

## **A Report/Introduction by Natalie Hope O'Donnell**

When three members of Pussy Riot were arrested after their *Punk Prayer* performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012, the feminist collective were propelled to global fame via international media attention and digital technologies that enabled the sharing of their music videos via social networks and keeping the cause alive. Gestures of solidarity and protests against the trial and their subsequent incarceration came from across the world: from academia, the stage and the streets. The colourful balaclavas provided a distinctive emblem for supporters of Pussy Riot. Since the release of Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina on 23 December 2013, there has been a formidable scramble to interview the two young women. They become spokespersons, not only for feminism and queer activism, but for prison reform, human rights, and freedom of expression.

This, at times frantic, media attention, which tended to only scratch the surface of the complex issues Pussy Riot's actions raised, preferring sound bites and photo ops, made the need for a more thoughtful contextualisation of their work all the more urgent. The First Supper Symposium, a collaborative, feminist art project launched in Oslo in 2012, provided the opportunity for this. Having already established contact with the group and invited the then-released Pussy Riot member, Ekaterina Samutsevich, to speak at their first event in 2013, they were well-placed to make the necessary contact with the group and to ask them who they ideally wanted to have a conversation with in Oslo. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the strong performative element of their feminist activism, Nadya and Masha requested Judith Butler, who was, fortuitously, already in conversation with her friend and colleague, Rosi Braidotti, about the significance of Pussy Riot for feminist and human rights movements. Hectic schedules notwithstanding, the two eminent academics and the two now-famous activists were united on stage for an intergenerational conversation in Oslo on 12 May 2014. The discussion was preceded by papers written especially for the meeting by Braidotti and Butler, which they have generously agreed to donate to web publication [here](#). Having also waived any fee for all their intense work, Braidotti and Butler embody the generosity of mind and spirit, which has characterised this project throughout.

From my earliest conversation with Rosi Braidotti in January 2014, via numerous e-mails with proposals, questions and reflections, a framework for the event emerged. A number of points were raised, including the disruption of power through protest; the role of the global media and social networks via digital technology; LGBT rights, the influence of feminist writing and early women punk bands; and the significance of images and different denotations of "woman" they were deemed to perform (from the masked punk activist, via "hooligans" and "naughty girls" to mothers of small children in the discussions around their release, which perpetuated the patriarchal notion of the appropriate "place" of a wife and mother). These issues could be explored separately in each paper, but after the initial "assignment" it became clear that there was one important component missing: the context of historical and contemporary Russian (performance) art. So Victor Misiano was invited to speak on that topic, as was Ekaterina Sharova. Together they provided an introduction to Russian art from the immediate post-Soviet era to the current day, showing examples of extra-institutional art practices, with a particular focus on Moscow actionism. I felt that, rather than a full day of talks, a focused, early evening event would be

preferable. Chateau Neuf, the Oslo Student Society's head quarters with its distinct concrete architecture, which had hosted important speakers and concerts and been the site of radical political activities since opening in 1973, was an ideal location. On the night, the large hall was at near capacity, and more than 800 audience members enthusiastically added their support to the event. Videos of all the talks can be found [here](#).

I knew that Professor Braidotti had written extensively on feminism, nomadism and the post-human condition, and that she took the notion of the affirmative advanced by her teacher, Gilles Deleuze, into her rousing public performances. I was unaware of her expertise in the field of Riot Grrrl bands and women's punk music. Her paper explored two central aspects of the Pussy Riot's performances: the visual and the musical. Introducing her paper by positioning feminism vis-à-vis "what is left of the left", she moved on to explore the significance of "the face" and thus the mask, via images of Queen Beatrix, Angela Davies, the Guerrilla Girls and others. The musical component included Janis Joplin, the ultimate Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill, Nina Hagen and, of course, Pussy Riot. Embodying the slogan "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution" it was a rallying cry for a positive, energetic approach to feminist theory and practice.

Judith Butler introduced her paper with some thoughts on performance (art) and the loose notion of "stage" that accompanies it, before exploring the alliance between church and state and the nationalist, patriarchal and exclusionary implications of the notion of "the soul of man", which Pussy Riot had protested in their song "Mother of God, chase Putin away". Clustering her subsequent contextualisation of Pussy Riot under three central points: performance, the media, and networks of solidarity, Butler underlined the importance of performance as a way of disrupting strategies of censorship, detention and exclusion that have become normalised and accepted within society. Seeing Pussy Riot within a wider network of protest movements against the unfettered exercise of state power and violence, Butler underlined the importance of their activism beyond the specific context of Russia for broadening the horizon of the possible.

The subsequent conversation overcame the language barrier, the generational gap and the different positions of the speakers. Braidotti and Butler are by no means "armchair activists", but they have other tools at their disposal; they perform in a different arena to Pussy Riot, and there was the risk of the conversation polarising into academics versus activists, thinkers versus doers. Although indicating some initial intimidation by the prospect of discussing feminism with Professors Braidotti and Butler, the warmth, genuine admiration and encouragement of the two scholars quickly turned the stage into a cosy conversation between Rosi, Judith, Nadya and Masha, exploring the history of feminism in Russia, the current struggle within a landscape of institutional crisis the, using the church or court room as a stage, the situatedness of any feminist discourse and thus the problem of merely importing a critical language from abroad. Expressing their gratitude to the women who defied the prison authorities to help them during their incarceration and informed their subsequent work on penal reform, Nadya and Masha located themselves within a broad network of artists and activists, and name-checked generously. The comments of all four speakers were reflective, thoughtful and, at times, playful.

It emerged from the questions from the audience that people read Pussy Riot's actions in the overlapping areas in which they operate according to their own situated point of view: as activists, as punk musicians, as artists. Nadya and Masha's media savviness means that they evade categorisation, preferring to operate in the slippages between different contexts, feigning ignorance of "the art world" and limited knowledge of academia in order to avoid getting trapped in either. Thanks to the thoughtful reflections of Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler the significant subtleties of Pussy Riot's disruptive, performative strategies may not be lost in the global media circus in which photogeneity, quick sound bites and human interest angles can mask what is at its heart an important struggle. For everyone.

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