

# Dissident “Street Art” Resisting Neo-Soviet Discourse: the “Voina” and “Pussy Riot” Groups

Gabriella Elina Imposti

«We’ve chosen the worst and most aggressive name possible, so that we cannot hide ourselves.»<sup>1</sup> This is how Oleg Vorotnikov, one of the founders of the art-group “Voina” (War), comments on the name of the group (Epshtein 2012:16-17). Other sources mention a different reason for this name. Vorotnikov is also known under the alias of “Vor”, which in Russian means ‘thief’, but this alias could also be read as ‘war’ in the Russian pronunciation of the sound /w/, which sounds more as a /v/. [Fig. 1] Therefore, there is at least a double interpretation of this name. This recalls the ambiguous and polysemantic interpretations of the nickname of one of OBERIU’s most interesting authors, Kharms, whose real surname was Yuvachov. This variety of nicknames and codes is typical of all the members of the group “Voina”. Vorotnikov’s wife, Natal’ya Sokol is also known as “Koza” (she-Goat) or “Kozlyonok” (kid, young goat), Pyotr Verzilov is also known as “Porosyonok” (“Piglet”) or “Khueplyot” (“Dickhead”) and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova as “Tolonko”. The poetics of nicknames and aliases in neo- or post-avant-garde groups could be an interesting field for further research.

Whatever the origin of the name of the group, the aggressive and disruptive character of its actions is clear, even by means of a quick

---

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from Russian are mine, unless otherwise stated. The transliteration follows the Anglophone simplified system.

overview of its history. Furthermore, if there is a war, it is important to understand against whom or what it is directed. As Oleg Vorochnikov said in an interview, «the idea of creating an art-group dates back to 2007, when it became clear that in our country all democratic liberties were being swept away and the only works artists were producing were all conformist and glam.» (informareperesistere).

The group "Voina" existed for a limited period of time, about five years. In February 2007 it was founded by Oleg Vorochnikov, Natal'ya Sokol, Pyotr Verzilov and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, with the support of Anton Nikolaev (born 1976), who was the founder of another group, "Bombily", and who for a while took part in the actions of "Voina". [Fig. 2]

In 2009 the group broke up into two factions: the so-called Saint Petersburg faction with Oleg Vorochnikov, Natal'ya Sokol, and the Moscow faction with Pyotr Verzilov and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova<sup>2</sup> who would later start the "Pussy Riot" group, which would gain instant fame with the action in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012. Because of this action, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich were arrested. Only the first two were sentenced to two years' detention. They were released in December 2013.

In November 2010 Leonid Nikolaev and Oleg Vorochnikov were arrested after the action called «Dvortsovyi perevorot» (Palace Revolution), which consisted of turning a number of police cars upside down<sup>3</sup>. [Fig. 3] At first the media minimized the significance of the action, reporting that the intention was to «take a child's ball from under a car». Later, a more political interpretation of the word "perevorot" (revolution) led the authorities to consider it an act of vandalism bordering on terrorism. Nikolaev and Vorochnikov were released in February 2011, when British graffiti artist Banksy bailed

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed report on this schism see Epshtein 2012: 48-61.

<sup>3</sup> The action took place on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

them out (gazeta.ru 2011/02/24). A month later, Oleg Vorotnikov was arrested again because of his offensive behaviour during the march of the dissident group *Strategiya 31* in St Petersburg<sup>4</sup>. In 2012 he was invited to be the curator of the seventh edition of the Berlin Biennale (berlinbiennale.de). In the same year Oleg Vorotnikov, his wife, Natal'ya Sokol and their children left the country in order to avoid further repression. They are currently in Italy, where they applied for political asylum. They presented videos of their performances at festivals in Venice (saledocks) and Milan<sup>5</sup> and for a period lived as squatters near the Arsenal in Venice. In 2014 Vorotnikov was arrested for a brawl with other squatters and then released (corrieredelveneto).

The art group "Voina" is integral part of the evolution of Russian Avant-Garde, which, according to the sociologist and expert in contemporary art, Alek Epshtein, in the twentieth and early twenty-first century went through four "waves" (Epshtein Langenburg 8-12). The first one developed from the beginning of the 1910s to, approximately, the end of the 1920s. It included artists like Malevich, Kandinsky, Khlebnikov, Kharms and others and was represented by various groups, including Cubo-Futurism, Constructivism, OBERIU. Stalin's repressions caused a long gap until the early 1960s, when the so-called "second wave" of Russian Avant-Garde began. [Fig. 4] Its more representative tendencies were the conceptualism of Ilya Kabakov's total installations and Andrey Monastyrsky's "actionism". [Fig. 5] The participants in the so-called "bulldozer exhibition" (1974), Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, were the founders of the so-called "sots-art". Together with Timur Novikov's neoclassical art, they

---

<sup>4</sup> "Strategiya 31" is a Russian organization for the defense of civil rights of peaceful assembly and demonstration granted by Article 31 of the Russian Constitution. Since July 2009 these demonstrations were held every 31st of the month.

