

Oslo, Judith Butler

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I am pleased to be here today and hope to keep my own remarks brief so that we can benefit from a conversation. There are many issues at play as we enter into this discussion with Nadya and Masha, and they include the political status of feminist performance art, the risk of imprisonment through public acts that are critical of an authoritarian regime, the conditions of political prisoners, and the possibilities of political solidarity. I think as well it makes sense to ask ourselves about the many roles that the media serves in all of this – indeed, what we mean by “media” and the risks that are run by relying on mainstream “media” to convey the political demands for prisoners rights, for freedom of expression and mobility, and for the broader critique of state repression. And finally, I would hope to talk a bit about theory as a mode of experimental thought that seeks to expand the realm of possibility. I am particularly pleased to be accompanied by Professor Rosi Braidotti who has given us a timely framework for thinking about expanding the realm of the possible – a theme to which I will return at the end of my remarks.

Let me offer first some thoughts on performance art and performance politics. What distinguished performance art from theatrical performance is that for the former, there is no one theatrical stage, no proscenium, no well-identified theatre into which one enters and out of which one exits, not even usually a ticket that one can buy.. The “stage” for performance can be the street, the church, the local store, the bus or the bus station, the major shopping mall, the lobby of your favorite

cooperation. We know this from zap performances in which people going to work or moving purposefully toward some goal, fulfilling a function or trying to make a deal, are suddenly stopped and disoriented, compelled to take notice of their world in some new way. In one sense, the ordinary sense of life, the common norms that tacitly organize our actions, are suddenly stilled, and we stop whatever teleological or forward action we were about to perform, whatever task it was we were obligated to discharge. In other words, performance can take place off stage, or it can transform the platforms of daily life into a provisional stage, reconfiguring the ordinary scenes in which we live and move, and calling into question the everyday rituals that govern spaces government buildings and churches. The Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, but many churches and others places of religious worship have their own rituals; in a sense the church becomes an inhabited and enacted space precisely by ordering how embodied observers enter and exit, what they do when they are there, what they say, how they sound, when they kneel and stand, and when they bow their heads, when they recite a prayer in unison, and when everyone is obligated to remain silent. In some churches, there is ritual eating and queuing. In some ways, contemporary performance is derived from ritual practice, which does not mean that they are the same. And yet, one can say that already, prior to any interruptive performance in the church, there are implicit and explicit rules governing legitimate embodied performance within the church, legitimate recitations of speech, accepted forms of lining up and kneeling down, moving about and staying still. We could even say that most of the accepted rituals within the church are carefully staged, which does not mean that there are not sometimes departures from the script. And as we

know, the Christ Our Savior Cathedral, embodies the spirit of the nation, and make nationalism into a sacred passion, so the one who enters the Church enters into a national passion and national self-understanding; the rituals, therefore, are one way of making a subject, producing the legitimate citizen of the nation-state. But the passage to citizenship is through the door of the Church. By making the Church, understood now as a form of institutional power, into the precondition of citizenship, the separation between Church and State collapses. But it also means that those who refuse to follow the rules and perform the ritual are at risk of having their citizenship suspended or negated. Imprisonment is precisely the suspension of rights of citizenship, and the prison system, a way of regulating citizenship, that is, determining who will be able to move and speak in that unconfined space we call the public sphere, and whose movement, speech, and rights of association will be suspended and curtailed through imprisonment. The state decides the passage in and out of the public sphere. And there is no public sphere that is not defined and limited by the prison. Imprisonment not only makes plain whose rights of citizenship can be suspended, but it performs that suspension.

But what are the terms of citizenship? Consider that the accusations against Pussy Riot, as you know, included not only blasphemy and hooliganism, but attacking the soul of the nation, even the soul of man. This raises an important question: has the Russian Orthodox Church been appointed as *the soul* of the Russian nation, even the soul of man? By entering that Church with a different performance, a counter-performance, did the members of Pussy Riot call into question how and why

this particular appointment has been made? Once the Church is regarded as the soul of the state, and the State allies with the Church in censoring and criminalizing any kind of speech that would call their relationship into question, then the language of morality emerges as an instrument of repressive power: Indeed, the language of morality, the discourse on the soul, and even the fragile “fate of man” becomes a powerful rhetorical instrument for justifying the state’s own criminal action. So when it is said of PR that “they spat on the soul of mankind” or even that, with their performance, “everything human is being destroyed”, we have to ask, who is fabricating the soul, and for what person? Which version of mankind is ostensibly being destroyed, and in whose interests? Indeed, when those who perform their political critique of the state in the Church or in public zones are themselves beaten, slandered, and imprisoned, threatened with death, and made to fear for their lives, whose souls are at risk of being destroyed? And how are we to describe the “souls” of the orthodox activists who are happy to beat Pussy Riot in public? Are they at risk of destruction? Or is there agenda the one that is truly destructive?

