



Roots Are Radical. Activist Embroidery in Central Europe

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Abstract. The traditional technique of embroidery has earned a significant position among the media of activist art and creative activism (craftivism) in the past two decades. It has also become one of the popular “slow” activities shared in communities that support community building. Examples of such activities, located in the Central European region that is defined by stances and ideas in interconnected cultures rather than by mere geographic proximity, may not be numerous. Nevertheless, they prove to be relevant for an enquiry into the phenomenon. This phenomenon has been researched mainly by Western scholars so far; only recently were they joined by a few scholars who come from and focus on Central and Eastern Europe. Taking the prevalence of cultural history and feminist perspective into account, this paper suggests a shift of approach by analysing the semiotic and multimodal aspects of the issue. The focus will be on the concurrence of iconicity and symbolism of the traditional patterns and newly introduced ones, on transmediations of narrative structures into embroidered representations, and on the multimodality of communication. The multimodal approach appears necessary due to the paradoxical relation between the materiality of the original media product and the immateriality of its media of display and distribution, typically social media. The characteristics and communicational potential of embroideries will be exemplified by the individual project “Vyzhylvanka” by Rufina Bazlova, a Prague-based, Belarus-born visual artist, and by the collective creations of the Slovak craftivist group, the KundyCrew.

Keywords: activist art, craftivism, embroidery, multimodality, Central Europe.

How to Approach the “Subversive Stitch”

The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity.

Rozsika Parker

The motto is taken from one of the seminal works on the gendered nature of embroidery and its evolution, Rozsika Parker's monograph *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1996, IV). It complies with the main subject of this paper: recent manifestations of embroidery applied as “a weapon of resistance” by women in Central Europe – be it individual artistic creation or in collective craftivist activities –, and its focus: their relation to the local cultural tradition and to the current international context. The Central European region may be understood here as a political rather than a geographical sphere characterized by ongoing efforts to defend and maintain democratic principles in the face of tough competition from populist and nationalist politics while still coping with cultural, mainly mental residues of the post-socialist heritage. How these processes are reflected in embroidered artworks will be exemplified here by the individual artistic project “Vyzhyvanka” (or “Embroidered chronicles of resistance in Belarus”) by Rufina Bazlova, a Belarus-born, Prague based artist,¹ and by a selection of the collective works of the Slovak craftivist group, the KundyCrew.²

Since both the diachronic and synchronic enquiries into the phenomena employ mainly sociocultural or feminist approach, this study suggests a shift of perspective by focusing on multimodal aspects of the issue while retaining also semiotic tools in operation. The necessity of applying the latter becomes obvious when considering the concurrence of iconicity and symbolism of the traditional patterns with newly introduced ones in the works of both Bazlova and the KundyCrew group. The intermedial focus will be on media transformations of narrative structures into embroidered representations by Bazlova and on her application of narrative tools of other media such as comics. Media transformations are understood here in terms of Lars Elleström (2014; commented on in Fedrová and Jedličková 2024, 419–422). According to his concept, the essence of medium lies in its capacity to create and distribute meaning as well as in its inevitable

1 Bazlova was born in Hrodno, Belarus. She graduated from the Faculty of Design and Art in Pilsen, and she lives in Prague.

2 The members of the group prefer to be addressed as a collective. Most of them live in Bratislava; one member has chosen the Czech capital, Prague. Despite the dominance of social media in their communication, this location facilitates the cultural transfer and public activities of the group.

relatedness to other media. In the process of media transformation, a set of media characteristics, that is distinctively structured content as semantic whole conveyed by the source medium (let us say a video recording of a protester escaping the members of special police units), is transformed into a new set of media characteristics (let us say into an embroidery structured in comic-like panels) by employing target-media tools. The resulting distinctive structure (a transmediation) is capable of conjuring up in the mind of the perceiver a representation related to the one structured by the source medium. The process includes both the application of equivalent elements of media representation and search for tools capable of compensating different media capacities.