<sup>5</sup> Macaomilano (2012). Inaugurazione mostra dei VOINA – «Soon we'll be completely fearless» <http://www.macaomilano.org/appuntamenti/750>

can be considered members of the third wave of the Russian Avant-Garde.

The fourth wave developed in the early years of the twentyfirst century and is characterized by its strong and unconventional reaction to the present social and political situation in Russia. It started with Anton Nikolaev's group "Bombily" and developed with the group "Voina", which cooperated with "Bombily" in the "Trade union of street-art" (Profsoyuz ulichnogo iskusstva), and later saw the creation of "Pussy Riot".

The group "Bombily" was founded at the end of 2004 by Anton Nikolaev [Fig. 6] and Aleksandr Rossikhin, who had worked in the studio of the artist Oleg Kulik<sup>6</sup>. The word "bombila" is commonly used for drivers who illegally work as taxi drivers. It was chosen because Nikolaev and Rossikhin were then spending a lot of time travelling by car in provincial Russia and had decided to turn their experience into a sort of "reality show" or "Life-Art" (Nikolaev «Ob artivizme»). The name of the art-group was also later interpreted in connection with the Russian verb "bombit'" (to bombard), from which it derives, in order to highlight the disruptive effect of its actions. It received vast media coverage thanks to the action called «Avtoprobeg nesoglasnykh» (The Dissenters' Car Ride), [Fig. 7] which took place on April 14<sup>th</sup> 2007, the same day as the March of the Dissenters (Marsh nesoglasnykh) in Moscow<sup>7</sup>. This action was the first in Russia to use the sexual act as a means of political protest. It consisted of a car of the old Soviet "Zhiguli" model, which was circulating with a red bed fixed on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Born in 1961 he is a representative of Moscow actionism. He became famous for his performance in which he acted as a "dogman" on a leash. The action "I bite America and America bites me", was performed in 1997 at New York's Deitch Gallery (artinfo.ru/ Oleg Kulik).

<sup>7</sup> In 2005 and 2007 in various cities of the Russian Federation there were many marches of the so-called "dissenters" protesting against Putin's policy and his ruthless erasing of any form of organized political dissent in the country.

roof, on which an heterosexual couple was having sex. The artists declared that through this act of sexual liberty they wanted to protest against the authoritarian Putinian regime and its control over the lives of Russian citizens (Jonson 2015: 149). We can apply to the authors of this action the modified Foucaultian formula of «founders of discursivity», if we replace the word “text” with “action”:

[These authors] are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works [actions]. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts [actions]. (Foucault 1998: 217)

What they produced was indeed the provocative and disruptive actions that the group “Voina” would perform in the following years. These groups followed the model of the performances of the 1950s and 1960s in the West and of Andrey Monastyrsky’s “actionism” in the USSR. The link between Moscow art-group “Voina” and the movement of Moscow Conceptualism was particularly clear when, in June 2007, it planned a performance with the artist Dmitrii Prigov, called «Gruppa Voina zanimaetsia tol’ko nekvalifitsirovannym trudom» (Voina/War does only unskilled jobs). Unfortunately, Prigov died before he could take part in the performance. On 24th August 2007 “Voina” organized an action called «Pominki D.A. Prigovu» (Wake in honor of Dmitrii Prigov). [Fig. 8] Before closing time the activists carried folding tables, food and drink into the Moscow underground, invited the other passengers to celebrate the memory of the great Russian conceptualist poet. The action was repeated in the metro of Kiev.

These art-groups renounced the creation of material artifacts suitable for the conventional and static structure of museums and galleries and moved their artistic actions into the streets, shops and commercial malls, police stations, courts and even back to museums. This calls to mind Mayakovsky’s well-known call to Futurists to «take the art to the streets» (*Prikaz po armii iskusstva* Command / Order to the Army of Arts), so that everyone can become not only a spectator but

also a participant in these actions. These actions are usually swift, unexpected and extremely provocative in their programmatic breaking of taboos and conventions. They are similar to flash mobs, and some have even been compared to terrorist acts. These performances can be perused for a very limited time by the public which is directly involved in them. However, the fact that they are recorded and then posted on the internet and social networks grants them a great degree of longevity, multiplying their effects. Anton Nikolaev talks about «cognitive terrorism», which by means of «"symbolic violence" achieves a media impact analogous to that obtained by terrorists by means of "subjective violence"» (Nikolaev "Bombily").

