SACRILEGE OR REVELATION? PUSSY RIOT IN RUSSIAN ORTHODOX PROTEST CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses problems in the translation of Pussy Riot across ideological paradigms, as exemplified with the phenomenon of celebratory reenactments and protests in support of Pussy Riot in two case studies in Chicago. The paper brings to the table questions about context-specific nature of political art and activism and offers a comparative application of religious and protest aesthetics, through the discussion of anarchism within Russian Orthodoxy and the transfiguration of “sacrilege” into “revelation” in the performance of Pussy Riot. This paper is situated in conversation with issues in cultural, visual and contextual translation, as well as post-colonial discourse and the politics of representation.
“There is absolute truth in anarchism and it is to be seen in its attitude to the sovereignty of the state and to every form of state absolutism. . . . The religious truth of anarchism consists in this, that power over man is bound up with sin and evil, that a state of perfection is a state where there is no power of man over man, that is to say, anarchy. The Kingdom of God is freedom and the absence of such power . . . the Kingdom of God is anarchy.”
- Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 1939

“Borrowing Nietzsche's definition, we are the children of Dionysus, sailing in a barrel and not recognizing any authority.”
- Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, in a letter to Slavoj Zizek, February 23, 2013
On February 21, 2012 the Russian feminist performance art group Pussy Riot performed “punk-prayer” in Moscow’s central Russian Orthodox Church—a Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which is now, and perhaps forever, lovingly known as Pussy’s Church, a name that loquaciously trumps even the Cathedral’s former nickname of “The atrocious samovar.” Footage of the performance shows four women wearing the group’s emblematic balaclavas and colorful dresses, singing, jumping and crossing themselves beside the altar for approximately ninety seconds before they are chased out of the cathedral. The chorus to the prayer-song runs “Holy Virgin, please chase away Putin.” The music-clip version, that so many have seen online, was produced post-factum in a studio. The fact of the studio recording of the performance, alluding to the presence of a group “manager,” has contributed

* Full English text of the punk-prayer (official FreePussyRiot.org translation):
Punk-Prayer "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away"
(chorus)
Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away
Put Putin away, put Putin away (end chorus)
... Black robe, golden epaulettes All parishioners crawl to bow
The phantom of liberty is in heaven
Gay-pride sent to Siberia in chains
The head of the KGB, their chief saint,
Leads protesters to prison under escort In order not to offend His Holiness
Women must give birth and love
Shit, shit, the Lord’s shit!
Shit, shit, the Lord’s shit!
(Chorus)
Virgin Mary, Mother of God,
become a feminist
Become a feminist, become a feminist
(end chorus)
The Church’s praise of rotten dictators
The cross-bearer procession of black limousines
A teacher-preacher will meet you at school
Go to class - bring him money!
Patriarch Gundyaev believes in Putin
Bitch, better believe in God instead
The belt of the Virgin can’t replace mass-meetings
Mary, Mother of God, is with us in protest!
(Chorus)
Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away
Put Putin away, put Putin away
to the controversy, particularly ignited by those in the Russian opposition, of the Pussy Riot women being “just thirsty for some P.R.”

3 Screenshots of original performance of Pussy Riot in Cathedral of Christ The Savior.

One notes that the music video, openly available on the Internet, had not been any more noticed or discussed by the public than the group’s previous work. In fact, the vindictive reaction of the authorities had been entirely responsible for the attention that the video generated in consequent months. In the following weeks, three women out of the four women appearing in the video were arrested. Local authorities in Moscow issued a warrant on charges of “hooliganism”—a sentence that can receive up to seven years in Russia’s prisons—for Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadia, 22, philosophy student and mother), Maria Alyokhina (Masha, 24, poet, student of journalism and mother) and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Katia, 29, graduate of the very prestigious Rodchenko School of Art). As a result of the six-month court hearing, Nadia and Masha were sentenced to two years in penal colonies and Katia was released on probation on October 10, 2012 because her lawyer, Violetta Volkova, successfully argued that Katia was not actually present on the ambo (‘ambon,’ the altar-space in Eastern Orthodoxy), and was presumably chased off while unzipping her guitar. As the members of Pussy Riot wear balaclavas that preserve their anonymity, the possibility of denial of the charges against them was implicitly available to each of the three women on trial. This socially-understood nature of the justice system in Russia—i.e. it is not outright draconian, but functions oppressively through its rewarding of complacency—is an important component of the debate, as it demonstrates the extent to which Nadia and Masha made ethical choices of
resistance to this system, making them de facto “prisoners of conscience.”