The materiality of media (or material modality of media, as introduced by Elleström in 2010, revised and extended in 2021) proves to be a parameter of importance in this enquiry: despite the materiality and tactility of the original media products, the dominant media of display has become the digital network with social media as prominent platform of distribution and reflection, and the cell phone as primary technical media of display. This medial paradox facilitates and enhances the communicational functioning of embroidered artefacts: in particular, under political circumstances such as those in Belarus, that would not allow a public presentation of activist art. At the same time, the digital representations deprive the original artefacts of the sensorial aspects arising from their materiality, thus weakening their media-specific qualities (tactility, visual effects related to the lighting of textiles, etc.). In her survey of recent developments in feminist art and artivisms, Katy Deepwell (2020, 12) argues, “the distribution of art outside a gallery space or in ‘non-art’ spaces can no longer be in itself a definition of art activism” (e.g. a mural can be decorative). Nevertheless, staging artworks as live cultural interventions in public space remain an important feature of activist art. This applies even more to various craftivist activities, be they represented by “guerrilla kindness,” such as encouraging messages or symbolic acts of empathy [*Figs. 1–2*], or outdoor presentations with workshops that involve exposure of the artefacts to the exterior and possible manipulation, and transform them into objects of various practices (visitors are encouraged to participate in creation or alteration of existing artefacts, to rearrange or wear them and the like). The scope of agents exercising influence upon the process of meaning making of the products of activist art or craftivism is extended when compared to the art sanctioned by traditional cultural institutions: a good reason to extend the method of observation and adopt the broad spectrum of multimodal studies. Intermedial studies started out as research into “arts and media,” focused on intermedial relations and the processes and results of media transformation. Multimodality studies enquire into representational practices that include not only mixed media but also particular social spaces and communities (cf. Ledin and Machin 2020; particularly illuminating papers on the interaction of aesthetic,

geographic, and social factors in installation of monuments may be found in Tønnessen and Forsgren 2019).

From DIY to Craftivism

The term craftivism was coined by Betsy Greer in the first decade of the millennium as a way of “voicing opinions through creativity that makes the voice of the creator(s) stronger, deepens their compassion and provides them with perseverance in their quest for justice” (Greer 2014, 8). Her non-essentialist concept is derived mainly from the intention, action, and experience of the subject of communication. The verb “voice” suggests the presence of the metaphorical or rather synecdochical understanding of the noun voice, which may represent those who are silenced, marginalized or ignored. The notion of “compassion” relates to the social function of craftivism: a collaborative project contributes to the socialization of the individual; it enhances the feeling of connectedness and community cohesion. The perseverance represents an inevitable prerequisite of the process of creating an artefact such as embroidery, which is particularly laborious, requires a significant investment of time, concentration, and patience. The aspect of perseverance comes to the fore especially when the craftivist activity becomes part of a deeply affecting long-term project that entails dealing with trauma, disappointment, frustration, and helplessness, such as “#Framed in Belarus” launched by Rufina Bazlova (see footnote 4, cf. Zhuk 2024, 31–40).

The nature of craftivism has been dealt with mainly by Western scholars involved in studying Western cultures, followed only recently by a significantly smaller number of researchers acquainted with and interested in the Central and Eastern European region (Kowalewska 2024, Zhuk 2024, Jiroutová-Kynčlová 2025, Tomková 2025 [forthcoming]). Due to these factors, a particular attention should be paid to differences stemming from distinct traditions and different political and economic circumstances of the culture in question.

This necessity becomes obvious when Myzelev (2021) attempts to locate recent manifestations of artistic embroidery applied as a means of expressing a political stance (in the work of Rufina Bazlova and the Ukrainian Oksana Briukhovetska) on the evolutionary trajectory of feminism characterized by a series of “waves.” While posing the question whether these phenomena may be related to the fourth wave or rather to post-feminism (Myzelev 2021, 2), she is missing the point that the trajectory of feminism in Central European and Eastern countries differs significantly from that of the Western cultures. Speaking of a post-feminist phase in the post-socialist countries sounds rather far-fetched. So does differ the relatively short history of craftivism. Craftivism is historically related to the revival of the Western DIY culture in the 1980s and 1990s (Myzelev 2021, 2) that

emerged from the dissatisfaction with the consumption-oriented society. People attempted to step off its production-consumption circle by growing their own crops, sewing clothing, etc., in order to secure their economic independence, subsistence, and general sustainability. Contrary to that, the Eastern, socialist DIY resulted primarily from limited access to goods (“forced self-subsistence”). The secondary source of the intensive DIY engagement, since the 1970s in particular, was the “cottage mentality”³ typical of the Czech society prior to 1989. Nevertheless, we may agree with Myzelev that the changes brought about by the third millennium may be understood as branching of the DIY movement or of the integration of this activity into other spheres of interest (Myzelev 2021, 2). One of these trends is the revival of traditional crafts that have been forgotten due to industrialization or have been maintained rather as folklore heritage than a living technique – and also held in scorn by previous generations of feminists as means of disciplining women in confirming their femininity and their essential relation to the domestic sphere (Parker 1984, 6).

