

# 10 Beating around the Bush

## Pussy Riot and the Anatomy of the Body Politic

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“‘What does it matter who is speaking,’ someone said, ‘what does it matter who is speaking.’”

—Samuel Beckett, as quoted by Michel Foucault (Foucault 116)

Слово и дело!  
Word and Deed!

—Motto of the *oprichniki*, in Vladimir Sorokin’s  
*Day of the Oprichnik*

Буду я, как стрелецкие женки,  
Под кремлевскими башнями выть.  
Like the *strelsty* wives, I  
will howl under the Kremlin towers.

—Anna Akhmatova, “Requiem”

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history.

—Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (205)

Vaginas need to talk.

—Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (72)

Surely the words must be spoken “seriously” and so as to be taken “seriously”?

—John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (9)

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The epigraphs to this chapter help triangulate the key facets of the Pussy Riot phenomenon, facets that bring together art, politics, punishment, and feminism as well as performative speech, embodied speakers, and the

afterlife of speech acts in their free (and possibly criminal) circulation. Pussy Riot is the anonymous feminist punk collective whose guerrilla art public actions culminated in the February 21, 2012 performance of a “punk prayer” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Their faces obscured by homemade balaclavas, five young women danced at the front of the church as they called on the Mother of God to drive Putin out of the country. A month later, three of the women (Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich) were arrested and subsequently put on trial. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina received a two-year sentence, eventually pardoned after 21 months (Samutsevich was released on a technicality).

While performance studies provides a useful lens through which to look at the group, Pussy Riot must also be examined in the context of critical, oppositional speech in the Russian Federation and its various antecedents. Pussy Riot implicitly poses a crucial question: “How does one say no to power in Russia?” The medieval experience of the *skomorokh* (minstrel) and the *urodivyi* (holy fool), the nineteenth-century traditions of liberalism and radicalism, and the Soviet phenomenon of dissidence suggest both continuity and novelty here. The explicitly feminist, indeed, female-embodied nature of Pussy Riot in itself is a new contribution, despite the long history of revolutionary feminism in pre-Revolutionary Russia and the first Soviet decade. Finally, the Pussy Riot case is embroiled in competing attempts to locate authorship, responsibility, and conspiratorial intent behind a deliberately anonymous and collective movement.

## Getting to No

The Pussy Riot collective are mistresses at the art of rejection: the group’s performances are only the most dramatic example of Russian attempts at the rejection of state authority. Even on the basis of crude cultural stereotypes, one would hardly imagine that Russians would have any difficulty making negative statements. Encounters with public institutions and bureaucracies can reliably produce “no” for an answer to nearly any given question, while more serious studies of Russian speech genres and communications, such as Nancy Ries’ *Russian Talk*, have suggested that pessimistic and negative verbal narratives are something of a national art form (Ries 1997, 83–125). But expressing concerned, public dissatisfaction with the authorities is a much more vexed question. The proximal context for comparison here is, of course, the experience of dissidence in the Soviet Union (and, by extension, throughout the Warsaw Pact). Dissent was indisputably an act of bravery, punishable by intimidation, imprisonment, and exile. The high stakes, combined with the high-minded traditions of the Russian intelligentsia, made dissent an endeavor of high seriousness. Indeed, if Alexei Yurchak’s work can be seen as a guide here, low-level dissenters could be perceived as tedious killjoys (“Can’t we just vote yes to the latest stupid Komsomol resolution and go out drinking now?”; 2006, 15–16).

The rhetoric of dissent in the USSR was primarily about truth and justice (“*pravda*”), and thereby resonated with free-thinkers throughout the world (think of Vaclav Havel’s “living in truth” [Bolton 2014, 223–24], or Solzhenitsyn’s “жизнь не по лжи»). Soviet dissidents were not complete strangers to irony, but their irony was largely unidirectional: it almost always focused on the system.

