

Lost in Translation? Pussy Riot Solidarity Activism and the Danger of Perpetuating North/Western¹ Hegemonies

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Abstract

This article critically discusses solidarity actions in support of Pussy Riot within the global North/West, arguing that most solidarity projects within popular culture as well as within the queer-feminist counterculture are based on a lopsided interpretation of Pussy Riot as Russian version of Riot Grrrl feminists. This one-dimensional interpretation of the performance art group as Riot Grrrl-identities further leads to labelling their performance at the Christ the Saviour Cathedral as anti-religious. Within this framework the group's negotiation of Orthodox religion within their song lyrics, performances as well as statements is ignored, supporting the binary construction of The North/West as progressive – tolerant and secular – and Russia as backward – dogmatic and fundamentalist religious. We attempt to complicate the view on Pussy Riot's performances and reread them within the Russian context, highlighting several political statements that got lost in North/Western translations. The focus of the analysis concentrates on the 'Punk Prayer', its mimicry of religious language and references to the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the local public critical discourses.

Keywords

Pussy Riot; solidarity; feminist theory; queer theory.

¹ The terms/concepts 'North/West' and the 'East' are problematic, relational and perpetuate unequal power relations. Their usage is however inevitable because 'they persist in their abundance of historical, cultural, political, geographical, ideological, and other meanings' (Kulpa, Mizielińska, Stasinska 2012: 137).

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This article provides a critical discussion of the discourses that structure interpretations and representations of Pussy Riot, their group identity as well as political aims, especially within pop- and countercultural solidarity actions. Although we focus on popular culture, the artistic and political punk and riot grrrl counterculture, we additionally consider mainstream media reports. We argue that solidarity actions as well as reports perpetuate Eastern otherness and white North/Western hegemonies, and that queer and feminist examples of solidarity actions are no exceptions from such tendencies. We argue that the rhetoric at play mimics cold war rhetoric paired with anti-religious homonormativity (Duggan 2004), which stabilises notions of a progressive free North/West and a regressive, backward and authoritarian East.

We focus on questions of artistic protest 'forms' and 'methods' to appropriately account for the fact that Pussy Riot use performance art as medium for their political protest, and self-identify as performance artists. Many commentators from the global North/West – activists, musicians as well as journalists and academic analysts – have portrayed Pussy Riot as a Russian version of feminist punks or riot grrrls. Solidarity discourses incorporate the feminist performance art group into North/Western activism, imposing the values of queer feminist punk and pop-culture on the group without consideration of their specific cultural location. This characterisation of Pussy Riot as riot grrrls, however, sketches a description lacking deeper understanding and explanation. Moreover, such focus provides the basis for the employment of the music genre as well as political concept punk rock as antithesis to religious and social backwardness, as well as authoritarianism. This does not mean that North/Western countercultures, pop-cultures or mainstream media do not consider Pussy Riot's 'work' and self-representation. However, they do not take processes of cultural translation (Bhabha 2004) as well as literal translation into account. Surprisingly, especially examples of feminist and queer-feminist solidarity projects – for example by FEMEN activists or Caren Coon (in Neu 2013: 94–95) – are very inadvertent in their readings of Pussy Riot to the point of

blunt anti-religiousness. We attempt to complicate such views from a critical kvir²-feminist and decolonial perspective, inspired by the work on the difficulties and gains of transregional kvir approaches by Robert Kulpa, Joanna Mizielińska and Agata Stasinska (2012).

Pussy Riot solidarity discourses within the global North/West – public solidarity statements by pop-figures as well as countercultural solidarity projects and academic analyses – situate the performance art group on the intersection of gender, sexuality and religion. We draw on works on the precarious playing off the freedom of religion against sexual rights and vice versa in North/Western Europe by Dhawan (2013), Pellegrini (2004), Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008) and others, to argue that Pussy Riot discourses, equally address homophobia, sexism and racism to legitimise the abjection and stigmatisation of Russian culture as well as Russian Orthodox religion, as repressive and backward. Moreover, they signify Russian reality with religiousness as backwardness, repression and dogmatism, and reintroduce North/Westernness in contrast through notions of secularity as ‘modernity, freedom, and peace’ (Dhawan 2013). While we argue that North/Western bias lead to a simplification of the complicated matter, and a reproduction of violence against subjects within the global East and a perpetuation of North/Western hegemony, we have no intention to silence criticism of homophobia and sexism within the Russian contexts, or the Russian Orthodox Church, or downplay the violence against Pussy Riot as a reaction to North/Western culture. However, it is important to emphasise that gender and sexuality are the preferred spaces where the relationship between secularism and religion is negotiated, within neoliberal formations (Dhawan 2013). Alcoff and Caputo (2011), as well as Dhawan argue ‘that the Cold War’s ‘communism versus capitalism’ opposition has been displaced by the secularism-religion divide, which cannot be understood unless we think about the way sexuality is being mobilized on both sides’ (2013: 192). Accordingly, this article uses the insights by these scholars as well as postcolonial scholars Aune et al. (2008), Brown (2008), Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008) to equally challenge the equation of ‘secularism with modernity, freedom, and peace’ (Dhawan 2013: 193) within Pussy Riot solidarity discourses.

