



Pussy Riot: Art or Hooliganism?
Changing Society through Means of Participation

Camilla Patricia Reuter

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í listfræði
Háskóli Íslands
Hugvísindasvið



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Preface

In my studies of art history the connection between the past and present has always intrigued me. As a former history major, the interest in historical developments comes hardly as a surprise. This is why I felt that the subject of my essay should concentrate on a recent phenomenon in art with a rich history supporting it. My personal interest in Russian art history eventually narrowed my topics down to Pussy Riot and Voina, which both provide a provocative subject matter. Having spent a semester in St. Petersburg studying the nation's art history one discovers a palpable connection between politics and art. From Ilya Repin's masterpieces to the Russian avant-garde and the Moscow Conceptualists, Russian art history is provided with a multitude of oppositional art. The artistic desire to rebel lies in the heart of creativity and antagonism is necessary for the process of development.

I wish to thank you my advisor and professor Hlynur Helgason for accepting to guide me in my writing process. Without the theoretical input from my advisor this bachelor's thesis could not have been written. In addition I want to thank you my family for emotional support and my dear friend Erin Honeycutt for her help with my English grammar. Finally, a special thank you goes to my significant other, Hákon Sæberg, who was patient and kind enough to take the time to read through my text as well as helping me through times of distress.

Ágrip

Athugun á störfum listahópsins Pussy Riot veitir skýra innsýn í hvernig listsköpun má nýta til pólitískra áhrifa. Hópurinn, sem kenndur er við pönkstefnuna, samanstendur einvörðungu af konum sem leggja áherslu á feminískar aðgerðir og nýta sér þátttökulist til vitundarvakningar meðal almennings. Markmið Pussy Riot er að veita aðgerðasinnuð inngríp í pólitíska umræðu. Hópurinn hefur tekið á sig mynd pönkhljómsveitar sem stígur á stökk í óþökk yfirvalda þar sem grímuklæddir meðlimirnir flytja atriði sín í almenningsrými. Íklæddar skærlituðum lambúshettum beina konurnar í Pussy Riot kastljósinu að raunum "hinsegin fólks" í Rússlandi, femínisma og vaxandi alræðistilburðum ríkisstjórnar Vladimir Putin. Listahópurinn notar gjörningalist til að veita ríkjandi stjórn mála- og menningarlegum hugmyndum Rússnesks nútímasamfélags mótspyrnu. Pussy Riot leitast eftir að brjóta niður hefðbundin valdamynstur og koma þar á stjórnarfarslegum breytingum í þágu lýðræðis. Í kjölfar frægasta gjörnings þeirra "A Punk Prayer", sem flutt var í Kirkju Frelsarans Krists árið 2012, fangelsaði lögreglan þrjá meðlimi hópsins fyrir óspektir á almannafæri. Neikvæð viðbrögð löggjafarvaldsins við uppátæki listamannanna sýndu hve áhrifaríkar aðgerðir þeirra voru í raun og veru. Atburðirnir vöktu athygli heimsbyggðarinnar og sýnir það fram á hvernig listsköpun getur á skilvirkan hátt stutt við aðgerðasinna í ríkjum sem rekin eru af alræðismiðuðum ríkisstjórnnum. Með þessari ritgerð er gerð tilraun til að greina þá þátttökulist sem Pussy Riot hefur notað til að vekja athygli á hinum ýmsu málefnum. Gagnrýnin snýr að því hvort aðgerðir listahópsins hafi raunveruleg áhrif til frambúðar. Ritgerðin sýnir að á sama tíma og verk Pussy Riot hafa færst í átt að ríkjandi gildum vestrænnar menningar hefur getu þeirra til þess að hafa áhrif á félagsleg gildi verið ógnað af síaukinni áherslu á efnisleg gildi.

Abstract

The art collective Pussy Riot offers an interesting case study on the possibilities of art for political influence. The feminist punk-art group employs participatory public engagement as a means for raising public awareness. Their objective is to carry out political intervention through established means of performance activism. The all-female collective has acquired the form of a punk band, which performs unsanctioned and anonymously on the public space. The performers dressed in bright balaclavas address current issues of LGBTQT rights, feminism and the growing authoritarianism of the Putin regime. Through the act of performative interfering, Pussy Riot aims to enrich the political and cultural opposition in contemporary Russia. Their objective is to challenge the governing power structures and implement political change for the sake of a democratic society. After their famous performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2012, three of the collective's members were sentenced to prison for hooliganism. The antagonistic reaction from the authorities serves to validate the effectiveness of the public intervention. The international attention sparked by the controversy demonstrates the capability of art to inaugurate and support political activism in authoritarian societies. The objective of this essay is to analyze the artistic participation employed by Pussy Riot as a method for successful public intervention. The question of whether the collective's actions can be seen as futile or productive for future developments can be regarded as central to the critical assessment of their work. As Pussy Riot have become merged into the mainstream culture, their capability to antagonize social relations is threatened by the increasing emphasis on material relations.

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1 Introduction

“Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

— Bertolt Brecht

The Russian feminist art collective Pussy Riot gained noticeable international attention in 2012 when three members of the group were put under arrest and charges leading up to seven years in prison were laid against them.¹ The reason for the arrest was the group’s latest art action, *A Punk Prayer*, which was performed in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21st the same year. Though the performance lasted in all its fury for under one minute, it immediately gained a larger audience by going viral on social media. As the performance raised both admiration and resentment from the public it was aiming to engage with, a snowball effect was put into action and the seemingly harmless act gained much more meaning than the collective could have ever imagined. In a fortnight, the three arrested members, Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolonnikova, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, became the most talked about activists in media as well as intermediators for freedom of speech and human rights in 21st century Russia.² Alongside Russian human rights activists, the international community rushed to deem the incarcerations as purely political and rightfully questioned the integrity of the juridical system.³ The idea of serving the maximum sentence of seven years in prison for the sake of art seemed simply absurd in the eyes of western democracies.

The objective of Pussy Riot is to employ artistic means for engaging with the surrounding society. Through the act of participation, the group addresses a range of controversial topics in contemporary Russian society. Their collective actions are highly critical towards the repressive political climate, which constitutes as their focal point for protest. These “flash mob” stylized performances address issues such as feminism and LGBTQ rights, as well as the authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin.⁴ In order to locate Pussy Riot in the context of art history, their performances are to be analyzed within similar artistic efforts. The aim is to form a connection between the group’s objectives and recent developments in politically inclined art. As follows, Pussy Riot’s artistic means are located within the established tradition of activist performance.⁵ Particular interest is laid on the emergence of participatory art and its capability to adapt into anti-democratic societies. The foundational characteristics of participation are analyzed both through examples of theory and practice. These examples help to illustrate the development of socially engaging art forms as a specific form of

¹ . Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (London: Granta Publications, 2014), 256.

² . Janet Reitman, “Putin Clamps Down: A Chilling report from Moscow”, *Rolling Stone*, April 30, 2014. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/putin-clamps-down-a-chilling-report-from-moscow-20140430>.

³ . Stephen Morgan, *Pussy Riot vs Putin: Revolutionary Russia* (Stephen John Morgan, 2013), 24.

⁴ . *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ . Samir Dayal, “The democratic potential of activist performance”, in *Open Democracy*, 10 March 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/participation-now/samir-dayal/democratic-potential-of-activist-performance>.

communal reaction against political oppression. In short, the objective is to construct a theoretical basis for the interest of analyzing the art collective Pussy Riot in relation to participatory art. Conclusively, the accusations of hooliganism and blasphemy are effectively counter-argued.

The ideas first formulated by Nicholas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998/ 2002) and the sudden inflation of similar art forms in the 1990's will offer a theoretical point of departure for the analysis. However, theoretical writings by Claire Bishop on the subject of participation will serve as principal literary sources. Her critical reassessments of Bourriaud's work beginning with the essay *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (2002) and followed by the book, *Artificial Hells* (2006), will both be applied as sources. Subsidiary publications include the collection of short essays edited by Bishop entitled *Participation* (2006). The forenamed materials concentrate particularly on the political aspect of participation which is essential in understanding the work of Pussy Riot. In addition, three recently published books on Pussy Riot will serve as primary sources on the collective itself: Masha Gessen's *Word's Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (2014), *Pussy Riot vs. Putin* (2013) by Stephen Morgan, as well as *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom* (2013). The aforementioned publications revolve largely around the happenings of the farce trial and have been accused of sensationalizing, even romanticizing, their subject⁶. The merging of Pussy Riot into cultural mainstream has resulted in the convergence of tabloidization and serious critical writing.