In their performances (but not, it would turn out, in their courtroom speeches), Pussy Riot dispensed with the declamatory and expository style of Soviet dissent, turning to a number of parallel avant-garde traditions. Chief among these are the Situationist International, a primarily French Marxist moment in the 1950s and 1960s that advocated the construction of “situations” that were designed to shock people out of their habitual, passive roles as spectators; Viennese actionism of the 1960s, whose body-centered performance art violated decency laws and sparked public outrage; and conceptual art, which gave primacy to the idea over the aesthetic.<sup>1</sup>

These traditions are irony-rich, but content-poor. That is, they express their critique obliquely, tangentially, and often with an element of deliberate repulsion. Here we should recall Pussy Riot’s genealogical connection with Voina (“War”), the performance art collective of which both Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samutsevich were members. Their antics were nearly always outrageous, and thus referring to their actions in the same breath as those of Pussy Riot became a kind of shorthand for offensiveness (chickens smuggled out of stores in vaginas, orgies in museums, police cars being turned over).<sup>2</sup> Actionists such as Voina and Pussy Riot make political statements without elaborating their actual politics; instead, they draw attention to their political aims through shock and novelty. Elena Volkova and Irina Karatsuba, the two religious scholars detained for wearing balaclavas at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior on the anniversary of the punk prayer, explained their sympathy for Pussy Riot precisely in terms of attention—we had been saying the same thing for years, they said, but no one listened to us (Makeeva 2013).

In its actions, Pussy Riot implicitly recognizes the limited utility of fighting against the regime in the same discursive register as the regime. In this, they differ starkly from dissidents, whose anti-Soviet critiques from the outside seemed to share so many of the premises of Soviet discourse.<sup>3</sup> And it is also consistent not only with the long tradition of Russian absurdism (from the provocative performances and nearly nonsensical verse of the 1920s OBERIU to the mannered sincerity of the 1980s *Mit’ki* subculture), but also with the ethos of the street protests that were taking place at the same time as Pussy Riot’s rise to prominence. Recall the playful irony of so many of the signs carried by the protesters (“Вы нас даже не представляете”—literally, “You don’t even represent us,” but also “You can’t even imagine us”). Far from the manifestos and open letters of the Brezhnev era, these protests strikingly resembled Facebook status updates, but done in the real world and conveyed by living, human bodies.<sup>4</sup> From dissidence through perestroika,

resistance manifested itself most clearly in the direct, unvarnished expression of what was perceived to be long-repressed truth. Putin-era resistance, of which Pussy Riot is the most spectacular and striking example, is not about glasnost. It is about attracting the scarcest and most desirable resource of the postmodern mediascape: people's attention.

### The Vagina Travelogues

Pussy Riot's political indirectness and its bid for attention are inseparable from the group's feminism, highlighted (albeit, for non-English speakers, obliquely) in the group's very name. It is safe to say that no professional or amateur observers of the Russian scene were expecting that a feminist guerrilla movement could ever occupy so much of the country's public consciousness. Expressing discontent with the current regime on explicitly feminist grounds never looked like a winning proposition; nor was feminism the only (or even the most obvious) source for an anti-Putin critique. Moreover, the group chose a name that was both bold and provocative (to those who knew English) and obscure and incomprehensible (to those who did not). And for both these groups, the name was all but unspeakable: for English speakers, who know what the name means, and for Russian speakers, who are not quite sure how to pronounce it.

Indeed, the name is something of a transnational scandal, a Russian phenomenon whose English designation redefined the limits of lexical acceptability on American network television news. If nothing else, the refusal by *NBC Nightly News* Brian Williams to even pronounce the word "pussy" (after previously referring to Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina only as "two young women") was an entertaining performance in its own right (Breihan 2013; Gil 2014). "Pussy" existed in something of a twilight zone for network television, sayable and unsayable at the same time (Schrodinger's pussy, caught in superposition): the word was sometimes acceptable, but *only* as a term of abuse, and not an anatomical description (Rose 2014).