Female and Feminist

A significant feature the works of Rufina Bazlova and those of the KundyCrew share is the evolution of their female experience and thinking towards the adherence to feminist stance. The first embroidered narrative structure in which Rufina Bazlova employs the traditional Belarusian cross-stitch technique bears the name “Zhenokol” (2012, translated as “Feminnature” to indicate the general validity of the original visual metaphor) [Fig. 3]. The embroidered circle is applied as a decoration on a skirt, and the individual images are ordered in a comic-like strip of panels. This structure renders an anthropogonic narrative invented by the artist’s friend and herself. It celebrates the never-ending mother-daughter cycle in manifesting the woman’s strength: her capacity not only to give birth but also to interact with the environment, to establish relations, to take

3 This conceptualization of the way of life and the distorted “ethos” of the so-called “normalization,” i.e. the 1970s to 1980s period in Czechoslovakia – marked by an idle job concept similar to the current “quiet quitting,” working days followed by a regular weekend escape to the countryside –, was introduced by the historian Havelka (2009, 623), whose intention was a consistent differentiation between the totalitarian and the authoritarian regime. According to Havelka, a violent totalitarian regime relies on the mobilization of citizens (against an external or internal enemy), while an authoritarian regime lives on the apathy of citizens, absorbed in their own interests. The latter one allows the authorities to retain their power presented as “public interest” (Havelka 2009, 624). In introducing the umbrella term “cottage mentality,” Havelka captured a number of interconnected phenomena and their implications: the DIY as well as collecting items for the cottages and country houses served as means of establishing “symbolic (social) capital,” and the retreat to the private sphere and the neighbourly coexistence in the country legitimized the fact of avoiding public engagement.

care of others, and to endure. This work may be considered an example of the concept of the strong woman that emerged in Czech and Slovak culture at the beginning of the millennium. In fact, it is a “traditional” woman that does not oppose the androcentric world but moulds it in using her female power (often in applying her extraordinary or even supernatural capacities such as healing abilities, clairvoyance, etc.).

Nevertheless, the major incentive and catalyst of the artistic projects of both Bazlova and the KundyCrew has become witnessing the process of democratic principles being undermined, the implicit or explicit restrictions of civil rights or even the full-fledged political repression. The latter is the case of the aftermath of the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests against the rigged presidential elections that were followed by arrests of political opponents, forced exile, and threatening of the supporters. In her survey of the social climate of this period, Krystsina Zhuk notes “a significant shift in the relationship between daily life, artistic expression and political resistance in the country” (Zhuk 2024, 3) that have become manifest in the development of “unconventional resistance tactics” (Zhuk 2024, 3). This shift may be considered an individual (very dramatic and rather short-lived on full scale) example of processes that have been observed in Western activist art since the 1970s: as Deepwell notes in relation to women’s art movement, it has moved from “practical strategies to strategic practices” (Deepwell 2020, 14). Bazlova’s art project “Vyzhyvanka” resulted from an almost imminent reaction to the events of the late summer of 2020. The subsequent public project “#Framed in Belarus” (2021) was launched to unite a community of embroiderers in order to maintain resilience, solidarity, and hope. Zhuk provides an extensive description of the functioning of the latter project and analyses the social aspects of the craftivist activities, as well as the ethical and emotional evaluations provided by the participants themselves (Zhuk 2024, 31–40).⁴ While Zhuk also thoroughly clarifies the relations of a selection of Bazlova’s images to actual events and their

4 This call for resistance by private embroidery was answered both by people in Belarus, expats who experienced frustration from the results of the 2020 protests, and people from other countries. The individual participants, some of which were taking their first attempt at embroidering, were suggested to represent the situation and heroic acts of freedom performed by concrete political prisoners in embroidered images including the names of the prisoners. Zhuk draws our attention to the fact that the opponents of the regime are often depicted as martyrs on the one hand and as those acquainted with strategies and tools that help them to survive detention on the other hand. In anonymized letters, the project participants shared their mixed feelings of helplessness and strength, intense engagement and pressure to do more than to provide a sign of compassion and, eventually, deep connectedness (cf. Zhuk 2024, 31–40). Most of them appreciated the activity as an occasion to maintain the awareness of the international public about the situation. A selection of the letters was displayed together with the works by Rufina Bazlova during the exhibition “Threads of Resistance” (Nitě odporu) at the GASK Gallery in Kutná Hora, Czechia, (10/2023–01/2024). The artist says she was forced to suspend the activity temporarily, since she has not been able to process the numerous contributions by enthusiastic participants (June 2025).

cultural implications, here the focus will be on the processes of representation and on media transformation in her works.

