



**DRESS OF  
FREEDOM**

# DRESS OF FREEDOM

Performance-happening, solidarity action

Exhibition dates: 6 February - 6 March 2022

Performance: 6 February 2022.

Screening: Panda Theatre, Knaackstraße 97, 10435, Berlin

Duration: 2.5 hours

Artist: Yanka Smetanina

Curator: Nikolai Ivanov

Photo: N. Barsegyan, A. Zhuk, J. Kreumer, Y. Smetanina, M. Stammwitz

Sound: Daniel Denisov @MethSmpl, Mikhail Chizhov @Apathe

Thanks to: Ānia Zaria, who made the dress, and Sveta Müller for providing the venue and the opportunity.

*«...I'm not taking into account cases with a fetishistic theme (not about that), nor am I touching on the bottomless field of research into the culture of drag queens and crossdressers. Just a masculine dress that could enrich a wardrobe and add a new experience. Why not? What would happen if you at least tried it on? It's not like you'll turn into a woman, but maybe you can feel something different? And yes, of course, it's just beautiful! Prettier than the one in the joke.*

*In the performance you will be invited to try on the dress, take selfies, make sure you are irresistible and that nothing terrible has happened to you after trying it on. And maybe the bravest of the brave will show the photos to their relatives back home, where they were be expelled from schools for dyed hair, expelled from universities for less serious rules and dress codes, jailed for propaganda and not jailed for violence.»*

*From the announcement of performance Y.Smetanina*

*«The artist insists that the dress is not a woman's dress. It is neither male nor female, says Yanka, it is neutral when a different essence comes into play. Gender differences and their inherent social manifestations have little meaning when it comes to true freedom, which is what is beautiful. What matters is the choice one makes to rely on and appropriate things that satisfy the categories of freedom. For the artist, freedom is the ultimate reference point. And the sacrifice made in the name of freedom is priceless. It signals the unity of liberation, will and beauty. That's what's beautiful! »*

*From the announcement of the exhibition by the curator Dr. N. Ivanov*



*Mirror corner.*  
Photo:  
Author.

A strict taboo on dresses for European men started about the first third of the 19th century, and although from the middle of the 20th century it was periodically broken, and in the 21st century fashion shows of male models presenting dresses which were considered feminine began to take place and an illusion of an era of gender-neutral clothing was created, still it was and is a privilege to appear in dresses of «star» men, artists and musicians. In everyday life, this type of clothing for men is for the most part socially reprehensible and unacceptable. Despite the wider latitude of freedom in Western Europe it is difficult to imagine a non-transgender man, a non-cross-dresser, a homo- or even more simply a hetero-male in a dress, for example in the workplace. The loyalty of women to men in dress is also mutually condemned. The division into masculine and feminine touches also relations of power. The rhetoric of conservative groups sees the wearing of women's clothes as a loss of masculinity, a chabbing or at least a perversion.

I have always been interested in this image of a man in a dress, just as I have always been interested in the combination of unconventional, rare forms, and naturally I have always wondered «well, why?». How, by and large, can a mere piece of fabric be so gender-normative? Where do the reasons for this taboo come from in today's realities? What is the reason for travesty artists to choose an objectified sexual image and so on and so forth?

The media image of the Belarusian female face of protest was certainly strong, though it was criticized by feminists. This in no way negated the strength of the women protesters, who were misled by the pseudo-feminist manipulative position of power. «Where are the men actually?» - I asked, and was told how they were being whipped by the police, but my imagination was already painting a utopian picture of universal gender unity in dresses at the protests, which naturally ended in victory, but dresses on men, damn it, are taboo in Belarus, because everything that is not the norm is taboo.

*Atmosphere of the opening of the exhibition. Photo: J. Krömer.*





## Action.

DJ musicians were invited to the opening, lights were displayed that both successfully illuminated the works and at the same time flickered, reflecting off the mirrored balls, which together created a cosy relaxed atmosphere of the club, and didn't resemble a cold White Cube. With the black walls it was easy.

When the audience had gathered and started chatting while sipping drinks, I started inviting men who wished to participate in the performance. I didn't reveal the full meaning of what was going on, but I did communicate the rules. We got to know each other, I told them what we were going to talk about, that I would ask questions and offer to do something, and that the participant could refuse to answer at any time or leave the performance, but then they could only find out the full meaning of the performance after the exhibition. A lot of people dropped out at this stage, but those who agreed almost all made it to the end.

When the attention of others was dispersed, I offered to try on the dress first. I would show the dress, tell them why it had such a cut, the choice of fabric, that I am not a fashion designer

*Performance action.* Photo: J. Krömer, N Barsigyan





and the dress was helped to make, and it was my first dress sewn with my participation. We moved on to the fact that the versatility of the size of the dress is adjusted if necessary with a loose drawstring. I wondered how loose and comfortable the dress was, asked to move around and then we had a conversation, walking around the vernissage among the people, looking in the mirrors and the participant would tell me about how they felt, share their memories or thoughts on the dress. I asked if the participant of the performance felt like a woman, if he lost his masculinity by wearing the dress, what changed in his feelings, if the dress could define gender identity, why the wearing of dresses by men is subject to some mutual criticism from both male and female parts of society. A separate question was whether societal pressures and taboos against adults wearing dresses or boys

dressing up in dresses were related to negative attitudes towards women and girls in society. Then I asked the participant to come on stage to show their image to everyone, if it would not make them uncomfortable, and on the way to the stage we talked about security, about the differences in attitudes to power norms in different countries. Since at least half of the participants were from Russia, which has a very strict patriarchal society with repressive laws, and even though we were in loyal Berlin, I made sure that the participant would not put his reputation on the line and asked to take a photo in his dress on stage and post it online. At the last point, I opened the cards and explained what the colours of the dress meant and that the







*Performance action.* Photo: J. Krömer.

performance was aimed at supporting the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the women's protest in Belarus, which is still in the media, and yet, just now, all its participants are being repressed, and the state, while legitimizing violence in search of enemies among the vulnerable and the weak, has also increased repression of the LGBTQ+ community. So I suggested to the participant, since we are in a freer environment and we are not in danger, to show solidarity and put the hashtag #жывеБеларусь on the photo. I asked to keep our conversation private



until the end of the performance in order to preserve intrigue. I miscalculated a little here, though, because who would have guessed that Kolya would have such a crowd of fans, and he couldn't have been interviewed at least first, because almost immediately after the photo was published, some of the invited guests had already seen it in their phones at the exhibition. The leak happened when only halfway through the performance had passed. However, this did not have much of an impact. At the end of the evening, of course, the slogans «Zhyve Belarus!» were heard right from the stage, and I was worried that they would be heard much earlier, which would disrupt the natural course of the performance. All in all, I talked to nine men during the evening.

Many thanks to all the participants of the performance for this free choice, for the detailed interesting answers and also to the curator Nikolai Ivanov, that we all agreed on the issue of solidarity and that dress is not about gender, it's not about power (although by setting standards in dress, power aims at manipulation), dress is just beautiful!

So freedom to dress, freedom to all, #longlivebelarus



#ЖЫВЕБЕЛАРУСЬ





*#longlivebelarus*



#жывебеларусь

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