Meanwhile, in an interview with *Russia Today* (the state's propaganda network for English-language viewers throughout the world), Putin himself challenged his British interviewer to translate "Pussy Riot" into Russian (a challenge the interviewer declined), in an attempt to emphasize the group's vulgarity without being forced to articulate it himself ("I thought it was referring to a cat") (Owen). No stranger to the power of words, Putin remarked, "These people made everyone say their name too many times. It's obscene" (Owen). The Russian equivalent ("pizda") has the harshness of the English "cunt," and, used as an obscenity, is laden with precisely the misogyny that Pussy Riot is attempting to combat. English-language attempts at reclaiming the term have been something of an uphill battle, but at least the term has been printable for decades (even if within limits) (Enslar 2001, 100–02; Muscio 2002, 3–11). The taboo on printing or broadcasting the Russian word is far stronger.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in its name, Pussy Riot reveals not only its Riot Grrl influence, but also its debt to French feminism's insistence on grounding feminist politics in the female body itself. And we can even see an element of the group's beloved Situationists here, since the name itself represents something of a *détournement* in the bodily discourse of power.<sup>6</sup> Pussy Riot began as an offshoot of Voina, representing a cohort of women frustrated with the lack of enthusiasm for feminist thought within the larger group.<sup>7</sup> The history of Voina is the history of a struggle between two charismatic men in two different cities to define the agenda of this actionist movement (and one of those men is, of course, Tolokonnikova's husband, Pyotr Verzilov), while their notorious orgy in the biological museum ("Ебись за наследника медвежонка") was a study in patriarchal power dynamics; it seemed not to have occurred to anyone involved that there could be a sex act that did not involve either vaginal penetration or fellatio.<sup>8</sup> Cunnilingus, it seems, is the love that dare not speak its name, and not only because the mouth is otherwise occupied. The biological museum event can safely be called pornographic not as a value judgment, but as a performance that followed all the rules of filmed heterosexual porn—all power to the penis. Perhaps inadvertently, Voina pointed the way to a bodily performative/political discourse with its famous phallic graffiti on a Petersburg drawbridge across from FSB headquarters; tracing a giant penis on public property is a classic "fuck you" gesture, but it is also one that inherently reinforces a gendered hierarchy. No one says "fuck you" with a vagina—the cock is the weapon of war (that is, of Voina).

Unless it is reclaimed, the English word "pussy" is the antithesis of this macho "fuck-you" gesture. As a term of abuse, it labels a person (usually a man) weak, cowardly, ineffective, flaccid. Patriarchal biological metaphors leave little room for female physical power: if so many actual weapons are phallic shaped (speak softly and carry a big stick), what kind of weapon is a pussy? Maybe we will live to see the day when soldiers fight each other with giant metal vaginas (in a surreal rewrite of "Imagine" that John and Yoko surely never considered), but it is neither ideologically nor aerodynamically likely. Pussy Riot completely recasts the power dynamic in their words: here the pussy is a trap. The vagina dentata is what the Russian futurists famously called a "trap for judges."

It is on the level of biological metaphor that Pussy Riot and dissent work so well. Pussy Riot is the scandal of female self-assertion, an attempt to say "fuck you" to authority while neither appropriating a phallic stance in a kind of transgender prosthesis, nor resorting to the readily available, maternal means of feminine resistance sanctioned by the culture at large (the mourning mother, à la the women in black). Their prayer is an appeal to the Mother of God, but it calls on her to take decisive, unequivocal action: Mother of God, cast Putin out. Appealing to female sexual biology would suggest one traditionally female model of dissent, a model that goes back at least as far as *Lysistrata*: the power to say no to male advances. Or, as the untranslatable patriarchal Russian joke puts it, "Женщины делятся на три

категории: на дам, не дам, дам, но не вам” (Women can be divided into three categories: I do, I don’t, I do, but not with you). This model locates female agency solely in response to prior male agency. By speaking the unspeakable of female anatomy, Pussy Riot uses the very name of the primary female sexual organ as its weapon against power. It may not be as easy to draw on the back of a bridge, but it is a far greater challenge to propriety. It takes a pussy to fight a dick.

### **Art and Answerability**

Finally, we must address the question of the group’s once and future anonymity. Conducting a series of public actions and Internet appearances without revealing the participants’ identity may well be a bigger scandal than the group’s foul-mouthed feminism. Judging from the media coverage (and, of course, the state prosecution), the existence of an anonymous collective that gives little evidence of self-interest is an almost unassimilable data point. Here Foucault comes to our rescue, but only succeeds in part. In his famous response to Roland Barthes’ essay, “Death of the Author,” Foucault proposes an archeology of authorship, noting that the author as a function only becomes important as an object of payment or punishment: who gets the credit, and who gets the blame? (1977) (From “Cui bono” to “Кто виноват?” (“Who’s to blame?”)). The Russian legal system is clearly preoccupied with the latter point, but the media focus more on the former. Every time that the members of Pussy Riot are asked about money and profits, they express their categorical disinterest in the group’s commercial potential. Yet rumors had it that the group was planning a European tour of stadium-sized venues and the Russian media could not seem to get enough of the question of Pussy Riot’s registration as a brand (Syrnikov 2002). Both the unmasked members of the group and their former lawyers framed the question of the brand in terms of protecting it from exploitation, rather than exploiting it themselves. But talk of profit and commercialization continued. When Party-Girl-turned-protest-icon-turned-party-girl Ksenia Sobchak interviewed Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina the day after their release, she insisted on pushing the interview towards questions of celebrity, comparing Pussy Riot to Destiny’s Child, trying to pick a fight between the two women over their travel arrangements, and asking about Alyokhina’s beauty regimen (“I can’t not ask the most important question—what’s up with your eyebrows?”) (Breihan 2013).<sup>9</sup>