The punishment ignited widespread international condemnation. Amnesty International officially proclaimed the sentenced members “prisoners of conscience,” and, in a concert in Moscow in August, Madonna infamously wrote “Pussy Riot” on her skin. The artistic merit of the punk-prayer work earned Pussy Riot the #57 ranking on the latest ArtReview Power 100 List and they were candidates for the Kandinsky Art Prize in Russia the same year. Although statistics of merit speak to the institutional recognition of the work, this paper draws primarily from an observation of the international social reaction to the controversy surrounding Pussy Riot. By contrasting examples of two different forms of activist engagement with the Pussy Riot cause in and out of Russia in two case studies—1. Reenactment and 2. Protest—the aim of this paper is to shed light on the role of context to a political work of art.

In Russia, the conversation about the Pussy Riot performance and the trials was both socially devastating and mutable in relation to the statements and behavior of the three women, and it created a felt schism among the politically active members of the social body, adding fuel to the ongoing culture wars over contemporary Russian identity and the role of Russian Orthodoxy within that identity. The conversation about Pussy Riot abroad was of a different nature, and predominantly popular among individuals who identified as “activists” and “artists,” and who identified with Pussy Riot and supported Pussy Riot in an unconditional way. Furthermore, there were several observable patterns that emerged among the supporters of Pussy Riot outside of Russia that were never present among their supporters in Russia, and arguably inconceivable in the Russian and Russian Orthodox context, where Pussy Riot folded into passionate ideological disputes over the territories or art, religion and the state. In Russia, the invasion of art or the state in the territory of religion can create felt violations of “the sacred,” and by short extension, connotations of “sacilege,” the symbol of the “holy fool,” and “holy revelation” become powerful tools for artists making political work. When looking at Western interpretations of Pussy Riot in the

‡ Reactions similar to the Pussy Riot phenomenon have been prevalent in the Putin years. A noteworthy case is the closing of the “Careful, Religion!” exhibition in 2006 and the consequent prosecution of the curator, Yuri Samodurov.
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two cases from which I draw examples, I argue that due to the relative impotence of the function of sacrilege to the Western activist social body, their forms of support are a misrepresentation of the stakes in the original piece. A closer look into the engagement of Pussy Riot with the Russian context through the group’s consideration of space, time and Orthodox ritual offers powerful examples of forms of activism that are alternative to common Western associations of protest, feminism and punk identity.

In Russia, Masha, Katia and Nadia were accused by the prosecuting attorneys of “spitting into the souls of the Orthodox people,” which colloquially carries the meaning of “blasphemy.” Among the supporters of Pussy Riot are people who question whether the corruption at every level of law and religion that had become standard practice in contemporary Russia left anything sacred enough to be soiled by being “spat at.” Another component of the debate is the question whether faith is something that one can “spit in” or whether a believer is someone who is always practicing “смирение” (‘pious acceptance’) and “милость” (‘grace’) — very traditional Orthodox virtues. Slavoj Zizek, in his article on Pussy Riot, poignantly draws attention to the impossibility of blasphemy in such a critical, ongoing state of blasphemy in Putin’s Russia. Among some supporters of Pussy Riot there is the argument for their actually being or else, engaging with the concept of the “holy fool:” in the context of Russian Orthodoxy, blasphemy becomes a form of holy revelation under particular conditions of Church corruption, and this is often revealed by the “holy fool.” Therefore, historical context is really at the forefront of the Russian debate, and unfortunately, it is what is less privy to accurate translation; for instance, blasphemy is not a pertinent term to the predominantly secular Western art and activism conversation.

Some criticism had emerged against this simplified engagement with Pussy Riot in the English-language media. As a response to this “Western” reading of the work, The New York Times published an Op-Ed by Vadim Nikitin titled “The Wrong Reasons to Back Pussy Riot” condemning the West for, essentially, its flaky involvement. Nikitin writes:

…there is something about the West’s embrace of the young women’s cause that should make us deeply uneasy, as Pussy Riot’s philosophy, activism and even music quickly took second place to its usefulness in discrediting one of America’s geopolitical foes. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, are dissident intellectuals once again in danger of becoming pawns in the West’s anti-Russian narrative? The author also alludes to Pussy Riot’s other artwork, and the fact that the American response to Pussy Riot cannot be ignorant of the larger oeuvre of
For example, Pussy Riot has Orgy in Museum and has Sex with Chicken in a Supermarket.