We will show how the heightened media attention and interest by the North/Western public in Russian socio-politics, concentrated on the Pussy Riot case and homophobic laws only. Through media’s single-issued focus on gender and sexuality, racist and anti-migrant actions during the summer of 2013 got ignored, despite the political and countercultural intersections with Pussy Riot. During that summer Russian police raided several underground companies and workers’ shelters in Moscow and several hundreds of ‘illegal migrants’ were violently put into detention camps and deported to their home countries. Contextualising Pussy Riot within their socio-political contexts of Moscow would have brought the issue

² Kvir as a critical modification of queer, focusing on (self-)representation and differences of kvir-feminist initiatives from the global East. Considering the risks of perpetuating unequal power relations between East and North/West, the term criticises the predominant North/Western commercialisation of ‘queer’ and reflects its transregional transport/translation into other contexts and back again. It opposes the North/Western monopoly on the production of knowledge and discourses and claims kvir as autonomous discourse.

of anti-migrant racism to the forefront. Through the oblivion of the deportations and the protests against them, visible kvir-feminist activists, their art and solidarity protest within Russia that addressed several issues simultaneously – repression of Pussy Riot, sexism, homophobia and anti-migrant politics – got ignored or silenced. Moreover, Putin, his state apparatus and the Orthodox Church became represented as all-encompassing, omnipresent repressive powers.

We point briefly to alternative readings of Pussy Riot, to suggest new forms of solidarity and alliances than those based on riot grrrl and punk identifications. Such alliances need to include recognition of the local socio-political conditions of Pussy Riot, their perception, as well as reactions by Russian kvir-feminist artists and activism. Thus, the verdict of the media of the ongoing elimination of an oppositional or dissident feminist movement within the North/West could be corrected by making the courageous kvir-feminist activist initiatives that continue to reject sexism, homophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression within Russia visible. Additionally, different readings of Pussy Riot's artistic and political forms, and methods that do not look for familiarities or similarities, not for punk politics or riot grrrl methods, but appreciate the differences to pop-cultural North/Western politics, could open up the possibility to set Pussy Riot in a dialogue with (often minoritised) historic and contemporary radical feminists beyond the North/Western world.

'From Russia, with Love:'³ Contextualising the 'Punk Prayer'

In the following passage, we briefly portray the history and politics of the group Pussy Riot, complementing the single sided picture given by mainstream media reports within the global North/West with insights gained through Pussy Riot's official blog on livejournal as well as other Russian blogs, independent online media and feminist online platforms.

The collective 'Pussy Riot' already formed in August/September 2011, but did not get much, if any, recognition from North/Western media until February 2012. The case of Pussy Riot appeared in the focus of the media and public interest only after the group's persecution, which was started by parts of right-wing and ultra-conservative groups of Russian Orthodox activists. Within North/Western media the large anonymous collective of Pussy Riot became reduced to the three identified and incarcerated members Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samutsevich, who became presented as victims of Russian state authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. The identification of Pussy Riot within the North/Western framework of punk politics allowed for a single-issued focus on their criticism of the connection between some parts of the Russian Orthodox Church to Putin, or in many cases, their alleged criticism of the Orthodox Church and Religion, and a further reaffirmation of liberalism and tolerance to secularism. A careful consideration or analysis of Pussy

³ 'From Russia with Love' was a campaign launched in 2013 by the 'Straight Alliance for LGBT rights' from Saint-Petersburg to thank the global community for their support to the Russian LGBT people. Considering the kvir-feminist criticism on their paternalistic attitudes, we want to mention this effort to show the existing variety of activisms and approaches in Russia.

Riot's history, however, provides information about the diversity of their issues and relativises the place of religion in their performance art and activism.

According to their blog Pussy Riot formed their collective as a response to the official announcement of Putin's candidacy for the presidential election (Pussy Riot 2014). Prior to their 'Punk Prayer' in Moscow's Russian Orthodox Christ the Saviour Cathedral, the group organised four 'illegal gigs' in Moscow (Pussy Riot 2014; Akulova 2013: 279), for example on the top of buses, in the metro, in front of a detention facility and on the Red Square in front of the Kremlin. The choice of their locations corresponded to the topics of their performances, for example their performance 'Death to prison, freedom to protest' in front of the 'Moscow detention center Nr. 1', where many activists were held under administrative arrest after the demonstration against the results of the State Duma election in December 2011. In the song lyrics they criticise political persecution – for example on grounds of political activism for LGBTIQ rights or gender equality and political protest in general – and show solidarity with the inmates.

Most of their songs called for a feminist riot, criticised sexism and homophobia within contemporary Russian society and most importantly, spoke out against state repression. The main targets of Pussy Riot's song lyrics were Putin and the Kremlin, not so much the Russian Orthodox Church and never Russian Orthodox religion. In their song 'Putin pissed himself', which they performed in front of the Kremlin, they threaten the regime singing that 'a rebellious column moves toward the Kremlin, Windows explode inside FSB offices'. Moreover they call 'for the system's abortion' and an 'attack'. While these songs may very likely have been the reason why Russian authorities closely watched the activities of Pussy Riot and gathered information about them (Lomasko and Nikolajev 2012), the North/West as well as Russian mainstream media hardly noticed their activities at this point. Pussy Riot attracted North/Western attention only after 21 February 2012, when four members of the collective performed their 'Punk Prayer' in Moscow's Russian Orthodox Christ the Saviour Cathedral.⁴ Again, the choice of the location speaks much to the content of their song. Although the Cathedral is perceived as Russia's 'main church' and a symbol of faith and fortitude of the Orthodox spirit, it also symbolises the commodification of religion and its abuse for accumulating profit.