In part, the answer lies in the nature of the modern capitalist media: selling and merchandizing is fundamental to the system, and one could argue that it is all but impossible for the media to conceive of disinterested cultural production. Yet a quick comparative glance at capitalist mediascapes in a variety of countries reveals that there are plenty of ways in which the media can frame an activity as non-commercial; in the US, for instance, one frequently finds the presentation of people whose activities are interpreted

as charitable or simply ideological. This does not mean that there is not a commercial component, or that, as Žižek argues, the very notion of philanthropy simply props up an unjust system (“First as Tragedy” 2010). But the Russian media are constantly trying to follow a money trail for which they have yet to find evidence.

The political ramifications are, of course, clear. What better way to attack an anti-capitalist movement than by showing money as the primary motivation? And what better affirmation of the idea that modern Russia is a place where only self-interest is conceivable? But there is much more at work here. First, there is garden-variety sexism: for many of the collective’s critics (particularly on NTV), the idea that a group of “girls” could do something like this on their own simply does not compute.<sup>10,11</sup> Clearly, there is a man behind it all. The most common candidate is Verzilov; as the head of Voina, he is a familiar “enemy” figure, and as Tolokonnikova’s husband, he is, by patriarchal definition, the boss. Beyond Verzilov, NTV quickly moves to the usual suspects: Boris Berezovsky and, indirectly, Georgian power broker Givi Targamadze. Here we are also dealing with rather straightforward and widespread conspiratorial thought.

But anonymity is challenging in other ways as well. Russia has no native tradition of masked avengers, no Batman or Spider-Men who hide their identity to protect their loved ones. What traditions of anonymity do exist are hardly laudable, and this brings us back to dissent; in the Brezhnev Era, dissent meant signing your name to an open letter, or publicly expressing an inexpressible view. In the few cases where identities were hidden behind pseudonyms, the sheer evil of the culprits seemed magnified in the state media (see the repeated characterization of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, on trial in 1965–66 for publishing their fictional works abroad, as “turncoats” and “changelings”). Anonymity was largely the preserve of the informer, the authors of anonymous denunciations that led to prison sentences for those denounced.

The Russian media are far more comfortable dealing with faces than with masks. On the one hand, there is the unflattering lighting and sinister music surrounding the defendants in the NTV documentaries. On the other, there is the basic fact that, her mask removed, the camera particularly loves Nadezhda Tolokonnikova.<sup>12</sup> When Sobchak interviewed Samutsevich, she continually insisted that it was impossible to imagine a group of Russian women discussing feminism instead of just complaining about guys and trading notes on shopping, and ended her blog post with the hope that Samutsevich will find herself a rich husband and settle down (Sobchak 2012; Sobchak and Sokolova 2012). For very good reason, no progressive is willing to go on record with informal Samutsevich gaydar results, but there is no political, sexual, or aesthetic basis to make this scenario seem at all likely. Rather, it recapitulates a sexist belittling of female agency and feminist goals; if the Pussy Riot defendants just had better husbands (and here I mean to stress all the ramifications of the English word “husband” that are absent from the Russian word “муж”), they would not be doing all this nonsense.

Unmasked, Pussy Riot is vulnerable to the powerful machinery of celebrity and glamor, even if their involvement is entirely against their will. Within days of her return to Moscow, Tolokonnikova appeared in a photo-shoot for a clothing company called “TrendsBrands” (a name that sounds like it was slapped together by a Random Capitalist Epithet Generator). Attacked for hypocrisy on Facebook and Twitter, Tolokonnikova responded that she had received no money for the session, and was merely helping people who had supplied clothing for her while she was imprisoned. Rejecting any claim of selling out, she responded, “I’m playing with capitalism, and capitalism is playing with me” (Tolokonnikova 2013). She and Alyokhina are also clearly playing with celebrity, even appearing in the third season of the American political drama *House of Cards*. Yet it is a celebrity that they are clearly leveraging for their political goals, particularly in connection with their new work in prisoners’ rights. The trade-off is, perhaps, inevitable, since they lost the luxury of anonymity the moment they were arrested. Here we have the ultimate irony of Pussy Riot: a group that spreads its message through anonymous viral video is undermined by mainstream video technology’s fascination with a pretty face. Video killed the anonymous star.