Threads of Quiet Resistance

The word “Vyzhyvanka” in the title of Bazlova’s authorial project is a pun: the author explains that she contaminated the original verb “vyshyvac” (i.e. ‘to embroider’) with “vyzhyvac” (i.e. ‘to survive’). As Betsy Greer might put it, Bazlova’s works performed in Czechia were meant as gestures of compassion with and manifestations of support of her Belarussian compatriots. She started to embroider images of actual events from the very beginning of the protests in the summer of 2020, following the reports as distributed mainly by social media, and sharing her works in the same way. In Elleström’s words, what Bazlova did in her elaborate way was “a repeated mediation by another type of media,” a transmediation (Elleström 2014, 11).

In other words, Bazlova transforms verbal and multimedia records of real events into the non-verbal language of the cross-stitch using traditional patterns with their inventory of icons and symbols, and introducing new ones. She develops a set of representational and compositional strategies: she introduces a pair of neutral figures that suggest the female/male duality, and she replicates them to suggest quantity and unity. The members of the special units are represented through a synecdochical icon: an amplified shield with protruding legs and arms. Iconic depictions of the modern symbols of the Belarusian state and Soviet history (e.g. the huge obelisk of the Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War) are introduced as reminders that these places and symbols witnessed the violent suppression of the protests. Traditional floral patterns are employed to visualize invisible bonds between people, the presence of which implies a hopeful atmosphere. In order to identify individuals, e.g. while representing the female leaders of the civil resistance, Bazlova miniaturizes patterns used to ornate folklore clothing. She also appropriates historical strategies of composition and proportion taken from medieval visual art to mark importance or leadership. In a tribute to Sviatlana Tsikahnouska, the presidential candidate of the opposition in the rigged election, a large female figure with clenched fist appears to be surrounded and “lifted” by a crowd greeting her with flowers. In introducing these semiotic and compositional strategies, Bazlova invents a new iconography of her own [Fig. 4].

The degree of legibility, or let us say the extension of the fictional worlds of the images, may depend on the recipient’s knowledge of the actual events and places referred to. This may be illustrated by the depiction of an individual act of

solidarity recorded and presented on social media in September 2020:⁵ a young man on the run from the members of the special units jumped into a taxi waiting at an intersection, and the driver saved both of them by an action-film-like epic drive. Bazlova uses dominantly iconic elements (a neutral male figure, the above-mentioned synecdoche of the members of the special units, a toy-like depiction of a car, etc.). Yet she does not hesitate to add symbols not present in the original event, i.e. the traditional red-and-white Belarussian flags. In the final panel, the flags are transformed into angelic wings that carry the car away, observed by frozen pursuers that may associate the stunned soldiers with the resurrection scene. In employing the traditional motif of a bird (dove), Bazlova adds a grain of humour: the birds – usually depicted facing each other to signify attachment – fly away, becoming heralds of freedom (in images depicting the rejection of violence, the doves express their opinion by a drop). The actual case was referred to as “taxi saviour” – and indeed, Bazlova’s embroidery transforms a real case of rescue into a symbolic image of salvation, evoking hope by pathos and retaining distance by humour.

It is obvious that not only time (as already highlighted, embroidering is a long, intensive process) but also the timing of the encounter with Bazlova’s work played a significant role in the reception of her works. The time slot of the intense social impact of her series has closed now, the events depicted have become the past. On her website, Bazlova faces this fact with the display of the “Saga of the Protests:” the images of the embroidered events and situations of the protests, as well as the symbolic constellations of their agents are arranged in a strip that the viewer can set to motion. This effect suggests a chronologic order that makes it possible to construct a narrative of the heroic resistance, thus elevating the chronology of events to history in a “Bayeux-tapestry-like”⁶ mode.

The headline of this section was borrowed from the title of the exhibition of Bazlova’s works that was held in the GASK Gallery (Kutná Hora, Czechia) in 2023. The adjective “quiet” was added to mark the type of resistance in terms of cultural studies. I hesitate to adopt Majewska’s notion of “weak resistance” (2021) derived from the historical practices of participants of the Polish union movement *Solidarność*, who created informal networks that allowed them to support each other in a practical mode. The reason for choosing the classification

5 Recording accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rje2qv_Wc3w (Last accessed 10 May 2025).

6 The Bayeux tapestry (Bayeux, France), a 70-m-long embroidered piece, tells the story of the Norman invasion of England and its conquest in 1066. <https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/over-the-centuries/> (Last accessed 10 May 2025). The Reading Museum in England holds a Victorian replica, a collective work created in 1885-1886 at the instigation of Elizabeth Wardle, an inquisitive embroiderer and the wife of a silk industrialist in Staffordshire. Each of the 35 female participants from various parts of the country were encouraged to stitch their names beneath their individual panels: <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/history-britains-bayeux-tapestry> (Last accessed 10 May 2025).