Significant in understanding the collective's actions are their ideological authorities along with stylistic predecessors. Attention is given to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) as a significant theoretical contributor to participatory art. Other essential writings are included as providing a cultural catalyst for direct and democratized action. The history of socially engaging art both in Western Europe and in the former Soviet Union are examined. The objective is to form a coherent structure of the cultural processes behind participation, as well as to recognize the influence of ideological differences. Participatory art practiced in the democratic West was formulated under different social conditions from its counterpart in socialist societies. Socialist ideology stylized the cultural geography of Russia, which should be taken into consideration when discussing art performed in public spaces. Finally, a question is posed whether Pussy Riot is a distinctly Russian phenomena shaped by its cultural context or a mere import of western ideas.

The essay is divided into three parts. The first one offers an introduction to the work of Voina, a street art collective preceding the formation of Pussy Riot. Additionally, the chapter discusses the role of participation and dissidence in contemporary Russian art. The second part introduces socially engaging art forms in a larger perspective through historical and theoretical frameworks. Starting from a definition of art which employs participation as its core element, the chapter then proceeds to a more thorough analysis of the concept. The third and final part of the essay concentrates exclusively on the subject of Pussy Riot. The chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the collective as a mediating object between democratic ideals and the society. Finally, the collective's most famous piece *A Punk Prayer* will be discussed separately as an illustrating example of the processes of participation.

⁶ . Ibid.

2 Voina

Before Pussy Riot, there was Voina. The name means War in Russian, which signifies the group's symbolic war against the Putin government and the increasingly stagnant contemporary art scene.⁷ The collective was founded in early 2007 by two couples, Oleg Vorotnikov and Natalia Sokol accompanied by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and her husband Pyotr Verzilov.⁸ These four members formed the heart of the anarchist street action group, under the artistic leadership of Oleg Vorotnikov. Since Voina has not organized any actions since *Dick captured by KGB* in 2010, the collective's future is uncertain.⁹ Just as Pussy Riot would consist of a loose assembly of participants, so was Voina open for like-minded artists and revolutionaries to join in their actions. According to Voina, over 200 activists have been involved in the construction of their actions over time.¹⁰ Both Pussy Riot and Voina have emphasized anonymity as a premise, as engaging in illegal street activism can lead to severe consequences. The tone of Voina mimics the language of Soviet officialdom, from the way the group presents itself as a "militant gang"¹¹ to the highly politicized manner of presenting their work. Voina's fundamentalism in matters of art and life can be seen as paralyzing artistic renewal, since their actions tend to repeat the same concept over and over again.

Voina's members consisted of young dissidents from different educational backgrounds, ranging from philosophy students to former physicists.¹² Formal artistic education was not required. Instead, the group stressed the importance of a strong ideological commitment. From the members of Voina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich would later form the core of Pussy Riot. Other women previously associated with Voina would accompany them, albeit they are known to a lesser extent due to successfully preserving their anonymity.

2.1 Artists as activists

*"Our concept is to screw the authorities till they fall. Voina screws them in an artistic position."*¹³

When the members of Voina came together in 2007, their motives were influenced by the political turmoil in Russia.¹⁴ The unlikely and sudden rise of a former KGB agent to the top of

⁷ . "Goals and objectives of the Art-Group Voina in the period 2008-2010," *Free Voina*, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

⁸ . Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement*, 34.

⁹ . "Actions of Voina", *Free Voina*, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

¹⁰ . Henry Langston, "Russia's Art War - An Interview with Voina," *Vice*, April 4, 2011, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/russias-art-war/page/2.

¹¹ . "About Voina", *Free Voina*, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

¹² . Gessen, *Worlds Will Break Cement*, 34.

¹³ . Alexei Plutser-Sarno, member of Voina, interview by Paco Barragán, *Art Pulse Magazine*, January 5, 2012, <http://artpulsemagazine.com/voina-a-russian-revolution>.

Kremlin had seized democratic developments and effectively disabled political opposition. In the years following Putin's rise to power, Russia's electoral system was disassembled and media was taken over by the Kremlin. After the chaos of the 1990's, Russia had once again fallen into the hands of an authoritarian ruler. These developments were not answered by sheer apathy from the public, as thousands of people partook in the Marches of the Disagreeable¹⁵ at the time Voina was formed. Being aware of the existing political opposition being smothered by the authorities, Voina recognized the potential in provocative measures. Engaging in political protest art would offer an alternative means of communication with the public in the symbolic war against their common enemies of cops, philistines, and the regime.¹⁶ As artists, Voina had to challenge the paradoxical relationship of art and politics, burdened by the heavy history of the Soviet Union and the ideological void followed by its collapse. As Masha Gessen describes, "they wanted to confront a language that had once been effectively confronted but had since been reconstructed and reinforced, discrediting the language of confrontation itself."¹⁷ It occurred to artists such as Voina, that going about illegally could generate more attention from the public which had grown immune to the message broadcasted through official channels.

Voina's war against philistines, namely the people lacking or hostile to cultural values and aesthetic refinement, would be an open attack both against the contemporary art scene and government officials. In the manner of Khrushchev denouncing unofficial art as "private psycho-pathological distortions of the public conscience"¹⁸ in 1964, the Putin regime had mobilized to battle against undesirable art. Through censorship and the arresting of artists, the Russian state claimed authorship to art produced within its borders.¹⁹ Socialist realism had insidiously been replaced by a dogma of patriotism and any criticizing art forms should be treated as a political threat to the state. Moreover, both curators and museum directors have been sentenced for displaying contemporary art not sympathetic to the government.²⁰ By jailing members of the art society, the state enforces its ideology on institutions and subdues its liberties. Through such totalitarian actions, contemporary artists are faced with the decision to comply or rebel. For Voina, this meant choosing rebellion and renouncing official art institutions along with its possible middlemen.

Another reason for the decision to proceed through direct action was the collective's desire to bring art closer to life. At the time Voina were planning their first action, the Russian contemporary art scene was dominated by commercially successful artists, disinclined to address current political themes.²¹ The art collective The Blue Noses offered an alternative through creating ironic and mischievous images, emerging from the collective consciousness.

¹⁴ . Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ . Ibid.

¹⁶ . "About Voina", *Free Voina*, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

¹⁷ . Gessen, *Worlds Will Break Cement*, 35.

¹⁸ . Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 152.

¹⁹ . Taryn Jones, „The Blue Noses,” *Art in Russia*, last modified October, 19, 2012, <http://artinrussia.org/the-blue-noses/> .

²⁰ . Ibid.

²¹ . Gessen, *Worlds Will Break Cement*, 34.

The group was founded by Alexander Shaburov and Vyacheslav Mizin in 1999 and was generally dubbed as the ‘Dumb and Dumber’ of the Russian contemporary arts scene.²² The underlined sarcasm thus worked as an apologetic gesture, undermining any real significance behind the provocation. Pranksters or not, The Blue Noses have been attacked by state officials multiple times. In 2009, both the curator and the director of Sakharov Center were charged with “inciting religious and ethnic hatred,”²³ after displaying two controversial photographs from The Blue Noses as a part of their exhibition on banned art. The picture causing the polemic was entitled *Chechen Marilyn (2005)*, which addressed Russia’s issues with multiple different ethnicities living in the Caucasus region. The other photograph displayed, *Era of Mercy (2005)*, proved to be a real nuisance to the authorities. This was not because the picture incited hatred towards a specific group, but rather the disturbing lack thereof. In *Era of Mercy* two police officers are portrayed in an ardent embrace amidst a snow-covered birch forest. The picture was to be displayed abroad in 2007, but was detained by former Culture Minister Alexander Sokolov as “erotic and a disgrace to Russia.”²⁴ The international public attention following the decision to withdraw the image only served to heighten the work’s popularity in the west, where such a work without the scandal would have otherwise gone largely unnoticed. Despite Russia being a country “marked by open displays of homophobia”²⁵ the image found acceptance in certain cultural circles. The reaction to The Blue Noses’ politically and socially controversial art reflects the government’s truculent attitude towards forms of cultural opposition. The group offers an akin example of the confrontation of art and politics inside the gallery, as opposed to Voina and Pussy Riot taking the action out to the streets.

