



The Protest Art of Antanina Slabodchykava

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Abstract: While online protest art attracts the public's attention, the act of its creation or the artists themselves often remain overlooked. This opinion piece will focus on Belarusian protest art in the digital sphere in summer–fall 2020 as exemplified by the work of Antanina Slabodchykava, the artist behind the logo of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Campaign Headquarters. Used by millions of Belarusians worldwide, her *Heart, Fist, and Victory Sign* (2020) became one of the most recognizable symbols of the protests. This essay narrates the story of the logo's creation, introduces other artwork by Slobodchikova, and evaluates her protest work in the context of her entire oeuvre. While the artist's usage of colors and mediums is somewhat new, the thematic continuity with her previous works dedicated to womanhood, motherhood, and childhood continues to resurface. All in all, by producing new images for the Belarusian revolution, the artist successfully found new expressivity without sacrificing the thematic, emotional, or intuitive components of her creative process.

Keywords: Belarusian contemporary art, protest art, art in digital sphere, Antanina Slabodchykava, Antonina Slobodchikova, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

In the ongoing Belarusian revolution, the language of the art has become 'one of the most important languages', as noted by poet Dmitry Strotsev (Strotsev 2020). Similarly to the revolution itself, the broader critical inquiry into the role that visual and performing art plays in these events remains a process in the making. With the closure of Ÿ Gallery in November 2020,¹ an entire era in Belarusian contemporary art has come to an end. While the older art journals and internet platforms dedicated to art criticism, such as *pARTisan*,² *Kalektar*³, or

¹ The author is grateful to the editors, as well as art historian Tatisiana Zhurauleva and film scholar Gala Minasova for their constructive comments on the manuscript's earlier stages.

Ÿ Gallery was a central independent exhibition space for Belarusian contemporary art that functioned from 2009 to 2020. While the gallery's Facebook page alludes to numerous reasons for its closure without naming them directly (Ÿ Gallery 2020), the arrest of gallery partner Alexander Vasilevich in October 2020 was a key factor behind this decision.

² *pARTisan* is an almanac of contemporary Belarusian culture founded by Artur Klinau in 2002. Its publication has been irregular, and all in all, thirty-five issues of the journal have been published.

Mastatstva magazine⁴ failed to respond synchronously to the explosion of the protest creativity in the country, the new resources that appeared during the protests, such as *cultprotest.me*⁵ and *Chrysalis Mag*⁶ were aimed at the dissemination of protest art, as well as its preservation. The abundance of protest-inspired visual content in the digital mediascape includes but is not limited to posters, videos, and memes shared by protest communities on social media. Frequently, the act of the protest art's creation or the Belarusian artists themselves remain overlooked by both the public and the commentators (with few exceptions⁷). One such example is Antanina Slabodchykava, the artist behind the logo of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's pre-election campaign (see Image 1).

Image 1. Logo of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Campaign Headquarters (2020)



Image description: A red heart, a closed fist and a peace sign in bold black and red outlines on a white background, a signature with year on the bottom right.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

³ *Kalektar* is an online research platform for contemporary Belarusian art founded in 2015 by Aleksei Barysionak, Sergey Kiryshchenko, and Sergey Shabokhin: <http://kalektar.org/>.

⁴ *Mastatstva* is a monthly magazine founded by the Belarusian Ministry of Culture in 1983 and dedicated to visual art, theater, and cinema.

⁵ *Cultprotest.me* is an online initiative by Maxim Tyminko (Netherlands) and Sergey Shabokhin (Germany) aimed at the free dissemination of protest art: <https://cultprotest.me/>.

⁶ *Chrysalis Mag* is an online magazine of contemporary Belarusian art founded in 2020 and curated by graphic artist Nadzeya Makeyeva. Makeyeva describes the magazine's goals as popularizing Belarusian art within the country and abroad and creating an online communicative environment for a general audience and professionals alike (Makeyeva 2021): <https://chrysalismag.by/>.

