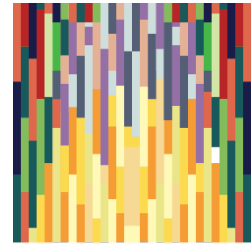


## Pussy Riot: Representing Russian Activism between East and West

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Comparative Media Arts Journal



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Published online: 2021 © CMAJournal

### Abstract

Pussy Riot's performance at the Cathedral in Moscow and an ensuing trial of three members of the group became an emblematic moment of the last decade. The trial demonstrated for many the major incongruence in values between the democratic Western countries and Putin's Russia. This article analyses the strategies that were used by Pussy Riot during the protest and afterward to explain how the action and the trial were understood differently. I concentrate on the representation of femininity, use of the DIY culture in music and self-fashioning, and Pussy Riot's feminist genealogies. The argument is that the protest was successful in a sense of attracting attention to the political and artistic dissent in Russia. However, the strategy of DIY and girlie culture that were characteristic of the third wave feminist in 1990s Western countries was entirely misunderstood by both supporters and opponents of Pussy Riot in Russia. The use of home-made aesthetic, punk rock riffs, infantilizing clothing, and colorful balaclavas added to the dissonance between the crime and disproportionately cruel and long-term punishment. The use of the girlie culture became successful when it comes to long-term existence of the group but the feminist message of the punk prayer had drowned amongst the media noise.

**Keywords:** Pussy Riot, DIY culture, Russia, balaclavas, feminism

On the morning of 21 February 2012, five young women walked into Mosco’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The Cathedral, the highest Orthodox Church in the world, is the main religious center in Russia’s capital, situated in the middle of Moscow. Wearing brightly colored sleeveless dresses, neon tights, and their signature balaclava ski masks, the women jumped on the altar, took out their electric guitars, and began singing a song that was a mix of punk-rock chords and traditional Orthodox chant (Figure 1). Their lyrics criticized the close ties between the Russian Patriarch Kirill and President Putin. The song addressed the anti-woman and anti-LGBT rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox church. The refrain – styled as a traditional Orthodox prayer chant – asks the Mother of God to “oust Putin” and “become a feminist” The women were seized by security and forcefully taken outside before they could finish. The fact that the group did not finish the song was vital since it became crucial during the trial, which words those present at the Cathedral heard at the time.

Following the Cathedral’s aborted appearance, they mixed a video of their performance with a more elaborately scored soundtrack and scenes recorded earlier and released their work on YouTube. Less than two weeks later, three members of the group were arrested, and a lengthy trial “that would make this "punk prayer" world-famous” commenced (Bernstein 2013a, 221). A few months later, the members of the all-female Pussy Riot were found guilty on charges of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” (Elder 2012) and received two-year prison sentences in all-female Russian labor camps<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 1. *Four of Pussy Riot members are performing Punk Prayer at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, 2012. Photograph by Philip Cosores.*

Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist rock punk group of about eleven core members, was established in 2011. Two of the group members have been active in an anarchist art collective called *Voina* (War) since 2009. Pussy Riot's practice consisted of sanctioned guerrilla performances that were usually short and involved musical numbers. These appearances were recorded, edited for sound, and then released online. The members preferred anonymity and performed in balaclavas, referring to each other by nicknames such as "blondie" or "terminator". The group became nationally and internationally known after the performance described above. The punk and ad hoc aesthetics of the group were expressed in the seemingly "unprofessional" clothing, music, and singing. It is also expressed in the fluctuating membership of the group. By the time of the 2012 performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, the group had occupied a marginal space in Moscow's activist performance/art.

The three members of the Pussy Riot, who were apprehended and later prosecuted, found themselves amid debates on free speech, separation of state and religion, and later, treatment of women in the labor camps. In the discussions that followed the Pussy Riot protest right after the performance at the Cathedral and until today, the disproportionate punishment has been an important topic. Most of the critics and supporters of free speech in the West find it very hard to digest that a short non-violent protest in a religious building could ensure such punishment. Based on interviews with the performers, they also did not expect such consequences. Based on precedents, they expected to be apprehended by the police, taken to the police station, and at most be punished by serving a short period of community service (Lucento 2017, 79–83).