### **Conclusion: Speaking Filth to Power**

It is this conflict between anonymity and celebrity that yields the most productive tensions in the Pussy Riot story, tensions that clearly surpass any question of the women’s original intent. Unmasked, the three defendants prove intelligent, articulate, and, most importantly, nuanced. They are no less brave without their masks; indeed, given the issue of criminal liability (an issue that remains relevant even after their release from incarceration), their courage is as visible as their faces. But the former defendants no longer publicly speak the language of punk. Quite to the contrary, they state on numerous occasions that their intent was not to hurt believers’ feelings, and even couch their dissent in terms of Russian Orthodox tradition. The point is not that their masked and unmasked stances are irreconcilable, but that the masks turn the women into speaking subjects that are not entirely congruent with their unmasked selves. The defendants faced charges that were tantamount to blasphemy (not technically illegal under Russian law at the time), and fought the charges with reason and intelligence. But the masked women of Pussy Riot, with lip-revealing balaclavas that even suggest the female anatomy they proudly proclaim, spoke a deliberately crude, viscerally affective language that was neither advisable nor available to the women on trial (a language, it should be added, that they have declined to reappropriate in their post-prison lives). They had covered their heads to become the voice of an outraged female genitality; now, their ongoing challenge has been to project a confident, carefully curated unmasked appearance while never agreeing to be only a pretty face.



## Notes

1. Pussy Riot is also linked to the Situationists by virtue of the mere fact of their Cathedral performance, which echoes a similar action by the Situationists' immediate precursors, the Leftrists; on April 9, 1950, the Leftrists interrupted a mass at Notre Dame in order to declaim their own anti-sermon on the death of God. The mass was being broadcast live.
2. For a thorough history and analysis of Voina, see, Alek Epshtein, *Total'naia "Voina." Art-aktivizm epokhi tandemokratii*. Moscow: Umlaut, 2012.
3. Sergei Oushakine argues that the dissident writings in late Soviet times was characterized by a "terrifying mimicry" of the official discourse, a function of the "dissidents' attempt to experience the dominant discourse not only as *acting on* them but also as *activating and forming* their subjectivity" (2001, 204).
4. For more on the protest movement, see Mischa Gabowitsch, *Putin kaput? Russlands neue Protestkultur*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013.
5. According to Gessen, the group originally called itself "Pisya Riot," incorporating a Russian word for female or male genitalia that is typically used by small children: "it is most like wee-wee or pee-pee" (65).
6. For a more thorough discussion of Pussy Riot in the context of postmodern performance, see Elena Gapova, "Delo 'Pusy Riot': feministiskij protest v kontekste klassovoj bor'by." *Neprikosovennyy zapas* 85 (May 2013). [www.nlobooks.ru/node/2794](http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/2794).
7. For more on Voina and its relationship to Pussy Riot, see chapter two of Masha Gessen's *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2014.
8. Literally, the slogan means "Fuck for the little-bear heir," a reference to the election campaign of Dmitri Medvedev, whose last name contains the Russian word for bear.
9. In the press conference that followed their return to Moscow, Alyokhina called the interview "completely artificial," while Tolokonnikova complained that all Sobchak wanted to talk about was the Pussy Riot brand (Vladimirova 2013).
10. Sperling notes that Pussy Riot "particularly resented the implication that their project had been masterminded by Tolokokonnikova's husband, Petr Verzilov. They explained that it would be 'contradictory to the ideas of feminism if they were fronting for some man'" (230).
11. Even Pussy Riot's allies fell into the trap of traditional gender roles; as Gapova notes, her defenders in the media repeatedly called for mercy specifically because the prisoners were women (and two of them were mothers of small children).
12. Anya Bernstein examines the contrast between the masked and unmasked Pussy Riot members largely in terms of the focus on their bodies as objects of possible corporal punishment (2013, 223–27).

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