For example, Voina (‘war’) — an activist art group that included several members of today’s Pussy Riot before they split off — in a 2008 event had group sex on the floor of the State Biological Museum, with Nadia being nine months pregnant during the act. They were also responsible for 2010’s “How to Snatch a Chicken” performance, where a female Voina member stuffed a frozen chicken into her vagina and walked out of a St. Petersburg supermarket without paying. These acts, largely unknown by many of the individuals who embrace Pussy Riot in the Western world, are indeed, more difficult to like, celebrate or attribute to goals of the women’s rights movement.

Differently from Nikitin’s ideological scope, I focus on how the support of Pussy Riot outside of Russia engages primarily with the group through its appealing visual language — the colorful balaclavas, etc. — an engagement that largely disregards the context of the original performance in Cathedral of Christ The Savior. The tools available through the discourse on globalization, translation and new forms of colonialism offer valuable insight into the problem of representation. Globalization, with its inherent movement of people, goods and images that we witness today is an important trigger to the contemporary discourse on translation and representation. It is common to regard translation, in particular in the well-developed field of literary translation, as an experience of “loss;” as Walter Benjamin notes in his canonical text, it is a loss of the original context, and implicitly the metaphorical, historical and language-specific alliances present in the original. Similarly, the movement of people also undergoes a kind of “translation” and “loss” — a translation of one’s identity from one context to a foreign one. Movement from “the periphery” into “the center” is more commonly subject to being lost in translation — i.e. mistranslation: immigrants from the Third World are in a disadvantage when coming into
“the center,” often becoming “migrants” and “refugees” in social status. Individuals traveling from the global center into its periphery, conversely, have the ability to become “expats” or “tourists:” a privileged social status. While the discourse on literary translation and the movement of human bodies is a developed one today, the discourse on the translation of visual information and its ideological implications is still budding, perhaps due to the fact that images had for much longer existed under the false protectorate of the “universality of vision.”

The visual language of Pussy Riot travelled virtually across the globe, being displaced in distant servers. Abroad, the visual language and music-group status of Pussy Riot permitted their base of support to merge a political stance against human rights violations with a following akin to music fandom. In the two following case studies one observes how international “fans” of Pussy Riot were able to feel like they are taking an activist and feminist stance by participating in the celebratory behavior that is more common of music affiliation: balaclavas, T-shirts, stickers, a characteristic dance—all in support of Pussy Riot. Thus, in the “Western” translation of Pussy Riot, forms of activism can take a celebratory form. When compared to the engagement with time and space in the original, questions about the ethics behind such celebratory forms of support can emerge.

**Case I: The Reenactment**

There have been numerous celebratory reenactments of the Pussy Riot performance carried out in the name of various progressive causes: freedom of expression, freedom of speech, women’s rights, etc.—all outside of Russia. These reenactments, organized in ideological affiliation with the “Free Pussy Riot!” movement, have been widespread. These often take place on the stage of a nightclub. The “Free Pussy Riot!” events that I have seen in Chicago’s nightclubs all unfolded in a similar sequence: the dance music is lowered, individuals in balaclavas appear on the stage, they start to dance in an imitation of the dance in Cathedral of Christ The Savior, and shout: “Free Pussy Riot!” Oftentimes the people on the stage also cross themselves as the Pussy Riot women did on the altar-space. This reenactment is welcome among the nightclub audience and it folds in naturally with the festive atmosphere, and the original music in the establishment comes on seamlessly right after the reenactment performance is over.
The fact of this kind of a celebratory reaction to Pussy Riot emerging in the West is interesting and revealing of the way that the ideological and contextual territory of art function in the West—a cause such as “freedom” is something that one can celebrate through music and art. This is less popular in Russia, partially because the territory of art shares a historically problematic, contested border with the territory of the sacred. The Russian conversation about Pussy Riot was made meaningful by the contested public reaction towards a work of art entering a scared space, a gesture that evokes Orthodox conceptions of sacrilege and blasphemy. The evocation of religious gestures in the reenactments of the Pussy Riot performance in nightclubs can be seen as sacrilegious, but the notion is not meaningful to the context of activism abroad, and in particular, it is irrelevant to the “Free Pussy Riot!” movement as it had expressed itself in Chicago’s Smart Bar in Case I.