The allegation that Pussy Riot attacks the soul of the nation or the very idea of man, the human as such, seeks to control the very definition of the “soul” and “mankind”, so that those who insist on acting from independent principles of freedom, who seek to affirm and make a more open life for art and politics, an open debate on church and state, on democracy, and on what can be said and shown, pressing the boundaries of the sayable and the visible, expanding human experience to include its creative and critical possibilities – these are the ones now branded as

“infidels” , excluded from the operative definition of humanity. And all this because why? Because they stand firm for a more open future, they open up a space for democratic criticism and debate, but because their performance mobilizes those critical energies required to expose and oppose the censorious and violent tactics of a regime that seeks to shore up its own power. The regime has sought to shut them down through arrest, criminalization, and imprisonment, making them political prisoners and leaving them open to attack on the street and in neighborhood restaurants by vigilante groups who know that the police will not arrest them; but also, the state justifies its own action and seeks to stop the radicalizing effect of Pussy Riot by controlling the basic moral vocabulary that distinguishes the citizen from the criminal. Not just the nation, the soul, life, humanity, mankind, and man, but girls, hooligans, liberals, destroyers, infidels.

I do not think we should underestimate the power of such rhetoric in post-Soviet Russia. Let us remember that the Soviet era was decried by the orthodox as having sought to kill the soul of man. The fear that the Church would be attacked again seems linked for some with the Stalinist attacks. All the more reason, then, for us to take the time to make some distinctions. First, let us consider the “man” part of “soul of man” – since that term does not imply a form of humanism, and it has everything to do not with the species, Man, but with its gender variant, men. The Church is, quite literally, the *Patriarchat*, the Church Patriarchy, and is apparently charged with protecting the patriarchal soul of the Nation. So when Pussy Riot is referred to as “those girls, acting recklessly and destructively, infected by a foreign

“liberalism”, infecting the nation with their disease, they are discounted as feminist critics, as theorists, as political performers, as those whose political expression is an explicit feminist critique of the illegitimate and anti-democratic state and its clerical allies. They have to be hooligans – otherwise, they are political actors and theorists feminist with a performative critique of power – and that performance and critique, that feminism, strikes at the heart not of the soul, but of existing power. The allegations seek to discount the political meaning of what Pussy Riot does, but the imprisonment acknowledges that meaning, and shows how fearful the state is of the possible political repercussions.

It must be from fear of something potentially very powerful that the Church-State conglomerate, monopolizing the use of violence, arrests, beats, tortures, confines, threatens, and kills. I say “kill” because we still do not have all the facts about Anna Altshuk, and other political prisoners who are said to have committed suicide, but whose deaths are widely believed to be the work of vigilantes who are implicitly or explicitly protected by the state. Indeed, one question is where the state begins and ends and where orthodox vigilantism begins and ends? Are we here confronting not just a church-state alliance in which the church backs Putin, but a church-state-vigilante alliance that patrols the speech and action and movement of those who seek open artistic and political expression?

Performance is one way in which the artistic and the political can, and do, come together. Indeed, the problem with Pussy Riot being arrested and shut down was not only that their artistic expression was repressed. In our continuing outrage, we should

not be so quick to say, “but, oh this is Art, performance art, and Art of all kinds ought to be protected by freedom of expression.” Of course that is true and right. But these performances are also explicitly forms of political expression, intervening in the established institutions and rituals of daily life to expose and resist the operation of political power supported by Church authority and state violence. In this way, the performance is, and remains an act of political criticism and expression, an act of theory, and performance of resistance. It was not only the Church rituals that were interrupted on the day that PR sang “Mother of God, chase Putin away!” – they also broke into the news cycles for months and years to come, entering an ongoing battle over whether they will be regarded as foolish girl criminals or astute political actors, calling for critical attention to political corruption at the highest levels.

Let me then make three (3) final points. The first has to do with the political and subversive character of performances such as these; the second has to do with the media, the way it now presents itself as both a problem and a promise. And the third has to do with forms of prisoner solidarity that suggest an important place for feminist interventions in global solidarity movements without losing site of the specific issue of political prisoners in Russia.