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is 'home' to Kirill I, the 'Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia', and is located in the centre of Moscow, close to the Kremlin. The original cathedral from the 19th Century was destroyed in the process of the Soviet Union project of reconstructing Moscow in 1931. In 1990 the struggling Soviet government gave permission to the Russian Orthodox Church to rebuild the cathedral, a decision endorsed by Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin after the collapse of the USSR. From 1994 on, a fund collected donations

⁴ Pussy Riot's video clip, which became known as the 'Punk Prayer' performance, was actually shot in two different locations on two different days. The first performance took place on 19 February 2012 at the Yelokhovo Cathedral in Moscow. Here, the women actually did enter the altar and played the guitars, whereas in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral they were removed by the security staff before they could uncover their instruments. Even though the performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral was much shorter and 'less provocative', the persecution of Pussy Riot started only after this incident, pointing to the importance of this place.

from organisations and private persons from Russia and foreign countries to cover the Cathedral's restoration (Khram Khrista Spasitelya 2014). Since then the Church has been criticised for the immense construction costs and pagantry, during a period when the general population was struggling to have their basic needs satisfied. The 'Christ the Savior Cathedral Fund', now reformatting as a NGO and official owner of the Cathedral – not the Russian Orthodox Church – has been under constant accusation of corruption and being nothing more but a 'business center' (Moskovskie Novosti 2012). The church complex has a council hall, several monastery canteens, a media centre, a conference hall, several sightseeing platforms, dry-cleaner's, a bakery, a car wash as well as other facilities, which can be rented for non-religious events. Even the Russian Orthodox Church is formally renting the complex for secular events such as conferences and festivities (Moskovskie Novosti 2012). Other criticism touched the topic of glorifying the tsarist Russian era, when in 2000 the cathedral served as the venue for the canonisation of the last tsar Nicholas II and his family as Saints.

Pussy Riot addressed exactly these discourses in their 'Punk Prayer'. Moreover, they criticise the tight connection between religion and state, for example through the lines 'The belt of the Virgin can't replace mass-meetings. Mary, Mother of God, is with us in protest!'. Here, they refer to the spectacular displaying of the Greek Virgin Mary's belt, an important relic of Orthodox Religion, in November 2011, right before the State Duma elections. The event was widely discussed as a political move in order to distract the people's attention from the ongoing election campaign and the newly forming protest movement. Interestingly, the transport of the belt was organised by a foundation run by Vladimir Yakunin, Putin's long-time associate and former government official, who stated that 'the relic's arrival shortly before the parliamentary election was coincidental' (Kueppers 2011).

In February 2012, after the dominant party 'United Russia' has won the election and anti-Putin protesters occupied Russia's streets on a daily basis, the Patriarch Kirill stated during a press conference that the era of Putin and the government's relation with the Orthodox Church is as 'miracle from God' and that Putin has 'rectified the crooked path of history' that arose in the 90s (Piter. TV 2012). On a previous occasion he indirectly spoke out against the political opposition, announcing that Orthodox people do not go to demonstrations, but humbly pray in a church or a monastery instead (Krechetnikov 2012). Even before the elections and the case of Pussy Riot, the Patriarch has been controversially discussed for his unclear KGB past (Pivovarov 2014) and his possession of real estates and various luxury goods (Newsru.com 2012), earthly wealth an Orthodox monk should be free from. Pussy Riot addressed exactly these topics in the 'Punk Prayer' as well as on their blog, writing that Kirill's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is not a spiritual place, but a secular one: 'not a church, but a shame' and nothing more but an 'office' of the Russian Orthodox Church. They state that it is 'perfect for performing' as there is already a concert hall, snow and smoke generators and a bubble- machine (Pussy Riot 2014).

Although the performance of the 'Punk Prayer' was interrupted by the security, the performers could leave the church freely. Following the hate campaign started by far right ultra-Orthodox activists and their public outcries 'to lynch' Pussy Riot for 'blasphemy' in February, the Russian Orthodox Church opened criminal proceeding against the, at the time publicly unknown, members of Pussy Riot (Grani.ru 2012). On 3 March two activists of the collective – Alyokhina

and Tolokonnikova – were arrested. Samutsevich, who was listed in the case as a witness, was arrested two weeks later on 16 March. After an unusually quick trial, the three were sentenced to two years in prison camp because of ‘hooliganism’, Samutsevich being released on probation in October 2012. Most commentators and officials in North/Western Europe and the US saw the trial and its verdict as a human rights violation.

Despite the fact that many activist groups, anti-globalisation and anti-Austerity movements, anarchists, politicians, authors and artists verbalised their solidarity with Pussy Riot, the overwhelming amount of these acts of solidarity came from musicians of pop-culture as well as countercultures within the global North/West. Interestingly, mainstream liberal discourses conjoin in their interpretation with countercultural interpretations, reading Pussy Riot’s performances as addressing religion as source of sexist and homophobic oppression. Against such view, we argue that these readings are much more informed through discourses within North/Western liberalism, than through Pussy Riot’s activism.

Pussy Riot’s Performance Art and Politics and the North/Western Gaze

Why did the North/West react so intensely when the three Pussy Riot members were incarcerated and why are pop-culture protagonists, state officials as well as countercultural activists – from Paul McCartney to Myanmar democracy leader and long-time political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi, to Petty Smith and Alice Bag – all of a sudden so immensely outraged about the introduction of homophobic laws in Russia? This and other provocative questions are by no means meant to belittle or diminish the importance of international solidarity. However, they point to the intersection of mainstream media, (local) collective knowledge as well as political state interests.

Former Moscow correspondent for the *Economist* Andrew Miller argues that ‘the way [Alyokhina, Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich] comported themselves at their trial, issuing impassioned defences of free speech and denunciations of Russia’s sham courts, earned them far more moral authority than had their original “offence”’ (Miller 2012: 205). Furthermore, they ‘were the ideal face of the opposition for Putin, [his perfect] adversary’ (Miller 2012: 205).

It seems that the North/West found the perfect victims of Russian state authoritarianism in Alyokhina, Samutsevich and Tolokonnikova. The three individuals represent Pussy Riot, and the group is seen as personification of the opposition through the North/Western gaze. On a different note, it seems worth mentioning that within public discourses today LGBTIQs reside among the groups idealised as powerless victims of the Russian regime besides women and children (Wiedlack et al. 2014). The authoritarian Russian regime is personified in turn by Vladimir Putin. On their backs, so to speak, pre-existing political views are negotiated, presumptions of Eastern authoritarianism and backwardness. Coming back to Pussy Riot, it is not to say that their aims and issues are not taken into account. However, the gaze or lens that their struggle against patriarchal structures, sexism, homophobia and political persecution become observed with, is biased through underlying North/Western expectations, which arguably lead to

simplified and narrow interpretations of their performances and political aims. Thus, neither their full oeuvre nor their specific cultural location are taken into account.