In these actions the spheres of the intimate, the personal and the public are mixed. It is up to the artist to decide the proportions of this mixture, sometimes even involving his/her own body and the very intimate sphere of sexual life and transforming it into a public statement. As one of the participants in the action in the Biological Museum in Moscow, Oleg Vasilyev, aptly summarised: «The social role of the philosopher [artist] is above all to reflect on the taboos of society and go beyond its limits.» (Epshtein 2012: 81).

To better understand the political impact of the actions of the group "Voina", let us explain the concept of "tandemocracy", which is particularly relevant to our discussion. It derives from the system of power shared in "tandem" between Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev, which started in 2008. Unlike the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, Putin decided not to alter the Russian Constitution, which limited the tenure of Russian President to two consecutive terms. He decided to step down as President of the Russian Federation but he found a loyal candidate for the office in Dmitrii Medvedev, who at the time was Deputy First Minister. When Medvedev was elected President of the Russian Federation, he appointed Putin as First Minister, *de facto* letting him continue to rule the country. Soon afterwards, a new law was passed which extended the duration of the office of Russian President to six years, paving the

path for further two consecutive terms for Putin as Russian President (from 2012 to 2024) (Epshtein 2012).

Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to understand the reason why the peak of "Voina"'s actions was in the year 2008. The group energetically protested against the political farce being played out in the country. The action which made it instantly famous took place on February 29<sup>th</sup> 2008 in Moscow in the Timiryazev Biology Museum in the room devoted to bears. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Pyotr Verzilov, Oleg Vortnikov and Natal'ya Sokol, Vladimir Shilov and Elena Kostyleva and two more couples, who by chance joined the action, took off their clothes and had sex while their action was being filmed. The ideologue of the group, Aleksey Plutser-Sarno held a sign saying «Ebis' za naslednika Medvezhonka» (Fuck for the heir, the little Bear-Medvedev). [Fig. 9] As Plutser-Sarno commented in an interview, this action is «the portrait of Russia before the presidential elections, when everyone is fucking everyone else, and the Little Bear-Medvedev observes all of this with repulsion. The group sex in the museum was a protest against the pornography and the moral dissolution which have swept Russia.» (Plucer-Sarno 26/11/2008).

After her release from prison, Nadya Tolokonnikova thus commented on this action: «When Putin said that a totally unknown politician [Medvedev] would become our next President, he put us in front of a *fait accompli*. In that moment the country had been really fucked. In our action we showed this as well as we could using the traditions of contemporary art.» (Tolokonnikova Alyokhina 2013).

Another interpretation of the action in the Biology Museum can be found in the renewed emphasis of the Russian government on the role of the family in the growth of the country. In May 2006 Putin sent an official letter to the Federal Parliament of the Russian Federation encouraging it to take effective measures against the dramatic fall in the birth rate and announcing a series of measures in support of families with more than one child (Vedomosti 2006). The year 2008 was officially declared to be the year of the family in Russia (Semya2008.ru). Public discourse began to focus on themes concerning

the family. For example, during the celebrations for the day of the capital, on September 7th 2008, one of the main events was a pageant during which dozens of young glamorous couples sporting prams and rosy babies marched in the square in front of the Moscow City Council building. Thus "Voina"'s action of copulating in public unmasked this message that had violated the limits of the private sphere of the lives of Russian citizens, encouraging sexual activity for the demographic growth of the country and transforming a private and intimate act into an act of public interest.

The reference to the "bear", "medved'" in Russian, in the context of the action of the group "Voina" is particularly polysemantic. Apart from the obvious hint at the surname of the new Russian president, there are a series of other connections. "Medved" is the acronym of a movement created in 1999 for the elections, the **Mezhregional'noe Dvizhenie Edinstvo** (Inter-regional Movement Union) whose symbol was a bear. [Fig. 10] After Putin's election as President in 2000 it was transformed into the party "Edinstvo" ("Union") and later into "Edinaya Rossya" ("United Russia"), which represents the present Russian ruling establishment.

In February 2006 the meme "Preved medved", "Hello, bear!" [Fig. 11] went viral on the Russian internet. It derived from the American cartoon "Bear surprise" posted by John Lurie. [Fig. 12] In it an anthropomorphic bear surprises a couple having sex in a wood. The word "surprise" in the Russian version is replaced by the semi-slang expression "preved" (privet), "Hello!" (Ukraine Daily, 2006). Since then there have been dozens of variants of this cartoon. The bear itself is often represented with Medvedev's face in a variety of funny or obnoxious situations. [Fig. 13]

After the action in the Biology Museum the group "Voina" carried out eleven more actions<sup>8</sup>. Let us mention two more rather remarkable actions aimed at buildings symbols of power in Russia. «Shturm Belogo Doma» (The Storm of the White House), i.e. the Building of

---

<sup>8</sup> See Plutser-Sarno's Blog, Epshtein 2012 and 2013.



