

Shvemy Sewin Cooperative



Action against reducing the ambulance service, Vasilyevsky Island, St. Petersburg.



Text on the banner in Russian: "Это не приглашение к изнасилованию" (It isn't an invitation for rape).



Text on the banner in Ukrainian: "49 заяв про домашнє насильство в Дніпрі щодня. Не мовчи!" (49 reported cases of domestic violence in Dnipro per day. Don't keep silent!)

It was a sunny summer day in 2015 and we were working in our workshop. That morning, we received information about an action against reducing the ambulance service taking place on Vasilyevsky Island in St. Petersburg: local authorities wanted to limit the number of ambulance workers and vehicles. Our friends had organized a protest against this on Vasilyevsky Island that day to prevent people from having to wait for emergency medical care. We were confused. One of us said that they didn't want to be only a seamstress – they wanted to be an activist too. Others agreed and we started to

think about how we can support our friends' protest action. We came up with the idea of sewing a textile banner three hours before the action was due to begin. We didn't have time to finish the banner, so it ended up as an image but without the planned inscription: "Солидарность – это сила, сокращения – могила" (Solidarity is a strength, reductions are a grave). Still, the banner turned out really nicely and the message behind the image of a hand with an IV fluid bag

Our Story Through the Activist Banners

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Text on the banner in Ukrainian: "Товариш_ко, з пелюшок вчи доньку самозахисту" (Comrade, teach the daughter self-defense from the cradle).



Text on the banner in Ukrainian: "Бам! І ти уже в рабстві. Новий трудовий кодекс України" (Bam! And you are already in slavery. New Labor Law of Ukraine).



Text on the banner in Russian: "Мы – лед под ногами майора" (We are the ice under the mayor's feet).

was clear. While working, we were making jokes about what we were doing. And to this day I remember one joke we made up: "Розова ткань топорщиться, капиталист от страха морщится" (As the pink cloth ripples, the capitalist wrinkles his forehead in fear).

When we came to the action with our unfinished banner, we were surprised at the effect it had: people were really glad to see such a sign of support and solidarity. For me this was the beginning of Shvemy Sewing Cooperative as an activist project.

The beginning of Shvemy

All of us finished the School of Engaged Art organized by the Chto Delat group in 2015. The idea of the cooperative was voiced (by me) during the last academic semester and it was supported by some other students. We were working on an activist assignment – dresses for the play "Vagina Monologues", directed by Sonia Akimova. We were trying to develop our methods of maintaining horizontal relationships and to practice



consensus. The results of our work were presented at the final graduation exhibition in the form of an installation and a performance.

Some of us didn't want to stop with our activities. Five people: Masha Lukianova, Anna Tereshkina, Aleksandra Kachko, Nadejda Kaliamina, and I, Tonya Melnyk, started a sewing cooperative after we finished school. The Chto Delat group gave us our first large paid assignment – decorations for the Creative Time Summit, which was part of the Venice Biennale. The decorations were made from the sketches of Nilolay Oleynikov. The group also invited us to work in the Cultural House they organized, and which they named after Rosa Luxemburg. This is when I moved from Kyiv to St. Petersburg to work in a cooperative.

Some of us were more and some less experienced in sewing and contemporary art. All of us were feminists and human rights activists. And we all had a huge desire to build something new. For me, it was something I had been dreaming of for many years, while working in different ateliers and sewing enterprises in Kyiv. Working across different positions, I didn't agree with how things functioned inside the organizations: hierarchies, exploitation of human and natural resources, poor working conditions, and salaries. I was thinking a lot about alternatives. An economic enterprise built on horizontal principles of organization and not alienated labour was one of the variants I was thinking about. Suddenly, in another city I found people who shared this idea and were brave enough to try. We started working



and studying together, having talks and discussions, cooking for each other, educating, helping, and supporting each other.

We were working out a model for a non-hierarchical company with the possibility for all members to participate equally in the working process; we looked for ways for such a company to survive inside the existing system of capitalistic economic relationships and the free market, which usually focuses on either cheap goods or famous brands products. At the same time, we began holding free open workshops on upcycling and repairing clothes. It was an opportunity for us to practice and do new things, and to promote ecological production. It was also an opportunity for anyone who wanted to, to learn how to remake, repair, or create something useful or desirable.