Voina expressed their support for the two imprisoned curators of the Sakharov Center in May 2009, by organizing an action in the Moscow district court. The action was entitled “Concert in a Courtroom,” consisting of Voina members performing a short punk song for the defense of the accused. The group wanted to draw attention especially to the growing influence of the Orthodox Church in matters of morality and politics, as well as the corruption of the juridical establishment.²⁶ Respectful to Voina’s good taste, the members introduced themselves as the punk collective *Cock in the Ass*, their song entitled “All Cops are Bastards.” In addition, members from the collective released a pack of cockroaches into the court building as a subversive gesture against the charade taking place inside.²⁷ The musical, yet dissonant interception organized by Voina anticipated the emergence of Pussy Riot. The all-female punk rockers would come to inherit Voina’s deliberate lack of sophistication as a form to undermine the spectacles of officialdom.

²² . Jones, “The Blue Noses,” <http://artinrussia.org/the-blue-noses/> .

²³ . Sophia Kishkovsky, “Organizers of Art Show Convicted in Moscow,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/13/arts/design/13curators.html?_r=0.

²⁴ . Ibid.

²⁵ . Ibid.

²⁶ . Alex Plutser-Sarno, ‘Новая акция Войны ’Хуй в Очко,’ ” (blog), May 29, 2009 (12:50), <http://plucer.livejournal.com/157798.html#cutid1>.

²⁷ . Kishkovsky, “Organizers of Art Show Convicted in Moscow”.

2.2 The Feast

The first successful action by Voina took place underground on the Moscow metro. The performance was entitled *The Feast* and presented a funeral wake held in the honor of the Russian contemporary artist and poet, Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov. The action was organized the 24th of August in 2007, about a month after Prigov's death. Before his passing away, the artist had agreed to perform together with Voina on an action.²⁸ In their first thoroughly planned performance, Prigov would be sitting inside a wardrobe, reading poetry, whilst being carried up the stairs of the Moscow State University. Prigov was a known dissident artist in the Soviet Union, therefore sympathizing with Voina's independence. As late as 1986, the artist was arrested by the KGB and sent to a psychiatric institution after performing the street action of handing out poetry to passers-by.²⁹ "The Feast" commemorated his memory by staging a traditional Russian wake amongst the public, in the symbolic communal space of the metro. Instead of climbing on the top of the Moscow University, Voina ascended inside another symbol of Soviet Monumentalism and the Stalin era. The participants consisted of approximately a dozen young people who got on the metro and set up red plastic picnic tables along the carriage.³⁰ They would then lay out the tables with traditional sweet and savory dishes accompanied by vodka and wine. The plan was to drive a full circle around the central line and invite fellow travelers to participate in the wake. Oleg Vorotnikov recited an early poem by Prigov, appropriate for the situation:

"My ambition is serving as compost

For the future, more rational sort

So a youth, full of merit and purpose,

*Grows tall in my fertilized dirt —"*³¹

Pyotr Verzilov, member of Voina, described the feast as a "total installation", applying the artist Ilya Kabakov's definition of an art work which blurs the lines between the audience and the artist.³² The observer is "simultaneously both a 'victim' and a viewer, who on the one hand surveys and evaluates the installation, and on the other, follows those associations, recollections which arise in him, he is overcome by the intense atmosphere of the total

²⁸ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 36.

²⁹ . Sophia Kishkovsky, "Dmitri Prigov, 66, Poet Who Challenged Soviet Authority, Dies," *NY Times*, July 20, 2007,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/20/books/20prigov.html?ex=1342584000&en=2abefdd4279f2682&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&r=0>.

³⁰ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 38.

³¹ . *Ibid.*, 39.

³² . *Ibid.*

illusion.”³³ Voina’s action encapsulated the essence of the Russian wake as filled with sentimentality and generous pouring of vodka. *The Feast* enacted a situation arising from the collective memory by combining gestures of Soviet officialdom with age-old Russian traditions. *The Feast* can be interpreted as an interactive installation, a participatory event, which invited the public to co-author the meaning of the work. Albeit the fellow passengers declined the refreshments offered by *Anton the Crazy One*³⁴, blinis and candy went around amongst the participants with delight.³⁵

The happening was witnessed by several people taking photos and videos, of which many were members of the press. Documentation on Voina’s behalf took place in the form of a video, which would later be edited into a short clip accompanied by a text narrative. Voina would continue recording their later actions, which would all be edited and published on their website. *The Feast* was later restaged in the metro of Kiev after a local television show had discovered the video clip of their original action.³⁶

The public success followed by *The Feast* legitimated Voina’s position in the contemporary art scene. However, Voina would lack similar authenticity and the experience of genuine participation in their later actions. Because Voina had always been so certain of their motives’ righteousness their attitude inevitably excluded the public as not intelligible enough to participate. In essence, the group would only welcome people ready to be subjugated in the established ideology. The structure of Voina resembles the ideological foundations so central to many western art collectives during the early 20th century. Furthermore, it can be argued that the group’s ideological radicalism ultimately contributed to their short life-span. By becoming more aggressive, Voina would eventually establish a conflict-ridden relationship with the police, culminating in the imprisonment of Oleg Vorotnikov.³⁷ Voina’s disdain of corrupt authorities would serve as a cornerstone for several future actions; after all, the group listed “cops” as its “enemies” amongst philistines and the regime.³⁸

2.3 Operation Kiss Garbage

After Voina started waning in 2010, two separate groups were formed under the same name. The first one continued the familiar style of terrorizing law enforcement under the guidance of Oleg Vorotnikov. In 2011, the separatists of Voina and the future members of Pussy Riot, created an all-female action entitled *Operation Kiss Garbage*.³⁹ The idea was simple: the women would walk up to police officers of the same sex and smother them gently by kissing

³³ . Ilya Kabakov, *On the "Total" Installation* (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz, 1995), 245.
https://ccrma.stanford.edu/courses/155/assignment/resources/kabakov_total_installation_readings_reduced.pdf

³⁴ . Pseudonym of a Voina member, Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 38.

³⁵ . “Pir,” YouTube video, 9:29, posted by ”michikokoz”, October 10, 2008,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDzjD6wBz8M>.

³⁶ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 40.

³⁷ . “The Arrest”, *Free Voina*, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

³⁸ . “About Voina”, *Free Voina*, <http://en.free-voina.org/about>.

³⁹ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 59.

on the lips. Originally, the action was to include men as well, except they all failed to participate before the critical hour.⁴⁰ The performance was recorded and made viral on International Women's Day on the 8th of March, suitable for the occasion.⁴¹ Albeit the action was published under Voina's name, it signified a refreshing change of direction from their previous style. Targeting the police was a decision influenced by President Medvedev's hollow decree of renaming the Russian law enforcement *militsiya* to *politsiya*, as if the culture of corruption would magically disappear along with the Soviet connotations of the name.⁴² When the artists were later questioned on their manner of aggressively forcing themselves on the officers, the future Pussy Riot member Yekaterina Samutsevich responded: "A cop's face is communal property,—, a nothing but a tool for communicating with citizens. We are proposing a new way of interacting with this tool; we are introducing variety into the relationship between the people and the police."⁴³ The act of kissing female officers, who embody the concept of a walking sexual object in their official clothing of high heels and tight skirts, was interpreted as emancipating. Furthermore, the homophobic legislation and language employed by the Moscow Mayor ignited the action.⁴⁴ *Operation Kiss garbage* was not only different in its underlying references to LGBTQ rights and feminism, but because it was executed independently by women. The distinct difference between Pussy Riot and Voina is that the latter was defined as a collective of artists and their wives, whereas the former can be considered to be their separate production. Instead of being a mere appendix of their husbands, the women parting from Voina were finally ready to create their own collective.

⁴⁰ . Ibid.

⁴¹ . Ibid.

⁴² . Ibid., 58.

⁴³ .Ibid., 60.

⁴⁴ .Ibid.

