Soviet colonization which stifled the development of an official Belarusian State and silenced cultural and linguistic practices. However, many contemporary Belarusian scholars argue against this duality and instead recognize that the Soviet Union shaped many Belarusian realities which are valid in their own right. It is important to recognize the consequences of a violent and multifaceted history while working to resist the immediate, ongoing struggles against immediate authoritarian violence.

Western Academic scholarship, rooted in values of liberal democracy, emphasizes the absence of political freedom and the violent repression of open expressions of Belarusian national identity which followed. Though the recognition of suffering rooted in violent silencing of alternative Belarusian narratives is imperative, it is also important to acknowledge that Belarusian-ness was not limited to the practice of political freedom. In fact, frameworks of suffering and victimhood fail to acknowledge Belarusian agency reenacted between the lines of official ideological order. This was addressed in the Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society published an article titled, “In Search of Agency,” co-written by Sociologists Feliz Ackerman, Mark Berman and Olga Sasunkevich (2017). It stressed the importance of

recognizing hidden, alternative and unofficial forms of agency employed by Belarusian citizens bound within an authoritarian order. The article challenged the previous tone within Western scholarship by employing Alexei Yurchak's framework of agency developed in *Everything was Forever Until it was No More* (2004). Yurchak is a linguistic anthropologist. This ethnography illustrated the interpretive power of Soviet citizens in their ability to re-conceptualize Soviet ideology and create alternative forms of meaning outside of political engagement. Tragically, this type of agency depends on the official ideological and institutional structure provided by the government. The argument in "In Search of Agency" was that in Belarus, agency exists in a plethora of ways and is not limited to the participation in a democratic system (Ackerman, Berman, Sasunkevich, 2017; Yurchak, 2004).

An example of such creative, unofficial agency was discussed in, "How to Grow out of Nothing," where anthropologist Sergui Oushakine illuminated a Belarusian strategy of post-colonial meaning-making in which the true meaning of Belarusian-ness remains unspoken (year). Oushakine draws an example from a tragic comedy, *The Locals,* written by key Belarusian writer Yanka Kupala (year). In the play, Russian and Polish ethnographers interrogate a young Belarusian man about the true nature of Belarus. "It is natural!" the Belarusian character ironically replies, "There are rivers, lakes and forests. There used to be the Pinsk Sea, he says, but the occupiers ruined it by filling it with mud. Now it is just the Pinsk swamp"(499). Oushakine claims that Belarusians simply dissociate from their history of a "sea muddled by occupiers (449)." Instead, a placeholder is left through silence and distancing from official practices of naming. Oushakine provides another example of this by illustrating the article with a series of photographs by contemporary artist Sergei Zhdanovich titled "Tabula Rasa," or blank slate. They depict emptiness, blankness and white space. Installed within public spaces

throughout Minsk, the images create breaks for reflection by interrupting the official order of the city, the architecture of which reflects its colonized history (Oushakine, 2017).

The 2021 edition of the Slavic review featured the work of the most recent scholarship which focused on the analysis of the 2020 Belarusian protests which I rely on heavily within my research. I employ Elena Gapova's interpretation of class and its contribution to mobilizing particular layers within Belarusian society. I apply methods from Mischa Gabovich's analysis of the role of social media in mobilizing the protests (Gapova, Gabovich, 2021). Most importantly, I expand on Natalia Paulovich's (2021) discussion of the role of gender in the 2020 Belarusian protests. She notes that beautiful Belarusian women quickly became the face of the protests. Moreover, she details the role of women in leading the 2020 opposition movement. Svetlana Tsikhanousaia, Maria Kalesnikava and Veranika Tspekala took over the roles of their partners, all of whom were men, following their incarceration. Paulovich challenges the liberal assumption that feminine agency is only possible when subverting and challenging patriarchal structures of subordination. She also employs the traditional Belarusian rhetoric of moral righteousness and self-sacrifice, which is a common theme that alludes to the traditional duties of Slavic women. Paulovich argues that performing gendered, moral high ground enables the women to criticize the regime's failed expectations of masculinity (Paulovich, 2021).

II Methodology

Merging interdisciplinary frameworks has been imperative in my analysis of the Belarusian protests. I resorted to virtual, visual, and autoethnographic methods due to my limited physical access to the field. Furthermore, I was hesitant to conduct interviews with Belarusians due to a culture of silence and fear as well as a very real threat of political persecution. In my

research, I engage interdisciplinary perspectives in order to discuss and address the multifaceted theoretical implications of the Belarusian protests while remaining methodologically grounded in my commitment to acknowledge the lived experiences and agency of Belarusian people. It is crucial to address the violent consequences of unwavering state ideology and authoritarian violence. It is also important to continue reflecting on the communicative visual power of the protests and the heroic actions of Belarusian people despite their immediate "failure" to implement immediate democratic change. The collective, public displays of dissidence offer access into the private, censored and hidden expressions and desires of Belarusian people brought into public space. As an ethnographer I believe that it is my duty to listen, see and translate human experiences in a way that amplifies their voices and honors their agency. Belarusian agency has been repeatedly ignored by "victimhood" rhetoric within Western academia, by the unwritten history of Belarusian trauma within the confines of the Soviet Regime, and by the forced incarceration and erasure of Belarusian experiences by the Lukashenka regime. Continued silence is a consequence of repeated impositions of colonialism and imperialism. It is not a lack of existence, opinion, desire and agency. The protests were a communicative act. It is our duty to see and listen.

