

**1374 | Ala Savashevich**

**19.09 - 19.10.2024**

Marginality is a radical place of possibility, a space of resistance. A place capable of offering us the condition of a radical perspective from which to look, create, imagine alternatives and new worlds. This is not a mystical notion of marginality. It is the result of lived experiences.

*bell hooks*

The number 1,374, which gives the exhibition its title, represents the number of hours of manual labour that artist Ala Savashevich (b. 1989, Stolin, Belarus) put into making the works presented in her first solo show in Milan.

Savashevich – whose multidisciplinary practice crosses sculpture, video and performance – deals with themes such as identity, memory, trauma and gender, integrating various phenomena from recent history and their consequences on modernity into her research. Particularly interested in the theme of women's work being systematically rendered invisible by patriarchal social systems, and the conditions of exploitation and precariousness they face on a daily basis, the artist develops her research from the legacy of post-Soviet society.

Savashevich stands within a long tradition of feminist artists who place women's presence and social condition at the core of their work. While having had no direct contact with the Soviet system and authorities, her generation still suffers the heavy legacy of that past. Having grown up within a social and educational *establishment* dominated by the patriarchal framework, Savashevich on the one hand lays bare systemic gender discrimination in her work, in the attempt to refute its normalisation, while on the other, she investigates the marginality to which the female figure has been confined over the centuries, re-centring her role in history through the acknowledgement of women's work, both material and immaterial.

The artist thus embarks on a rewriting operation, one in which repression and invisibility – phenomena historically suffered by women in particular – are transformed through the theme of work (including artistic work) into an act of resistance. Exploring the emotional tensions between the construction of the female role and history, that of post-Soviet society in particular, Savashevich reinterprets a past of marginalisation and precariousness in search of a new location for herself first and foremost.

The experience of both personal and collective marginalisation thus allows the artist to delve into the interstices of history by deploying a repositioning process that brings the peripheral body of women from the margins to the centre of the narrative. A clear demonstration of this is the work *On heads, on hands, on legs*, 2024 in which, like columns, female silhouettes support the roof of an imposing portal, in a clear reference to Greek caryatids. The frieze references

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the entrances of houses in Belarusian villages, and the material used – straw – recalls such basic elements of peasant life as sunlight, rye, soil and ploughing. The background the work stands against is painted red, a regal colour that evokes sunset: the end of the workday.

In her recent production, the artist often draws on elements of the traditional decorative and craft aesthetics and techniques of Belarus, her homeland, through a language that moves beyond sculpture to explore and blur the boundaries between art and life. For example, the two vases in the exhibition (*Girls, strike while the iron is hot*, 2024) are made using straw marquetry and reflect the iconography of the portal. The marquetry decorations represent female figures engaged in work activities usually associated with men, such as smithery: a craft considered demanding and prestigious in Soviet society, and which the artist here associates instead with female labour. These also allude to the training Savashevich received at the art academy she attended, where students were often asked to produce sculptures inspired by the theme of work.

Also in *Exercise is Technique*, 2024 the artist plays with the post-Soviet aesthetic assimilated during her education. The sizable mask, made of woven oakum linen and steel chainmail (on the back) in a process that alludes to the patience and care associated with women's work, depicts an expressionless, vaguely ironic young woman's face, and parodies the stoicism of communist idols to be found in the monumentalist tradition.

The steel sculpture *Sew Your Own*, 2022, has a more severe presence and reveals how women's intergenerational memory may confront the weight of patriarchy, exploitation and violence. With hundreds of metal rings, the artist wove an armour-apron, applying the same technique used to make the chainmail band *Miss Worker* that accompanies the only photographic print in the exhibition, one of the rare portraits of the artist's grandmother caught during her endless hours of manual labour. The band and the apron both allude to deeply ingrained sexist social mindsets. Resulted from an exhausting and prolonged working process, the artworks emphatically reveal the real burden borne by the female body so as to fulfil the role socially attributed to women.

According to Savashevich, the processual dimension inherent in her own art is strongly bound up in to a post-Soviet celebratory conception of work handed down through her family, one which has been linked to textile handicrafts for generations. In her practice, she demonstrates a deep awareness of just how much is socially required of artists today to serve also, and ever more, as entrepreneurs able to convert creativity into managerial skills. The textile work *82 hours*, 2024, on which the hours taken by the artist to create her works are embroidered, reveals a scenario in which all distinctions between life and work are blurred, in a dissolving of boundaries initially claimed by the avant-garde as a form of self-determination and which, today, indicates instead the total pervasiveness of exploitation and the inescapable sacrifice of one's life time on the altar of labour.