Government of the Russian Federation in Moscow, took place on the eve of the 7th of November 2008, which is the anniversary of the October Revolution. Putin at the time was Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. A group of activists of “Voina” succeeded in taking a fifty-kilogram laser generator to the top of the Ukraine hotel, opposite the White House from where they projected a giant picture of skull and crossbone onto the government building, while another group climbed over the fence surrounding the White House and made a brief “invasion”. The image was twelve stories high and stayed there for a very short time, long enough though to be filmed before the power was switched off by the security staff of the hotel<sup>9</sup>. [Fig. 14 ] This time there were no slogans, the action was left to the free interpretation of the Russian citizens. On his blog Plutser-Sarno commented, saying that the «skull and crossbones on the White House is there to warn the government about the Russian people dying while the new bourgeoisie are drowning in luxury.» (reported in Epshtein 2013: 271).

The other (in)famous act protest was «Khuy v plenu FSB» (The Cock Held Prisoner at the FSB [Federal Security Agency]), also called «The Leteyny-bridge Cock» (Plutser-Sarno blog). It took place on Che Guevara’s birthday, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2010. A 65 metre long erect phallus was painted on a drawbridge in Saint Petersburg in less than a minute just before the bridge was raised. The image was proudly erect right in front of the FSB building in Saint Petersburg. [Fig. 15] It immediately went viral on the internet. In April 2011 it was awarded the Art Innovation Prize as «the best work of visual art» by the National Centre for Contemporary Art<sup>10</sup>. However, the group “Voina” did not claim the prize and left it to the Russian organization “Agora” for the defence of civil rights (Plutser-Sarno blog).

---

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of the action with commentaries of the actors see Epshtein 2012: 126-134.

<sup>10</sup> For further information about the prize and the querelle it provoked see Jonson 2015: 155-156.

According to "Voina" activist Verzilov,

Art being taken from galleries and brought outside into the streets is the healthiest sign of the times. Voina is at the origin of a completely new type of actionism. Here the emphasis is shifted from the abstract and symbolic mini-gesture made within the limits of gallery art, and onto specific, naked street action, made as close to the viewer as possible. [...] We have to show people what forms of possible self organisation are available to them. [...] To inspire individuals to create their own band, to be autonomous and bold. Today this kind of art is mainly promoted and propagandised via the internet, since there are no other resources free from federal control. (quoted in Epshtein 2013: 272)

At the beginning the group "Voina" had no definite strategy to publicize their actions. They did not keep an official blog. They mainly used the technique of the leakage of news to the press and on the internet. Their fame spread mainly thanks to Aleksey Plutser-Sarno, who at first appointed himself as «honorary member of the group», then as «artistic director», and in 2011 as «media-artist of the group» (Epshtein 2012: 89). Since March 2008 he kept a blog devoted to the actions of "Voina" and their interpretation (Plutser-Sarno blog). These reports were usually agreed with Vorotnikov, although they often acquired a rather bombastic and surrealistic tone and did not always correspond to the reality of facts. Plutser-Sarno «'squeezed' the maximum from the actions, enacting big media-shows around them on the virtual stage of internet, every time managing to get a full house.» (Epshtein 2012: 90). [Fig. 16]

At this point, it is important to introduce the concept of "artivism" formulated by Anton Nikolaev, which he applies to the art-groups of the second half of the first decade of this century:

Although the actions of activism and artivism are apparently similar, they use different strategies of expression (representation). The representation of the actionists consisted of the action itself,

while the product of the activists consists of the artist's report of the action on the internet. This upload of information into the mediasphere is meant to excite violent reactions and animated discussions. [...] You can say that activism is interactive. (Nikolaev «Artivism i aktivizm»)

Plutser-Sarno took on himself this role of «'specialist in fine discursive tuning', who rocks the mediasphere, provoking its reactions and generating additional meanings» (*ibidem*). As Oleg Vorotnikov himself acknowledges, the group "Voina" owes its fame to Plutser-Sarno (Epshtein 2012: 95). According to Baudrillard, replacing reality with the signs of reality is what characterizes contemporary culture, which evolves from «reflecting reality» to camouflaging its absence and reaching a point where the signifier is not connected with any reality at all (Baudrillard 1995). Plutser-Sarno's representation of the actions of "Voina" is therefore very close to Baudrillard's concept of "simulacrum". As Alek Epshtein suggests, Plutser-Sarno was one of the first to apply to the Russian web the achievements of Russian conceptual art and activism.