⁷ For example, Rufina Bazlova and Vladimir Tsesler receive regular attention from the media, while the names of other artists are less well-known by general audiences.

The Campaign Headquarters were formed on July 17, 2020 by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala after two of the alternative presidential candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanousky and Viktor Babaryka, were arrested, and the third, Valer Tsapkala, was forced to flee the country. Used by millions of Belarusians worldwide, Slabodchykava's *Heart, Fist, and Victory Sign* (2020) became one of the most recognizable symbols of the protests. At the same time, both the art piece and the artist are hardly mentioned in the texts dedicated to this topic.⁸ This essay aims to narrate the story of the logo's creation, introduce the reader to other artwork by Slabodchykava, and evaluate her protest work in the context of her entire oeuvre.

It would be inaccurate to say that Antanina Slabodchykava, the Gen-X artist who came on the stage in the late 1990s–early 2000s, is entirely unknown to those specializing in contemporary Belarusian art. Publications dedicated to this artist include Erenburh and Haranskaia 2010, Artimovich 2011, Solomatina 2012, Herasimovich 2012, 2013, Shparaha 2013, Broukhovetskaia 2014, Zhurauleva 2019, and Hauryliuk 2020. Trained as a graphic artist at the Aliaksei Hlebau⁹ Art State College in Minsk, Slabodchykava continued her education at the Department of Monumental Painting of the Belarusian State Academy of Arts, graduating in 2004. From 1998 onwards, her work was shown in six solo and more than fifty group exhibitions both in Belarus and abroad. She has worked in a variety of mediums, including book art, mixed-media collage, installations, performance, and video art.¹⁰ Slabodchykava's themes gravitate toward the exploration of female subjectivity,¹¹ death, and silence, probing the very nature of her creative process, which is discussed below.

The hallmark of Antanina Slabodchykava's style crystallized in her 2012 exhibition *It Is Here* (2012), which combined the vivid palette of her mixed-media collages dedicated to womanhood (see Images 2 and 3) with the macabre mortuary aesthetic of her installations. Take, for example, the black letter print installation *It Is Here*, a visual translation into Belarusian of a poem by German poet Monika Rinck (Image 4). The use of artificial flowers creates a strong association with funeral services. The artist's earlier work *Wheel* (2009, Image 5), sculpted out of churned children's toys, triggers various associations with childhood fears.

⁸ Among a number of recent articles dedicated to protest art in Belarus, only Anika Walke mentions the logo of the Tikhanovskaya Campaign Headquarters (Walke 2020). For other examples see Wicha 2020, Strotsev 2020, Gaufman 2020, Erizanu 2020, Brown and Rea 2020.

⁹ Aliaksei Hlebau (1908–1968) was a Belarusian Soviet sculptor known for his monuments to Francysk Skaryna (1470–1552), a Ruthenian humanist and one of the first book printers in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

¹⁰ Antanina Slabodchykava's artists books include the following titles: *Trip to Africa* (2004), *A Sanitary Book* (2007), and *A Warm Place* (2011). Her paintings and mixed-media collages include *Mother-Hero* (2009), *Ave Maria* (2009), and the *Black Spots* series (2008–2009), to name a few. Slobodchikova is also known for the following installations: *Herbarium of Death* (2003), *Black Job* (2009), *Es Ist Da* (2010), and *Going to the Light* (2010). In the early 2000s, Slobodchikova and her husband, artist Mikhail Gulin, formed a performance group, 1+1=1, which is known today for the following performances: *Renaming of the Street* (2005), *Dissection of a Woman* (2010), *Hollow Fountains* (2012), and *Access to the Sea* (2012). For more about 1+1=1 performances, see Shparaha 2013. Slobodchikova is also known for her city interventions, such as *Sacred Horror* (2015) (for more, see Bubich 2018).