A significantly problematic point is that the topic of religion in Pussy Riot's songs was translated as criticism of Orthodox religion as such. Sophia Kishkovsky for example titles her report for *The New York Times* from 20 March 2012 'Punk Riffs Take on God and Putin'. Although she rightly observes that '[t]he band's text, [...] was unequivocally against Mr. Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy' (Kishkovsky 2012: 10) she nevertheless simplifies their criticism of state power, its structure and 'staff' as criticism of 'God', in this context the God of Russian Orthodox religion. In contrast, Pussy Riot's own interpretations of the performance, presented on their official blog, were mostly neglected by media reports as well as in the ongoing moralistic discourses later on. Hence, in this contribution we want to take up the staging of the 'Punk Prayer' from the perspective offered by Pussy Riot themselves, carefully rereading it within the context of Russian Orthodox Religion. On the actual day of the performance, 21 February, the announcement of the 'Punk Prayer' on livejournal is accompanied by a quote from a woman from the Pussy Riot collective – a self-identified churchgoer – saying: 'Today, during the morning service, I understood for what and how to ask the Mother of God, so something would finally change on our spiritless earth'. Referring to Kirill's just mentioned statement on the humbleness and devotion of 'true' Orthodox believers, who are not supposed to demonstrate on the streets, but to pray, Pussy Riot invite for their special intercessory service: 'Today, on Tuesday of the Maslenitsa week, we the performers of Pussy Riot [...] invite all our most religious friends [...] to the "Punk Prayer" to the Christ the Savior Cathedral. If hundred thousand peaceful demonstrations don't bring any immediate result, we will ask [...] the Mother of God to drive Putin away as soon as possible' (Pussy Riot 2014).

In light of these blog entries we argue that both performance and lyrics are much too ambiguous and ironic to claim criticism or rejection of Orthodox religion *per se* as one of Pussy Riots political agendas. Neither Orthodox fundamentalism nor Orthodoxy in general are explicitly named by the lyrics. What is directly addressed is the connection from the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow, Patriarch Kirill, to the political regime. The lines 'Black robe, golden epaulettes' and '[t]he KGB chief is their chief saint, he leads protesters to prison under escort', points to the political history of the Patriarch Kirill, his alleged employment in the secret service of the USSR, suggesting that he has still political power, disguised through his religious role. The verses 'Patriarch Gundyayev believes in Putin. Bitch, better believe in God instead' address the Patriarch by his secular last name, doubting his independence from the Kremlin's political influence and accusing him of glorifying Putin as a Saint or as 'miracle from God', as the Patriarch said in the mentioned interview. In the lines '[i]n order to not offend His Holiness, women must give birth and love', the lyrics mimic Russian Orthodox liturgical language to criticise the Patriarch's gender values. An addition to such mimicry is the chorus 'O Mother of God', addressing the Virgin Mary that ends with the often repeated line 'put Putin away'. Contemporary president and former Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, his politics and ways of ruling and his tight connection to Kirill are the main targets of their critique.

Further important points, which gained little if any attention within North/Western discourses, are the actual name of the performance and the original place it was performed in the cathedral. We argue that the translation of the Russian 'Pank Moleben' as 'Punk Prayer' is incomplete and dispenses the performance from its Orthodox and Slavic context. In the Orthodox Church the moleben is not simply any prayer but a public and collectively performed (partly sung) 'service of supplication' or 'service of solicitation', celebrated in order to honour and thank the Lord, the Mother of God and the Saints. Additionally, as an intercessory prayer, it is used to ask for help and wellbeing for oneself, the family as well as for the entire country.⁵ Accordingly, Pussy Riot address religion as potential source for both oppression as well as empowerment. Especially the conjuration of 'Virgin Mary' and the appeal 'Mother of God, Virgin, become a feminist' can be read as feminist reclamation or affirmation of aspects of Russian Orthodox Religion and a reference to the general Christian Orthodox tradition of women addressing the Mother of God in difficult times. Another aspect of the feminist reclamation is the literal space in the Church. Pussy Riot wrote: 'For we, the feminists, will do our service – the punk prayer – in front of the altar, because women are not allowed there. If [...] the Mother God would enter the Church, she wouldn't be allowed to enter the altar area' (*ibid.*).

Especially this act caused heated debates in Russia, culminating in accusations of 'blasphemy' and 'religious hatred'. The outrage about their performance surprised the detained women as well as the rest of the collective and Alyokhina, Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich officially apologising for having 'insulted religious feelings' in July 2012, while trying to explain the underlying political agenda in front of the court. Tolokonnikova claimed that '[t]here was no aggression towards the spectators, only the wish to change the political situation [...]' (Ria.ru 2012.) We understand this particular statement of Tolokonnikova as paraphrase of a line from the 4th Chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians: 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' The three detained women were extensively citing passages of the Bible throughout their court statements, demonstrating their ample knowledge of it and offering religious readings of their performance. Similarly, the rest of the collective was also referring to the Bible in their livejournal posts, reaffirming religious aspects of the 'Punk Prayer'. The (especially North/Western) media, however, ignored these references, because '[f]or some of the journalists', so Pussy Riot on their blog 'it is profitable to present our performance as if it was antireligious. But we criticise the church's striving for securing a presiding role in Russia's social and political life. There are believers among us, we respect religion and in particular Orthodoxy' (Pussy Riot 2014). The title of this blog entry was 'First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see', citing Matthew 7:5, 'You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye'.