A comparison of the above-stated reenactment with the engagement with space and time in the original performance effectively speaks to the problem of translation and contextual displacement. In terms of timing, Pussy Riot staged their performance following a series of turbulent protests throughout Russia concerning the fraudulent re-election of Putin that March. The activists of Russia were mobilized by the event in hundreds of thousands, occupying Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square, and a real schism was felt in the country. Bolotnaya Square in Russia echoes to Occupy Wall Street, however, the reasons for Bolotnaya were not economical. Arguably, Putin’s years have been comparatively prosperous and stable since the fall of the USSR, however, the stability and growth have been created through vast networks of corruption. Among the many reasons that people united against Putin were personal ethics and a desire for democracy and free speech, but one cannot assume that these values mean the same thing to a people that had witnessed the collapse of the ultimate promise of utopia in the disillusionment of the USSR. The words “freedom” and “democracy” need
to be understood to carry a different set of signifiers.

The choice of space in the original performance is also an important part of the context. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior is a replica of a previous cathedral there and it is the main Orthodox church of Moscow. Standing at 103m. in height, the original Cathedral was notoriously designed to be the largest Orthodox cathedral in the world. Following the demolition in 1931 under Stalin, the site was to be used for the realization of epic Stalinist architecture, but the project failed. The world’s largest outdoor pool, Moskva Pool, was built in place of the cathedral in 1958, under Nikita Khrushchev. After the Fall of the Soviet Union, the replica of the original Cathedral was re-built and consecrated in 2000, demonstratively attesting to the fact that the Orthodox Church of Moscow had again developed political alliances with the state. For many people this site of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior symbolized a history of top down corruption, and in particular, the Cathedral symbolizes the corruption of the Orthodox Church during the Soviet times; the Church has notoriously cooperated with the KGB, of which the president Putin is not impartial himself. It is because the Russian Orthodox Church maintains strong ties to the Putin government that this space was strategically selected by Pussy Riot for their performance.

**Case II: The Protest**

Public protests for the release of Pussy Riot from prison are also telling as to how a singular visual information can fold into different contexts and very different traditions of activism. Footage of one Chicago rally in support of Pussy Riot is revealing of how the case was being “translated” and received by an activist audience outside of Russia. The YouTube clip of the protest shows balaclava-clad individuals screaming: “Are women’s right human right? Yes they are!” while holding up a poster that says: “Punks against Apartheid.” The clip also shows a young woman wearing a balaclava and speaking to the camera, saying:

[Pussy Riot] went into a church of a religion that continues to hate women…. They tell us we don’t have rights. They tell us we can’t have birth control. They tell us we can’t have rights over our body. And the women, who are objectified in the church, are sexual objects…. So when they go in and tell Mother Mary that she should be a feminist, they are doing the best thing for religion…. That’s why we’re out here. It is absolutely a feminist case in this situation. It’s a humanist case, and it’s a feminist case.”
The speaker’s reading of the Pussy Riot performance and its goals folds into a Western reading of the work: the performance is seen along feminist, implicitly secular lines of activism. The young woman makes uninformed assumptions about Russia and women’s status in Russia by giving examples of contemporary American feminist challenges; she mentions birth control, rights over one’s body, etc., and she falsely attributes these to the Pussy Riot cause. Furthermore, the speaker in the video appears to identify herself as part of “Pussy Riot” by wearing the balaclava. It is alarming how her views on religion and feminism seem to be informed by her own cultural background and how seamless this transition becomes through the evocation of the balaclava. Furthermore, it is interesting how the young woman does not distinguish between “the church” and “religion” itself; in fact, the Pussy Riot performance is often seen as anti-religion among foreign activists. In Russia, the Pussy Riot performance is seen as anti-religion predominantly by the pro-Putin opposition to Pussy Riot.

Differently from the feminist and punk interpretation of Pussy Riot, the women of Pussy Riot explicitly affiliate themselves with the tradition of Orthodox anarchism in their court statements. Through their closing statements in court, it becomes evident that they are not only aware of, but even see themselves as contributing to a tradition of spiritual protest in Russian Orthodoxy: they use the tools of “blasphemy” and “sacrilege” to make a statement against corruption. In Russian Orthodoxy, sacrilege (богохульство), is an unholy act that causes spiritual damage unless it serves to reveal a larger sacrilege itself. Then it becomes a holy act. For example, Christ was accused of sacrilege. Whether Pussy Riot was an act of sacrilege or revelation is a large, interesting component of the debate- albeit one that is hard to engage with outside knowledge of the function and canon of Orthodoxy, which has a long history of Раскольники (‘church dissidents’), like the Dostoevsky character in Crime and Punishment, and including Dostoevsky himself. Thus among the supporters of Pussy Riot,
few see them as being anti-religion; Yuri Samodurov, the influential curator of the exhibition “Careful, Religion!,” which was shut down by the government in 2006, in an interview on Pussy Riot says that “…What their work ultimately showed is the difference between true faith and government-sponsored institution of the church.” Conversely, the state and the church see Pussy Riot as having “spat into the souls of the Orthodox people;” the Arch-Patriarch Kirill of the Holy Orthodox Church condemned the act as an act of hate, and several priests throughout have resigned over this condemnation by the Patriarch.