¹¹ In 2012, Slobodchikova did not identify as a feminist, but as someone belonging to a third space in art, neither male nor female ('Kruglyi stol, Vozmozhno li feministkoe iskusstvo v Belarusi?' 2012).

Image 2. Elizabeth (2008)

Image description: A collage depicting a pink female head with black hair labeled 'Tonia', in red sunglasses and with an open mouth containing a picture of Frida Kahlo on a turquoise background and body with an exposed breast and an orange cross inside a speech-bubble on the right-hand side of the head.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Image 3. Mother Hero (2009)

Image description: A collage depicting a woman made out of baby heads with a halo holding the picture of an ancient painting of a nude woman with an infant on a calendar with the date Monday, May 1, on a pink background.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Image 4. It Is Here (2010)

Image description: A photo of the word *ianotut* in big, black letters in front of a dark background highlighted in grey-white in the middle as to make the letters visible.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Image 5. Wheel (2009)

Image description: A photo of a black wheel consisting of smaller, undistinguishable objects in front of a white background.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Slabodchykava's later video installation, *Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes* (2012–2016), continues the themes of childhood and mortuary rites. The burial of the frozen pig's tongue in the left part of the screen (Image 6) alludes to the Soviet children's game of little secrets,¹² while simultaneously implying that artists often deprive themselves of their voices.¹³ In an interview, Slabodchykava described her initial concept as follows: 'When we are in an environment of totalizing control..., the artist muffles...himself, buries his voice, deprives himself of his right to speak...,because this voice is not needed by anyone, he is forbidden to speak' (cited in Zhurauleva 2019).

Image 6. *Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes* (2012–2016)