He bet heavily on the absence of a boundary between representation and original. He described the actions of "Voina", so that they appeared in the most effective way, according to the rules of cyberspace, regardless of whether his 'reportages' were close to the real description of the events or not. (Epshtein 2012: 97).

In a nutshell, Plutser-Sarno made the events of the actions of "Voina" «become merely a master matrix, or a mold for casting its own reproductions» (Anders 1956: 20).

\*\*\*

The "activism" of "Voina" was further developed by the "Pussy Riot" group, which was in fact started by one of "Voina" members,

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and others «around the end of September 2011, right after Putin announced that he was planning to return as president» (Langston 2012). This feminist punk group is inspired by earlier punk rock groups like "Bikini Kill" and the "Riot Grrrl" movement and among feminists several names are quoted: Simone De Beauvoir, Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone, Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, and Pankhurst's «brave suffragist actions» (Langston 2012).

The very name of the group "Pussy Riot" is a call to female sexual agency and power, as one of the group explains:

A female sex organ, which is supposed to be receiving and shapeless, suddenly starts a radical rebellion against the cultural order, which tries to constantly define it and show its appropriate place. Sexists have certain ideas about how a woman should behave, and Putin, by the way, also has a couple of thoughts on how Russians should live. Fighting against all that—that's Pussy Riot. (Langston 2012)

By wearing neon balaclavas and brightly coloured dresses the group chose «masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity» (Žižek 2012)<sup>11</sup>. As one of the members declared in an interview:

We often change names, balaclavas, dresses, and roles inside the groups. People drop out, new members join the group, and the lineup in every Pussy Riot's guerrilla performance can be entirely different. (Langston 2012)

---

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, a man masked like the Pussy Riot also took part in the attempted action in Sochi in February 2014.

They write songs with provocative titles aimed against the president like “Putin pissed his pants”<sup>12</sup>, “Fuck the Sexists, Fuck Putin’s Henchmen”. After Putin’s 2011 election and December 2011 mass protests in Moscow, their songs called to rebellion following the model of Tahir Square: “Do Tahir in Red Square”, “Egyptian Air is good for the Lungs” or pointed to the Russian anarchist tradition as in “Krapotkin Vodka”<sup>13</sup>. Their actions did not stop even after the release of Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina from prison in December 2013. Their first action was in Sochi in February 2014, when they sang “Putin will teach you how to love the Motherland”<sup>14</sup>.

The actions of “Pussy Riot” draw on the carnivalesque principle of exposing and subverting the fundamentals of power by mixing absurd, parody and chaos. Perhaps it is not by chance that the notorious action in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was performed at the end of “Maslenitsa”, that is to say the Russian Carnival (Bessant 2014: 169). This is another reason why, as for “Voina”, the choice of public spaces is crucial for their protest art and even more relevant than the lyrics of their songs (Bessant 2014: 171). Even before the action in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012, which triggered their world-wide fame along with their harsh repression, as in carnivalesque performances (Bakhtin 1965) all of the venues of their actions implied the potential presence of mass audiences. These venues have a strong symbolic value: the Moscow underground, Red Square,

---

<sup>12</sup> Performed in Red Square on 20 January 2012. The song (optimistically) refers to Putin being allegedly scared by the 2011 December mass protests against his re-election.

<sup>13</sup> For an English version of these songs, see Jonson 2015: 179-182.

<sup>14</sup> Their first attempt was blocked by a group of cossacks who beat them with whips and sprayed them with teargas. Afterwards they managed to perform in front of the Olympic symbol (The Guardian 2014; Archive Colta ru; Stereogum).

the roofs of the buildings opposite the prison where leaders of the December protest were held<sup>15</sup>, the Elokhovo Cathedral.

The worldwide notoriety of the group is mainly due to their uploading on the internet of short videos edited and assembled on the basis of their performances, which in fact last a matter of few minutes. Thus they go viral, multiplying the impact of their action and erasing time and space thanks to their infinite repeatability. This aspect recalls another point of analogy with the OBERIU poetics, and in particular with Daniil Kharms' vignettes in which the same absurd action is repeated over and over again<sup>16</sup>.

As we have seen, the meaning of the actions performed by "Voina" wasn't always clear and easy to decipher and in some cases, for example the action «Pamyati Dekabristov» (In memory of the Decembrists: a Gift to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov)<sup>17</sup>, they were completely and maliciously misinterpreted. Indeed, in 2012, in response to Angela Merkel's criticism of the "Pussy Riot" case, Putin quoted this action, in which Tolokonnikova took part, as an example of the group's alleged antisemitic feelings.