3 Defining Participatory Art

A Russian riot, the draw of protest

*A Russian Riot, Putin has pissed himself*⁴⁵

On January 20th, 2012, Pussy Riot performed a punk song titled “Putin has pissed himself” on the Red Square in Moscow. Being fully aware of the historical significance of the location, Pussy Riot consciously joined the list of Russian contemporary artists who had previously performed on the square. Despite the location being somewhat overexposed, the group also recognized the value of the scene for a political protest. Just a few hundred meters away from Kremlin’s doors and Putin’s headquarters, the song was especially dedicated to the authoritarian ruler. Like other actions performed by the collective, this one relied heavily on the context assigned by its site-specificity. By occupying the official stage for state propaganda Pussy Riot continued with its practices of public intervention. In order to engage with their audience, the group took to the streets just as the Dadaists had done first almost a century ago.⁴⁶ These Dada events, which André Breton referred to as “Artificial Hells,” were the historical forerunners of art concerned with participation. By seeking to involve the public of Paris in their performances, the Dadaists were the first to anticipate the development of socially engaging art forms. Thus, the first examples of participation can be found from the period of historical avant-garde.

In recent historical context the organizing of such public performances has come to be known through different artists employing social participation as a central structural element in their work. When the supply list for the performance includes “lots of people”, and no physical art object is present, chances are high that the work revolves around social relations. The proliferation of such art forms in the 1990’s created a need for a theoretical language to evolve, a call which was first answered by the French curator Pierre Bourriaud. In 1998 he coined the term *relational aesthetics* in his book by the same name. However, the ambitious aim of assigning a variety of art practices under the same definition left noticeable room for revising. Bourriaud’s original assessments have since been re-evaluated and critically constructed, particularly by Claire Bishop. She emphasizes the social dimension of participation and the collective experience in bringing art closer to everyday life.⁴⁷ Instead of concentrating solely on the aesthetics of relations, she accentuates the politicized working process of participation.⁴⁸ The possibility for an empowering experience through physical or symbolic participation offers an indicator on whether the work has succeeded or not. Since the heart of the work lies in the interactions between participants, critical focus is not concentrated on a physical object. Therefore, the aesthetics of participation are defined by the

⁴⁵ . *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer For Freedom* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), 36.

⁴⁶ . Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 4.

⁴⁷ . *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁸ . *Ibid.*

achievability of a relationship, which succeeds in producing a sociopolitical realization.⁴⁹ The objective of Pussy Riot can be described in terms defined by Bishop: Through disruption of the everyday routine the participants will hopefully become more aware of the surrounding social and political reality in which to locate themselves. Bishop recognizes the underlying political implications of such art forms in the manner of “personal is political” and calls for a more critically informed discussion on the topic.⁵⁰ She highlights the theoretical parting point from Bourriaud’s original assessments by referring to such art practices as *participatory art*. Hence, this definition will also be used in the context of Pussy Riot and Voina.

Similar art practices have been referred to as socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and social practice.⁵¹ The variety of names illustrate the multidisciplinary roles acquired by participatory art and the theoretical flexibility of such practices. Participation as a means of art is in continuous exchange with other disciplines. It shows us an integral interest in art to form relationships with spheres of ethics and politics, as well as pedagogy and social studies.⁵²

3.1 Participation and social practice

The bloom of participation since the 1990’s has not only been a shift in the European art scene but a global phenomenon.⁵³ The explanation lies behind the growing desire for a shared, communal experience in art, at a time when individualism is commercially promoted.⁵⁴ The emergence of social art practices not only reflect current societies, but have a historical past in the enthusiasm to invent art again. New forms of artistic expression eradicate the well-established relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. Art no longer needs to be confined by physical boundaries. At the same time, globalization makes the sharing of social experiences break cultural boundaries.

In the core of participation lies a counteraction to the state of modern society to which art is formulating responses. Put into words by Jacques Rancière, “art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but a lack of connections.”⁵⁵ The essential problem is the excess in everything which can be owned and the capitalistic culture surrounding us which concentrates purely on the satisfaction of individualistic needs. The traditional notion of art objects produced for the market by the single and lucrative artist fails to respond to the needs of this politically incited counteraction. Through participation, the lines of this triangular model can be blurred to the extent of complete eradication. Furthermore, the market driven

⁴⁹ . Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, (2004): 64, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/1701/SS04October.pdf>.

⁵⁰ . Ibid.

⁵¹ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

⁵² . Ibid., 1-10.

⁵³ . Ibid., 8.

⁵⁴ . Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses du réel 2002), 7-10.

⁵⁵ . Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (Polity, 2009), 57, http://www.aaronvandyke.net/summer_readings/Ranciere-Problems%20and%20Transformations%20of%20Critical%20Art.pdf.

idea of the artist's position as the nucleus of the work is abolished by establishing multiple authorities. On the one hand, the artist, or group of artists, transforms into a participant by becoming an active producer in the situation. The audience, on the other hand, becomes a participant or a co-producer of the work by assigning the work its meaning.⁵⁶ As a consequence, the audience is emancipated from being a passive receptor and the artist acquires a less centralized position. The toppling of existing hierarchies is the central objective for Pussy Riot, beginning from the art world and extending to the society at large.

3.2 Participation as art

Art works based on participation are characterized by their open-endedness, and their quality of a "work-in-process."⁵⁷ Participation is affected by its meanings gained through other connections and its fluidity through time. Experience is not only limited to the actual duration of the performance, but rather continues in the reception of the work. As the work is not based on physical qualities it becomes portable both in the mind of the participant as well as physically through the internet. For instance, the situations organized by Pussy Riot last around a few minutes, yet the majority of participants aren't even physically present. These participants are referred to as the secondary audience⁵⁸ who gain their subjective experience from recordings, photographs and written descriptions after the performance has taken place. In essence, the actual chain of reaction is created by the buzz of reception. Pussy Riot does this by compiling a video-clip of the situation, often followed by a short narrative and the lyrics of the song. Hence, the video accompanied by audio is the main physical product of the performance which is meant to spread the collective experience to a larger audience. It is also the "the mediating object" between Pussy Riot and the secondary audience. In other words, the meaning of physical participation in the actual scene of the performance is irrelevant for the establishing of relations. Therefore the situations produced by Pussy Riot rely heavily on the assuredly democratic space of the internet for circulation.

The dimension of performing characteristic to participatory art derives from its close relationship to performance art and the realm of theatre.⁵⁹ However, participatory projects differ in their emphasis on collaboration, which desires to make the separation between performer and audience indistinct. The collective dimension of social experience blurs the lines between professional and amateur, consequently locating the essence of the work in between as a shared experience. Theatricality is an element Pussy Riot incorporates in their performances when putting on their neon hued balaclavas, matching with their multicolored tights and bright dresses. Albeit the covering of faces serve the practical purpose of a hidden identity, the balaclavas have since become a part of the Pussy Riot brand. They are an effective way for its members to identify themselves as a part of the group which otherwise works in terms on anonymity and consists of a fluctuating cast of participants. Such props also facilitate putting on the character of a fierce feminist punk rocker. Additional core element of performing is the symbolization of going on stage. It is the locational requirement

⁵⁶ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

⁵⁷ . Ibid., 208.

⁵⁸ . Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ . Ibid., 2.

for a punk performance in the limelight. The choosing of a right platform can also serve a practical purpose when the performance takes place illegally. The function of the stage is to mark the physical boundaries of the constructed situation, as well as protect from the authorities trying to seize your actions prematurely. For Pussy Riot, different constructions from garage roof tops to sacred altars and public monuments have served as stage during performances. A sense of theatricality can be heightened by firing up light bombs, using banners, or burning pictures of authoritarian figures.

Yet another dimension of performative acts is the construction of gender as argued by Judith Butler in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988). Just as the role of a feminist punk rocker, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure.”⁶⁰ Thus, the theatrical context in the case of Pussy Riot serves not only for facilitating social collaboration but it also relates to a range of theoretical questions about the act of gender in patriarchal society. By adopting the aggressive language of punk, Pussy Riot purposely shatters worn out conceptions of femininity as passive or submissive. From their act arises the possibility for a cultural transformation to take place in Russian society, a message both Pussy Riot and participation constitutionally hold within.

3.3 The relationship of participation and politics

Cultural transformations have to be supported by the political system of the society in order to be realized. The objective of Pussy Riot is to attain political influence through art in a society where other forms of influence seem to be efficiently blocked. This creates a variety of important questions concerned with the relationship of art and politics. By trying to equal artistic influence with politics, the work risks overlooking “the limitations of what is possible as art.” As the artist Thomas Hirschhorn states, “I am not an animator, teacher or social-worker.”⁶¹ The declaration of political agendas in the manner of Pussy Riot is impossible for many contemporary artists working in the democratic west as they lack a similar political antagonist for their work. It is important to distinct the differences between democratic and authoritarian societies as providing different frameworks for producing critical art.