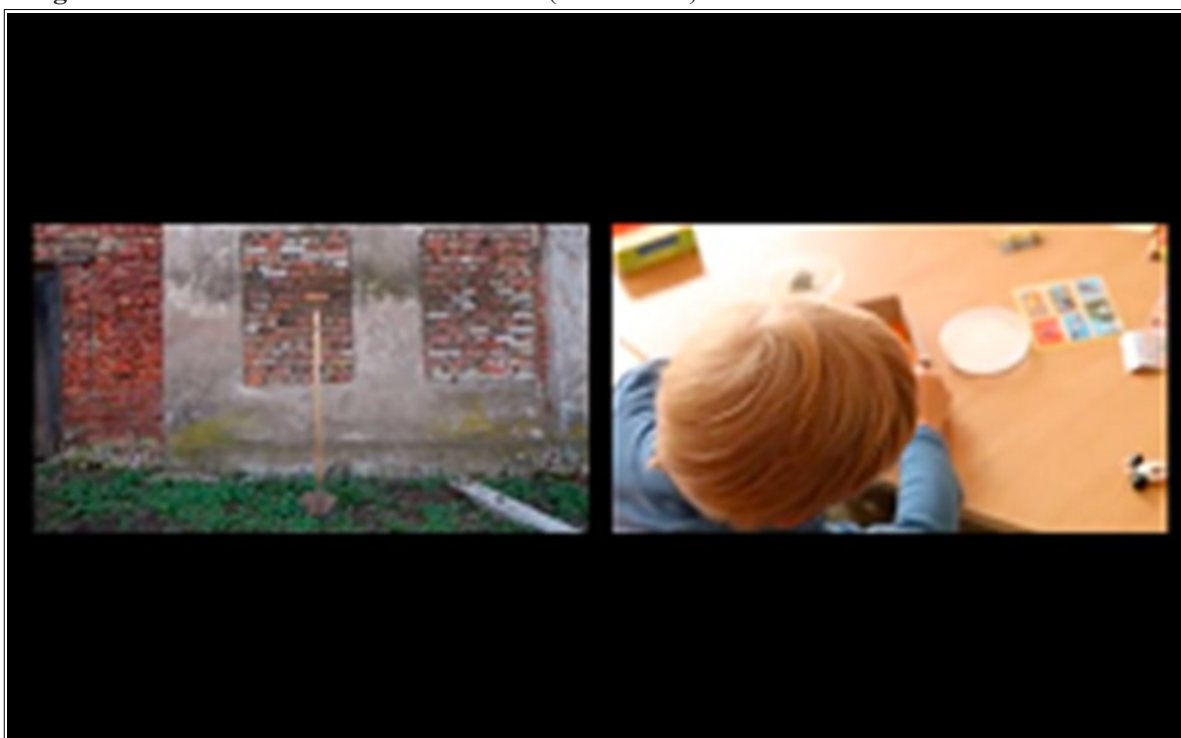


Image description: On the left, a photo of a garden wall with a shovel. On the right, a bird-view-perspective photo of a child playing.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Antanina Slabodchykava's protest art of summer–fall 2020 stands in stark contrast with her previous work. Whereas before, her creative language was somewhat obfuscated, her 'protest phase' acquired a more straightforward symbolism. In a recent interview with the author, Slabodchykava described how she created the Tikhanovskaya Campaign Headquarters logo.

¹² Little secrets [Sekretiki] was a popular game among Soviet children in which one had to bury a found object or a plant under a glass shard and partially cover it with soil.

¹³ Curator Oleg Kostiuchenko writes about this video performance: "The pigs' tongues that were to be buried were purchased at the Komarovskiy Market in Minsk. Performed by the artists in Sevastopol Park, the action was disturbed by the apprehension of two of its participants, Mikhail Gulin and Tatiana Gavrilchik. The project could not be completed because of the difficulties that arose. The tongues were not 'buried.' They were initially frozen in a fridge to be afterward defrosted, cooked, and given to a dog. In 2016, the artist finished the action on her own, burying an animal tongue not far from her studio" (Kostiuchenko 2019).

According to the artist, when she saw the first photograph of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala posing for the cameras with the hand gestures of the clenched fist, the heart, and the peace sign, she became excited and immediately started sketching. An hour later, the artist uploaded the finished drawing to her Facebook page. The combination of dynamic black and red lines communicated a sense of urgency, while the white and red colors also alluded to the historic white-red-white flag used by the Belarusian opposition that is all too familiar to audiences within the country. This combination of simplicity and symbolism immediately captured the popular imagination. The next day, Maria Kalesnikava asked the artist for permission to use this artwork for the campaign (Slabodchikava 2021). In the following weeks, requests to use the logo for web content and merchandise came flying in from all directions. A group of designers helped make the high-resolution image public via an anonymous download link, and the rest was history (ibid.). During the early phase of the protest movement, Slabodchikava saw her art reproduced all over Minsk, Belarus's capital, finding it on posters, banners, stickers, t-shirts, buildings, and even receiving it as a gift from an acquaintance who was genuinely unaware of the image's authorship (ibid.). Thus, the logo, which we now perceive as an intrinsic part of the protest visual culture, came into being as a spontaneous artistic response to the unprecedented political event in the country, i.e. the creation of the women's coalition with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as its head. The logo's popularity, however, outshined that of its creator.

Slabodchikava's contribution to the revolution continued after the elections and includes the graphic series titled *Violence* (2020), a direct response to the massive state violence which ensued following the events of August 9, 2020. According to the artist, she attended some protests, including the notorious flash mob *Art of the Regime*, which took place on August 16, 2020 near the Palace of Arts in Minsk. However, after experiencing severe panic attacks, Slabodchikava felt that she could no longer take to the streets and instead responded by making art (ibid.). Her new graphic series include variations on the image of hands holding rubber police batons and flowers (see Images 7–9).