Unlike "Voina", "Pussy Riot" are articulate and explicit in explaining the meaning of their actions during the numerous interviews they have released from the very beginning and do not delegate any "spoke-person" to do this. This is particularly clear in the letters Tolokonnikova and Žižek exchanged during the imprisonment of the "Pussy Riot" activists discussing artistic subversion, political

---

<sup>15</sup> See the video in Langston 2012.

<sup>16</sup> As for example in *Falling Old Ladies*. To be sure, Tolokonnikova made explicit reference to OBERIU in her closing statement at the 2012 trial (Pussy Riot Closing Statement).

<sup>17</sup> Performed on 7 September 2008. In 1826 five participants in the Decembrist uprising were hanged. Holding a banner saying «Nobody gives a fuck about Pestel», the participants in the action performed a mock-hanging of two homosexuals and three Central Asian guest-workers (see Epshtein 2012: 114-120).

activism, democracy, later published in a book (Tolokonnikova Žižek 2014). "Pussy Riot"'s opposition to power after Tolokonnikova's and Alyokhina's liberation has not limited itself to Russia, but has extended to social problems such as the migration crisis that has currently involved most of Europe. From this point of view the recently produced video «Refugees In» is particularly significant (Pussy Riot at Banksy's Dismaland 2015).

"Voina" performed actions which changed style and procedure every time. The aesthetic aspect of their performances was sometimes rather refined. For example, the disposition of the bodies in the photos of «Fuck for the heir, the little Bear-Medvedev» closely recalls that of a painting. On the contrary, in their actions "Pussy Riot" follow a clear "format" with masks and gestures which never change. Their jumping up and down, their plastic guitars and bright balaclavas have become an authentic 'trademark'. Even the music does not seem to change much. What changes are the lyrics of their songs and the venues of their performances. To these features one should add their being a group clearly defined from the gender point of view and «their name, perfectly pitched to both shock and attract the western media» (Idov 2012). All of this and last but not least, the ferocious repression of their «rather marginal act of arty protest» (Idov 2012) greatly contributed to their international success<sup>18</sup>.

In spite of predictions about their "end", which started soon after their liberation from prison (Nekhezin 2013), and all allegations of «the death of the "Pussy Riot"»<sup>19</sup>, they have continued their action of resistance against the repressive laws enforced in recent years and the «general apathy» that has engulfed Russia nowadays (Zoladz 2014).

---

<sup>18</sup> In an interview Tolokonnikova remarked: «Probably no one would have noticed our protest if Putin himself hadn't highlighted it to the whole world» (Tolokonnikova 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Recently they staged a self-mocking performance about their alleged death: «Aktsiya! Aktsiya! Pussy Riot Likvidatsiya! Pussy Riot is dead» (Special offer! Liquidation of Pussy Riot. Pussy Riot is dead) 2015.

As Tolonnikova said in an interview after being beaten with a whip by a Cossack during the attempted Sochi action:

Anyone can become a member of "Pussy Riot", including one of you. The only thing you need is to be passionate about politics, make up a song, record that song, find a place, put on a mask and perform. Anyone can be Pussy Riot. (Pussy Riot gets whipped at Sochi).

### List of illustrations

**Fig. 1** «Voina Wanted». Oleg Vorotnikov in the courtroom 14 January 2011. Photo: Vladimir Telegin





**Fig. 2** Art-group “Voina” in Moscow for an interview with Sergey Korneev from the free newspaper “Aktsiya” (Action) 8 April 2009. Photo: Natalya Eremina <http://akzia.ru/politics/08-04-2009/2545.html>



**Fig. 3** Action “Palace Revolution” 16 September 2010, Saint Petersburg. See: <http://plucer.livejournal.com/tag/Дворцовый%20переворот> . See video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue\\_Wd2AjKAI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue_Wd2AjKAI)



**Fig. 4** Artist Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933). Photo: Aleksey Filippov (ITAR-TASS) <http://artchronika.ru/news/kabakov-anniv-2013/>



**Fig. 5** Artist Andrey Monastyrsky (b. 1949). Photo by Daria Novgorodova. <http://www.ncca.ru/innovation/en/shortlistitem?slid=186&contest=26&nom=6>



**Fig. 6** Artist Anton Nikolaev (b. 1976). Photo from <http://vk.com/halfaman>



**Fig. 7** "The Dissenters' Car Ride", 14 April 2007. [http://nnm.me/blogs/assa82/v\\_moskve\\_proshel\\_avtoprobeg\\_make\\_love/](http://nnm.me/blogs/assa82/v_moskve_proshel_avtoprobeg_make_love/)  
See video: <https://vimeo.com/16046649>