*Performance.* I want to say that it matters that what happened was staged in that church and through song and music, that the ski masks were colorful, and that the sounds were punk. The problem was not that a performance suddenly happened in a place of worship, or that particular Church, with its overwhelming symbolic and national meaning. What happened, it seems, is that pussy riot interrupted one

performance by staging another; church and state were in the midst of doing their duet, and through the sound of punk music and outraging lyrics, Pussy Riot claimed the space of the church as *their* stage, raising the question, to whom does public space belong? To whom do the public airwaves belong? They exposed and provisionally halted the ongoing wedding performance binding Church and State. In other words, they sought to expose and stop one performance by inserting their own. Let's remember that Bertolt Brecht thought that power becomes ratified in the rituals of everyday life, and that for significant political change to happen, everyday life had to be "interrupted" - the best performances were those that stopped the natural and commonly accepted flow of life, jolting into focus our attention, enlivening our capacity for open and public criticism.

It is this critical potential of performance that always makes it eligible for criminalization. For if a given regime of power seeks to control what can be said and heard and seen, if it seems to control the way we register political reality through our senses, then it will outlaw those forms of criticism that potentially call into question, and make us feel, the illegitimacy of those powers by which we are governed. It is a regulation of the senses and so of art that becomes so crucial to the state's project of censorship and self-legitimation. Radical performance mobilizes sound, vision, embodied action, rhythm, and speech; it occupies and remobilizes existing symbolic spaces, and its breaks open the senses so that our critique of existing power is not merely abstract, but embodied, dynamic, and living. Trials and sentencing rituals are performative as well; the state can only keep its power by showing its power; and

trials are a way of displaying power, and in the sentencing of political prisoners, the trial is always a show trial, a grotesque performance of unbridled power, serving up a threat to all who see it that such a fate could be theirs as well if they say and do what ought not to be said and done.

Performance can be a way of critically interrogating what are commonly taken to be the norms that govern society. It was said by the opponents of Pussy Riot that they destroyed common norms. But what makes norm common? How do certain norms get established as common, and others as uncommon or aberrant? These questions are too large to pursue here today, but we can see that the alliance between Church and State is something that had to take hold in post-Soviet Russia, and that a good historian could probably show how that alliance has come to be taken for granted as part of political life. What resources does a public have when it wants to stop such an assumption from becoming “natural”? When it wants to make the case that such an alliance should not be taken for granted? What we saw with the arrest and imprisonment of members of Pussy Riot was the silencing of a political criticism that sought to break into media and breaks apart the growing assumption that Church and State should be one.

Let us also remember that one reason to be in favor of the separation of Church and State is to protect forms of artistic expression that depend upon secularism. But another reason to be in favor of the separation of Church and State is precisely to protect religious minorities who are not part of the “Church” that has engaged the State in acts of reciprocal support. The rise of anti-Semitism in Russia, in Hungary,

in Greece, and Germany are all reasons to be critical of this unholy alliance between Church and State. It is always one Church rather than another, and all religious minorities lose their protections when one religion becomes identified with the soul of the Nation and the protectorate of the State.

*Media:* Here I will be brief. It seems clear that when one is arrested and imprisoned by a state that is unjust the active presence of the media is absolutely central to getting the word out, and bringing global attention to this injustice. It was clear in the first demonstrations at Tahrir Square, in the Gezi park events of last June, in Puerte del Sol, and the education demonstrations in Rome, Athens, Santiago de Chile, Montreal, and Berkeley. The cell phones had to witness police brutality, but also to establish networks of support and solidarity, to get the word out through media channels that included mainstream media outlets and more informal networks on the internet. Of course, one is tempted to try to get the word out by any means possible, and under dire circumstances, that makes sense. But perhaps we have to develop a critical approach to the media in order to take into account those efforts to make celebrities out of prisoners, to reduce their situation to a marketable soundbite, to convert the ongoing conditions of political imprisonment into a human interest story that tends to be restricted to just a few news cycles. And let us remember that although the internet can be a space that gets past state censors, it is also mainly organized by corporations that have been complicit with state surveillance. Our search engines are for the most part structured by corporations that have their own interests in controlling what we see. So perhaps we have to take account of both

explicit and implicit forms of censorship, the commodification of the political prisoner story, and those other forms of media representation that deflect our attention away from the problem of illegitimate state power, censorship, and political imprisonment as ongoing conditions at both the national and international level.