Image 7. Untitled (2020)

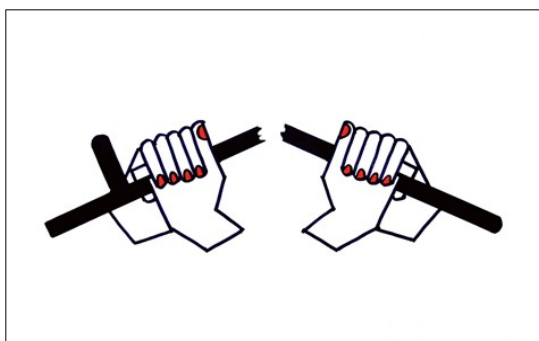


Image description: An illustration depicting two hands with red nail polish and a black outline tearing apart a black baton on a white background.

Source: Antanina Slabodchikava.

Image 8. Untitled (2020)

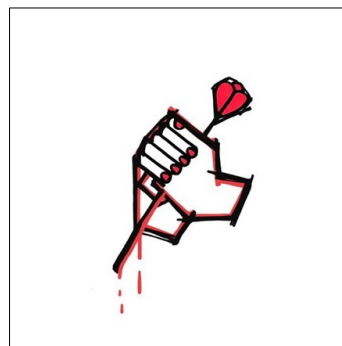


Image description: An illustration depicting two clasped hands holding a red rose in bold black and red outlines on a white background.

Source: Antanina Slabodchikava.

Image 9. Violence (2020)

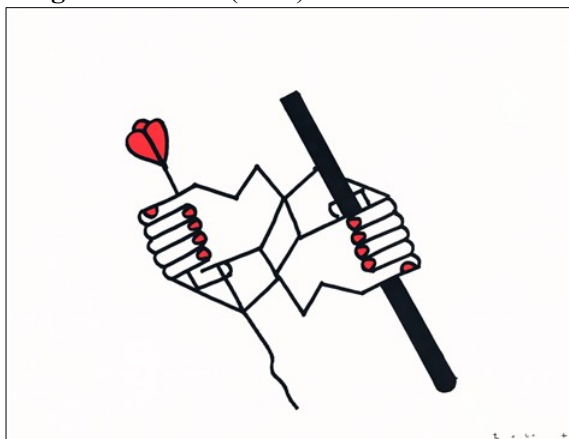


Image description: An illustration depicting two hands with red nail polish and a black outline, the left one holding a red rose and the right one holding a black baton.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava and Iryna Herasimovich.

Another series features the word ‘violence’ written in different languages crossed out with a red marker (see Image 10). Slabodchykava undertook the latter initiative in collaboration with translator Iryna Herasimovich, and they presented these series as a part of the exhibition L’Œuil extérieur – Neufomatierung des Raumes [The Outer Eye: Reformatting Space], which took place in October of 2020 at Affspace in Bern, Switzerland.

Image 10. Untitled (2020)