12 “ДЬЯВОЛ ПОСМЕЯЛСЯ НАД НАМИ.Патриарх Кирилл о пусси-райт.” “The Devil laughed at us. Patriarch Kirill about Pussy Riot.”

In fact, in the closing statements of Pussy Riot from court, the women themselves evoke the tradition of Orthodox revolutionaries and conceptions of “true faith” and “true freedom.” Nadia, in her closing argument on August 8 talks about the various trials of philosophers, dissidents and saints in history: from Socrates to Dostoevsky to OBOREU (avant-garde poetry group) to Solzhenitsyn. She draws parallels between Pussy Riot and the trial of Christ, who was supposedly condemned for being “possessed by the Devil.”

13 The Closing Statements from Nadezhda Tolokonnikova Trial.

Masha, in her closing statements on August 8 talks about the prison as being a microcosm of Russia today. She frames Putin as a system that creates a society of people who are no longer “citizens”—because they do not believe that they can change or effect the status-quo of the country and their lives. She ties this to the Orthodox term "смирение" (pious
acceptance’), which changes ‘sons of God’ into de-facto ‘slaves of God.’ She states her personal philosophy as one of ‘inner freedom’ and ‘action;’ she sees both as inheritance from the New Testament, and she references the trial of Christ for богохульство (‘blasphemy’). Finally, Masha rebels against the term ‘so-called’ whether in relation to her art or to the trial, and says that the only not ‘so-called’ possibility in Russia today is her freedom.  

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16 The Closing Statements from Maria Alyokhina in Trial.
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Adding to the affiliation with Orthodox forms of protest, Katia issues a statement for SNOB Magazine saying that:

> In our performance we dared, without the Patriarch’s blessing, to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture and that of protest culture, thus suggesting to smart people that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch and Putin, that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia.  

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There are many fascinating lineages of Russian protest culture and Orthodox Church aesthetics in 20th century and contemporary visual art. However, there seems to be an ideological conflict, or else, a paucity of cultural references for the accurate translation of Russian contemporary activism, particularly activism that plays out in religious and political forms of art. From “Careful, Religion!” to the trials of Pussy Riot, to debates around the Russian theatrical production of “Jesus Christ Superstar,” to Pyotr Pavlensky’s nailed testicles on the Red Square; the arts have become the center stage for new, post-Soviet culture wars and ideological territorial disputes, all of which ultimately bring into focus questions of what it means to be not only Russian, but also Russian Orthodox or a Christian anarchist, a Slavophile or a Zapadnik, a dissident or a Tolstovets, a citizen or an artist in post-Soviet Russia and the territories of the former USSR. Through the two cases of representation of Pussy Riot outside of Russia, this paper shows how “Free Pussy Riot!” is a complicated affiliation, and that perhaps it goes
beyond the freeing of the women from prison. It is also a stance against the oppressive, simplified and colonial engagement with the translation of art, people and their context. The present stakes of freedom and activism are extreme in Russia and deserve international support, but this support must come through a sincere engagement with challenging ideas in the era of globalization. I believe that an understanding of space, time and historical context is a step towards the overcoming of this visual displacement, and it is the first of many steps needed for an ethical engagement with notions of freedom that do not only mirror those relevant to one’s own system of values.

**Endnotes**


2 Cathedral of Christ the Savior, author’s image; 2012.

3 Screenshot, original performance of Pussy Riot in Cathedral of Christ The Savior.


10 “Pussy Riot Solidarity Rally in Chicago.”


“The closing statements from Nadezhda Tolokonnikova in Trial 8 August Free Pussy Riot Free Pussy Riot.”


“The Closing Statements from Maria Alyokhina in Trial 8 Ag 2012 Free Pussy Riot Maria Alyokhina Trial.”