Turning her gaze to the traditional decorative practices and aesthetics of the Soviet past, the artist thus invites us to pay further attention: as she

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deconstructs the notion of the exceptionalism of artistic labour and undoes the male-oriented, patriarchal modernist myth of the individual, isolated artist, her work raises immediate political implications, necessary to imagine generative alliances and intertwinings.

The works in the exhibition thus recount the exploitation of 'agent' bodies, kept to the margins of history, yet bodies that – through language, action, gesture and movement – claim a space of existential and political appearance in a collective, egalitarian and relational dimension that, as philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests, is the only real possibility for the existence of freedom.

*Chiara Nuzzi*

The exhibition was organized with the support of the Consulate General of Poland in Milan and Polish Institute in Rome.



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**Ala Savashevich (b. 1989, Belarus) lives and works in Wrocław, Poland.**

Ala Savashevich works with sculpture, installation, video and performance. In her artistic practice she addresses the issues of social pressure, control mechanisms and oppressive systems. In particular, she explores themes of collective memory, trauma and identity formation in societies with experience of authoritarianism and patriarchy. Savashevich is interested in the mechanisms of socialisation into the role of women in family systems, education and through the gendered division of labour. By working through histories of exploitation and violence, she also visualises the prospects of reclaiming agency, solidarity and freedom. In her works she often uses the atavistic power of the image, coping with the post-Soviet symbolic and material heritage.

Savashevich is a graduate of the Belarusian State Academy of Arts in Minsk and the Wrocław Academy of Fine Arts. The artist is a laureate of the ING Polish Art Foundation Award 2021. She has recently exhibited at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (PL), Polish Sculpture Center in Oronsko (PL), Kode Art Museum in Bergen (NO), Manifesta 14 Biennale in Prishtina (XK), GFZK in Leipzig (GER), Sentiment in Zurich (CH), Arsenal Gallery in Białystok (PL), Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź (PL), BWA Contemporary Art Gallery in Wrocław, Katowice and Zielona Góra (PL), West Den Haag together with Slavs and Tatars within the project Pickle Bar in Den Haag (NL) as well as OP ENHEIM, Krupa Art Foundation and 66P Subjective Institution of Culture in Wrocław (PL). Her works are part of the ING Foundation, NOMUS Museum in Gdańsk and private collections.

**Chiara Nuzzi (Naples, 1986) is a curator and author.**

Since 2019 she has been curator and editorial manager of Fondazione ICA Milano, where she curated the exhibitions *Erika Verzutti. Notizia* (co-curated with Alberto Salvadori); *Camille Henrot & Estelle Hoy. Jus d'Orange*; *Rebecca Moccia. Ministry of Loneliness*; *Chemutai Ng'ok. An impression that may possibly last forever*; *Annette Kelm. DIE BÜCHER* (co-curated with Alberto Salvadori); *Costanza Candeloro. My skin-care, my strength*; the group exhibition *Small Fixations*; and *Simone Forti. Vicino al Cuore /Close to the Heart* (co-curated with Alberto Salvadori).

Her main fields of interest include transdisciplinary, transcultural and collaborative art practices in which the politics of representation, acts of imagination, decolonial and ecological thinking are central. Interested in the work of artists addressing key issues of our time, her approach combines artistic, experiential, and theoretical practice to imagine and activate alternative transformative ways of establishing community with and through art, starting with an interest in the profoundly changing present and its fragilities. Since early 2024 she has also been curator of the collection for the Bonollo Foundation in Thiene. In 2023 she curated the annual Project Room program for the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation in Milan with the exhibition projects *Lito Kattou. Whisperers* and *Paul Maheke. The Purple Chamber*. Nuzzi has curated group and solo exhibitions in Italy and abroad, collaborating over the years with various public and private institutions including Fondazione Bonollo, Thiene; Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro; Istituto Svizzero, Milan; ar/ge kunst, Bolzano; Museo MART di Trento e Rovereto; Le Narcissio, Nice; Independent Art Fair, Brussels. Recent publications include: *Camille Henrot & Estelle Hoy. Jus d'Orange* (NERO Editions, 2023); *Rebecca Moccia. Ministry of Loneliness* (Humboldt Books, 2023).