Inadvertently, they became the embodiment of Russia's refusal to accept the western value of freedom of speech. It is their contribution to activist art and the political debates from 2012 to present, although unintentional, show how activist art could become a catalyst for great debates and changes. In that, Pussy Riot succeeded. How could five young women in colorful minidresses, that performed in the Cathedral for less than sixty seconds, succeed in disseminating the message of hatred and lack of free speech in Russia? This article argues that the Pussy Riot's success lies in the fact that they were understood to the West due to the use of the Do-It-Yourself punk rock strategies. At the same time, their strategies that utilized third-wave feminism familiar to the Western viewers were completely unfathomed to the audiences in Russia. Moreover, during Pussy Riot protest in the Cathedral they also created a series of connections to third-wave feminism and the girlie culture of the feminists of the 1990s. I argue

that Pussy Riot strategic behavior during and after the performance had insured that different audiences understand their protest in a way that satisfies these audiences. Thus, this small action had become the emblematic non-violent performance protest of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Perceptions: West and East**

Most Euro-American coverage of the trial concentrated on familiar dichotomies between “free speech” and “blasphemy,” “the secular” and “the sacred,” or even “rationality” and “obscurantism” (Bernstein 2013a, 222–23). Both the media and the audience seemed bewildered by what appeared as a disproportionate reaction of the Russian state to this affair. The Euro-American press’ conclusions were unanimous that Pussy Riot was covered under freedom of speech, which is included as a citizen's right in the Russian constitution and could not be prosecuted legally.

In Russia and Eastern Europe, the response was vastly different. Support for the group was limited mainly to the like-minded artistic and a few liberally inclined creative groups. Even those who supported Pussy Riot shared a common sentiment in the Russian Federation that they had crossed a mysteriously invisible line, breaking a previously unspoken taboo, and thereby revealing its existence. Moreover, as Mark Lipovetsky argues, Pussy Riot managed to demonstrate that both the supporters of Putin and his most radical opposition shared a set of conservative values (Lipovetskii 2017, 143). Pussy Riot's action and trial demonstrate that Russia is ruled by a particular brand of nostalgic masculinity that cannot tolerate its authority's challenge by even a peaceful, non-violent artistic protest. For example, on the same day that the action took place, a well-known journalist and TV presenter, Maksim Shevchenko, wrote: “I think Orthodox women should catch and flog these little bitches with birch rods. Let them also have a ‘performance’” (Bernstein 2013a, 225). An influential conservative intellectual, Egor Holmogorov, opined that “if I were working for this church, I would first call the TV crews and then undress them, cover them with feathers and honey, shave their heads, and kick them out to the cold in front of the cameras” (Bernstein 2013b, 222). Following the news about the upcoming trial of Pussy Riot, the Internet was filled with cruel, often sexually sadistic comments such as calls “to strip them naked”, “to have them tarred and feathered” or “to strip them naked and tie them to the whipping post.” Many commentators also used punishing verbs such as to “spank”, “flog”, “whip”, “birch” or to “give them a fatherly spanking”(Kostiuchenko 2012).

Speaking outside the courthouse on the first day of the trial, Boris Nemtsov, an opposition politician and leader of a liberal-democratic coalition that regularly criticizes Putin, said, “If I could get my way, I would spank these girls and let them go. What is going on here is sadism and cruelty.” (Kostiuchenko 2012) Gennadii Ziuganov, the leader of the conservative Russian Communist Party, commented: “I would take a good leather belt, give them a good spanking, and then send them back to their children and parents. This [beating] would be a good administrative punishment for them. Moreover, I would tell them not to engage in such blasphemy anymore”(Vzgliad: Delovaia Gazeta 2012). When discussing the performance at the Cathedral, Putin called it a “witches’ gathering”(Owen 2012). Putin was also aware of women’s involvement in group sex during one of their previous performances. In a forced attempt at a joke, he noted that the group sex can be better than “individual” sex because one can always “slack off” (Mayer 2013).