“quiet” is the adherence to Václav Havel’s idea of “the power of the powerless” (1985/1978) that results from an examination of the modes of operation, status, and possible impact of independent civil initiatives: quiet yet substantiated and persistent. During the 1970s, the ossified authoritarian regime (referred to as the period of “normalization”) in Czechoslovakia, though it continued persecuting its opponents, provided a breeding ground for alternative culture including private artistic and educational activities such as home seminars, theatre performances and exhibitions, samizdat editions of books and periodicals. These parallel structures also gave birth to shadow documentation institutions such as VONS (Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, established by a group of dissidents in 1978). The purpose of VONS was to monitor and publish cases of people who were prosecuted and tried in Czechoslovakia mostly for political reasons in violation of Czechoslovak laws and international human rights conventions. The documentation of the cases itself may be considered a form of quiet resistance, a reminder that the activity of the regime is being witnessed and recorded carefully to be presented “aloud” at the international forum.

Bazlova’s artistic project “Vyzhyvanka,” or “Embroidered Chronicles of Resistance in Belarus,” may be considered a creative transformation of this quiet mode of witnessing and recording in order to keep the powerholders aware of being under constant surveillance. Bazlova transformed the original records of events into a particular language of symbols, introducing the embroidery as an alternative code of documentation. The primary target audience were actually those who had been acquainted with the represented events or even involved in them. The embroidered representation was meant as an option to process the experience (cf. Myzelev 2021, 3) and to find consolation in its universal human or transcendent dimension. For other recipients, the symbolic-narrative structure meant a challenge to decipher the story and to relate it to political reality. This work has gained Bazlova international recognition in the past few years, which also implies having drawn attention in Central Europe to these so far under-explored phenomena.

In a recent article written for *The Guardian*, historian Karolina Wigura together with journalist Jarosław Kuisz offer the Western colleagues a lesson for the upcoming authoritarian age, claiming that in Poland, people with their historical experience know the strategies of “developing powerful antibodies against oppression” only too well (Kuisz and Wigura 2025). After the 1989 turn, people in the post-socialist societies hoped that they would be able to employ political tools for open political negotiations in a democratic society. Gradually, they have learned that both the cemented mechanism of capitalism and creepily revived authoritarian principles may escape these standard strategies and realized that it might be worth trying to reset their social organism in order to start developing “antibodies against oppression.”

“Roots Are Radical.” The Poetics and Politics of the KundyCrew Group

If we ordered the artefacts (or rather “collective craftifacts,” as we may call them) of the Slovak KundyCrew group according to the date of their creation, we would detect a trajectory of response to social issues and political shifts – as experienced by attentive and engaged Slovak citizens and creative and compassionate women. The group started out as a bunch of “angry girls that robbed their grandmothers of their feminine leisure:” the embroidery (Štefková 2025). They had been taught this traditional craft as kids, and rejected it as dull and old-fashioned in their teens. Nevertheless, it was also in her teens that she made her first move towards feminism, as one of the members recalls. Shortly after she had experienced her first menstruation and adopted the stance of a young woman, the first political attempts to restrict the access to abortion were made in Slovakia (2001, cf. Štefková 2025, 15). Most of the members adopted the feminist stance after 2010; their search for means of expressing their opinion in public was inspired by the activities of the *Australian Cross Stitch* group (Kavanová 2013). Their continuous activities represent a salient example of the application of craftivist principles. Their projects are collective, and they maintain a very loose concept of authorship without emphasizing the individuality. They do not conceive of their works as inviolable originals, adopting patterns from Slovak folklore or introducing fragments of random inspiration, and gladly sharing not only their schemes but the craft itself with participants of workshops: “We declare anticopyright” (Kavanová 2013). They understand their craftifacts as means of an ongoing communication with others and the society, be it in material form or in the form of digital images. No wonder social media play a significant role in the distribution of their work, enhancing the possibility of distributing the message, getting connected or and announcing action. Already their first public craftifact, “She should not have provoked” (*Nemala provokovať*, 2010), reveals the double communicational nature and spatiotemporal relatedness of their creations: the historical motivation of the text was a response, a “backlash” to a friend who “provoked” their activity in its beginning. Nevertheless, taking into account the group’s consistency in manifesting feminist stance, it may be read also as a reminder of a typical rhetoric addressing victims of gendered violence and resulting in their secondary victimization. The phrase “she should not have provoked (him)” includes various specifications such as: “She should not have worn a miniskirt. She should not have walked alone. She should not have started talking to a stranger,” etc. A similar semantic ambiguity is suggested by the piece “Feminism: You have brought it on yourself” (*Feminizmus: Môžeš si za to sama*, 2015).