Since participatory art often employs politicized themes, it also influences the critical analysis of the art work. If ethical is automatically equated as a “good work of art”, it implies that *quality* and *equality* are concepts simply parallel to each other. Making democratic arguments on the behalf of art makes the critical assessment of the work a difficult task, but nevertheless it should not raise art above the notion of quality. As Bishop notes, “Some projects are indisputably more rich, dense and inexhaustible than others,”⁶² making claim for constructive criticism. In regard to participatory art, the critical language traditionally applied in aesthetics has to widen its perspectives to include practical, political, social, and ethical factors. Making good politics doesn’t necessarily make good art.

⁶⁰ . Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, No. 4, (1988):153, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>.

⁶¹ . Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 79.

⁶² . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 8.

The rhetoric around socially engaging art forms largely revolve around the notion of equality.⁶³ Canceling out the position of a single profitable artist has traditionally been seen as a more democratic form of creating. When a performance is composed by a collective, as in the case of Pussy Riot, the authorship of the work is dispersed within the artists. By emancipating the audience in the position of a co-producer, participation is shared further. The work is based on a joint realization, which then gives actual political and artistic significance back to the work. These relations form the core of the work, placing individuals in the context of a community. Albeit participation in principle constitutes a democratic sphere of art, in practice structures can risk becoming hierarchized especially within the group.

A feature of equality inside the group is their pledge for anonymity - that is, as long as it can be protected. After the performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, selected members of the collective were elevated to an authoritarian status. When three of the collective's artists were singled out to carry the consequences publicly, their exposed identities became a part of a message previously promoted anonymously. Since then, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolonnikova have become the centralized members of the group and consequently its official mediators. The lavish international attention around Pussy Riot puts the group's original ideology of abolishing creative hierarchies under risk as personas become heightened above the art they produce.

An important dimension of participation is how it also works as an indicator for democracy. In *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, Bishop argues that antagonism in social relationships have a stabilizing effect in society.⁶⁴ According to the art historian Rosalyn Deutsche, public space is democratic only insofar as it offers the possibility for oppositional views to be expressed; "Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence."⁶⁵ It is exactly these invisible boundaries Pussy Riot exposes and aims to distinguish by performing in the public space. The official reaction to *A Punk Prayer* was merely the last drop for Putin in the series of anti-government performances, pushing the limits of seemingly democratic spaces to the extreme. The consequence was the revealing of a totalitarian state with a parliamentary system as a front. The authorities desire to silence any conflicting opinions constituted as the fundamental sociopolitical realization for the participants, i.e. the public. What the government failed to understand was that their aggressive reaction would only serve to validate the message of the group. The relationship of the public space reflecting the democratic level of society is a constructive element for Pussy Riot's performances.

3.4 Theoretical framework

Interest towards the eradication of existing hierarchies is hardly a new notion in the world of art. Such art practices have traditionally been strongly ideological, relying on Marxist theory and the opposing of the capitalist consumer spectacle. The revolutionary desire to change society through the incorporation of art into life aims to misplace the art object from its high

⁶³ . Ibid., 7.

⁶⁴ . Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"65.

⁶⁵ . Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 289. https://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/deutsche_agoraphobia.pdf.

pedestal and to reinvent the traditional relationships surrounding it. Another reason for the interest in human relations rather than the individual's aesthetic experience is the increase of visual messages in everyday areas of life. The city has become saturated of images mediating consumerist values; aesthetic experience has turned into an everyday activity of filtering out the overflow of meaningless messages. Thus, politically inclined art has answered by appropriating a new language suitable for the era of advanced capitalism. The passive spectators are turned into active participants through means of art.

As a central reference point to contemporary artists working with participation, including Pussy Riot, are the ideas formulated by the French film-maker and writer Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). In this collection of 221 short theses, Debord lays out his theory for "constructed situations" which interfere with the spellbinding spectacles of consumerist capitalism. Debord was a central figure in the collective Situationist International (SI), whose members regarded themselves as social revolutionaries. The group was formed in 1957 via exclusive membership of intellectuals and artists. The collective's original assertion of turning art into life gradually led to an increasing incapability of realization and the alienating of artists from the group. The first years of SI from 1957 to 1962 are generally regarded as their most receptive phase towards art.⁶⁶ During this period the Situationists organized group exhibitions in commercial galleries of Paris, which concentrated on the dismantling of the institution of single authorship. Characterizing to these exhibitions were the abstract paintings produced on a roll of canvas and be sold by the meter, which the artist Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio referred to as "industrial paintings".⁶⁷ The group's growing demands for more radical forms of art merging with revolutionary practice eventually limited major developments to the theoretical field.

According to Debord, capitalistic society had become disillusioned by the ongoing spectacle. The spectacle has come to replace authentic social relations by their mere representation, a condition which can be interfered by the construction of situations.⁶⁸ The dehumanizing effects of the spectacle which epitomizes "the prevailing model of social life"⁶⁹ can be suspended by active participation. The theory has been embraced by leftist artists and curators as highlighting the importance of social participation because "it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production."⁷⁰ Debord further describes the creation of collective environments as "the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature."⁷¹ According to Debord, the role of art is to overturn the everyday of falsified social relationships through authentic human interaction. Aware of the theoretical

⁶⁶ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 82.

⁶⁷ . Ibid.

⁶⁸ . Guy Debord, "Towards a Situationist International," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 96.

⁶⁹ . Guy Debord, *The Society of The Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), thesis 6.

http://www.antiworld.se/project/references/texts/The_Society%20Of%20The%20Spectacle.pdf.

⁷⁰ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 11.

⁷¹ . Debord, "Towards Situationist International", in *Participation*, 96.

implications, Pussy Riot's design is to organize actions which both stimulate and shake the everyday spectacle of modern life.

Central to the Situationists' theory on how to produce effective critical art forms is the idea of *détournement*. Instead of adding to the excess of signs employed by the spectacle, proper critical response would be attained by reappropriating images in a manner which would undermine their original significance.⁷² As Bishop states, "*détournement* was regarded as the more successful the less it approached a rational reply."⁷³ The relationship of *détournement* with Dadaist and Surrealist art practices are obvious. Where surrealists sought to unravel unseen meanings, Dadaists employed the tactics of nonsense and absurdity in right proportions. The political photomontage by the artist John Heartfield of Hitler swallowing gold and turning it into meaningless gibberish encapsulate the idea of *détournement*. In essence, the ideological function of capitalist consumerism should be reversed by knocking the bottom out of the spectacle.

Contemporary artists have interpreted Debord's ideas of constructed situations through different outcomes. For Pussy Riot, the connection to Debord's theory of the spectacle is obvious: The group actively refers to its performances as "situations" or "happenings", acknowledging the theoretical implications behind. By applying DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetics and the intensity of punk attitude to their actions, their constructed situations successfully manage to break the hypnotic bond of the spectacle. Loud music and obscene lyrics serve the purpose of gaining immediate attention, accompanied by the performers' bright colors and fidgeting dancing moves. Since Pussy Riot doesn't announce the locations for their performances beforehand, a chaotic sense of immediacy is effectively preserved. It seems as if the group is almost too aware of the theoretical implications of their work, as their situations so fundamentally disturb the everydayness of given surroundings. In a society so completely submerged in the spectacle only extreme measures are capable of breaking the mesmerizing bond, as Pussy Riot surely feels about the situation.

3.5 Participation in contemporary context

In *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud claims that contemporary participatory art differs from that of the earlier generations concerned in Marxist dialectic and revolutionary aspirations.⁷⁴ Instead of trying to establish new utopias, Bourriaud sees contemporary artists as more interested in the creation of *microtopias*: "It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows."⁷⁵ This statement also suggests that artists today are more keen on engaging with like-minded people in the setting provided by current social order instead of trying to change existing conditions for creating larger communities. If utopia becomes replaced by microtopias, the toppling of hierarchical social relations seems to be a dream of yesterday. As Bishop notes, "since the 1970's, older avant-garde rhetoric of opposition and transformation have been frequently replaced by

⁷² . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 84.

⁷³ . Ibid.

⁷⁴ . Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 163.