Indeed, the Russian left, the right, and the centrists became unwittingly unified in their rejection of women’s feminist subjectivity and insistence on treating the women as children or girls. Even their staunchest supporters used the word “girls” in the Russian language (*devotchka*) rather than “young women” (*devushki*) or “women” (*zhenschiny*)(Vanina 2012). The BBC special “Pussy Riot: Punk Prayer,” which was decidedly on the side of PR, also fell into the same trap of infantilizing Pussy Riot members by dedicating at least a quarter of the footage to the interviews of the parents of Samutsevich, Alyokhina, and Tolokonnikova (Lerner and Pozdorovkin 2013). The parents talked about their upbringing and how they were formed. Even their parents did not acknowledge that their daughters were now independent adult educated women. One of the unifying themes in the documentary was the parents’ dismissal of the PR’s performances, including the one destined to become infamous. They unanimously talked about it as growing pains and the craziness of the young.

The strong reaction of both supporters and deniers of Pussy Riot’s right to express their views demonstrated that “Pussy Riot sharply divided society. However, what exactly the lines of this division were has proven, and continues to prove, a hot debate subject” (Bernstein 2013a, 226). Pussy Riot’s performance in the Cathedral and other appearances are examples of non-violent feminist protests. Pussy Riot adheres to a type of feminism that believes in the empowering not only of secular women but also the institution of Christian Orthodox religion.

As will be explained below, the relationship between nostalgia and religion is incredibly tight in post-Soviet Russia. Religion that was severely persecuted during the Soviet time became one of the post-Soviet conservative identity pillars. In this sense, Pussy Riot's peaceful protest indivertibly hit at the very core of Soviet collective trauma and therefore was understood in Russia as far from peaceful and was punished by a two-year jail sentence.

### **Pussy Riot: Rock Band or Performance Artists?**

Several authors addressed the band's atypical performing strategies, noting that they pre-recorded some of their music and lyrics before appearing in public. During the performances, they often only play guitars while the lyrics were transmitted through the speakers. Thus, the elements of live performance and interaction with audiences through their music were limited. They usually appeared only once or twice with the same song and never had concert tours. Instead, they released recordings of the performances on social media sites – YouTube and their own platform Life Journal: Pussy Riot. One of the observers called it a mix of authentic with inauthentic, which characterizes some of the punk music (McMichael 2013, 108–9). The same observer also noted that Pussy Riot's punk political performance style is unique for Russia where most of the punk scene ideologically aligns with the political regime (Pilkington 2012, 258)<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, Pussy Riot members commented that their inspiration came from female bands of the early 1990s. One of them is *Riot Grrrls*, an American band that combines punk music aesthetics with feminist messages and the use of exaggerated femininity to attract attention to the fact that punk music had remained, at least until the early 1990s, a mainly male-dominated field.

Several scholars specializing in punk music noted that Pussy Riot's music, although rooted in punk tradition, was not a significant factor in their performances (Gapova 2014, 18–22). Instead, the main visual impact came from the performers and what they were wearing, along with their choices of locations, such as the top of a bus or a wall surrounding the Kremlin. The lyrics of the songs, although significant when analyzed, also became secondary since it was hard to hear the words when the women were singing. Besides, the lyrics were exclusively in Russian and, therefore, required translation for non-Russian audiences. During the years of the group's existence, they never performed in any venue such as a concert hall or auditorium, nor did they produce a disk or record a song without a video. All of the above leads me to argue that it is more productive to see Pussy Riot's actions as performance art, or actionism, as it is called

in Russia, even though they call themselves a punk rock group.