The methodological approaches within visual anthropology allow for observational? analysis and engagement with photographed and digitally captured experiences of people (Pink, 2003). Visual modes communication are imperative in shaping cultural narratives in the digitalized world and the protests were clearly intended to be a spectacle[3]. My methodology relies heavily on both autoethnographic and visual analysis, rooted in my virtual observation and engagement on Telegram and Instagram during August and September, which was when the

[3] See section 4, page 17

Belarusian protests were at their peak. Sarah Pink has written on the validity and necessity of relying on visual information within virtual spaces in an increasingly digitized world as an ethnographic method (Pink, 2012). Other visual anthropologists have written on the ethnographic opportunities presented by photographic, digital media to reflect on social changes by comparing images of similar phenomena captured during different time periods. This method is particularly effective in the context of globalization, when field sites may not be accessible in person due to shifting physical location between subject and researcher (Crowder, 2013). It is also effective because it allows visual access into otherwise forbidden spaces. Because the protests were largely a phenomenon intended to be seen, visual analysis of protesting people is a form of "listening" to their experience without access to their voices. All of my research was conducted virtually as a result of the physical limitations imposed on ethnographic opportunities by the coronavirus pandemic.[4]

Autoethnography frames my personal relationship to Belarus; my reflections on my own affective experiences and emotional responses to the specific images I analyzed for this research. It also allows me to critically reflect on my affective experience of an ideologically organized public space and the function of ideology within it. Over the course of the past year,I both intentionally sought out and accidentally encountered tens of thousands of images on various forms of media which had informed me of the situation in Belarus, while challenging my memories of the calm, orderly public spaces in Belarus. I also employed an autoethnographic approach in my own experience having witnessed the disinformation and silencing of the regime

[4] Being able to collect, interpret and critically analyze virtual ethnographic material is an increasing priority in a fast-paced, digitally driven world, especially in times of crisis, where developing and privileging controversial methods of "fast ethnography" in order to respond and provide insight into political crises in a timely manner (Vozyanov, 2020)

at the start of the 2020 pandemic. Autoethnography has also been useful in reflecting on how digital spaces allow access into otherwise distant and unavailable worlds and experiences, offering space for communication and empathy. Despite my physical location in the United States, my thoughts, friendships and intellectual interests remain in Belarus and I am constantly accessing and reaching into depictions and interpretations of Belarusian reality through everyday digital consumption and engagement. Digital messaging platforms and video calls also enable me to connect with my Belarusian friends, bridging the spatial and temporal distance between us.

Initially, I had planned my research around conducting interviews with Belarusians who had first hand, physical access as well as an embodied understanding of life in Belarus during the cultural uprising. I intended to deepen my understanding of the aesthetic symbolism within the protests by inquiring about its significance from Belarusian informants. However, after getting in touch with a trusted source back in Mink through an encrypted Telegram call, I was strongly suggested to abandon my plans of conducting interviews for several reasons: The first reason was the danger I could be putting my informants in by asking them to reveal their political opinions about the protests. People expressed fears of being tracked by the government, the responses of which were violent and unpredictable. Even though Telegram was a private and encrypted platform, the fear and anxiety of disclosing any political opinions to the wrong people remained. The second reason was that words were simply not enough to capture the depth and complexity of the multifaceted, unstable and dangerous Belarusian reality. I was told that Belarusian perspectives are shifting every day. Life is precarious and meaning remains in flux. I

reflected on a poem by Belarusian poet Julia Cimafiejeva. “I’m scared, I’m home. I have received a trust fund of fear.”[5]

I pondered this information and changed the design of the project, choosing instead to rely on visual analysis of several emblematic photographs of the protest which combined the various elements that I was interested in exploring theoretically. Instead of relying on language, I chose to rely on images for several reasons: The first being practical in that I had an abundance of sources which provided me with plentiful access to visual information from various media platforms as well as stock images taken by journalistic photographers and granted public access. The second, more importantly, was the symbolic, performative communication captured and translated digitally into the photographs. It also captures time through the subjective engagement of the photographer with the moment. The moment becomes immortalized and commodified, and in the case of the photographs of protests, grants access into otherwise inaccessible images of reality left to the subjective interpretation of future spectators.

A critical, ethnographic analysis of protest images allowed me to engage in the symbolic complexity of the protests on multiple levels. On one hand, it offered fresh insight into familiar spaces I had navigated in the past. I reflect on my own photographs of the Belarusian public space which had been taken before the 2020 protests reflect on how my understanding of the same public spaces had shifted (Crowder, 2013). I compare my own visual reflections via photographs I had taken to other photographs of the same places captured while the protests were ongoing. This provided me insight on the impact of the protests in reinterpreting experiences of public space which I include in the autoethnographic reflection of my analysis.

[5] See Index 1

Viewing tens of thousands of publicly available digital images also offered me access to important patterns which recurred within the public performances. The repetition of particular gendered imagery and performances within the protests captured in hundreds of photographs informed me of their symbolic importance to both the photographer, and the people depicted within the photographs. The photographs I chose were also aesthetically powerful. I rely mostly on the artwork of professional, editorial photographers. They are ideal examples of digitized, commodified fragments of reality intended to capture the attention of the consumer. Images by these same photographers were central in shaping the visual imagination of both Belarusian and global audiences because of their circulation through popular media articles. The artful and knowledgeable framing by journalists despite the continuous persecutions of artists and photographers reveals the power of digital media to immortalize windows into fragile and endangered moments of expressive resistance while also commodifying and objectifying this experience within the digital attention economy.

Images transcend beyond linguistic limitations of the Russian language and its the colonial and hegemonic imposition onto Belarusian linguistic consciousness in the process of the Russification of Belarusian lexicon during the Soviet Period, which was continued during Lukashenko's presidency in his failure to reinstate Belarusian as the official language of the country in 1994 (Gapova, 2008). Prioritizing visual, sensorial and embodied communication of Belarusian cultural identity via the protests limits my reliance on the Russian language. Shifting focus on the embodied performances, rather than the language, stressed the decolonizing power of the protests (Tlotsanova, 2017). Plenty of linguistic communication did appear on protest banners which featured Belarusian, Russian and English text, however. The limited knowledge and use of Belarusian as the native speaking language haunts the younger generation. Russian

remains the dominant language. During my time living in Belarus several of my Belarusian acquaintances had informed me of their feelings of emptiness and inadequacy connected with their lack of Belarusian knowledge and their desire to communicate in the language, which is actively being revived by students, scholars and activists interested in reviving and strengthening Belarusian cultural identity (Gapova, 2008). The visual, rather than linguistic communication of Belarusian identity via visual, public performance offers the opportunity of aesthetic expression that expands beyond the colonial implications of the Russian and English languages.