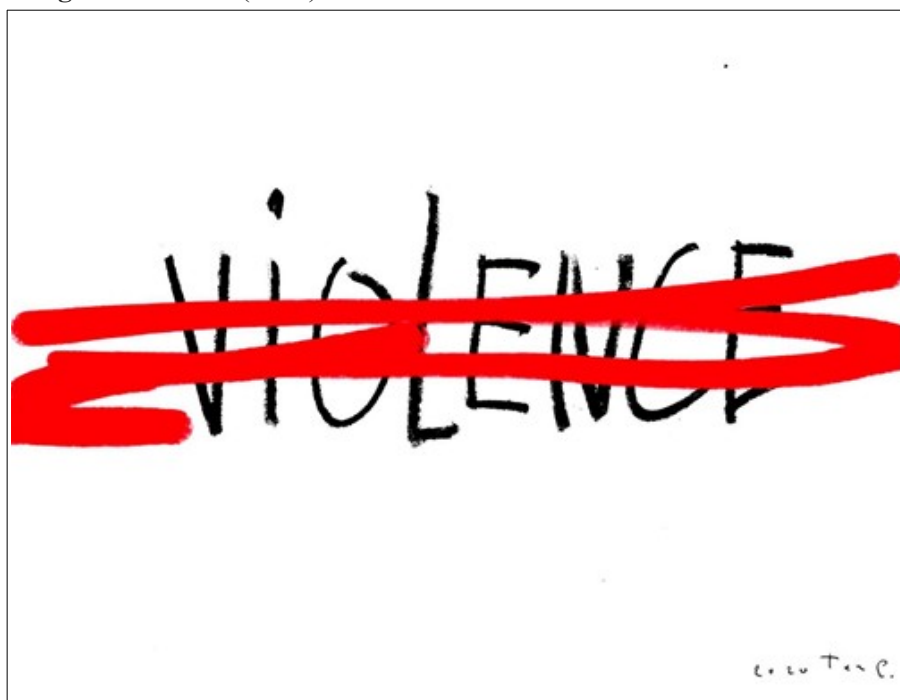


Image description: The word violence handwritten in black capital letters and crossed out in bold red on a white background. A signature with year in the bottom right corner.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Additionally, Slabodchykava started converting her graphics to videos and uploading them to Facebook.¹⁴ Having a physiological condition that makes her hypersensitive to sound, she chose to use the authentic sounds of the protests, focusing on videos that featured parents and children. This choice of the form, according to the artist, was spontaneous and came from within because an ‘artistic response to violence required a straightforward expression’ (ibid.). The use of authentic protest sounds and the video format to present her visual work were precisely that. Ultimately, the artist managed to incorporate her protest collection into an installation entitled *Requiem for a Dream* at the exhibition *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance*, which opened at Kyiv’s *Mystetskyi Arsenal* on March 25, 2021. Slabodchykava placed a recreation of her logo inside a police van, illuminated the set by projecting protest graphics, and used the authentic protest sounds associated with the event to enhance the installation (see Images 11–13). Paradoxically, *Requiem for a Dream* does the opposite of her 2016 video installation *Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes*, which spoke to the viewer in more open-ended and ambivalent ways. Instead of muffling one’s voice, the use of the authentic sound amplifies the protesters’ voices, and with that, the voice of the artist.

Image 11. *Requiem for a Dream* (2021). Fragment.



Image description: Fists outlined in bold red and black with a handwritten black scripture in the background projected on a big white area.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

¹⁴ See, for example, the following links: <https://www.facebook.com/1776810364/videos/10207731615766515/>; <https://www.facebook.com/1776810364/videos/10207806992250880/>; <https://www.facebook.com/1776810364/videos/10207832584050659/>; <https://www.facebook.com/1776810364/videos/10207954125889129/>.

Image 12. Requiem for a Dream (2021). Fragment.



Image description: Hands outlined in black with red nail polish, tearing apart a baton projected on a big white area.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

Image 13. Requiem for a Dream (2021). Fragment

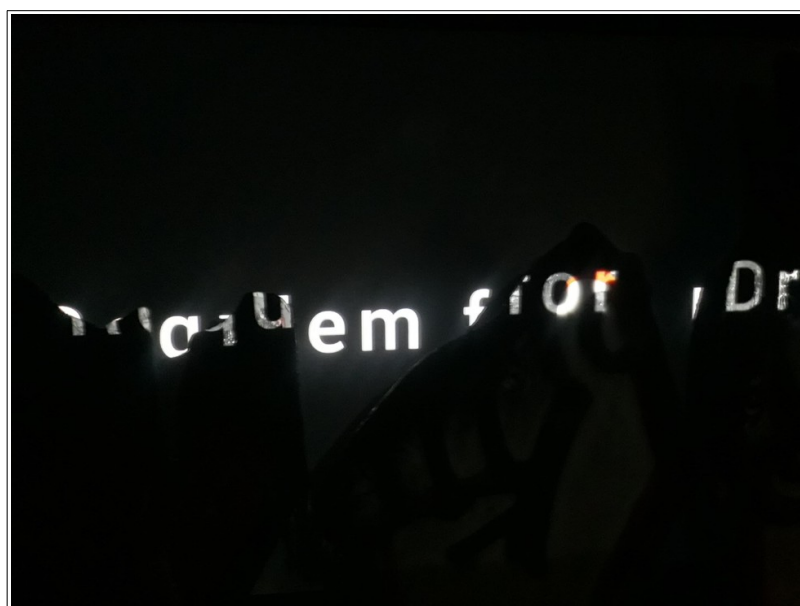


Image description: 'Requiem for a dream' in shining silver with some letters missing in front of a black background.