### **Religious and Political Reactions**

When the masquerade of the performance ended, the masquerade of the courtroom began. The conviction on the grounds of 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred' ("Pussy Riot Members Jailed for Two Years for Hooliganism" 2012) shows profound misunderstanding or, more probably, refusal to understand the group's actual goals and performances. First, this verdict obliterates that PR had political motivations: asking the Virgin Mary to oust Putin in their songs. Second, it completely disregarded the groups' feminist concerns asking the Virgin Mary to become a feminist to protect women from the church and the Russian state's unlawfulness. What was recognized in the verdict was the unruly behavior or hooliganism, a sentence with no political or social agenda but instead suggests the idea of infantile, immature, uncontrollable thugs, the likes of which put graffiti on the walls or fight with each other after soccer games.

The verdict and subsequent punishment became completely incongruent since most of the debates were about Pussy Riot offending the believers. Again and again, the women explained that they did not want to offend people and respect religion, but they are against the bond between religion and government. As Alek Epstein explained, the performance in the Cathedral was not illegal in terms of the functionality of the space because that same space is offered for rent for musical and theatrical performances on the website of the Cathedral itself ("Русская Православная Церковь Кафедральный Соборный Храм Христа Спасителя : Русская Версия" 2015). Thus, some sarcastically commented that Pussy Riot was punished not because they performed inappropriate songs in the Cathedral but because they did not pay rent for the performance (Épshteĭn 2012, 21). It seems that religion and masculinity in Russia had become part of a single consolidated process of restorative nostalgia that is mitigated by traditional and new media. Pussy Riot then tried to undo a very tight knot between the nostalgic feelings of the Russian people attempting to restore their traditions and religion taken away by the Bolshevik revolution. Interestingly, these religious beliefs and traditional ceremonies, along with the architecture of the churches, did not go through European or North American modernization. In Russia, religion seems to be going back to where it was one hundred years earlier (Knox 2004). It is not surprising that at this time, the religion in Russia is affiliated with governmental bodies and supports the traditional version of stable and conservative masculinity (Wickström and

Steinholt 2009, 321). Thus, the performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour perhaps inadvertently challenged a whole range of connections and assumptions and created a robust and unpredictable reaction.

### **Do-It-Yourself in Music and Culture**

Pussy Riot's performance in 1912 presents an example of the unpolished, grass-root, home-made attempt. In this, it fits within the parameters of the Do-It-Yourself culture which represents at its core the rejection of the capitalist modes of living and consumption. Broadly speaking DIY culture had existed as early as the development of the Industrial revolution when people attempted to adopt the lifestyle that would take them away from the mainstream industrialized society (Frost 2014, 1–15). George McKay links the new revival and redevelopment of the DIY culture to the 1980s and 1990s when activists started organizing small protest actions that would fit within the non-conformist lifestyle (McKay 1996). He defined it as “a youth-centred and -directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, and new musical sounds and experiences... a kind of 1990s counterculture” (McKay 1998, 2).

By the end of the 1990s, DIY culture became a prevalent type of expressing dissatisfaction with the culture of neoliberalism. The DIY spread into gardening, building, architecture, craft, music, and agriculture. It ranged from those who chose to make their own clothing and bake their own bread to combat capitalism through small deeds to those who learned to make furniture to undermine the monopoly of Ikea. One of the most prominent examples of the DIY that should be considered here was Riot Grrrrls. As Hanna (Hanna 1991) noted in the manifesto of the group the main objection was again the fact that “concepts, ideals, and bodies also gain exchange value within a cultural context” (Riordan 2001, 280). The resistance to commodification of the female bodies, clothing, and music was at the core of Riot Grrrrl performances and the DIY culture that they developed. Not only did their music and the lyrics were opposed to commodification but also the sites of their performances and the fact that they established them as safe spaces for women to enjoy music and to participate in the performances made the group unique in the punk rock feminist history (Huber 2010, 65–68). The DIY aspect of the group was expressed in the zines that the group published. The zines were home-made and home-printed magazines that expressed the aesthetic and ideas of the Riot