The final justification of my choice to engage in visual ethnographic analysis of the photographs of protests is rooted in their unique interpretive power within the post-modern, digital realm. Due to the ease of access, processing and distribution of visual media virtually, formal ideological monopolization of reality by official state narratives has become increasingly difficult. Though the use of misinformation to control official State narratives through the internet is very much a reality in many authoritarian countries, the modes of informational governance through “old media" and outdated rhetorical tactics employed by Lukashenka is laughable to younger, tech-savvy generations. Instead, reliance on digital media distributed amongst one another is prioritized because it allows the hidden existence of alternative modes of personhood, expression and interpretation of reality. Lukashenka’s regime continues to rely on Modern, Soviet ideological principles, sovereignty, and rhetoric in a postmodern, digital age of information which I theorize in Section 4.

The images of the protests that I visually analyze exemplify the aforementioned criteria alongside my personal, autoethnographic experiences with digital engagement and former participant observation within Belarusian public and private spaces. The specific images I draw on below were accessed through publicly available collections of stock images uploaded by

photographers on getty images. Most of them had been taken by Belarusian photographers Sergei Gapon and Natalia Fedosenko, who are currently working for the French and Russian media companies. Some of the photographs are unfortunately owned by media companies directly and do not name the artist. All of the images I accessed through the stock collection were reminiscent, if not identical to the images I had previously seen circulating social media platforms.

III Theoretical Frameworks

My theoretical framework is rooted in postmodern theory, art history, and visual studies due to the prominent role artistic and aesthetic resistance served in challenging authoritarian ideology in post-Soviet spaces. I rely on postmodern theory to contextualize the function of art and media within varying political and cultural frameworks and to explain the reasons behind the failure of state ideology in Lukashenka's authoritarian regime. I interpret the use of new technology and digital media as contributing to the construction of Belarusian resistance by relying on Western scholars within the field of visual studies. The extensive analysis of the impacts of mass production and circulation of images within capitalism offer insight into the way digital media influences political mobilization. Employing Western scholarship in media studies offers a critical insight into the role of digital impact on citizens living within non-democratic spaces such as Belarus. Finally, I unpack the decolonial potential of performance art. The embodied acts of resistance ignite the rebirth of cultural and national identity through the collective performative of resistance within the protests.

Jacques Rancière theorized about the representational and the aesthetic regime of the arts in The Politics of Aesthetics (Rancière, 2004). The representational regime imposes categories of interpretation rooted within a paradigm where there is one, objective "truth." The aesthetic regime of the arts is a postmodern liberation of the sensible from the confines of a representational order. (Rancière, 2004). Rancière argues that Western civilization led to the reign of the aesthetic regime over the sensible after a rupture with narratives that made a singular, linear interpretation of history possible. The notion is echoed by American political scientist Fukuyama, who argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union caused the "end of a history" which made the linear interpretation of past events impossible. In the case of Belarus the official state ideology which functions as the representation "truth" is rooted in the ideology inherited from the Soviet Union which holds on to Soviet values three decades after its collapse. Within an ideal, free, democratic world, "truths" are determined through individual subjectivity. The notions of individual freedom, democracy and capitalism as superior ways of life came out of Western Europe, which has long established itself as the pinnacle of human progress and civilization (Todorova, 1997).

Due to the entanglement of democratic ideals within the confines of neoliberal capitalism, the market now reigns over most forms of contemporary life, except where limitations are placed on political and economic freedom, such as in Belarus. Democracy, individual freedom and artistic expression is a critical value, arguably a right, of global citizens in the world today. Lukashenka's regime, however, continues to operate within the framework of the representational regime. The "truth" that determines the categories of "art" versus "life" is officially dictated by Belarusian state ideology. Lukashenka's welfare state had been able to prevent a massive uprising by providing for the basic needs of the Belarusian people for 26 years

while silencing and incarcerating anyone expressing political criticism and challenging his rule. He slowly shifted the socialist economy into one of State-capitalism to meet consumer needs, while continuing to crack down on all political resistance (Gapova, 2017). However, mass discontent erupted following his failure to address the needs of Belarusian people following the events of 2020. Elena Gapova noted that the participation of Belarusian citizens in the 2020 protests which followed election fraud was rooted in their desire for autonomous citizenship. She also linked the importance of class to the protests, noting that new classes, made of professionals whose livelihoods are dependent on the "technological base of the global economy" such as the IT sphere, and independent creative contractors. Many of the protesters were young, educated, skilled professionals (Gapova, 2021). Their needs as contemporary, global citizens are deeply rooted in the values of autonomy, political freedom and creative expression. These values and needs are arguably informed, at least in part, by the digital world. Participating in democratic digital spaces such as Telegram allow access to free communication, uncensored information and mobilization to occur (Gabovich, 2021). The digital world undoubtedly shapes contemporary Belarusian consciousness. The internet and social media offer endless possibilities of accessing, presenting, and interpreting information. Smartphones, which are possessed by most, are designed as tools for commodifying, displaying and consuming everyday, subjective "truths" (Pink, 2014). As a result, the legitimacy of the single, ideological "truth" offered by Lukashenka's representational regime is lost as official public narratives are fragmented and decontextualized within the digital realm.

For example, social media and messaging platforms are a critical source for accessing and sharing information that undermines the official rhetoric of the Belarusian regime. Most younger people distrust official government narratives and ridicule official sources of "old

media," such as television, altogether. Digitally connected younger people exchange alternative narratives amongst each other on the social media platforms such as Telegram chat rooms and news channels. They depend on one another for believable information and often ridicule official ideological narratives perpetuated by the State. Social media platforms, especially virtual spaces are central to the circulation and exchange of information in a "democratic" manner. Almira Ousmanova (2020) argues that virtual media was central to what she referred to as "horizontal networking" as opposed to the "vertical command system" of ideologically ridden old media[6]."