⁷⁵ . Ibid., 45.

strategies of complicity.”⁷⁶ Hence, compliance has seemingly taken over radical forms of art. Behind these developments lie the changes in political ideologies after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the self-declared victory of capitalism. Consequently, the contemporary participatory art practices concentrate less on the emancipation of the proletariat as a social class, and more on the emancipation of distinct groups relevant to current topics in social inequality. Increased interest in social field towards LGBTQ rights, feminist issues and immigration address the rights of specific groups instead of an abstract notion of a utopia. Thus, it can be argued that utopias have not completely been replaced by compliance, but rather a more concentrated criticism of flawed social structures.

Furthermore, this paradigm does not seem to align with the political inclinations of Pussy Riot, which in no way represent tendencies of compliance. Has art in the democratic west become tamed by their historical predecessors and exhausted by the revolutionary language of yesterday’s ideologies? Or are the situations constructed by contemporary artists becoming compliant with the society of the spectacle, incapable of transforming social structures beyond the creation of temporary intermissions?

The paradox of critical art’s ineffectiveness for permanent transformation is an issue addressed by the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere. The problem as he sees it lies in the inability of participation to activate people beyond raising awareness. As Ranciere states rather pessimistically, “the exploited have rarely had the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them.”⁷⁷ According to Ranciere, mere understanding of the injustice in existing power structures have little potential for the transformation of consciousness and situations.⁷⁸ Ranciere claims that it is not the “misunderstanding of the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed,”⁷⁹ which assumes that the realization of being oppressed should be somewhat self-evident before entering into participation. However, the totalitarian reaction of the Russian authorities leading to the imprisonment of three members of Pussy Riot almost certainly took the public by surprise. The jailing of artists leads to a powerful realization of the government’s undemocratic procedures used to oppress those who do not simply comply with the rules.

The problem with critical art, as Ranciere sees it, is how it risks inscribing itself into the already existing excess of interpretative signs. Hence, critical art faces the challenge of becoming a mere ineffective addition to the spectacle, eventually taming out any resistance altogether. This is why critical art has to be able to utilize the relationship of art and politics properly by means of *détournement*.⁸⁰ In the manner of Duchamp’s mustachioed Mona Lisa (1919), an art work becomes critically effective through the successful reversing of already existing signs. In regard to Pussy Riot, *détournement* is accomplished by applying current political themes in an irrational manner, namely by acquiring the appearance of a punk band.

⁷⁶ . Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 71.

⁷⁷ . Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” in Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Polity, 2009), 45, http://www.aaronvandyke.net/summer_readings/Ranciere-Problems%20and%20Transformations%20of%20Critical%20Art.pdf.

⁷⁸ . Ibid.

⁷⁹ . Ibid.

⁸⁰ . Ibid., 47.

3.6 Social under Socialism

As argued in the chapter 2.3, participatory art produced in the democratic West works within a different political framework compared to contemporary Russia. Collectivism, the foundational implication for participatory art has different cultural connotations between liberal democracies and post-soviet societies. In order to understand Pussy Riot in its cultural context, the history of participation under socialist state rule needs to be introduced. The effects of historical developments influence the cultural conditions foundational to societies today, and consequently influence the art produced. As Bishop argues, the connotations of participation echo differently in the histories of the west compared to the east.⁸¹

In the Soviet Union, collectivism was a norm imposed on the people by the state, penetrating the sphere of both everyday and private life. As the historian Jochen Hellbeck has argued, Soviet identities were successfully manipulated by the socialist ideology to the extent of suppressing private identities.⁸² In art historical context the same issue is addressed by Victor Tupitsyn, who speaks of “the communal perception.”⁸³ The communal perception is inherently opposed to individualized vision, binding together geographical culture and art produced within such lines. At the same time, communal sight diminished the gap between the viewer and the socialist hero, inviting the audience to participate in the ideological indulgence present in the image. Albeit the days of socialism are formally over, the “heritage” of totalitarian past⁸⁴ echoes in the dissident art produced by young Russian artists today.

The socialist state promoted communalism by organizing mass spectacles where the individual had value only insofar it benefited the body. These events of unified collectivism had the single purpose of mesmerizing the public through monumentality and displays of strength without any concern to the real problems in people’s lives. Sadly, such spectacles did not end after the fall of communism, but continued under a new premise, patriotism. The Victory Day parade organized yearly in the Red Square in Moscow is the very epitome of the spectacle, as it only offers delirious images to distract the people from authentic relationships. The ideology has changed its name since, but still employs the same language learned from socialist propaganda. Although the Soviet Union officially lacked the capitalist spectacle to antagonize, the spectacle of Soviet bureaucracy was in no way less capable of anesthetizing the people.

The predicament of participation in Soviet Union was not necessarily the lack of a proper antagonist, but rather the constant excess of ideology which saturated everyday life. In principle participation could have simply become an inverted version of the West. Instead the premise changed all together. As Bishop states, “participatory art under state socialism was

⁸¹ . Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 129.

⁸² . Jochen Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9,” in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 77-116.

⁸³ .Viktor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (post)modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 13, <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/VIKTOR-TUPITSYN-The-Museological-Unconscious.htm>.

⁸⁴ . Ibid.

often deployed as a means to create a privatized sphere of individual expression.”⁸⁵ Artists were under a constant pressure of keeping up with public appearances and producing art suitable for the communal perception. Since society was wrapped in political ideology, artists in general had little interest to engage in political matters. Suppressed feelings of disappointment in the dominant state dogma did not serve to encourage artists to contribute to its structures of community. The suppression of individualism thus found a way of expression through participation, questioning communality as a foundational premise.

Unofficial art was efficiently controlled through the formation of Union of Soviet Artists in 1932, of which every artist was to be a member. The highly regulated and hierarchized union controlled artistic freedom by subordinating produced works under the official dogma of Soviet Realism. Under these circumstances, participatory art provided a more democratized form of art as it offered the possibility to realize oneself outside the official system. In contrast, contemporary artists working with participation seek to openly challenge the prevailing structures of power in spite of facing political persecution.

⁸⁵ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 4.

4 Introducing Pussy Riot

Pussy Riot emerged from the ashes of the actionist art collective Voina during the protest waves of 2011 in Russia, caused by the re-election of Putin to power. The group was founded by Yekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova in the form of a collective, open to all ideological sympathizers of the female sex. The continuous fluctuation in the group's assembly characterizes the open-endedness of their work. The ambiguous and fluid nature of the collective is strengthened further by endeavors of de-individualization. The group commonly addresses its members by pseudonyms and has had participants join their actions completely anonymously.⁸⁶ The message is that anyone can become, and successfully embody, the phenomena of Pussy Riot. By recycling costumes between actions, stage personas become consisted of multiple identities. The Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek comments on the erasing of individuals for the sake of creating a community: "the message of their balaclavas is that it doesn't matter which of them got arrested — they're not individuals, they're an Idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea!"⁸⁷ But what is this "Idea" composed of?

The objective of the group is to promote feminism and social equality, regardless of one's sexual orientation. Gender and LGBTQ rights construct the group's principal themes with which they aim to "enrich the Russian cultural and political opposition."⁸⁸ By bringing their act to the public space, Pussy Riot intends to highlight problems of sexism, male domination, and hypocrisy penetrating the Russian society and government. In many ways, they embody the message of the diverse political opposition by openly resisting Putin. The aggressiveness of their act challenges the conformity of the contemporary art scene, which is currently absent of any daring political message. The social message is spread by acquiring the form of a punk band, complete with a DIY aesthetic and rebellion towards the governing system. Pussy Riot has stylistically been inspired by the 1990's Riot grrrl-movement which consisted of several feminist underground punk rock bands. Riot Grrrl originated in the United States, involving political activism for the emancipation of women in music as well as other creative spheres. Another significant reference point to Pussy Riot is the Guerrilla Girls activist group, which criticizes the male dominance of the art world. Anonymity and covering of faces behind hairy gorilla masks facilitate concentration on the actual issues instead of personalities. In addition, Guerrilla Girls aim to be shocking and willing to upset people for their cause. Since Russia had never experienced a feminist revolt in culture, Pussy Riot looked west in order to define its language for proper agitation. Pussy Riot employs aesthetic means associated with the third-wave feminist movement, despite working within a cultural frame where feminist issues have never been comprehensively addressed. The lack of such a foundation explains the difficulties of contemporary Russian society to understand the message embodied in Pussy Riot. The mixed feelings ignited in many Russians towards the group can be explained in terms of a cultural clash. Though Pussy Riot is easily understood in Western liberal democracies, within the Russian context they are generally regarded as an oddball. Since the

⁸⁶ . Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement*, 99.