Grrrls and were distributed to their fan base. The main aspect of the culture was to get people to do it themselves for themselves: “BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are goanna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates or DISRUPTs the status quo” (Hanna 1991). While Riot Grrrls combined song writing, live performances, and the publishing of zines using lyrics of their songs and illustrations in a style that could be compared to graphic novels, Pussy Riot decided to concentrate on more media-driven strategies. Instead of zines, they used blogs and regularly posted their performances and rehearsals on YouTube. The performances that were posted in 2011 and 2012 had not only political meaning akin to DIY culture of Riot Grrrrl but also the Do-It-Yourself aesthetic. The music, the lyrics, the clothing, the balaclavas worn to the protest all had unfinished, homemade eclectic quality emblematic of the DIY movement.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century DIY movement had branched out into a subculture that was mainly insistent on negating capitalism and creating their lifestyle from scratch. A different brand of the DIY feminism turned to culture that emphasized femininity not as a way for men to objectify women but as a choice of being feminist. Third-wave feminism became about the choice of agency and lifestyle. Many feminists of the third-wave expressed themselves through feminine or girly cultures as an attempt to compensate for the second-wave’s refusal of femininity. Pussy Riot’s colorful, child-like clothing and unpolished musical performance expresses the culture of girlishness. This femininity and infantilization played into the perception of the West that was used to third-wave feminism. In Russia, it allowed not to take their message seriously and denigrate them to children.

### **Performance Art Strategies and Role Models**

If one thinks of Pussy Riot's actions as performances, it is more apt to compare Pussy Riot to Guerrilla Girls, a source of inspiration that members of PR noted on several occasions. Guerrilla Girls, a group of several women, was formed at first in 1985 to respond to the large blockbuster exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York called *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* (1984). The exhibition featured 169 artists, of which only 13 were female. The subsequent campaign, which started as protests at the museum entrance, continued with posters attracting attention to gender and race inequality in the arts. The ape masks that the group adopted as their official coverage differs from balaclava because they

completely excluded both race and gender from the visual appearance of the collective. By completely obliterating themselves, Guerrilla Girls then attempted to “focus on the issue and not on personalities”(PROJECTS 2015). Positioning the groups as performance art also underscores the severity of the two-year sentence that goes against the presumed freedom of speech in Russia and freedom of artistic expression. It is helpful to think about Western groups of political performers such as Yes Men, who bring up critical social issues such as paying reparations to African American people for slavery that they experienced, or Guerrilla Girls, who attract the attention of Western society to the fact that men represent the majority of artists in American museums. However, at the same time, the Yes Men and Guerrilla Girls remain free and are practicing their art because of their claim to be performance artists rather than political activists and because they practice mainly in the West (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2007, 90).

If we think of PR’s actions as performance art, it is vital to understand their fashioning. Their performance clothing consisted of brightly colored balaclavas, which were made from handmade or store-bought ski masks. Using scissors, they crudely cut holes to allow openings for the eyes and mouth. The shape of the balaclava, or Templar masks, as they were previously called, dates back to the Middle Ages when they were made from chain mail and worn by knights to protect their faces. Lighter than helmets, they were used in jousting competitions and parades. The knitted masks first appeared in Russia around 1854 during the Crimean War when British women made them keep British soldiers warm during what was perceived as cold and windy Crimean winters. Since then, the Balaclava – as they became known because the British troops were stationed on the Balaclava Peninsula – became associated with military action and criminal actions requiring anonymity(Rutt 2013; Thompson 2017)



Figure 2. *Pussy Riot members preparing for a performance, 2012.* Photograph by Denis Bokharev.

