



Weakness Street

29 IV 2022 – 19 VI 2022

Venue: [Günter Grass gallery in Gdańsk](#) (Poland)

Artist: Lesia Pcholka

Curator: Anna Łazar



Bases, 2022

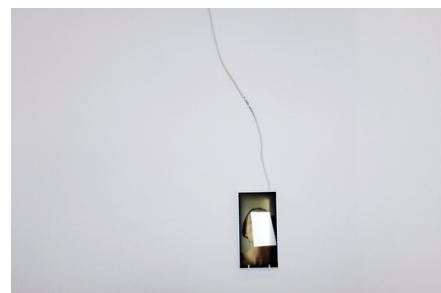
stone sculptures with CCTV cameras and tablets

Five sculptures reproduce the shapes of the bases of the street lamps along the main thoroughfares of Minsk: Independence Avenue and Victor's Avenue. It was in these streets

where the most important protest marches took place in 2020. The ornamentation on the lamp bases was designed by Nikolai Mikholap, who took inspiration from *Stuck sashes*. There is a story behind this: In 1937, a group of scholars, art experts and artists were working to establish the first State Gallery of Art in Belarus. Its opening was held in 1939, and its Director, Nikolai Mikholap himself, included in the gallery's collection *Stuck sashes* the Radziwiłł family had collected in the town of Nesvizh. In 1941, the collection included 2711 specimens, almost 400 of which were on exhibition. From June 1941 to June 1944, while Minsk was under German occupation, the collection remained in the city. Although Mikholap tried to organise an evacuation of the collection, he failed to move it abroad; everything in it, including the *Stuck sashes*, was lost. After the liberation, Nikolai Mikholap was accused of embezzling the collection. Dismissed from his post as director, he took up design. He also worked with ornamental and landscape design as the head of artistic design in the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Many towns and cities were destroyed and needed rebuilding or even to be rebuilt from scratch. At that time, Mikholap designed ornamentation using the motifs of the never retrieved *Stuck sashes* for kontush robes and placed it on the bases of street lamps. The lamps were installed in the 1950 and remained in Minsk practically unchanged until 24 June 2017. On that day, one of the lamps was hit by a tank during preparations for a military parade. There were no casualties but the Minsk Directorate of Street Lighting concluded that the life-time of the old lamps had passed and that they should be replaced with plastic ones. The refurbishment was finalised by the end of 2019. In 2020, the thousands of people who took to the streets walked past these new plastic lamps – which became new witnesses to history, and a reflection of our culture and/or its real absence.

Invisible Trauma, 2020 — 2022

lightbox with a photograph



The last photograph was taken in Minsk in January 2021. White sheets of paper placed in windows became the symbol of protests against the regime. Even the lack of any symbol makes Lukashenko's hatchet-men tremble, being a sign of divergence and a means of expressing one's views. It was formally impossible to legally charge them with a crime. An empty sheet of paper does not express anything. However, even these were banned in

2021, and people's flats were raided if there were white sheets of paper in their windows. The inhabitants were beaten-up, arrested and fined huge amounts of money. A sheet of paper on glass, an invisible protest.

During the active stage of anti-government protests in 2020, I worked to document them, photographing all the opposition marches. In November 2020, I was arrested at a Sunday march in which a female protester named Roma Bondarenka was killed. I was arrested for taking pictures, and the Militisya (Police) tried to drag me into a police car. I was defended by some women and managed to escape, but for a long time I was not able to overcome my fear and continue realizing my idea.

In January, I produced three photographs showing a white sheet of paper. I hung the first of them from my window, the second – was a photograph taken in front of the entrance door to our building, and the third was taken at the Post Office in my neighbourhood (this is the one featured at this show). My actions might have been considered organising a protest in a public institution, but I was trying in this way to continue documenting the Belarusian protests.

I also made a filter-mask on Instagram and registered a chat-bot on Telegram. With a friend of mine Katia Pomazana, who is a human rights campaigner in Ukraine, we began collecting stories of people suffering the effects of the regime's psychological violence. We conducted five extensive interviews and collected comments and photographs made using the filter-mask on Instagram and Telegram. The Belarusian protest had been transferred to the Internet. The regime has taken our streets from us, gagged our media, and even our houses have ceased to be our safe havens. People are in a state of fear but they continue to protest. Small lightboxes feature the portraits of anonymous people from Belarus who are threatened with prison just because a photograph like this exists. Lukashenko's regime knows how the global media function. No photograph – no protest. However, nothing has ended; Belarus has been continuing its protest on a daily basis, even if this is not visible.

Sunset over a Swamp, 2020-22

installation from an archive of the Belarusian regime press 2020-2021



It seemed to us in August 2020 that everything had changed; the people in the streets had changed and the state's antiquated machinery was falling apart. We had no water, there were black-outs, and the underground was constantly breaking down. A rotten system was dying, everyone knew this too well. It was then that I started to build an archive of the propaganda press, believing these would be the last papers printed by the regime. I planned to

analyse them later. There are no independent media in Belarus. They ceased to exist when Lukashenko gained power in 1994. By the end of 1994, Siarhiey Antonchyk, an MP in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus, presented a report on corruption in the President's circles. The report was not published but newspapers were issued with blank pages because the ban on printing it had been issued at the last minute. From that moment on, independent media were either liquidated or submitted to the control of the authorities and published only radical propaganda. The installation makes references to the regime's placing ornamental red and green flags along the streets of Minsk. The flag's design was approved of during a rigged referendum, promoted by Lukashenko. This is not the national flag, there is no real idea behind it. It is a symbol of fear. The propaganda press is full of fear, hate and resentment.



A Pole, 2020
Photography

A photograph of a pole taken on Sunday in Minsk in summer 2020. In the original, the colours of the regime flags are red and green. Such flags were placed on police cars, under such flags people were tortured and murdered. Belarus is the only state – save for Transnistria, which has not been recognised by the international community – which has returned to the use (with small changes) of Soviet symbols. The Belarusian Regime has no vision of the future, the authorities sustains themselves on the slogan “may there never be war”. Today, when Russia is attacking Ukraine from Belarusian territory, Lukashenko continues his repressions against Belarusian women and men, trying to build his image as an advocate of peace and presenting to his electorate the idea of peace during wartime.

Mirror, 2020 — 2022

Print-out on glass



I made these screenshots in the summer of 2020 when the streets were full of people and anyone could view images streamed by the independent media, which had yet not been banned by the regime's administration under the pretext of fighting extremism. The Internet signal was sometimes being disrupted, we could not see images but only hear voices – that we were tired with waiting and wanted to live in a normal state. In 9–12 August, the Internet was cut off in Belarus. Connections could be made using 2G, making only text messages and alarm calls possible. After normal communication was restored, information on beatings and violence against the protesters was spread, which led to protests erupting with renewed energy.

Lesia Pcholka (born 1989 in Borisov, Belarus) – artist, leader of the [VEHA](https://cargocollective.com/veha) sociocultural initiative. Currently lives and works in Gdansk, Poland. In her artistic and research practice she works with the themes of memory and everyday life <https://cargocollective.com/lesiapcholka>