⁸⁷ . Slavoj Žižek, "The True Blasphemy", *Dangerous Minds*, 2012, accessed May 5, 2015, http://dangerousminds.net/comments/the_true_blasphemy_slavoj_zhizhek_on_pussy_riot.

⁸⁸ . Pussy Riot, "Meeting Pussy Riot," interview by Henry Langston, *Vice*, March 12, 2012, <http://www.vice.com/read/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot>.

majority of Russian society is unfamiliar with the language Pussy Riot employs, it is thus more comfortable in labeling their actions under hooliganism or blasphemy.

Since attaining international status as a household name, Pussy Riot's artistic integrity is threatened by the surrounding spectacle. By getting involved in politics not only through means of art, criticism towards the group has raised the question whether this jeopardizes their original motives as artists and serious activists. Pussy Riot's transformation from an underground art collective to an international phenomena flirting with popular culture bears witness to the power of the spectacle. By incorporating oppositional culture into the mainstream the spectacle only reinforces itself and effectively annihilates traces of resistance. Similar claims have also been presented by Leon Trotsky in 1938. According to the Marxist intellectual, new tendencies in art are evoked by the desire to rebel. The aura of rebellion against everyday life, be it conscious or unconscious, active or passive, is necessary for creating a truly creative art work.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Trotsky recognizes the historical development of oppositional art as predestined to assimilate with the prevailing culture by stating: "Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion."⁹⁰ Thus, by gaining "official recognition" from the Bourgeois society,⁹¹ Pussy Riot will become absorbed into the antagonistic class it originally sought to oppose.

4.1 Direct Action

As was the case with Voina's *Cock in the Ass*, Pussy Riot took the appearance of a fictional punk band. Musical background was not necessary for participants, albeit it certainly proved useful. Their first songs were done simply by borrowing music composed by a variety of Western punk bands, to which they simply recorded their own lyrics. Interestingly, they also share stylistic parallels to proletarian music composed to heighten the minds of the oppressed. By urging the Russian people to participate in the necessary reconstruction work for a more open and liberal society, Pussy Riot merely replaces the demand for a revolution for that of protest. On the one hand, obvious references to the revolutionary history of Russia, distaste for rulers, and talk of freedom, suggest a willful relationship to Agitprop⁹². On the other hand, politically inclined music for the agitation of the public has little option but to comply with its historical predecessors.

Pussy Riot started by practicing their actions on the Moscow metro, which provided a well-established communal stage for the young art collective. From the early onset, unauthorized performances would lead to a clash with the authorities, as regularly spending time at the police station became a part of their routine. The collective's sense of revolt was inarguably heightened by the antagonism their presence spawned in public spaces. One of their early actions, performed to heighten the minds of political detainees at Special Detention Center Number One, would come to symbolize Pussy Riot as the voice of the mixed opposition. The action entitled "Death to Prison, freedom to Protest", was organized on the

⁸⁹ . Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," *Partisan Review* 11, no. 2 (1950): 61, accessed May 5, 2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>.

⁹⁰ . Ibid.

⁹¹ . Ibid.

⁹² . Agitation Propaganda in Soviet Culture.

top of a garage roof facing the detention center, filled with protesters angered by Putin's announcement to run again for president in 2012.⁹³ The December protest's waves had stirred up the whole country, providing a particularly receptive audience for Pussy Riot. The second time Pussy Riot sang their catchy chorus in "Death to jails", the men behind bars shouted back: "Freedom to protest."⁹⁴ Four women partook in the action, armed with instruments, smoke bombs, and brightly colored balaclavas. As with Voina's actions, Pussy Riot would document their actions in the form of a video. The objective was to edit the material afterwards into a series which would constitute as video art in itself. The group agreed on seriality as their defining style, not only on video but in their performance as well.⁹⁵ A sense of continuity was thus created between actions. The music would usually be recorded beforehand to be mixed together with the video, and the outcome was then posted on official channels online. Documentation constitutes an integral part of the presentation of the collective's work. The group would usually tip off a couple of trusted documentarists with cameras in advance of their next action. Since the actions themselves could be abruptly disrupted, the video would often act as to complete the outcome.

Pussy Riot's most notable action before their appearance in Cathedral of Christ the Savior, took place in the Red Square on January 20th in 2012. The action was well rehearsed beforehand, due to the location's active federal guard control. Eight women partook in the performance, which was miraculously not interfered by the authorities. The group had chosen their spot well, since Ivan the Terrible's stone platform entitled Lobnoye Mesto, was too high above from the ground to remove the women without risking to hurt them in the process. The historically charged spot in the heart of Moscow's political front had served as a stage to multiple Russian activists and contemporary artists. In 2013, Russian contemporary artist named Pyotr Pavlensky protested against the apathy and political indifference of the Russian society in front of Lenin's mausoleum.⁹⁶ The artist nailed his scrotum on the cobbled stones of the square as an extreme statement bound to awaken the interest of western media on the subject. After removing Pavlensky from the premises, the authorities submitted him to psychiatric evaluation, which is still a common procedure in Russia to undermine the social message of artists. Similar to Pavlensky's treatment, the imprisoned members of Pussy Riot underwent psychological examination. The willingness to declare any critical art as the impotent product of an insane person is a relic from the Soviet Union, where the lack of ideological commitment was interpreted as mental retardation.⁹⁷

⁹³ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 97.

⁹⁴ . *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹⁵ . *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁶ . Michael Walsh, "Russian performance artist nails testicles to pavement to protest 'police state' apathy," *Daily News*. November 11, 2013, accessed May 5, 2015.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/russian-nails-testicles-street-protest-police-state-article-1.1512495>.

⁹⁷ . Innokenty Grekov, "Punitive Psychiatry Making a Comeback in Russia?", October 22, 2012, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/2012/10/22/punitive-psychiatry-making-a-comeback-in-russia>.

4.2 The Punk Prayer

By performing on the Red Square, Pussy Riot had become recognized as artists by the Russian media.⁹⁸ Their next action was faced with the anticipation of surpassing the previous one, which was a difficult premise after having performed in the cultural heart of Russia. Finally, The Cathedral of Christ the Savior emerged as providing a suitably controversial venue, due to both its historical and current cultural significance. The church had been demolished in 1931 by Stalin's orders and was later rebuilt in the 90's as a symbol of renunciation of the Soviet Past. In addition, the church was regularly visited by Vladimir Putin and Dmitri A. Medvedev for televised holiday services, as a symbolic gesture of the newly found piousness defining the Post-Soviet era. Religion was employed to reinforce patriotism as the official state dogma, which had come to fill the ideological void left by socialism. Patriarch Kirill openly advocated the Putinist regime, suggesting the authoritarian leader to have been approved by God himself.⁹⁹ As Pussy Riot ironically expressed the problem, "Patriarch Gundyayev¹⁰⁰ believes in Putin / Bitch, better believe in God Instead".¹⁰¹

The relationship of church and state in a constitutionally secular country had been an issue addressed by Voyna regularly in their actions. In 2011, Oleg Vortnikov dressed up as a "Cop in a Priest's Robe", and shoplifted bags filled with groceries without anyone daring to protest against him. The action illustrated the immunity of both authoritarian institutions all too clearly. The privileged position assigned to the church by the Putin government discouraged anyone to question its power. The two art curators, who had been convicted of inciting religious hatred in 2009, served as a precautionary example to the art world of the limits to artistic expression.¹⁰² Albeit the curators had been found guilty, they were never actually imprisoned but punished by fines.¹⁰³ Since the incident had provoked opposition, especially amongst the cultural elite, attacking artists proved to be a disservice to public image. This led Pussy Riot partially to believe that a detente had taken place in cultural atmosphere since, and that the authorities would surely not repeat their mistake.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, when the decision was made to perform in the Church of Christ the Savior, the group had no realistic prognosis of the consequences. In their opinion, the public was ready to participate in *A Punk Prayer*, designed to "chase Putin away."¹⁰⁵ Despite the collective's shared mentality of defiance, not all members agreed to participate in an action so sensitive.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the five performing members were partially disillusioned by Pussy Riot's previous successes, as well as their strong belief in changing society for the better through means of art. Additionally, most of the performers in *A Punk Prayer* had experience in subversive public art as the ex-members of Voyna. In its golden splendor, the Church symbolized Russia's obsession of luxury status-symbols. An early Pussy Riot action had taken place in boutiques along the main shopping

⁹⁸ . Gessen, *Words will Break Cement*, 107.