**Fig. 8** Art-group “Voina” “Wake in honor of Dmitrii Prigov” performed in the Moscow underground 24 August 2007. <http://plucer.livejournal.com/199938.html?thread=7162626>



**Fig. 9** Art-group “Voina”. Action “Fuck for the heir, the little Bear-Medvedev”, performed on February 29<sup>th</sup> 2008 in Moscow in the Timiryazev Biology Museum. <http://plucer.livejournal.com/68093.html>



**Fig. 10** Logo of “Edinstvo” (Inter-regional Movement Union)



**Fig. 11** The Meme "Hello, bear!".



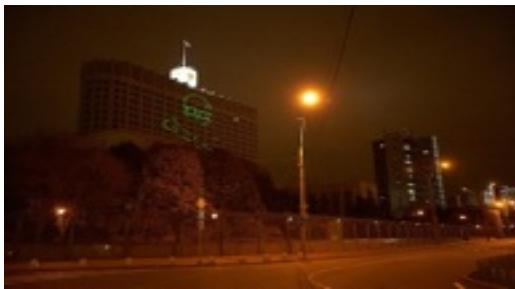
**Fig. 12** "Bear surprise" by John Lurie. <http://www.johnlurieart.com/art/index.php?s=prints>



**Fig. 13** The Meme "Hello, bear!" with Dmitrii Medvedev. See <http://netspider.com.ua/index.php/2008/03/02/preved-medved/>



**Fig. 14** Art-group “Voina”. Action “The Storm of the White House” performed on 7th November 2008 in Moscow. <http://lj.rossia.org/users/plucer/98046.html>



**Fig. 15** Art-group “Voina”. Action “The Cock Held Prisoner at the Federal Security Agency”, performed on 14 June 2010 in Saint Petersburg. Frame from Andrey Gryazev’s movie “Tomorrow” (Zavtra), 2012.



**Fig. 16** Philosopher, journalist and art critic Aleksey Plutser-Sarno (b. 1962) [http://vk.com/album-50618732\\_184369560](http://vk.com/album-50618732_184369560)



## Bibliography

- Anders, Gunther, «The World As Phantom And As Matrix», *Dissent* (3:1), (Winter) 1956, pp. 14-24.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura srednevekov'ya i Renessansa* [The works of François Rabelais and the popular culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance], Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1965.
- Baudrillard, Jean, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, translated and with an introduction by Paul Patton, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Bessant, Judith, *Democracy Bytes: New Media, New Politics and Generational Change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Epshtein, Alek, "Voina", *Total'naja "Vojna" Art-aktivizm epokhi tandemokratii* ["Voina": Art-activism in the Age of Tandemocracy], Moscow: Georgii Eremin, 2012.
- Epshtein, Alek, «The Voina Group: Radical Actionist Protest in Contemporary Russia», in *Post-Post-Soviet? Art, Politics & Society In Russia At The Turn Of The Decade*, edited by Marta Dziewańska, Ekaterina Degot & Ilya Budraitskis, Warsaw: Museum Of Modern Art, 2013, pp. 263-276.
- Foucault, Michel, «What is an Author?», in M. Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault: Aesthetic, Method and Epistemology*, edited by James Faubion, English translation by R. Hurley and others, vol. 2, New York: The New Press, 1998, pp. 205-222.
- Jonson, Lena, *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Tolokonnikova, Nadezhda & Žižek, Slavoj, *Comradley Greetings: the Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj*, London and New York: Verso, 2014.

## Sitography

- «Aktsiya! Aktsiya! Pussy Riot Likvidatsiya! Pussy Riot is dead» May 2015, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/34906.html>
- Archive Colta ru (Pussy Riot in Sochi 14 February 2014), <http://archives.colta.ru/docs/27877>
- Artinfo.ru/ Oleg Kulik, <http://www.artinfo.ru/RU/news/main/OlegKulik.htm>
- Berlinbiennale.de, <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/7th-berlin-biennale>
- Bernstein 2013 Bernstein, Anya, «Post-Soviet Body Politics: Crime and Punishment in the Pussy Riot Affair», <http://somatosphere.net/2013/09/post-soviet-body-politics-crime-and-punishment-in-the-pussy-riot-affair.html>
- Braidotti, Rosi, «Punk Women and Riot Grrrls» (First Supper Symposium, Oslo, May 12, 2014), <http://www.thefirstsuppersymposium.org/index.php/en/text-symposium-2014>
- Corrieredelveneto, <http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2014/31-luglio-2014/venezia-dissidente-russo-arrestato-l-associazione-non-estradatelo---223663546384.shtml>
- Epshtein Langenburg, «Zhdanov protiv Rodchenko: chetyortaya volna Avantgarda na skame podsudimyykh» [Zhdanov against Rodchenko: the Fourth Wave of Avant-garde in the dock] (Langenburg interviews Epshtein), [http://www.be-in.ru/art-process/25620-pussy\\_riot\\_process/](http://www.be-in.ru/art-process/25620-pussy_riot_process/)
- Gazeta.ru 2011/02/24, [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/02/24/n\\_1719509.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/02/24/n_1719509.shtml)
- Idov 2012 «Pussy Riot prove the only professionals in sight» Friday 17 August 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/17/pussy-riot-only-professionals-in-sight>
- Informareperesistere, <http://www.informarexresistere.fr/2011/02/18/le-anime-vive-di-voina/>