New media created what she referred to as a "digital multitude," which was critical in distributing alternative, oppositional information amongst younger citizens (Ousmanova, 2021). For example, continuous digital broadcasting of videos and images depicted violence against protesters. Oppositional Telegram news channels such as Nexta mobilized protesters to flood into the streets, rupturing the boundaries between hidden digital worlds and official public spaces (Gabowitsch, 2021). The visual capturing of the protests through thousands of digital images as well as their continuous distribution through new media created a feedback loop of resistance between digital and physical spaces.

There are many layers of "truths" within the protests – the embodied and physical acts of resistance, the violence of the State, and the photographs of both displayed and circulated throughout the internet. The protests continuously challenge the defunct ideological order by actively disrupting representational categories. The digitally informed categories of the aesthetic regime spill into the Belarusian public sphere. Moreover, they are captured, commodified and consumed virtually all over the world. This actively blurs the boundaries between art and life and

[6] Via presentation at the Vilnius Institute of Culture

makes ideological governance and control over the definition of politics, order and aesthetics impossible. The Belarusian State responds to the complete symbolic upheaval of its legitimacy by seizing control through brute, physical force.

The Belarusian protests became a spectacle. They were an embodied, aesthetically disruptive, artistic performance, which brought formerly hidden dissent into the public eye. The protests disrupted the ideological order of official spaces. They consisted of intentional, oftentimes gendered acts which were photographed in massive quantities. The "spectacular" participation within visual culture has been employed as an analysis of postmodern visual phenomena. I rely on the definitions of scholars who have illustrated the ironies of contemporary visual reality. The plurality of postmodern vision is constructed and mediated through the mass production of images. The objectification, reproduction, distribution and consumption of everyday life through media has been discussed by numerous scholars (Benjamin, 1989; Chomsky, 1972; McLuhan, 1964). The visual spectacle is both a consequence of capitalist consumerist culture, which invokes desire through the commodification of bodies and spaces, while also remaining an effective strategy of dissent. (Garoian, Gaudelius, 2008). Many feminist artists employed this strategy of bringing "transgressive" acts rooted in private memory into the open to fight for gender and racial equality and the recognition of alternative, queer modes of personhood.

Similarly, many Eastern European contemporary artists utilized the phenomena of the spectacle to fight for cultural democracy, critical citizenship and even decoloniality in authoritarian spaces where resistance against official order was persecuted. They utilized public space as a site of democratic enactment through which they symbolically reclaimed the public order. Spectacles possess the power of revealing the complex and multifaceted nature of "truths"

by bringing formerly hidden narratives in the public eye. In Belarus, many narratives remained hidden and muted as a result of a history of silence which grew out of imperialism, colonialism, war and censorship. Soviet ideology fit all of the past into an officially permitted, official category of official "truth." Lukashenka continues this tradition.

According to Rancière in The Politics of Aesthetics:" the arts only ever lead to projects of domination or emancipation" (8, Rancière, 2004). Madina Tlostanova argues that performance art serves a decolonial function in Post-Soviet spaces. (Tlostanova, 2018). She claims that art appears to be one of the few remaining places for critical reflection, decolonization and de-Sovietization of spaces. She writes that in Post-Soviet spaces "art fulfills the function of missing, strangled social theory, philosophy and political activism (6)." She also reflects on the function of aesthetics in their ability to perceive beyond the seen and address the sensibility of life (referencing Rancière). I am applying Tlotsanova's approach in addressing the decolonial potential of contemporary art, specifically performance art, as a method of critical, embodied resistance. Tlostanova interviews artists who reclaim and reenact their hidden history and silenced narratives by taking up space and publically rewriting their existence through embodied performance. I argue that the citizens participating within the Belarusian protests did the same. In doing so, they collectively partook in the decolonization and reclamation of Belarusian identity in an act of collective performance in the physical act of reclaiming public space. However, this act was not limited to that material and temporal plane as it was quickly commodified through digital photographs and distributed within the virtual sphere becoming captured and entangled within neoliberal algorithms (Flisfeder, 2021).

The aesthetic regime blurs the categories between art and life in democratic, liberal spaces where aesthetic interpretation is not bound by representational determination.

Lukashenka's oppressive ideological control over public order and definitions of art continue outdated representational traditions of the Soviet Union. The protests, however, collectively challenge this ideological control by actively introducing the aesthetic regime into the Belarusian public space. In doing so, they actively blur the boundaries between art and life. This makes ideological governance and control over the definition of politics, order and art impossible. The only way to challenge this complete symbolic upheaval of ideological control is through brute, physical force. This regime of the aesthetic, which is emerging all throughout post-Soviet spaces after the breakdown of ideological control, allows for art to no longer occur between "ways of doing and ways of making." Instead, it dismantles former ideological categories of the sensible, which become commodified and digitized. This is how the protests blur the boundaries between art and politics, the public and the invisible, the material and digital realms.

IV Autoethnographic Reflections of Digital Participant Observation

My relationship to Belarus is personal; I remember strolling down the wide, spotless streets of downtown Viciebsk and admiring the calm, quiet order and the familiar [7]Soviet architecture of the cities. I traveled to Belarus as a Fulbright Fellow in mid-August of 2019 and spent nine months living and teaching English in Viciebsk until mid-March of 2021. My fellowship was terminated prematurely as result of the spread of the novel coronavirus which shortly resulted in a global lockdown and the change of the former social order as we had known it. I was lesson planning in the literature department of Masherov State University, overlooked

[7] I identify as Russian-American. Being born in Russia, traveling there frequently, and even conducting previous research in post-Soviet spaces has familiarized me with the socialist-modernist architecture.

by a dozen portraits of Russian and Belarusian authors, when my coworkers had informed me that the Chinese Teachers were being sent back home, so I will likely be too.