Pussy Riot used the masks in a different more playful and original way (Figure 2). Instead of using black masks that are associated with criminality and military actions PR members use colorful, neon balaclavas. The masks clearly made out of children's winter hats using scissors to cut holes for eyes, nose, and mouth create a dialogue with the audience regarding the ideas of beauty, trendiness and infantilism that are usually embedded in bright neon colors in Western cultures (Bruce 2015). In that they follow Riot Grrrl's DIY aesthetic. They resignify this object by changing its color and its look. The bright colors aim at breaking the association with violence, while sloppy craftsmanship points to the tradition of DIY culture that is also present in their music and lyrics. This DIY idea places them thoroughly in the third-wave feminist movement, members of which combine interests in traditional female crafts, DIY culture, emphasis on femininity, and the feminist agenda. The simple, sleeveless mini-dresses and bright tights produce an overall look that is, while anonymous, also undoubtedly feminine. The bodies are thin, feminine, and conventionally attractive. At the same time, these bodies are covered enough to be considered mainstream and decent. The fashion works with what Angela McRobbie called post-feminist masquerade (McRobbie 2007, 318; Rose and Duncan 1996, 57–64). It is the combination of female empowerment and adherence to feminine norms that make the feminists' message palpable and digestible to the non-feminist audience.

In this sense, there is a difference between the choice of coverings by the Guerrilla Girls, who decided on the Gorilla masks, and PR's balaclavas that coincide roughly with feminism ideas and post-feminism. While McRobbie's observations of the need to mitigate the demands of normativity and female empowerment were taken on by PR, the audience read their feminine clues in very different terms. I argue that the performance in the Cathedral has been misunderstood precisely because of the self-fashioning of women as post-feminists. Given the complicated role of female empowerment in Russian culture due to the onslaught of the Bolshevik revolution, PR's attempt to be both feminine and feminists provoked an unusual and – one can even suggest – pathological degree of anger.

### **Pussy Riot's Feminist Influences**

When discussing feminism in relation to PR's work, it is important to separate the notion of feminism as understood and expressed by PR members and the general understanding of a woman's role in Putin's Russia. PR's interest in women's empowerment and feminism is shared

by a tiny percentage of women (and very few men) in Putin's Russia. While extensive research on feminism and the role of women in the political struggle under Putin is yet to be written (Гессен 1998, 93; Gapova 2014), it is safe to say that feminism, as it is understood in the West, is mainly relegated in Russia to the academic and artistic circles. As is well known, in the Soviet Union, women and men are considered equal, and women are not relegated to the domestic sphere as in most Western countries. Thus, the feminist struggle during the Soviet period was mainly geared towards better contraceptives, allowing for more private space and recognition by the government that women's needs differ from those of men in terms of work and domestic experience. After the Perestroika, the ideal of equality was abandoned, and the traditional family's idea became the focus of ideological propaganda. The family in which a man works and a woman takes care of the children and is the epitome of femininity came to represent the ideal. Like any ideal, the reality was, of course, different, and many women still had to work and take care of the children during the turbulent 1990s and early 2000s. Most of the feminist struggle now revolves around rape and sexual harassment issues and a general lack of respect and concern for women's opinions and needs. While women in Russia, on the whole, are as educated as men, they represent the minority in all aspects of government and business.

Pussy Riot's feminism represents a blend of both Western influences and understanding of the older Soviet model. One of the most critical influences on PR's practice as artists and feminists was Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952). In several interviews, Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova noted that they were inspired by Kollontai, whose early revolutionary feminism (1920) was geared towards educating women in the various parts of the then-recently created Soviet Union on their rights by using performances and proclamations (“Pussy Riot Meets Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti” 2014). Her early 20th-century activist performances – put together during the turbulent times of the post-revolutionary period in Russia – in essence, propagated values of the then-ruling regime and are very different from the context of Putin's politics. Kollontai, an early 20th-century socialist and feminist, was part of Lenin's circle that later unleashed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Kollontai's feminist works are essential for Russian feminists because she is one of the very few women who contributed to understanding women's role in a socialist society. Although problematic both then and now, her works are some of the rare examples of feminist-socialist writings.