- Langston 2012 «Meeting Pussy Riot» by Henry Langston , <http://www.vice.com/read/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot>
- Macaomilano (2012). Inaugurazione mostra dei VOINA – «Soon we'll be completely fearless», <http://www.macaomilano.org/appuntamenti/750>
- Nekhezin 2013 «Konets istorii Pussy Rayot?» [Is this the end of Pussy Riot's history?], [http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2013/12/131227\\_tolokonnikova\\_alekhina\\_end\\_of\\_pussy\\_riot.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2013/12/131227_tolokonnikova_alekhina_end_of_pussy_riot.shtml)
- Nikolaev, Anton «Artivizm i aktivizm» [Artivism and activism], <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/510998.html>
- Nikolaev, Anton «Bombily», <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/510998.html>
- Nikolaev, Anton «Ob artivisme» [About Artivizm], <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/661972.html>
- Plutser-Sarno 26/11/2008, Evgeniy Finkel, interview with Aleksey Plutser-Sarno, [http://www.newsru.co.il/world/26nov2008/plucer\\_102.html](http://www.newsru.co.il/world/26nov2008/plucer_102.html)
- Plutser-Sarno blog, <http://plucer.livejournal.com>
- Pussy Riot at Banksy's Dismaland November 18, 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/news/62174-pussy-riot-perform-at-banksys-dismaland-in-refugees-in-video/>
- Pussy Riot closing Statement (August 13, 2012), <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/pussy-riot-closing-statements/>
- Pussy Riot gets whipped in Sochi (Vice News), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFrZfluKDrc>
- Pussy Riot livejournal, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html>
- Pussy Riot songs, <http://songspro.ru/43/Pussy-Riot>
- Saledocks <http://www.saledocks.org/voina-soon-well-be-completely-fearless>
- [semya2008.ru](http://www.semya2008.ru/), <http://www.semya2008.ru/>
- Stereogum, <http://www.stereogum.com/1666006/pussy-riot-putin-will-teach-you-how-to-love-video/video/>



- The Guardian 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/19/pussy-riot-attacked-whips-cossack-milita-sochi-winter-olympics>
- Tolokonnikova 2014 «Amelia Gentleman interviews Nadia Tolokonnikova for the Guardian» , <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2014/sep/19/nadya-tolokonnikova-pussy-riot-interview-nothing-to-lose>
- Tolokonnikova Alyokhina 2013 Interview with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina «Pussy Riot: Putin, chekist s obiljem strakhov» [PR: Putin, a chekist with a lot of fears], published 27-12-2013, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25214238.html> ,
- Ukraine Daily, 2006, <http://www.uadaily.net/index.php?view=5611>
- Vedomosti 2006, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/2006/05/10/prezident-rf-predlozhil-programmu-stimulirovaniya-rozhdaemosti-v-rossii> ,
- Žižek 2012 «The True Blasphemy», <https://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/the-true-blasphemy-slavoj-zizek-on-pussy-riot/>
- Zoladz, Lindsay «Interview with Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova i Masha Alyokhina» April 10, 2014, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/9374-nadya-tolokonnikova-and-masha-alyokhina-of-pussy-riot/>

## **The author**

### **Gabriella Elina Imposti**

Gabriella Elina Imposti is Associate Professor of Russian Literature in the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Bologna University, Italy. She has worked on Russian and Italian Futurism, Russian Romanticism and its reception of British and German literature. She is also interested in contemporary Russian

Gabriella Elina Imposti, *Dissident "Street Art" Resisting Neo-Soviet Discourse*

women writers and the development of gender studies in Russia. See also her page <http://www.unibo.it/docenti/gabriella.imposti>

Email: [gabriella.imposti@unibo.it](mailto:gabriella.imposti@unibo.it)

## **The article**

Data invio: 15/05/2015

Data accettazione: 30/09/2015

Data pubblicazione: 30/11/2015