Activist expression

Everyday life posed a lot of challenges: we lived in Russia, a country with very cruel and militaristic politics. Activist banners and patches were one of the brightest methods for us to publicly spread activist statements and to support people with similar beliefs. We joined numerous actions on gender and labour issues, supporting political prisoners and LGBTQ+ people, against police and state violence. We held workshops on activist banner- and patch-making for people to get the chance to create their own statements on fabric. As a result, the textile banners became our “business cards”. So, we created a lot of them. Some of them were presented during exhibitions at contemporary art galleries, museums,

activist festivals, and sold at auctions to support people and initiatives, who suffered from the regime or were close to our ideas. An example is the banner “Это не приглашение к изнасилованию” (It isn’t an invitation for rape), made in December 2015, and which was created for an action on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In March 2019 it was sold at an auction to support the Eva’s Ribs feminist space in St. Petersburg.

During the first six months of its existence, Aleksandra Kachko and Nadejda Kaliamina left Shvemy for personal reasons. For a period of time we were three in the group, calling ourselves an international Ukrainian-Russian project. Being in St. Petersburg we supported the antiwar movement against Russian military aggression in different countries, particularly in Ukraine. In September 2015 we made a banner for the March of Peace in St. Petersburg with the slogan “Хуй войне” (Fuck War). But we decided not to show it during the action, because it was really unsafe: Russian law prohibits cursing in public. At night, once the Peace March was finished, we hung this banner on a tree near the metro station where the action had started.

Distant common activities

We lived and worked together in St. Petersburg until summer 2016, which is when I and Masha Lukianova moved to Kyiv. Before moving to Kyiv, we organized a School of the Sewing Cooperative. Olesia Panova joined Shvemy following the school and after that we were four in the group. We continued our activities from a distance, from time to time joining events on artist and activist topics in different countries. We did workshops, exhibitions, performances, and street actions concerning state and patriarchal violence, and the capitalist system of exploitation and oppression. One of the most remarkable events for me was organizing a series of field workshops on banners, patches, and stencils during CIVIC MEDIA LAB 2017 (Dnipro, Ukraine) in June 2017.

During these workshops with local feminists and activists we created several banners that were placed in public space. One banner that read “49 заяв про домашнє насильство в Дніпрі щодня. Не мовчи!” (49 reported cases of domestic

violence in Dnipro per day. Don’t keep silent!) was placed along the archway of the former restaurant Mayak at Shevchenko Park – the place is perfectly visible if you go walk the park towards the embankment.

A different, very colourful banner “Товариш_ко, з пелюшок вчи доньку самозахисту” (Comrade, teach the daughter self-defense from the cradle) perfectly fitted into the environment of the bright children’s playground. After hanging it up, we checked on our banners for several days until they disappeared. We gifted the only surviving banner from the children’s playground to the Gender Museum in Kharkiv.

From time to time Ania and Olesia, and Tonya and Masha, living far away from each other, continued

creating activist banners in St. Petersburg and Kyiv respectively. In April 2017, the Kyiv part of Shvemy participated in the picket against the adoption of a new Labour Law in Ukraine. This bill came as a surprise with its abundance of reforms that would narrow the rights of workers and the ability of trade unions to influence labour relations. Tonya and Masha came with a banner that featured the inscription: “Бам! І ти уже в рабстві. Новий трудовий кодекс України” (Bam! And you are already in slavery. New Labour Law of Ukraine). The banner was meant to be a parody of the frequent advertising of a job search site in Kyiv, which says: “Бам! І ти уже на новій роботі” (Bam! and you’re already at your new job).

In May 2018, Ania and Olesia participated in an action against torture in law enforcement agencies. The purpose of the strike was to draw public attention to the practice of using torture by the Russian police and the FSB, which has become the norm. For this event, Ania and Olesia created a banner with a slogan: “Мы – лед под ногами майора” (We are the ice under the mayor’s feet).



Our lives won't be the same!

In addition to banners, we also held performances in museums and in public space on the topic of the rights and working conditions of workers in the garment industry in developing countries. More precisely, the banners had evolved into more complex actions and we focused on this particular topic. We stopped being an economic project and proclaimed ourselves the International Ukrainian-Russian art activist project.

It was very difficult to continue such intensive work remotely, and the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to put the project on pause, and we became engaged in self-archiving and survival. To this

day, all of us continue our activist and artist work and to fight for a better future without exploitation, hierarchy, patriarchy, and violence. Tonya and Masha created another sewing cooperative in Kyiv, named ReSew; Ania is co-founder of the feminist band “Krasnie Zori”; Olesia participates in many feminist stand-up shows. Shvemy had a great influence on our lifestyles, ways of communication, and building work-life relationships in teams. Our lives won't be the same!

Further reading

[facebook.com/groups/shvemy](https://www.facebook.com/groups/shvemy)