⁹⁹ . Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ . Patriarch Kirill's worldly last name, Ibid., 118.

¹⁰¹ . Ibid.

¹⁰² . See chapter 2.

¹⁰³ . Kishkovsky, "Organizers of Art Show Convicted in Moscow".

¹⁰⁴ . Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ . *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer For Freedom*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ . Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement*, 111.

street in Moscow, indeed criticizing the mesmerizing power of consumerist capitalism. The promotion of both consumerism and religion by the state was interpreted by Pussy Riot as a clever use of the spectacle, intended to revert any democratic developments. Absurdly enough, the church also provided luxury car wash services, from which profits were directed to personal use, rather than charitable contributions.¹⁰⁷

The Russian Orthodox Church has advocated traditional gender roles as a treatment for contemporary society's problems.¹⁰⁸ Unlike other patriarchal religions, the Orthodox Church has avoided public pressure to discuss emancipation, sparing the age-old institution from any significant reformations. Due to decades of religious persecution by the Soviet state, Orthodoxy has not been confronted by modernization, unlike both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have. Women's role in the Orthodox Church is therefore questioned by a growing tension in developing society, faced by the religious community's stubbornness to properly address the issue. Traditional family values propagated by the Putin regime are authorized further by the religious community. Pussy Riot's action was directed against the patriarchal structures dominating the public sphere. In essence, the role of the Church in institutionalizing misogyny motivated the action, as can be detected from the lyrics of the "punk prayer". To make the issue at hand obvious, Pussy Riot sang "Women must give birth and love" and pleaded "Virgin Mary, Mother of God" to "become a feminist."¹⁰⁹

Decision was made not to disrupt the service, since this might have led to a misinterpretation of Pussy Riot's motives by the public. Instead, during spare hours between services the performers could dare to enter the altar area and its holy premises. After all, the collective targeted the political aspect of religion with their song and had no intentions to ridicule the religious community. The gaudy interior of the Orthodox Church provided the performers with a spectacular venue. Gendered roles inside the cathedral posed a practical dilemma for the collective, since security would not allow women with guitar cases to enter the premises, whereas a man carrying instruments was not considered to be out of the ordinary.¹¹⁰ Thus, the group had to recruit a male friend to bring their electric guitar in. Since the poor lighting in the cathedral posed difficulties, the collective decided to pre-record material for the video inside another church. The rehearsal happened in a less centralized church named the Cathedral of Apparition, stylistically barely distinguishable from the original setting of Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Hence, the video clip published afterwards and entitled as *Virgin Mary Put Putin Away (Punk Prayer)* was ultimately a compilation of both practice and the actual performance.

After the performance was attacked by the Orthodox community, gender was again at the center of controversy. The five women had displayed their bare arms and their dancing choreography had insulted the religious community as indecent. However, it was the line "Shit, shit, holy shit!"¹¹¹ which gave way to accusations of blasphemy. Some Orthodox

¹⁰⁷ . Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ . Nadieszda Kizenko, "Feminized Patriarchy? Orthodoxy and Gender in Post-Soviet Russia," *Signs* 38, No. 3, (2013): 595, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/668516>.

¹⁰⁹ . *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer For Freedom*, 13.

¹¹⁰ . Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement*, 112.

¹¹¹ . *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer For Freedom*, 13.

Nationalists demanded the public flogging of the performers, whereas others showed forgiveness in the manner of Jesus' sympathy towards "fallen women". As Nadieszda Kizenko comments on the reaction of the religious community, "This incident marked a growing conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church and an anticlerical segment of Russian society".¹¹² As the objective of Pussy Riot is to stir controversy in order to reveal the underlying structures of discrimination and political injustice, *Punk Prayer* can be considered to be a successful action. The performance did not only awake international attention, but successfully provoked the Russian society to re-evaluate governing attitudes towards structures of power. Not only did the performance address the relationship of church and state, but also gender as traditionally defined by the Orthodox Church. Moreover, the performance had a dividing influence amongst the public, which can be considered as participants in the work through their role in discussion. The controversy of the action left hardly anyone speechless, least of all those who were confronted critically by it. Whether the impact will prove to be only temporarily is seen in the future development of the Russian society. Through cultural anti-propaganda as performed by Pussy Riot, the public becomes more conscious of the possibilities to alternative developments. Therefore, culture plays a vital role in elevating societies to higher levels of consciousness.

¹¹² . Kizenko, "Feminized Patriarchy?," 609.

5 Conclusion

For Pussy Riot participation represents an efficient method for spreading a social message. Participation's relationship to politicized art and the ability to antagonize provides artists with a powerful tool for igniting action. The history of participatory art has always followed a certain pattern of challenging prevailing structures. From the avant-gardists' revolutionary desire to assimilate art into life, participation has evolved into a popular art form which challenges the ideological vacuum produced by the end of communism in the post-modern era. The interest in socially engaging art forms testifies for the strong, albeit paradoxical, relationship of art and politics. The ethical dimension of participation is connected both with its democratic appearance, as well as its traditionally strong positioning on the moral scale.

Participation has successfully developed into different forms depending on the structures of the consequent society. Practices of participation in the Soviet era provided an exceptional sphere of individual experience, as the surrounding society was deeply affected by communalism. After the collapse of socialism, the spirit of free market and consumerism swept over Russia, which in turn transformed the former premise. Thus, participation had to re-emerge in Russia in order to provide an equivalent form of opposition. The task was first undertaken by a group of oppositional activists, interested in trying on the role of a contemporary artist, entitling themselves "Voina". The formation of the alternative art collective signified an important turn in the contemporary art scene, as the hierarchic art society was challenged by a group of outsiders. The passivity of the art world was confronted by the desire to provoke, a desire which indisputably originated from the common consciousness. By rejecting official channels, Voina acquired the capability to free expression only outlaws could possess.

Pussy Riot has targeted specific politicized themes in their actions, respectful to tendencies in contemporary participatory art to concentrate on distinct forms of injustice. Institutionalized discrimination is often targeted through socially engaging art forms, highlighting topics of controversy in the 21st century. Due to the effects of globalization, social criticism becomes collectivized and jointly undertaken as a task. However, cultural differences complicate artistic endeavors adopting themes from outside their vocabulary. By addressing issues of feminism and the rights of sexual minorities, Pussy Riot has been faced with the problem of constructing a language understandable in its present cultural context. From the morally superior western perspective, Pussy Riot is provided with the ideal dictatorship to antagonize. However, such perspectives completely ignore the audience Pussy Riot is trying to engage with, namely the contemporary Russian society. Albeit the collective emerged as representing the oppositional underground, by 2012 they were entitled "heroes"¹¹³ and "the coolest revolutionaries"¹¹⁴ in western media. Contradictory to this embracing attitude is the extreme antipathy from official Russian media which has described the group as

¹¹³ . Penny Starr, "Lawmakers on Pussy Riot Visit: 'These Women Are Indeed Heroes,'" *CNS News*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/penny-starr/lawmakers-pussy-riot-visit-these-women-are-indeed-heroes>.

¹¹⁴ . Carole Cadwalladr, "Pussy Riot: will Vladimir Putin regret taking on Russia's cool women punks?" *The Guardian*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/29/pussy-riot-protest-vladimir-putin-russia>.

“traitors,” “demons” or even “agents of Western influence.”¹¹⁵ Pussy Riot’s actions can be considered successful as long as they continue to incite antagonism from the institutions they aim to interfere with.

The paradoxical endeavors of participation to challenge the spectacle is obvious in the case of Pussy Riot. As Bishop states, “Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.”¹¹⁶ The future of Pussy Riot seems to be dependent on the collective’s ability to work from within the spectacle in order to influence it. Another alternative is to generate a new rebellion, even more effective in its *détournement*. Either way, according to the formula created by Trotsky in 1938, every innovation in art is eventually outmaneuvered by the desire to rebel.

¹¹⁵ . Janet Reitman, “Putin Clamps Down: A Chilling report from Moscow”, *Rolling Stone*, April 30, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/putin-clamps-down-a-chilling-report-from-moscow-20140430>.

¹¹⁶ . Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 277.

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