

Pussy Riot: Representing Russian Activism between East and West

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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

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 *Voyna* (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 f

that Pussy Riot strategic behavior during and after the performance had insured that different

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)². 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

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 Grrrl 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.

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completely excluded both race and gender from the visual appearance of the collective. By

by a tiny percentage of women (and very few men) in Putin's Russia. While extensive research

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 of tde(m) -2 (a) 4 (ybe) 4 () 4 () -10 (of) -2(m BT 50 0 0 50 400 -885 T

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

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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).

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