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Pussy Riot at PS1: A Report and Some Reflections

by Alain Kirili

Members of **Pussy Riot** in Conversation with Klaus Biesenbach about *Zero Tolerance: Activism, Artistic Courage and Civil Disobedience*

MoMA PS1, Sunday, November 2, 2014



Members of **Pussy Riot** in their February 2012 performance-protest at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Moscow. Photo courtesy of MoMA PS1

Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, better known to the world as members of **Pussy Riot**, were co-winners of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought, 2014. The performance artists spent 22 months in a Russian jail in terrible conditions for their notorious anthem, "[Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away](#)," and were released on the eve of the Sochi Olympics last year. Their film-performance of their "Punk Prayer" is part of PS1's current exhibition "Zero Tolerance," a show that brings to mind the alternative spirit of PS1 in its foundational years in the mid-seventies. Last month, the curator of "Zero Tolerance," PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach, interviewed Alekhina and Tolokonnikova, and Tolokonnikova's Russian-Canadian husband Petya Verzilov, who served as spokesman of **Pussy Riot** during their incarceration, in a public event which I attended.

Although I wrote an article supporting **Pussy Riot** in August 2012 in the Parisian paper [Liberation](#), this was the first time I have seen them in person. Their manner and appearance were both graceful and forceful. I was impressed by their detailed attention to the Russian-English translation of their "Punk Prayer," which they corrected several times in order to get it precisely right. At the very outset they emphasized a clear statement: they love Russia. They confirmed that they love living in Moscow, where they plan to continue their courageous activism. Their future goal, they said, is to publish an account of their time in jail and to organize performances concerning sexual issues such as homophobia in Russia. They plan to stay very active in denouncing the local justice system and conditions of imprisonment, which have not changed since the Stalinist era. Apparently the Gulag survives perfectly in Russia today. On the very first day they arrived in prison, they were beaten and dressed in clothing that would not be changed for almost two years (clothing is only changed once every three years in this prison system). In their 22 months in jail, they were never allowed minimal privacy; one noted that conditions were so bad that her menstruation cycle ceased.

When their performance prayer to the Virgin in August 2012 was interrupted, the Cathedral's security personnel asked them to leave. It was a full week later, and based on manipulated witness accounts, that the police arrested Alekhina and Tolokonnikova, along with a third member of the band, Yekaterina Samutsevich, who was later released on a suspended sentence.

The artists said that when one is put on trial, one automatically goes to jail afterwards in virtually all cases. As the world knows, they were already incarcerated in a cage during their trial.



Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina. Photo: Celeste

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Pussy Riot is an artistic collective in which multiple members represent the whole. We can all be **Pussy Riot**, they seem to be saying: it is a state of mind. Their artistic and political activism translates itself into punk music, interviews, writing, and disguises. The group recalls the long history of agitprop, which was so creative and effective in Russia during the revolution. Indeed, their work derives specifically from that of Vladimir Mayakovski, the poet and creator of Russian Futurism, and perhaps the ultimate propagandistic agitator. This tradition of political and creative movements reaches back to the Paris Commune (1871) and the engagement of Gustave Courbet. Even earlier, it appears in Eugene Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), which presents a beautiful young topless woman with a French flag, guiding and inspiring the people at the barricades. In the 20th century, after the Russian Revolution, there are many examples of related activism, such as the amazing creative process that produced the posters during May '68 in Paris. The Situationist movement was composed of visual artists and philosophers who created paintings, comics, posters, and now-familiar slogans such as "la Beauté est dans la rue" ("Beauty is in the street"). Dada and Surrealism likewise contributed to their

critical commitment against what Guy Debord would later call *The Society of the Spectacle* (the title of his 1967 book). The members of **Pussy Riot** studied philosophy, literature, and visual arts, and certainly read Debord.

Women play a particularly striking role in this and other related contemporary resistance movements. It's very important to relate **Pussy Riot** not just to the Guerrilla Girls, but also to contemporary Muslim women in revolt against the sexism of their societies. I am thinking, for instance, of Taslima Nasrin who I met at the premiere of by Steve Lacy's "jam opera" *The Cry* (1999), which sets some of her texts to music. And of Ayaan Hirsi Ali who wrote the scenario for assassinated film director Theo Van Gogh. Ali denounces the situation of women in Islam through her books and her contributions to films like *Submission* (2004).

In China there are extremely courageous artists like the sculptor Ai Weiwei, now in permanent household arrest, and the great writer Liu Xiaobo, an imprisoned dissident who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. Add to their number Salman Rushdie, one of the first writers to undergo a fatwa, and we have a long line of writers, filmmakers, cinema photographers, dancers, and visual artists that are explicitly expressing their sense of revolt against repressive political situations around the world.

Creation is an act of resistance. Today in our world, the resistance is against the sleekness of kitsch. Kitsch, as I define it, is a simulation of emotions and the representation of derision. The Austrian writer Hermann Broch reminded us, in his 1955 essay "Some Remarks on Kitsch," that behind a kitsch work of art there is kitsch man and kitsch society. There is a connection between kitsch and fascism: this form of art should never be taken lightly. Creation is a political act when it's not kitsch, but rather alive with subjectivity and emotion. A rebellious work of art is as challenging to dominant institutions as an explicitly political artwork. Both are political and complementary.

Pussy Riot received worldwide support against their imprisonment in part because the arbitrary regime of Putin is obviously complicit with the Russian Orthodox Church, notably the Patriarch Kirill. Whereas, in the West, there is no democracy without the separation of church and state, Putin has eliminated this separation. Today **Pussy Riot** can be arrested at any time and attacked by any nationalist individual. Last March, Alekhina and Tolokonnikova were attacked by a group of young nationalists in a restaurant in the city of Nizhny Novgorod. The thugs poured a green antiseptic liquid over the women, an action that was filmed. In Sochi, police were ready to arrest them on the basis of false accusations of stealing in their hotel. Their commitment is crucial in a world of cynicism and corruption where art is manipulated by capital. They believe in the endless symbolic power of art. This is the reason why the art world should not be silent on their actions but, on the contrary, deeply vigilant in its support of them. There is a deeply artistic engagement.

Translated from French by Philip Barnard.

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