The “Feminist Prayer” that was presented (not in full) at the Cathedral blends the non-

violent approach to the public performance of Kollontai and the Guerrilla Girls with the religiosity of the Soviet feminists of the 1980s. The PR members choose to pray to God and ask the Mother of God, in Russian *Bogoroditsa*, the Virgin Mary, to protect women and become more feminist. Repeating the ideas of feminists of earlier generations, they hope for Mary's love and protection against the evil that for them is embodied in the figure of Putin. With their performance, PR asked to be considered seriously as young independent women who wanted to fight for other women's rights outside of the influence of church and state. However, in their lyrics and as we will see further in their self-fashioning, they present themselves as feminine. Instead of being seen as independent feminist performance artists after their arrests, they were transformed from masked villains to criminals. As Anya Bernstein argues, one of the most popular images that were circulated in the Russian media was the photograph of the three women sitting behind bars, literally in the cage, for everyone to see (Bernstein 2013a, 230). The exhibitionism ingrained in these photos, together with constant surprise that the women seem to be conventionally attractive, and two of them were mothers of young children, complicated the discussion. The audience seemed to have expected the stereotypical "angry, ugly feminist monsters that were often ridiculed in the media. Instead, once the masks were removed, the women who were presented to the Russian audience were brave, outspoken, educated, and independent. Instead of bright dresses and tights, they wore casual or business clothes. Nadia Tolokonnikova often wore shirts with Che Guevara or proclamations of political freedom.



Figure 3. *Three Pussy Riot members during the trial.* 2012. Source: <https://p.dw.com/p/15c1Z>

The balaclavas were adopted by their supporters who gathered around the courthouse and expressed their support for PR members by wearing colorful balaclavas. The masquerade's removal damaged the core of PR's modus operandi, as the root of their performances was anonymity. Their performances aimed to represent every young woman in Russia, not Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina, in particular. Once the women lost their generic young femininity and presented themselves as intelligent, educated personalities with a sense of humor and aloof attitudes towards the authorities, the media changed its tune. They attempted to vilify them by pointing out their deviance. They were accused of being bad mothers whose behavior brought about jail sentences that, therefore, would damage their children's lives.

## **Conclusion**

While the somewhat infantile and feminine clothing of the PR could work in the West, Russian audiences understood their self-fashioning as not serious, awkward, and ultimately immature; they then projected these same feelings onto PR's actions. Thus, it is not surprising that the responses that infantilize these women and denigrate them as children, such as "stupid little girls," occurred.

Pussy Riot's performance had several unpredictable outcomes. First and foremost, it elevated the three prosecuted members to martyrs' level for the cause of free speech and separation between church and state. Their faces and the footage of their performance wearing colorful dresses and balaclavas became visible across the world. For many, it was one more or maybe the last needed proof that Russia remains a totalitarian state despite the Perestroika and the disintegration of the Soviet Empire. The self-fashioning of Pussy Riot, along with their DIY approach to music and performance, served them well during the trial when it came to the West's opinions. The digital-savvy of their activist brand and their youth's emphasis were essential factors in swaying public opinion in the West. Added to that was their self-assured positioning during the trial and their well-informed speeches compared to those of the bureaucrats, whose main goal seemed to be to find a way to put the women behind bars. During the trial, the three women were kept in a cage-like area separated by the bars (Figure 3). The incongruity of the fact that the women were never violent and were not accused of violence yet were kept in the cage like most violent criminals confirmed the barbarity of the Russian legal system. Simultaneously, their youth, attractiveness, and DIY presentation guaranteed that they were not taken seriously in