Arguably, the initial trigger of the cultural uprising began with the public-health care catastrophe which followed the dismissal of the dire threat of the mysterious infection that slowly began to circulate around Belarus during my time there, in the beginning of February of 2020. I remember innocently contemplating my decision to leave or stay in Belarus, after receiving deceptive information from official sources about statistics of the spread of the virus. Even the American United States Embassy staff I consulted with over the phone had initially believed the Belarusian government to have things under control. For a few ignorant moments, it felt to me that staying in Viciebsk was a safer option than returning to the United States, where New York and California reported thousands of new cases and hundreds of new deaths daily. Thankfully, my fluency in Russian had enabled me to form close, trustworthy connections with Belarusians who had been more experienced in navigating the displays of competence on part of the government. “Things are never really simple like that," one of my close friends warned when I had shared with her that it might be safer for me to stay in Viciebsk than return to the United States. Her voice was heavy with doubt in response to my optimism concerning the official statistics.

The next day, I remember reading screenshots of messages between another friend and her acquaintance, who worked as a nurse in a public clinic. The screenshots of the instant messages sent via Telegram revealed that the nurse had learned of handfuls of people sick with aggressive forms of viral pneumonia in a hospital just outside of town where she had been redirected to work. Four people had died the prior night. There was no official record of this. I called my landlady, who was a doctor, and asked about this information, thinking that she might

be able to clarify. Over the phone my landlady announced that there had obviously been a misunderstanding and that everything was being properly taken care of by medical authorities. In person, she revealed to me that she had been afraid of disclosing any information as it was likely that our conversation over the phone was being recorded and overheard. She subtly hinted that the information I had gathered from the screenshots was quite plausible. There was nothing else she could disclose. Months later I remember reading posts on Instagram about doctors who had been incarcerated after challenging the Lukashenka's mishandling of Covid-19 on social media platforms. After returning to my home in Florida in March of 2020, I maintained close contact with several friends I had made in Viciebsk and continued teaching my students through virtual zoom classes. The digital world has allowed an intimate interweaving of our lives despite the temporal and spatial gap between us. My friends engaged in hopeful discussions about the upcoming August elections discussing their preferred candidates. The tone of these conversations shifted following one the incarceration of oppositional candidates one after another.

The night of August 11th I remember laying on the floor of my bedroom in the dark, frantically refreshing the Telegram app on my phone. New notifications from Nexta, an oppositional news channel which covered the ongoing protests and shared videos of ongoing police violence, popped up continuously on my screen. My room was flooded with sounds of screaming, which came from videos of protesters running from the attacks of OMON militia forces through Belarusian streets in Minsk and Viciebsk. I remember being encapsulated in fear for my loved ones back in Viciebsk following the day-long silence of digital disconnection. The Lukashenka regime shut down all internet access in Belarus to prevent people from gathering in the streets. After internet access returned, images of brutalized, hospitalized relatives, neighbors, and friends circulated media platforms. The bodies and psyches of those protesting the falsified

elections as well as those who had just happened to be in the wrong place and at the wrong time had been beaten by OMON officers on the streets and in prisons. My friends told me that groups of people crowded in the apartments of those who had access to some slow and spotty wifi connections which were set up illegally, in order to inform one another of each other's whereabouts. I was privileged with a fragile moment of shaky connection that revealed to me that my loved ones were safe. I remember the relief flowing over my body after I had learned that none of my closest friends had been beaten or detained. Later, I listened to stories about those gone missing that night, as well as over the course of the heavy, frightening days that followed.

My Fulbright coworkers and I met a journalist on our travels to Hrodna. I will call him Stefan to avoid disclosing personal information. Stefan was a curious and friendly reporter with deep set blue eyes and a contagious smile who bicycled around the region and wrote stories about local events and recorded alternative histories of the region. One of his main projects involved collecting interviews with elderly Belarusians who remembered the city of Hrodna before Soviet occupation. He was deeply passionate about discovering the hidden history of the region and sharing the complexity of Hrodna's past with his wide plethora of social media followers. The night we met he began to share stories with my group of friends and me at a local bar, and we ended up taking a spontaneous, tipsy excursion of the city around the dimly lit, cobblestone streets of the city center. Stefan shared his expertise with us and the crowd which had whimsically gathered around to hear his stories about the region. There was no charge for his extensive historical and cultural insight. His eyes were wide with the love he had for Hrodna. In mid-August of the following year, Stefan made a post to Facebook after which I began to weep. He shared with his audience that he had just been released from prison. He was badly beaten,

tortured, and both of his arms had been broken. Something had changed in his eyes. The photo he posted to announce that he was released and temporarily safe revealed that the enthusiastic curiosity and openness which had illuminated his face was replaced by something ominous. Pain was evident in his gaze despite an attempt to smile for the camera.

These small, personal anecdotes offer my own intimate engagement with the digital spaces through which the lived experience of my Belarusian friends was communicated through these precarious and violent times.

V A Brief Autoethnographic Reflections on the Organization of Public Space in Belarus

After several months of life in Belarus, it became evident to me that the Belarusian State is deeply invested in monopolizing cultural, historic, and aesthetic narratives which are continuing to be quietly challenged through the arts. The ideological "truth" of the representational regime of state-socialism governs the distribution of sensorial reality. It materializes throughout every city, informing public order and interactions. This was evident to me when I lived in Viciebsk in 2019. All public space was shaped in ways that suggested collectivist unity and reminded passersby of the official Soviet past. The representational regime is reflected in the tidy organization of public space. The seats face each other on buses, trains and marshrutkas in a way that stresses community and leaves little room for personal space. The desks in the tiny seminar classrooms are paired together to ensure collaboration. The auditorium's space was formally distributed in a way that elevated the visitors in a circle around the central podium, where a single speaker, serving as an extension of the State, carried out orders and reviewed the performances of others. This same aesthetic order is reflected in the

cleanliness of streets, the strict architecture of building units and even in the movement of citizens through the spaces; the distribution of space revealed an extrinsic stability. Many cities and squares were named after victories in WWII, Russian authors, cities and political figures. Others were named after Marx and Lenin. Statues of figures central to the construction of Soviet ideology such as Marx and Lenin gazed from their pedestals onto passersby, reminding the interconnection of Belarus's history with the USSR.