⁵ In other words: in the original Russian language Pussy Riot have named their performance 'Pank Moleben' ('punk service of supplication') and not 'Pank Molitva' ('punk prayer'), which demonstrates the collective's awareness and knowledge about Russian Orthodoxy.

These quotes show that the 'Punk Prayer' can be legitimately read within Russian Orthodox religion. However, we argue that it is not important to clarify, whether 'Punk Prayer' was actually a 'real' prayer, a feminist 'service of intercession', a spiritual ritual performed in a secularised place or a playful artistic or subversive mimicry. The crux of the matter seems to be that both readings were denied by the discourses that followed, transforming the 'Punk Prayer' into a blatant anti-religious act it was never meant to be. Russian feminist scholar and activist Vera Akulova stresses that 'the protest against Putin and political establishment' (Akulova 2013: 279) was at the core of Pussy Riot's performances, while religion, or religiousness were not explicitly addressed. Yet, Pussy Riot's appeal to female images of the Bible in the lyrics of the song 'Putin pissed himself' saying 'Madonna in Glory will teach us to fight' and 'the feminist Magdalena went to the demonstration', can be understood as a thematisation or feminist exegesis of Russian Orthodox religion. In their lyrics, Pussy Riot present the Mother of God as well as the reformed sinner and saint Magdalena both as strong and fierce women, who fight together with Pussy Riot in the 'feminist phalanx' (Pussy Riot 2014).

At this point, it also seems important to highlight that Russian Orthodoxy as well as the Russian Orthodox Church are not a homogeneous group of believers, without any differences. This diversity becomes visible in the distinct reactions of Orthodox people towards the 'Punk Prayer' ranging from open hatred to mercy, irony and even admiration. The statements of Russian Orthodox Church officials were equally more diverse than presented in the media. Deacon Andreï Kuraev, by that time professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, offered a religious interpretation of the 'Punk Prayer', noting that Pussy Riot performed it at the beginning of the 'Maslenitsa', a week of Slavic religious holidays, during which social roles and norms are questioned and transgressed in an ironic, playful and carnivalesque way (Interfax.ru 2012). Kuraev suggests that the Pussy Riot members performed their social and political critique within the framework of religion and religious rituals as a 'religious performance' rather than directing their critique against them. During the trial Kuraev stuck to his rather differentiated positions, pointing out that the criminalisation and detention of the three Pussy Riot members would produce martyrs and actually harm the Church more than anything else. After the trial, he argued that believers get disenfranchised with the Russian Orthodox Church rather because of some of their leaders' desire for luxury, than through Pussy Riot (Siapress.ru 2013). However, Andreï Kuraev was dismissed from his position at the Theological Academy in December 2013, with its science board officially stating that his activities in the mass media are 'scandalous and provocative' (Pravmir.ru 2014).

North/Western solidarity discourses picture the Orthodox Church as a unified conservative church, unquestioningly supporting the Putin regime, ignoring the existence of various positions towards the Pussy Riot case across the Russian Orthodox Church as well as religious people, with some calling for leniency and forgiveness and others demanding harsher punishment. Bacon (2013) and Papkova (2013), however, point to the fact that there are at least three different visible discourses within Russian Orthodox Church, a more liberal, a traditionalist and a fundamentalist. The Moscow Patriarchate, 'for all its perhaps inevitable conservatism, maintains a somewhat centrist position when set against the more extreme nationalism' following Papkova's analysis (quoted in Bacon 2013: 66). According to Bacon and Papkova, only the fundamentalists within

Russian Orthodoxy, are producing discourses highly 'hostile to religious pluralism', 'xenophobic, with anti-Semitism', 'anti-North/Western and antimarket', and 'seek censorship of the media' (Bacon 2013: 66). North/Western observers, on the other hand, refer to fundamentalist values speaking about the Russian Orthodox Church in general (Bacon 2013: 66).

To put this differently, Bacon and Papkova argue that North/Western analysis and media reports simplify the diverse ideological makeup of Russian Orthodox Church by taking only the fundamentalist discourses into account, without signifying this simplification. Moreover, they see tendencies within North/Western discourses to overemphasise the role of Russian Orthodoxy as well as the Church for state politics (Bacon 2013: 65). Addressing the political discourses around Pussy Riot, Bacon argues that '[b]ehind the angry denunciations of Pussy Riot's actions stands an array of distinct, if loosely related, issues, such as concern for the preservation of public decency, anti-North/Westernism, and a reaction against the perceived creeping universalism of a liberal human rights discourse' (Bacon 2013: 64), rather than religious beliefs or church politics. Akulova argues that the 'Punk Prayer' symbolises 'the "white-ribbon" protests against Putin's regime' within Russia, and sprouted 'numerous discussions about morals and religion, particularly within the Russian Orthodox Church itself' (2013: 280). Her analysis draws attention to the fact that the Russian Orthodox community and Church, despite its representation within the North/Western media is diverse and most importantly not resistant to change.

From Madonna to Bob Dylan: North/Western Pop-Culture and the Performance of Solidarity

Considering these scholars' cautious comments might also shed a new light on some of the reaction by Russian state officials towards Pussy Riot solidarity actions within or from the global North/West. One telling example is the reaction by Russian state officials to US-American pop singer Madonna's gay solidarity actions during her concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg in August 2012. The reactions seem interesting to reread referring to Akulova, Bacon and Papkova, because they caused quite a media ruckus within the North/Western world. According to the AFP report by journalist Marina Koreneva from 9 August 2012, deputy prime minister and former NATO envoy Dmitrii Rogozin tweeted: 'Either take off your cross, or put on your knickers'. Additionally, St. Petersburg local lawmaker Vitalii Milonov said in an interview: 'We should not allow the imposition here in Russia of Western values that Madonna promotes' (Koreneva 2012).