the courtroom. The ideological outlook of Putin's Russia treats women as children. Thus, the self-representation with colorful balaclavas and dresses, youth and attractiveness showcased these women as lacking authority. While the Russian language infantilizes women in general – for example, it is customary to refer to a woman in her forties as a “girl” or adolescent woman (devushka), the clothing of Pussy Riot featuring bright, neon, girlish colors played into the overall denigration of women and their opinions. Despite that, numerous debates and conversations took place. Pussy Riot attempted to introduce their brand of feminism rooted in Russian and Soviet struggle. Their Punk Prayer expressed both admirations for the idea of a feminine deity and an evident attitude of disregard for religion as it exists in Russia now. Given the history of the Russian Orthodox religion in 20th-century Russia, PR's ridicule, sarcasm, and the usage of swear words were understood by the institution of Russian Orthodoxy as a direct attack. Religion was an essential part of Tsarist rule, and Russia before the Bolshevik revolution was one of the most religious countries in Europe. The Bolsheviks, most of whom came from secular families, banned religion and destroyed or closed numerous cathedrals and churches. Religious beliefs were ridiculed and prosecuted during the Soviet period. One of the falls of the Soviet Union results is the revival of the Russian Orthodox religion. The religion and state in Putin's Russia enjoy mutually beneficial connections. Pussy Riot attempted to raise awareness of the extent to which these two institutions are intertwined in Russia. While some of the conversations did happen, most of the real debates were turned towards freedom of speech and women's attitudes. Neither in the West nor Russia was the religion brought up, understood, or thoroughly discussed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were released from prison in December of 2013, after serving 23 of their 24-month sentence. Samutsevich's sentence was commuted.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Grazhdanskaya Oborona [Citizen Protection] or projects of Egor Letov.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Punk Prayer, English version by Carol Rumens**

(Chorus)

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin,

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish him, we pray thee!

Congregations genuflect,

Black robes brag gilt epaulettes,

Freedom's phantoms gone to heaven,

Gay Pride's chained and in detention.

KGB's chief saint descends

To guide the punks to prison vans.

Don't upset His Saintship, ladies,

Stick to making love and babies.

Crap, crap, this godliness crap!

Crap, crap, this holiness crap!

(Chorus)

Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

Be a feminist, we pray thee,

Be a feminist, we pray thee.

Bless our festering bastard-boss.

Let black cars parade the Cross.

The Missionary's in class for cash.

Meet him there, and pay his stash.

Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin.

Better believe in God, you vermin!

Fight for rights, forget the rite –

Join our protest, Holy Virgin.

(Chorus)

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin,

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, we pray thee, banish him!

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### **About the Author**

Alla Myzelev is an Assistant professor of Art History and Museum Studies at the State University of New York at Geneseo where she teaches courses in modern and contemporary visual culture. She is also a coordinator of Museum Studies minor. In her capacity of faculty member of the museum studies and art history she had developed several courses that encompass gender and digital humanities. She is currently exploring opportunities that Digital Humanities and Virtual Reality provide for teaching museum studies and art history. Prior to coming to SUNY Geneseo Myzelev taught at University of Guelph, University of Waterloo, OCADU, and University of Toronto in Scarborough.

Myzelev received her Ph.D. in visual and material culture from Queen's University in Kingston, Canada. Her dissertation was dedicated to the revival of the peasant crafts in the early twentieth century Britain and Russia. She held two post-doctoral fellowships: SSHRC and Paul Mellon. Myzelev has published extensively on feminism, activism, and material culture. She is currently

writing a manuscript on masculinity and fashion in the Soviet Union. Myzelev is the author of *Architecture, Design and Craft in Toronto 1900-1940: Creating Modern Living* (Ashgate 2016). Her edited collection of essays *Exhibiting Craft and Design: Transgressing the White Cube Paradigm* has been published by Routledge (2017). Her research interests revolve around gender and contemporary culture. She published extensively on DIY culture and fiber art. Myzelev also curated several shows including a yearly exhibition of Feminist Art Conference International exhibition in Toronto (2014-2017).