The State attempts to prevent the dissolution of its domination over aesthetic order at all costs. The government limits and persecutes creative expression that challenges its ideological principles. Artists, journalists, poets, photographers and actors are the most commonly prosecuted following the cultural revolution in Belarus. Art schools teach students traditional practices of art, such as painting busts, still-lifes and training according to Soviet representational standards (Gapova, 2016). Nevertheless, art spaces all over Belarus also serve as the most prominent hubs of opposition to the state. Performances of grassroots, oppositionary oppositional rock musicians and artists take place in more casual, private spaces, away from the official glares of the State. Artists whose work extends beyond the mandated aesthetic hierarchy, such as The Belarusian Free Theater (BFT), which is illegal in Belarus, operate in secret. The BFT performs plays in a private apartment in Minsk, relocating frequently due to fear of imprisonment by the state for challenging the representational hierarchy (Goldmann, 2020). Rock concerts by formerly incarcerated Belarusian nationalists take place in crowded, dimly lit bars at night. In Viciebsk, beautiful surreal murals decorated public buildings in ways which expressed creative agency and disrupted the official aesthetic order through mysterious metaphors.

Image 1: Statue of Marx in Viciebsk, Belarus
Taken by the author

Image 1: Photograph of murals in Viciebsk, Belarus
Photo taken by the author

VI Visual Analysis of Gendered Performances of Aesthetic Resistance

The definition of aesthetics which I employ refers to the adherence of a phenomenon to the sensible world. When categories of representational hierarchies are blurred and released from an ideological order, they enter into the aesthetic regime of the sensible, where there are no defined boundaries between art and life, between aesthetics and representation (Ranciere, 2004). Symbols exist within a free-reign of interpretation instead of referencing something particular within an established order of meaning. I argue that the gendered performances within the Belarusian protests are of purely symbolic significance. The images I analyze below capture performances of resistance against the State by employing gendered symbolism. Below I analyze the particular phenomenon of the feminine aesthetic and its method of resistance against the official patriarchal order of the State. In many cases, performances of femininity function as a symbol within the 2020 protests. The performance of a feminine aesthetic is not employed in

order to address the subject of gender (women) with relationship to the representational category of gender as it relates to the Lukashenka regime; ironically I believe they are not addressing the subject of women at all. Instead, I argue that femininity within the 2020 Belarusian protests represents the formerly hidden creative autonomy of Belarusian-ness, released from beyond the rigid, masculine, ideological categories of State ideology.

Paulovich (2021) argues that women rely on essentialized femininity in order to assert the moral authority of Belarusian women over the violent masculine state, noting that resistance and agency is capable of operating within structures of oppression. I am not arguing against this point because I acknowledge the plurality of meanings which gender might indicate. A multitude of identities and belief systems are represented within the 2020 Belarusian protests. They range from the liberal feminist LGBTQ flag, to traditional Orthodox Christian icons of the Virgin Mary (Gapova, 2021). This indicates that the interpretation of aesthetic sensibilities within Belarusian society is liberated from the representational regime. The contemporary Belarusian person expresses their identity from a variety of belief systems. People from many spheres oppose the oppression of the State.

I apply feminist theory to examine the symbols of femininity in how they relate to patriarchal structures. This allows a deeper insight into the constructions of ideological representations of power and oppression within the official Belarusian social order. The framework of the public, private divide addresses relational strategies of domination. I am not applying the principles of liberal feminism as a necessary direction for Belarusian society because gendered hierarchies function differently across cultures, however, I rely on it as a tool for the analysis of the aesthetics of the protests. Within the patriarchy, the masculine subject is the absolute human type, who exploits sexual differences to create a system of women's

subordination. The “public-private” is an analytical tool for addressing power relationships within the social order (Gal, 2000). Femininity and masculinity are aesthetic descriptions of dominance and subjugation within these categories. It is important to note that symbolic functions of neither the aesthetic, nor representational order neatly describe the nuanced conditions of material reality. Rather, they offer a framework of analysis for imagining a relationship to official and alternative structures.

The feminine aesthetic within the protests references a formerly hidden, private symbolic order of expressive freedom, autonomy and Belarusian-ness. The feminine has been traditionally restricted to the private sphere. The patriarchal order assigns the creation of public culture to men, who embody the masculine, and the “natural” duties of child-rearing, growing food, and tending for life to women, who embody the feminine (Ortner, 1974). Official, patriarchal Soviet legislature and ideology, most often written and enforced by men, failed to address the existence of the private sphere altogether. Though founders of the USSR, namely Kollontai, addressed material gender inequality by establishing institutions to address sexist distributions of labor, the oppression which happened in private was ignored (Holland, 1985). Official Soviet ideology did not acknowledge the existence of the private sphere. Everything had been made public, according to Communist doctrine. Therefore, the private realm existed outside of the recognition of the State. The femininity of the women in the image below symbolizes that, which has been hidden and silenced in the private sphere, outside of the acknowledgement of the state. However, this was also the place where creative agency and cultural interpretation could be practiced unofficially (Ackerman, Sasunkevich, 2021).

Image 3: Sergei Gapon, via getty images, 2020

Many protesting women emphasized their femininity as they took over public spaces. In many cases, they wore white dresses (even wedding dresses), makeup, traditional embroidery and carried and distributed bouquets of flowers[8]. The women gathered in crowds on large streets, squares and standing in lines while holding hands in front of commonly visited places. Those, who were formerly hidden and silenced, took over and reinterpreted the official, masculine public order. This is one of the ways in which alternative practices of Belarusianness declared themselves into official existence within the protests. The women in the image above wear white. In reference to Oushakine, blankness, whiteness, and "nothingness" serves as a placeholder for authentic Belarusian identity (Oushakine, 2017). White can be interpreted as a blank slate, a potential to experience liberation from former categories of meaning. Thereby, the feminine women in white also carry the message of potential for the possibility to finally fill in the blankness, the "nothingness" which Belarusians had used as a placeholder for authentic

[8] It is traditional to gift women flowers in Eastern Europe

expressions of their selfhood. White ribbons wrapped around the wrist were worn on August 9th during election day by those voting for Tsikhanousaia in order to silently gesture towards the number of those voting for the opposition.

