

Katharina Büttgen
Embroidering Dissent

Text by Gaia Crotti

Marignana Arte is pleased to present ***Ricamare il dissenso / Embroidering Dissent***, a solo exhibition by Katharina Büttgen at Marignana Project. The project was developed in collaboration with CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo following the exhibition prize awarded to the artist as part of the second edition of CREA OPEN, an international open call for emerging and established artists working across a range of disciplines.

Born in Germany to a Belarusian family marked by the traumas of Soviet repression, the artist confronts a fragmented identity and the legacy of a culture that has long been marginalised and censored. Her first-hand participation in the Minsk protests of 2020 and the subsequent state violence made it impossible for her to return to Belarus, where the expression of national identity has been criminalised. It is from this experience that memory, belonging, and the need to preserve what is at risk of being erased come to play a central role in her artistic practice. *“A single embroidered thread becomes a form of remembrance and preservation, especially within a culture where much has been erased or silenced.”* With these words, Katharina Büttgen articulates an artistic practice that refuses silence and transforms the act of embroidery into an affirmation of existence. In this context, distance from politics – a survival strategy passed down in authoritarian contexts as a means of protecting private and domestic life – is called into question and reworked. The family warning resurfaces in the work *Untitled* (2024), met with a response that is at once ironic and disobedient: “fighting with flowers.” The flower, a recurring symbol of non-violent opposition during the 2020 protests, replaced weapons, transforming an apparently apolitical gesture into an act of resistance.

When words are censored, belonging no longer coincides with a physical place, but is instead translated into the construction of a map of affections and testimonies. The words written more than a century ago by Janka Kupala in the poem *За свабоды сваю* (*For My Freedom*) resonate once again in the present through the textile work *Untitled* (2026), tying historical memory to the present and becoming custodians of a collective memory threatened with erasure.

The textile medium, historically associated with the domestic sphere and the transmission of women's knowledge, protects and preserves cultural memory. Büttgen recovers vintage tablecloths, lace, and curtains found at flea markets, weaving them together with rare and irreplaceable family textiles brought from Belarus – emotional remnants of a land to which she no longer has access. The value of these fabrics lies not only in their provenance, but in their ability to hold a story and preserve a connection that distance and repression have failed to sever. On these soft and familiar fabrics, the artist uses traditional Belarusian embroidery – associated with ornamentation and floral motifs – to depict and denounce scenes of violence and repression perpetrated by the police and OMON special forces against demonstrators. Alongside episodes of violence, several objects that have become symbols of repression also appear, such as the baton, an emblem of physical violence, and the vehicles used to arrest demonstrators and transport them to prisons. Through these elements, the work documents the systematic repression of the protest movement and shows how state violence has shaped public space and people's lives.

In the composition of the work *Protest* (2025), scenes of the demonstrations are framed within the symmetrical and mirrored structure typical of Belarusian ornamental doilies. The contrast between the delicacy of the support and the brutality of the depicted images highlights how events taking place in the streets can invade the domestic and private sphere, assimilating and normalising the act of violence. This theme is also taken up in *Untitled - series of 4* (2022), in which old everyday placemats are hand-embroidered with scenes of arrests, beatings, and tanks in public spaces.

The domestic imagery merges with personal testimony in *Untitled* (2024), where the memory of the arrival of tanks and the closure of metro stations overlaps with a photograph of a Belarusian home. In contrast to the immediacy of media images, the slow act of sewing and the precision of phototransfer transform ephemeral news into a physical and enduring presence, reflecting on the very fragility of memory, which, like remembrance itself, is never entirely stable but requires constant reactivation and transmission.

In *Embroidering Dissent*, the thread thus becomes a form of testimony that preserves what is at risk of disappearing and makes visible what has been erased. Katharina Büttgen transforms embroidery into an act of cultural resistance that not only exposes memory, but makes it legible and returns it to the public sphere, reaffirming the possibility of a shared memory in the face of imposed silence.