Source: Antanina Slabodchykava.

At the same time, the question may be asked: How does one evaluate the protest art series in the context of the two decades' worth of artwork by a professional artist? Should one include the 'protest series' in their professional corpus or not? What is the place of Slabodchykava's new red and white color palette next to her vibrant collages or her macabre installation series? While the usage of these colors is entirely new, there are certain elements that still point to thematic continuity with her previous work. In particular, such themes as womanhood, motherhood, and childhood continue to resurface. See, for example, the previous mirror image of hands with painted nails holding a police baton on the right and a flower on the left (Image 9).

While the Belarusian uprising was being cast as the women's revolution by the media and scholars alike, there were also women who continued fighting on the other side of the barricades, serving in the OMON (law enforcement force under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus) and Lukashenko's apparatus. Slabodchykava's previous forays into female subjectivity enable this complex view that remains otherwise obfuscated in the nascent protest iconography. Another aspect worth mentioning is the artist's engagement with the theme of motherhood and childhood that is also a marked feature of her previous works.¹⁵ The incorporation of the recycled artwork (from 1+1=1 performance *Dissecting a Woman*)¹⁶ in one of the videos only reinforces this continuity.¹⁷

The political upheaval in Belarus caused a transformation in Antanina Slabodchykava's artistic expression. Although this current work might appear as a radical departure, it is, in fact, a continuation of earlier concerns as exemplified by the feminist themes, active social commentary, and explorations of medium that were made explicit given the urgently felt crisis in Belarus. The ostensible changes in her artistic expression include the following: 1) The mediums of installation and performance surrendered to laconic protest graphics; 2) the sharp color contrasts of her mixed media collages surrendered to the white and red palette of the protesters; 3) the hermetic artistic language of her hallmark exhibition *It Is Here* surrendered to the straightforward slogans 'we love, we can, and we will win' and, later, 'stop the violence'; 4) the meditation on silence in *Vote to the Ground: Ashes to Ashes* surrendered to the protesters' voices. Thus, it can be asserted that Slabodchykava found a new expressivity, while Belarusians themselves found new agency as citizens. After all, she triumphed not only in creating one of the most popular protest visuals, but also successfully found a new voice, losing the ambiguity and nuance of her previous works but not sacrificing the thematic, emotional, or intuitive component of her creative process. Given the absence of private art collectors within Belarus, the lack of a centralized archive of contemporary art, and the general weakness of its contemporary art institutions and critical apparatuses, protest histories like this one are at risk of falling into oblivion. While the new digital protest art archive affiliated with *Chrysalis Mag* is currently being created by the transnational community of Belarusian art enthusiasts, it operates within some restraints because exposing certain details poses an immediate danger to those authors, artists, and editors who remain inside the country. The

¹⁵ See, for example, *Herbarium of Death* (1998), *Wheel* (2009), or the *Mother Hero* (2009).

¹⁶ 1+1=1 is a performance group consisting of Antanina Slabodchykava and her husband, artist and curator Mikhail Gulin. *Dissecting a Woman* (2010) is a video installation that received first place at the Towards the Contemporary Art Museum contest of curatorial projects (Belarus). It features a video installation in which the artist team performs surgery on an artificial woman.

¹⁷ The video is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sl.antonina/videos/10207861168925263> (10.12.2020).

situation with independent academic scholarship is different. Therefore, by moving away from an analysis of protest art beyond its content toward a broader cultural landscape, including the artist's other productions, it is possible to explicate the processes of the past three decades within Belarusian art and contextualize its revolutionary impulses.

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