Image 4 (below) features twelve women standing closely together. They wear white clothing and are barefoot. They smile. Two of the women hold a large white sign, with “Мы Разам,” or, “We Are Together” written on it in black. The women are smiling and raising their hands up in the air. Ribbons with traditional Belarusian embroidery are wrapped around their wrists. In similar photographs women wearing white held hands and linked arms. The women are all young, likely in their mid-twenties. Seven of the women are wearing white dresses, the rest wear white blouses and black or denim bottoms. They are standing at the very center of Minsk, behind them is a building which reads “Подвиг Народа,” or “Feat of the People" in red. The building behind them is emblematic of the Stalinsist architectural style in which the center of Minsk is built.

The sign on the building is a commemoration of tremendous losses Belarus had faced during WWII, during which over a fourth of the population was lost. The sign marks the official narrative of Belarusian history -- the inheritance of the nation’s Soviet legacy which was maintained by Lukashenka. I remember asking one of my acquaintances in Belarus about the attitude of Belarusians towards this heroic legacy on which official national identity depends. She told me that in theory, she understood and respected the history of WWII, however she recalls that the repeated and forceful reminder of the heroic victory and the sacrifices made by Belarusian people felt unnecessary to her growing up. It is a function of state ideology that informs people of their history, directing their memory towards the traumatic, war-torn past of the country.

The relationship between the handmade sign held by the women and the large red letters of the building is compelling because both invoke collectivity, but in different ways. The photographer's choice to include the slogan on the building recontextualizes its initial meaning. The letters are located above the smiling women, who stand beneath the sign. They are the heroes within this image. They allude to a different kind of collectivity with their sign and white ribbons, clearly referencing the togetherness of Belarusian people in their opposition to Lukashenka's rule. This photo, like many others, references togetherness through both physical space and connection as well as semiotically. These close-knit relationships between Belarusians are what allowed many to survive the Covid-19 pandemic and what continued to empower the protesters.

Image 4: Photography by Sergei Gapon via getty images

Many protesters wore traditional dress featuring red embroidered patterns as well as more modern clothing decorated with the patterns as seen in Image 5. The red and white indexes the

colors of the “oppositionary flag.” These embroidered patterns, or *vyshyvanka*, are important symbols of Belarusian identity. Embroidery has long served as a tool for expressing national identity within Slavic cultures. Gapova writes that cultural groups within Eastern and Central Europe relied on various types of embroidery to differentiate themselves under Russian and Austrian rule since the Napoleonic wars. Embroidery was also rooted in rural, folk and feminine creativity as opposed to Westernized bourgeois culture of industrially produced modern clothing. Purchasing and wearing clothing that depicts traditional embroidered patterns is a way of participating in contemporary expressions of nationalism rooted in consumer culture (Gapova, 2017). It also references feminine, private, creative agency through which national identity has been expressed.

Image 5: Misha Friedman via getty images

Within the protests, masculine aesthetics invoke the representational order of the Belarusian government. By doing so, they trigger a particular affective association with the regime. The OMON soldiers, who defend this order, embody the rigid, masculine structure. They are ominously dressed in either black or military fatigues and their faces are covered, concealing their identity. The covered faces erase individuality and provide anonymity; the militant officers are nameless, faceless extensions of the State, implying that there is no accountability to the public when violence is enacted. The uniforms are identical. This stands in contrast to the diverse attire of the protesters, which showcase a variety of unique styles and are color coordinated to symbolize the oppositional flag. The officers line up in identical rows to guard public spaces, carrying metal rectangular shields that form impermeable barriers. They carry phallic-like black batons with which they attack the protesters, bruising and violating those who violate the autocratically imposed order. This is illustrated in Image 6 below.

Image 6: Photograph by Misha Friedman via getty images

The aesthetics of masculinity represented by the OMON officers stem from Soviet ideologies of gender which were intended to be limited within the all-encompassing, rigid ideological order and interpreted within it. As discussed previously, Lukashenka adopted and enforced many structures of the Soviet government and its ideological categories. The militarization of masculinity was one of the ways the male power was entrenched in the Soviet social order (Petrone, 2000). This same militarization is seen in the masculine aesthetic of the Belarusian OMON officers. Men were expected to serve as soldiers and defenders of the State. The same is seen in Lukashenka's Belarus, except that the OMON officers protect his representational regime instead. The OMON officers are meant to preserve the ideology of the State and maintain the hierarchy within the representational order of the sensible.

Within the paradigm of the representational regime, the aesthetics of militant masculinity index to unity, strength, selflessness, protection and order. The aesthetic regime experiences the same categories as brutal, controlling, oppressive, lacking both reason and agency. Within Soviet ideology the role of militant masculinity was to forcefully defend the nation against outside enemies, protecting its citizens (especially women and children) from harm. The irony is that the true enemy of the regime is its own ideological structure. It protects the symbolic categories and their resulting social order with brute force from ideas and belief systems, which it cannot withstand, thereby cruelly enacting violence on peaceful Belarusians. Moreover, these ideas, or more concretely, desires for freedom and autonomy, are performed through the aesthetic of femininity, and enacting violence against women undermines its own moral order. As a result of

the feminine performances, the OMON officers should have been ideologically opposed from utilizing violent force against the women, but disturbingly, this was only so in some cases. The enemy of the representational regime is the paradigm shift which blurs the categories of symbolic order, revealing the loss of control over former conceptualizations of power and personhood.