Taking into account that the pop star Madonna has a global and very enthusiastic fan community all over the world, including Russia, the local politicians might have felt the need to reject the intervention into Russian politics by the pop-culture figure by all means (besides the obvious sexism). The invocation of religious values might have been a sign for their rejection of this interference by a figure that represents North/Western power rather than a sign of religiousness or religious fundamentalism. It is not our intention to speculate on the reasons why the officials invoked religion as well as morals. But we argue that

the identification of religious beliefs and values is not as evident or unambiguous as some think.

The form of solidarity and reasoning Madonna chose additionally need to be considered. During her concert in Saint Petersburg on 9 August, she stripped to her shirt on stage to reveal the words 'No Fear!' written on her back as she asked her audience to 'Show your love and appreciation for the gay community' (Rappler.com 2012). Two days earlier, Madonna had stripped in Moscow, to reveal the words 'Pussy Riot' on her back (Rappler.com 2012). Madonna criticised St. Petersburg's law against 'homosexual propaganda' in front of a more than 10,000 people strong audience. Her support of homosexuals, in full acknowledgment of its illegality, was a provocation aiming at a reaction by state officials. The type or kind of reaction the state showed, however, might have been not exactly expected. We agree with Miller that Russian authorities do not consider North/Western values or world views for their political actions and agendas, and that '[t]he main audiences for the Pussy Riot drama, [...] were domestic' (Miller 2012: 206). Hence, what makes Madonna's intervention problematic is that her solidarity for homosexuals and Pussy Riot was actually performed within Russia. It was packaged in a glamorous, spectacular, pop-culture show, the unlikely representation of stereotypical North/Western culture: advanced technology, special effects, commercial success, corporate support, nakedness and a paternalistic 'shaming' and universalistic rhetoric supporting human rights.

Before moving on from solidarity action within or through US popular culture to the sphere of activism, we want to briefly come back to the particular and spectacular form Madonna used to bring Pussy Riot into the discussion. As mentioned, she striped off her shirt, revealing the words 'Pussy Riot' on her naked back. This format seems especially interesting, because it does in no way refer to Pussy Riot's way of performing but nevertheless, has been used by many groups in the global North/West for their solidarity activism, for example by musicians staging a punk rock street concert in solidarity with the three women on trial in Sydney, as the *Guardian* reports (17 August 2012). While black letters on a naked upper body do not at all refer to Pussy Riot's performative formats, it points to another feminist activist group that originated within the global East, to FEMEN. This observation suggests that some solidarity actions homogenise all 'Eastern' feminisms, of which they might know just two, namely Pussy Riot and FEMEN, into an undifferentiated mass, despite their political and ideological, as well as artistic or conceptual differences.

The reason why North/Western media and cultural protagonists might have found their confounding of Pussy Riot with FEMEN confirmed, was the spectacular solidarity action by FEMEN activist Inna Shevchenko on 17 August 2012 in Kiev. North/Western media happily distributed the picture of the topless FEMEN activist, chain sawing down a big wooden cross – which was a memorial cross erected by the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church in memory of the victims of the Soviet regime (Vasilenko 2013) and had no connection to the Russian Orthodox Church at all – the words 'Free Riot' written on her chest. Arguably, Shevchenko's violent act and the media distribution of this act also cemented the connection of Pussy Riot to a critical stance towards religion and the church in the North/Western view, despite Pussy Riot's own distancing from such criticism. The FEMEN action came only a couple of days after the members of the performance art collective had read their court statements within which they clarified that it had never been their intent to reject or mock religious beliefs.

Madonna's as well as Shevchenko's acts proliferated a new media interest in Pussy Riot within the US and Europe. But while Madonna reaffirmed the connection between Pussy Riot and LGBT discourses, the FEMEN protest reaffirmed the reference or label feminism. Both references are problematic considering Pussy Riot's political agendas as well as the specific local context within Russia, especially the feminist movements. Protagonists of Russian feminisms like Akulova highlight the fact that although Pussy Riot introduced the 'new, previously non-existent, word "feminism" into the vocabularies of Russian media', their own 'references to feminism and LGBT activism' were only 'very brief' (2013: 279). Nevertheless, they created enthusiasm for the subject of feminism and feminist activism within mainstream media, leading to the coverage of a large amount of Pussy Riot solidarity actions by not particularly popular North/Western feminist and kvir-feminist groups and individuals.

The Incorporation of Pussy Riot into the North/Western Punk Politics and Riot Grrrlism

The difficulties of 'cultural translation' of Pussy Riot's politics to North/Western values can be already seen in the labels they become addressed with. Media reports identified them almost in unison as feminist punk group and especially (queer-)feminist punks quickly joined (or preceded) mainstream media in identifying Pussy Riot's artistic and activist forms as (queer-)feminist punk (only). North/Western feminists, riot grrrls and punk activists misunderstood the artistic adaptation or conceptual reference as identity politics and political statement, identifying Pussy Riot as 'one of them'. They produced punk music based on this interpretation or identification to express their solidarity with the (what they believed to be) Russian punk feminists, seemingly using the same form or format as the subjects of their solidarity action.⁶

Akulova, however, argues that the labels 'punk band' and 'activists' misrepresent the form and format 'Pussy Riot' (Akulova 2013: 279). Although Pussy Riot 'used formal techniques inherited from Riot Grrrl', their oeuvre is much better described as 'media art [...]'. In each of their works, the final product was not simply the performance itself (some of them were filmed in fragments and in different locations), but blog posts [including] text, photos, and specially edited videos' (Akulova 2013: 280). Following up on Akulova's proposal that the multimedia aspect has 'not been properly considered outside of Russia' (Akulova 2013: 280) we argue that the identification of Pussy Riot as punk band within the North/West is a misinterpretation or misidentification of the feminist punk or riot grrrl movement.