In adopting and adapting traditional patterns and employing them in textual images as means of political resistance, the KundyCrew undermines various

manifestations of conservatism in the Slovak society. These may be understood as persistent relics of patriarchal hegemony, such as the saying: “Beating up your wife is like spreading manure on your field” (*Keď ženu zbiješ, akoby si roľu pohnojil*, 2024), or effects of recent political trends such as positing limitations on women’s reproductive rights that prompt the strong independent woman to speak up: “Keep your doctrine away from my vagina” (*Držte svoje doktríny mimo mojej vagíny*, 2020). In the public discussion, red flags are being raised time and again even though the reproductive rights may not explicitly be at the very centre of the intended changes, nevertheless related to issues such as the current (September 2025) amendments of the Slovak Constitution that entail enshrining biological definitions of two sexes, limited right to adoption, etc. As a result, resistance expressed in a craftifact several years ago may be understood as an urgent call again.

The KundyCrew exposes the hypocritical morals of the conservatives, gender inequality, or limited rights of minorities or draws their audiences’ attention to current hot-button themes such as the housing crisis and the rising number of homeless people. Inspired by a Valentine’s Day card distributed by the Czech community centre Homelike, which offers support for homeless women, and by a traditional English nursery rhyme, KundyCrew created an embroidered version of their own, “Roses are red / Violets are blue / I have a home / And so should you” (2025), to increase awareness of the housing crisis. It has to be admitted that the impact of such focused creations may be limited to the social bubble of followers on social media and enthusiastic supporters [figs. 5–6].

Appropriation and Provocation

The visual poetics and design or representational scheme introduced and applied by KundyCrew is based on a small-format picture with a short text (a call, a comment, a proverb, a saying, a short poem, etc.) embroidered in cross-stitch and framed by patterns and individual motifs appropriated from Slovak folklore. The structure of a dominant textual message surrounded by mainly idyllic motifs may also be related to items of daily use, mainly decorative covers used to protect the kitchen walls from stains, which date from the last decades of the nineteenth century and that were typical of the Central European region (Germany and the countries of the Habsburg Monarchy, Bohemia, Hungary, and partly Slovakia). These protective textiles give a pictorial impression at first sight, since they feature a variety of idyllic and homey scenes. Nevertheless, it is the textual message that matters, such as quotes of songs, folk wisdom, or Christian orders. But most of the texts focus on the proficient housewife and her obligations to her husband and household, providing her with numerous

recommendations, pieces of advice, and warnings that affirm the subordinate and subservient role of the woman and limit her aspirations to the domestic sphere.⁷ As a result, a double subversive gesture may be observed in the craftifacts by KundyCrew: the traditional (folklore) semiotics of the cross-stitch patterns is put in contrast to the modern content that challenges the “order” of the conservative androcentric world as it used to be presented on the protective kitchen covers.

The scheme described above may underlie an explicitly politic work, such as “Obedient Slovakia” (*Poslušné Slovensko*, 2018), in which rosebuds and rose shoots curl around the inscription. This geographic synecdoche of submissive people is embroidered in fading shades of brown: an easily legible reference to the temporarily ascending and descending yet persistent influence of the rightist ideology on the society. In fact, the legibility and the process of meaning making of KundyCrew’s creations brings about a cultural challenge. To start with, let us focus on the linguistic aspect. Though the group’s work also involves pieces texted in English, the majority of them come in Slovak. Inevitably, the use of the national language significantly limits the span of the audience mainly to native speakers and deprives the message of its intercultural impact. Nevertheless, KundyCrew has embraced this limitation, since they – as it is typical of craftivists – prefer relatedness to universality and wish to address their fellow citizens as target audiences (cf. Duchová 2018, 52).