The protesters queer Lukashenka's representational paradigm by flooding public spaces with performances of the feminine aesthetic, which now represents dissidence and a demand for the recognition of formerly silenced, private struggles. Many protesting women wore long, white dresses, carried flowers and wore their hair in braids. The performance of this exaggerated femininity looked striking against the stern, black garments of OMON officers. There is cruel irony in the fact that the duty of the OMON officers, as symbolized by their militant masculinity, are now meant to defend Lukasheka's rule against flowers, white lace, and beautiful women who embrace them. Image 7 and 8 capture the performances of young women who were granting hugs and kisses to the OMON militia guards as a form of political protest. These embraces queered and undermined the patriarchal, ideological hierarchies established by the State by playing into them. The significance of the kiss is inherently political, as the protesters are marching and performing against the ideological confines and violence of the current State. The kiss became an art form that interrupted the representational regime. It reinterpreted and decontextualized former ideological categories. Moreover, the digitalization of this act and its distribution within social media platforms completely blurred the boundaries between art and life, spectacle and performance, aesthetics and politics, and symbolically destroyed any ideological control over the interpretation of reality. Multiple images and videos of women hugging and kissing the guards and giving them flowers circulated social media platforms.

Image 7 via BelarusFeed
Unmentioned photographer

Image 8: via BelarusFeed
Unmentioned photographer

Pastoral forms of governance, on which Soviet ideology relied, assume the existence of an absolute political truth (Lukashenka's representational regime is rooted in this ideology) and grants absolute power in the hands of the government, as well as expectations of obedience by citizens in exchange for care, guidance and protection (Foucault, 1977). This unspoken social contract, which for some time existed between the government and the people, had been broken during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lukashenka neglected to issue mask mandates, properly supply hospitals and pharmacies, and openly ridiculed people's concerns about the virus, despite the rising infection and mortality rates which were not disclosed to the public. This was a time of political failure, irresponsibility and neglect at the hands of the Masculine state, the responsibilities of which had been taken over by the coalescence and solidarity through which Belarusians recognized their collective power (Liubakova, 2020). Political sovereignty however, remained clenched in Lukashenka's fists.

Distrust and fear in the Belarusian government amplified, following hundreds of arrests and the abuse of prisoners within the prison system (Gilmore, 2020). The prior execution of force against protesters, especially women protesters, by OMON officers, had already significantly undermined the moral authority of the state and triggered further waves of anger and discontent amongst Belarusian citizens. Anton Saifullayeu argued that the Belarusian protests crushed the semantics of "Батька", or "Daddy" which was a long-standing, friendly way of addressing the dictator as a father figure who takes care of citizens in return for obedience. The protesters renamed Lukashenka "ебатька," or "fucker" following his forsaking of Belarusian citizens (Saifullayeu, 2020). Image 9 perfectly illustrates this concept by featuring a

gun captioned “Отец года” or “Father of the year” ironically invoking Lukashenka’s former nickname.

Image 9: via getty images
Photograph by Sergei Gapon

By blurring the boundaries between the aesthetic and the political, the visual and semiotic, the private and the public, Belarusian protesters collectively challenged the ideological and patriarchal order imposed by the State. Moreover, the protesters queered and broadened practices of political participation through collective, embodied performances. The protests were more than displays of political discontent. They reinterpreted and undermined the defunct, symbolic order on which Lukashenka’s regime stands by engaging the practices of performance art.

Conclusion

In *Art Power,* Boris Groys discusses the aesthetics of socialism and their inability to withstand the colorful, enticing, alluring and shocking aesthetics employed to drive capitalism forward (Groys, 2008). It is the main intention of digital technology to create beautiful commodities, which trigger imagination, desire, and possibility which might be achieved through practices of consumption. Certainly, the digital world offers opportunities for communication, mobilization and freedom of informational exchange, which are critical for participating in contemporary practices of communication; however, digital media is also driven by algorithms which stifle access to diverse streams of information. While social media platforms that are monopolized by corporate giants though participation are open and free now, the flow of information is not. Telegram, which was the platform utilized within Belarusian protests, is unique in that the makers of the application refuse to sell personal data to advertising companies. Every other platform peddles deeply personal information to advertisors. Though in the case of Belarus, technology has offered a unique and powerful possibility for creating pockets of freedom outside of the gaze of the regime, the digital sphere poses an increasing threat to democracy in the contemporary world (Flisfeder, 2021)

The digitalization of the Belarusian protests served as a powerful communication tool for addressing the election fraud, human right violations, and depicting the desire for democracy and freedom in the case of Belarus. They were powerful against the outdated informational practices of state socialism which had failed in addressing the needs of Belarusian citizens because the socialist representational aesthetic is ineffective and defunct in a postmodern world. However, what if media had the potential to manipulate desire away from practices of true democracy as they do in nations where democracy is already in place? Digital spaces, which

are so central to forming the contemporary personhood are already rumored to censor dissent against white supremacy, capitalism, and sexual freedom. The commodification and distribution of political information must lead to liberation against authoritarian violence rather than a trap into political and expressive oppression.

Another central challenge regarding political freedom remains in the fact that despite the obvious power of art to translate, reinterpate and extend beyond ideological control, brute force remains able to brutalize and scare citizens into silence. Decoloniality has the power to express itself through art. Art is liberating in its ability to transcend and reinterpret monopolized ideological narratives. It brings hidden experiences into visibility. It is powerful in its infinite possibilities of expression, which transcends the limits of order. However, authoritarian violence remains a threat to this potential. It is imperative the Belarusian diaspora of artists throughout the world, who have brought the expressions of Belarusian discontent and mobilization beyond the confines of Lukasheka's regime, be uplifted, and that the performances of dissidence and decoloniality continue. It is also essential that Belarusians, who have brought their powerful performances and the declarations of their desire for freedom into the public eye, are heard, understood, and supported by those able to share this experience from the outside.

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Poem by Julia Cimafejeva, 2020.

Translated from Belarusian by Valzhyna Mort

1. Use the stone
to make your heart heavy.
The stone will help you unlearn
how to breathe with a full chest.

2. Let the stone
rise until it's stuck in your throat
sucking on your words.
The stone will help you unlearn
how to say what needs to be said.

3. Watch the fear emerge
wrapped in the umbilical stone
around your neck, hung
with the umbilical stone on your chest,
your eternal pullback weight.

- How pretty! Is this your grandma's?
- Yes.
- Take good care of it.
- Always.