An example and arguably one of the first of such misrepresentations, which should cement the label 'punk', was by Amy Scholder, editor of the book *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom* that provided a (imprecise) translation of lyrics, the court statements of the three incarcerated Pussy Riot members, as well as comments by US based queer-feminist artists, academics and musicians.

⁶ For an in depth analysis of the interpretation of Pussy Riot within the countercultural sphere of Riot Grrrlism, see Wiedlack 2014.

The book, which was translated into German and other languages, introduces Pussy Riot as 'Russian feminist punk collective' (Penny, in Scholder 2012: 1). Even before, JD Samson, queer-feminist punk and riot grrrl icon might have suggested the connection to riot grrrl politics, when she organised a reading of Pussy Riot's court statements, prison letters and songs, in New York City, on 16 August 2012, involving other riot grrrl musicians like Johanna Fateman as well as queer-feminist celebrities like Justin Vivian Bond or Eileen Myles (Gensler 2012). Another representative example is the five page article about Pussy Riot called 'Me and Pussy Riot' by music critic Everette True. Arguing that Pussy Riot incorporated elements of music by 'Crass, [...] Bikini Kill, [and] The Ex ...' (True 2012: 7), landmarks of punk history, in their music, True wanted to defend Pussy Riot's music against derogatory comments about their musical value in *The New York Times* (True 2012: 7). But why is it necessary to defend them for their musical ability and not their performance art or politics? Pussy Riot members have pointed out many times that, although they choose punk style and punk-styled performances as their preferred art form at the moment, they are not a band. In an interview they explain that they have decided to use punk rock and illegal performances, because they were looking for a spectacular, ironic and provocative form, a form, which was not smoothly to be integrated into the conservative sphere of mainstream media (Pussy Riot 2014). They wanted to be as visible as possible and punk seemed to be the perfect format and brightly coloured balaclavas the perfect attire.

Notwithstanding the importance of solidary actions, we want to critically engage with the omissions of such incomplete or miss-interpretations of Pussy Riot as 'Eastern Riot Grrrls'. For once, this focus on riot grrrl overlooks the reference to the earlier artistic forms of Russian Actionism in Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer'. Furthermore, the label riot grrrl subscribes Pussy Riot to a set of political values and beliefs that they do not communicate in their songs. Russian punk researchers Gololobov and Steinholt (2012), have pointed out that Pussy Riot had no relations to the local punk communities. Their cultural location is definitively elsewhere. Two of the three incarcerated Pussy Riot members used to belong to the performance artist group Voyna prior to Pussy Riot, an art collective, which became quite famous Russian-wide for their anti-government actions and performances and which some researchers understand as representatives of the 'new Russian Actionism' (Gololobov 2011). Pussy Riot were most likely connected to the broader conceptual art scene with political artist collectives and platforms like 'Bombily', 'Chto delat'?' or 'MediaUdar', as well as other art-activists like Victoriya Lomasko and broader feminist, anarcho-feminist and kvir feminist circles: a fact that complicates the North/Western focus on Pussy Riot as the only representative of Russian feminism.

A fact that additionally speaks against the identification of Pussy Riot as riot grrrls or punk musicians is that the design or concept of their political performances is much more an intervention into public space, than an actual punk concert. It is meant to disrupt everyday life, offend and provoke. Although most punk concerts, especially queer-feminist punk concerts are partly also about all of that, the latter are also much about sound, music, queer-feminist punk community and enjoyment. The North/Western attribution of Pussy Riot to riot grrrlism, is a dangerous negation of difference between Pussy Riot and US riot grrrls and oblivion of their different local experiences, histories and socio-political

structures. At the same time it is a production of extreme difference between the US state and the Russian Federacy. Furthermore, references between the US and British history of punk rock, like True's invocation of Bikini Kill, Ex and Crass, who are all bands of the past – a past where the USSR still existed – imply that the struggle feminists in Russia have to face are of the North/Western past. This stabilises North/Western hegemony as '[i]n this construction', so Kulpa and Mizielińska, 'whatever [Central- and Eastern Europe] became/is/will be, North/West had become/has already/will have been' (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011: 18). These scholars argue for more cautiousness for post-socialist localities, suggesting 'to look for possibilities of conceptualizing and doing sexual politics in CEE without falling into the false logic of origin/al and copy; to go beyond the diagnosis of the North/Western/American hegemony and CEE legitimization through referencing this hegemony' (Kulpa et al. 2012: 119).

Through the references, like that just quoted by True, Pussy Riot get incorporated into a North/Western canon of rebellious musicians. True uses her North/Western knowledge to explain Pussy Riot when she compares them with 'Crass and The Ex [...] politicized bands with a leaning towards anarchist beliefs', and '[T]he power of the collective. [...] Bikini Kill is the obvious one. The connection between the two bands is obvious, both musically and politically. Female. Empowered. Confrontational. Determined. Even now, especially now, it seems there's still a perceived right and wrong way to play a guitar, record a song, how to make your instruments sound: an idea rooted in fifty years of male expression. Pussy Riot's music is so charged with emotion and intelligence and humour and – yes, catchy as shit choruses – that it's an insult to label it as anything other than music' (True 2012: 7).