This limitation becomes salient in craftifacts based on wordplay. The first one encountered here was of an etymological nature: “The roots are radical” (*Korene sú radikálne*, 2018) [Fig. 7]. In fact, the text may serve as a motto of the group: through wordplay, it manifests the craftivist gesture of appropriating a traditional technique for an up-to-date challenge. The puns require both knowledge of the language and insight into the structure of Slovak politics. The phrase *Bolo nám treba?*, literally ‘Was it necessary for us?’, is likened to a right-wing extremist’s name, “Kotleba,” and results in a linguistic contamination: *Bolo nám kotleba?* (2016). The question may be interpreted as a challenge to the Slovak public: “Did we have to let it go that far?,” in other words: “that far-right?” The text of the embroidery, *Bijem sa ako baba* (2014), is a challenge for translators (here let us do with the preliminary translation ‘I fight like a female human’) and suggests a whole scope of alternative interpretations that fit into the individual context. The expression *baba* is marked by polysemy both in Slovak and in Czech: it

7 These decorated protective pieces had experienced their heyday from the end of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century to be followed by a revival in the 1970s and 1980s marked by a wave of reconstructions of old country houses and constructions of cottages in the Czech region. These textiles were conceived of as other antique items related to the traditional daily life (such as stoneware pots, wooden wheels, etc.), as objects carrying material traces of the “good old times” and evoking “a homey atmosphere” – and treated as valuables inhering symbolic capital related to social status, collectibles exhibited proudly to the visitors of cottages.

may refer to a witch or an old repulsive woman, to a young attractive woman, to a strong woman of any age, to a “bitch that bites,” to a weak woman – a coward (the derived adjective *zbabelý* means ‘baba-like,’ prone to act timidly) – and, last but not least, to any woman. The message may be likened to the “Run like a girl” theme introduced in a commercial campaign some ten years ago in order to draw attention to the fact that employing gender-based schemes results in the humiliation of women. It was followed by numerous memes depicting women, young girls in particular, voicing their independence and manifesting their power.

A reference to the shared socialist pop-culture comes to the fore in an embroidered decorative pillowcase. In the past, pillowcases used to be embellished with reassuring and soothing texts, such as the one legitimizing the father’s afternoon nap: “just a quarter of an hour.” Though the text introduced by KundyCrew, “I’m living my dystostory” (*Žiju si svůj dystopříběh*, 2024), may sound rather disturbing, it is humorous. It is legible for those who are acquainted with the icon of the socialist pop music of the 1980s, Michal David, whose simple flat melodies have proved to be capable of surviving the rapidly changing music styles of the past four decades till these days. The 1987 music film “Discostory” (*Discopříběh*, directed by Jaroslav Soukup, soundtrack by Michal David and Zdeněk Barták) was a socialist version of the Western teenage genre “girls meet boys” that manifested a teenager’s emancipation from the conservative parents’ generation, staged as a surrogate of all social limitations of the time. The substitution of the compound “disco-” for “dysto-” (referring to dystopia) in KundyCrew’s piece may be understood as a mere ridicule of the simplifying socialist pretext known to several generations, as an ironic reference to living in an illusion, in a private fictional world without realizing it, or as an expression of being aware of the dystopic nature of the social order of the actual world. A recent Instagram post of the KundyCrew group displayed one of the members, holding the above-mentioned decorated pillow and addressing the followers with a request for financial support of the newly introduced treatment of the illness she had been coping with for years: without letting anyone know, she has been living her “dystostory.” A campaign launched in support of her on the Donio.sk platform was successful. In other words, the craftifact became part of a communicational process that transformed a private issue into a public one by introducing a publicly known craftifact.

Communication Channels

The digital space and social media represent an important but only alternative communication channel for the KundyCrew group, not a vital one such as in Rufina Bazlova’s case. The interventions in public space and exhibitions of

their craftifacts in both private and state galleries bring the question of the social status and the relation of craftivist creation to arts to the fore. In 2014, the group participated in the first temporary collective exhibition of an independent gallery (Knoll, Vienna, and Budapest 2014). The crew understood this occasion as a change of the status of their activities: “KundyCrew in a gallery – the end of punk,” suggested one of the members (Duchová 2018). A selection of their works had been obtained by and integrated into the collection of the Slovak national gallery in 2023.⁸ This acquisition might have been understood as a “legitimization of the craftifacts as artworks,” worth of preserving in a state institution. And it was only this “symbolic capital” (in Bourdieu’s terms, 1996) that persuaded her family that “there was something about her work” eventually, says one of the members (Štefková 2025, 15). Though the following hypothesis may sound rather far-fetched, it reveals the variety of factors that exercise influence upon the functioning of craftivism. After having been publicly sanctioned by a renowned state gallery, the KundyCrew creations have arrived at the edge of being classified as “a qualified medium” in Elleström’s terms (2010), that is, a medium that involves the Bourdieuan “rules of art,” parameters of evaluation, and institutional recognition, and may end up as an art accepted by representatives of the elite, thus surrendering their creative independence.⁹