*Networks of Solidarity:*

All public assembly is haunted by the police and the prison. And every public square is defined in part by the population that could not possibly arrive there; either they are detained at the border, or have no freedom of movement and assembly, or are detained or imprisoned. In other words, the freedom to gather as a people is always haunted by the imprisonment of those who exercised that freedom and were taken to prison. And when one arrives in public or common spaces with radical and critical views, there is always an anxious or certain anticipation that imprisonment will follow. Sometimes we walk, or run, knowingly in the direction of prison because it is the only way to expose illegitimate constraints on public assembly and political expression. In Gezi park, some who were assembled were detained, and others were hurt. The lawyers who came to help those who were detained were themselves detained; and sometimes the medical workers who came to help the injured were themselves subject to injury. And yet a new group would arrive, members, journalists, health professionals, lawyers, replenishing the network of support. With Pussy Riot, demonstrations broke out in major cities all across the globe, and internet forms of solidarity emerged to put pressure on governments and human rights agency to press for the release of those imprisoned and to object to the conditions of

political imprisonment. But for this story to become more than a story about Pussy Riot that has ended with their release, we need to turn our attention to political imprisonment, and to the institution of the prison-industry as a global mechanism for the regulation of citizenship. In the United States, two-thirds of prisoners are Black men, and nearly every person on death row is a person of color. Angela Davis has argued that the prison continues the work of slavery by suspending the very rights of citizenship that were supposed to be secured for Black people in the aftermath of slavery.

I would suggest that if our freedom of expression is fully determined by the state, that is, if we are only able to do and say what is already deemed acceptable by the state, then our freedom of expression is always no more than an instrument of state power. Criminalization happens when speech or political expression or forms of assembly break out of those confines to draw attention to the illegitimate circumscription of speech, assembly, and political expression. If one does not stay within the prisonhouse of speech that composes the state-regulated public sphere, then one is sent to the literal prison as a way of confirming the state's power to restrain speech. And yet we can and do exercise freedoms that are not acceptable to the state, and these are forms of dissent, and even potentially forms of revolution. They are sometimes understood as anarchist, but what brings them together is the pursuit and affirmation of democratic life. On the one hand, the state should protect the freedom of expression; on the other hand, there is always the possibility of freedom of expression that does not depend upon the paternalistic protection of the

state. Democracies depend upon this paradox.

Finally, we are living more and more within the terms of what is sometimes called “the carceral state” – one in which state institutions are intimately bound up with prisons and the prison industry. In Russia, it would seem, it is the unholy alliance of state, church, and prison that has to be considered in any such analysis. But elsewhere we see the enormous rise of detention centers on the borders of many nation-states, a way of dealing with refugees through a form of effective imprisonment for which there is no legal representation. In Palestine, the vast majority of the population confronts the prospect and reality of indefinite detention where “security” is invoked without having to provide any concrete evidence to support an arrest. Prison solidarity movements exist across regions precisely because the prison industry is expanding as a profitable method of demographic regulation and control. Although prisoners cannot, by definition, assemble in public to ask for rights, for legal representation, due process, and redress, they do “speak” through lawyers, through networks of support, and media attention. Such networks allow us to consider the historical and structural conditions of carceral politics and to make our interventions through forms of solidarity at once embodied and virtual. Such forms of public solidarity require acting in concert across distances and across languages, and for that we need people who can work technologies and speak more than one language, who can compare legal frameworks and compose a paragraph or two, who can teach philosophy in prison education projects. Although the human interest story very often draws attention to an underlying problem, the only way to address the

enduring and accelerating dimensions of incarceration as a bio-political reality is precisely through entering into those mobilizing networks and letting them use our resources. For in a time in which citizenship rights are increasingly subordinated to security issues, censorship, and population control, we will need to get very savvy and subversive in learning how best to unleash our networks in order to disturb those relentless regimes of power.

Feminism is a crucial part of these networks precisely because feminist critique is increasingly understood to be threatening the fabric of society, opening up possibilities for women that are considered unthinkable or unacceptable, and destroying the common norms of life or even threatening the soul of man. We see the mass movements against reproductive freedom, gay marriage, and teaching gender in schools, but also constraints imposed upon women's literacy, employment, and expressive freedoms. Time and again we are told that equality and freedom go against the "common norms" of a national culture. Perhaps we can struggle together to perform those questions we have about those so-called "common norms" –whose lives were never included in those norms? Whose lives are explicitly excluded from those norms? What norm of the human constrains those common norms? And to what extent is that a masculinist norm? Can we perhaps mobilize all the expression of the senses, including sound and image and to lay claim to a free and livable life, to a sensate democracy?

When women's radical action calling into question the legitimacy of a corrupt political regime becomes condemned as "unthinkable" or as "impossible" then

something surely has happened to rock our ideas of what is possible, and to make us ask again, or anew, what really is possible?. As Rosi Braidotti puts it, as feminists and critical theorists we must “take on a larger sense of the possible”. We know the risks, and they include becoming beaten and imprisoned, but the risks of failing to take on that larger sense of the possible would subject us to the prison of our fear. One can be afraid, and still move onto the stage of one’s making and sing, especially if one is in good company. Few performance acts, it appears, are more politically powerful, especially when they come from a set of unruly girls breaking out of the paternal order, showing us new regions of the possible.