The presentation of KundyCrew’s work in the Artwall open-space gallery in Prague (2014) may be understood as a project capable of bridging the gaps between the guerrilla interventions in public space typical of craftivism and the social affirmation resulting from institutional exhibitions. The exhibition space of the Artwall Gallery consists of eight niches embedded in a retaining wall along a quay of the River Vltava. The idea is to bring art to the public: the works exhibited may be watched by passengers on trams or passers-by. Unfortunately, there is no empirical study on viewer attention that would document the effectivity of this media of display. These niches used to bear posters celebrating the socialist regime on its memorial days; thus, the perception of the space may differ in representatives of various generations of viewers. Currently, the projects introduced by Artwall Gallery focus on human and civil rights.¹⁰ For the 2014 presentation, the tiny embroidered craftifacts by KundyCrew were transformed

8 The craftifacts were exhibited by the Slovak National Gallery in 2023 within a selection of new acquisitions together with akin works by female artists expressing their view on the traditionally gendered roles in the society and family: <https://sng.sk/sk/sng-bratislava/podujatia/luciadovicakova-jana-hojstricova-kundy-crew-vyber-z-novych-akvizicii-sng> (Last accessed 10 May 2025).

9 Nevertheless, such processes of convergence may be suspended or aborted due to the growing normative view of art and governmental control of living culture in Slovakia. As a result, socially provocative art may easily regain its “punk” or “guerilla” independency.

10 An exhibition of Bazlova’s work opened in February 2022, just a week prior to the Russian invasion to Ukraine. <https://www.artwallgallery.cz/cs/vystava/rufina-bazlova-belorusky-folklor> (Last accessed 10 May 2025)

into XXXL blow-ups. The huge letters of the images were suggested to be read in the iconic mode as in comics: big letters mean speaking out loud, “making the voice stronger,” as Betsy Greer (2014) would put it.

The two case studies suggest a whole scope of issues worth attention in further research: to extend it from individual presentations of artists to comparative studies that may survey the variety of modes applied in order to embrace or subvert the local tradition of embroidery (e.g. Zlata Lamrová in Czechia, Ivana Šáteková in Slovakia), and to evaluate their representational potential taking into account their spatiotemporal relatedness, including cultural limits. Another challenge is answering the question raised by Katy Deepwell (2020, 13), who doubts art’s capacity to produce an actual policy change: “If the subjects art tackles, represents or addresses are ‘about’ campaigns for better health care, housing rights, human rights, [...] violence against women, does this make the artwork ‘art with social purpose’ or just an ‘individual’ perspective in which the subject alone signals a ‘politics’ and a social conscience about the contemporary moment?” The possible answer inheres in several inevitable aspects. We may say that Bazlova’s works in “Vyzhyvanka” are “about the Belarussian protests;” nevertheless, the fictional worlds she developed by transforming the traditional technique induce a complex experience in the recipient in drawing the human aspects of the concrete historical situations to her attention and, in doing so, retaining her engagement. It may be also the further “use” of the artwork that limits or extends its purpose: the distribution of artworks or craftifacts on the social media may trigger a wave of (mere) affirmations by members of the social bubble of what is supposed to be “critical art [...] that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to make obscure and obliterate” (Chantal Mouffe as quoted by Deepwell, 2020, 13). Exhibiting an artwork legible as the artist’s political statement in a local gallery temporarily and installing it in the lobby of a public institution with political influence definitely makes a difference. In this context and with the experience of late socialism as well as of capitalist colonization of post-socialist culture, unlike Deepwell, I dare to appreciate the art’s capability to raise awareness of political issues and to maintain a particular mindset – in order to support one’s perseverance, as Greer would put it. And, even though an expert evaluation requires a certain distance, it seems reasonable to follow these processes in living culture simultaneously instead of waiting to employ “an archaeology of embroidery” in the future.

Credits: Rufina Bazlova, The KundyCrew.

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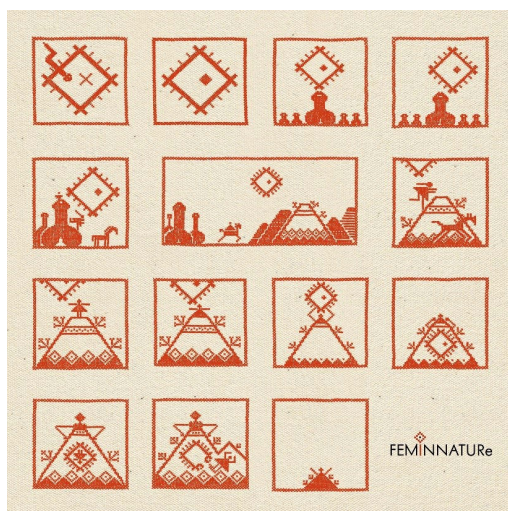


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