Pussy Riot's choice of protest form and art made it understandable for North/Western – especially North/Western queer-feminist – eyes. They made the reference to riot grrrl to attract an international audience and get solidarity, they distributed their videos of their performance only hours after their recordings and reached the North/Western public at the same time as the Russian and counted on the creation of a collective feeling of injustice, of community, without ever having met one another. However, Pussy Riot are not concerned with questions of sound and musical ability. This doesn't mean that these questions are not important in other contexts. Rather, we want to create awareness that the incorporation of Pussy Riot into the North/Western canon of queer-feminist punk values and issues makes their actual issues invisible. We see an important hint to the problem at play in the title True gave her article: 'Me and Pussy Riot'. The problem is that most individuals within the Free Pussy Riot movement, which is arguably a form of 'emotional protest', which means affect plays a more important role than argumentation, need a form of identitarian identification with Pussy Riot. The agitation about the abolition of free speech, the persecution of homosexuals and other minorities is not enough for people to get involved to this degree, it seems.

Another example for the affective politics of Pussy Riot solidarity projects was given by journalist A. Gensler in her article in Huffington. She quoted JD Samson saying that the reference to Riot Grrrlism was the reason why she 'feel[s] so close to them, and think[s] that in solidarity [...] must fight for their freedom' (Gensler 2012). This statement is a good example of the incorporation of Pussy Riot into the riot grrrl movement history and the affective attachment of North/Western riot grrrls to Pussy Riot. Moreover, Samson is an important

figure within the Free Pussy Riot movement. She produced a Free Pussy Riot song and video with her fairly famous queer-feminist punk band MEN, organised the mentioned reading of court room statements and letters and participated in many protests in New York, latest in a riot in front of the Russian embassy in New York on 17 August 2013, one year after the verdict. Despite the importance of solidarity, a critical discussion of the underlying assumption of solidarity needs to be done. By reducing Pussy Riot's action to the reference to riot grrrl punk values and forms, North/Western queer-feminist punks project their own political issues into Pussy Riot, and ignore their own benefits the solidarity actions have.

Further examples of the projection of local desires into Pussy Riot by North/Western riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks, artists and writers can be found in the international activists' publication 'Let's Start a Pussy Riot' (2013). The foreword of the book is an interview between its editor, Jade French and one of the initiators of the project, Emely Neu. Neu reaffirms the interpretation of Pussy Riot's performance as riot grrrl act, praising its 'raw DIY punk power' (Neu 2013). Asked why she felt the need to create a solidary project for Pussy Riot, she answers that she felt like 'growing up in the 90s, [her generation] never had one of these moments that hit you like a thunderbolt. Those provocative, musically-tinted click moments that every generation seems to have, except [hers]' (Neu 2013: 5). Pussy Riot satisfied her desire for a political spectacle, danger and extreme oppositionality. The reason why the political immediacy of Pussy Riots actions translated into Neu's political consciousness, however, was through the identification of the Russian activists group as (North/Western) riot grrrls. It seems that the political urgency of endangered lives needed to arrive in a familiar format to create a strong attachment and initiate a reaction. This format, obviously, was Pussy Riot's reference to punk rock. It can be argued that Pussy Riot filled a personal or collective void or lack for politically interested riot grrrls, queer-feminist punks and other feminists. Neu's book 'Let's Start a Pussy Riot' additionally confirms the reading of Pussy Riot as anti-religious through artwork by artist Carol Coon, who produced several prints in solidarity with Pussy Riot, among others the piece subtitled 'It is a Women's Duty and Right To Hate Religion' (Neu 2013: 94/95).

Conclusion and Alternative Readings

We argued throughout this article that the media hype around Pussy Riot within the North/Western world, fuelled through the outcry and support of pop-culture figures like Madonna re-establishes discourses of North/Western progress and Eastern backwardness. Ironically, solidarity actions by North/Western radical political opposition, by riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks, artists and activists participate in such discourses.

Representations of and references to Pussy Riot within pop-cultural solidarity discourses in the US, and North/Western Europe, frequently present Pussy Riot within the framework of political music, concretely punk rock and riot grrrl feminism. This reading of Pussy Riot privileges radical queer-feminist punk movements within the North/West, their forms and methods of solidarity. Pussy Riot get incorporated into the North/Western riot grrrl movements and the genre

of political music, and assigned to the values of these North/Western movements. Moreover, they become seen as representing North/Western values and their prosecution and incarceration becomes seen as rejection of universalised (North/Western) values like equality and freedom by the Russian regime. Additionally, they become presented as anti-religious, while the North/West becomes assigned to secularism in turn. The interpretation of Pussy Riot as riot grrrl also confirms their status as victims of a repressive regime, overemphasising Putin's power and neglects any diversity within the Russian state or the Orthodox religious community.

Everything in Pussy Riot's performances and politics that does not fall into the North/Western framework of riot grrrl feminism or queer punk politics becomes side-lined or completely ignored. The Russian art traditions, like Russian Actionism get ignored or brought to oblivion within the public eyes and Pussy Riot become reduced to mere copy of the riot grrrl movement, which originated in the US during the 1990s. Hence, this identification of Pussy Riot as riot grrrls, without paying attention to their transformation or usage of riot grrrl forms, reaffirms what Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska have called a 'North/Western present' as a Russian 'future to be achieved'. Consequently, the Russian present is coerced as North/Western past (2011: 16). Within this narrative, Russia can never become equally tolerant, progressive, free and so on, as the advanced North/West.

Moreover, and most importantly, every solidarity action runs the risk of becoming a paternalistic gesture of charity that helps Russians to catch up with North/Western conditions, which by definition they never can. This not only ignores the multifaceted forms of kvir and feminist art and activism within the Russian Federacy that do not use North/Western forms and methods like riot grrrl punk, but also neglects the possibilities of building discursive references and solidarities to feminisms and kvir-feminist activities outside the global North/West. If Pussy Riot's performances are not reduced to punk politics, their usage of the balaclavas could be read as reference to other minoritised feminisms, like the Chiapas movement in Mexico, a Zapatista group famous for covering their faces through knitted wool balaclavas (Huber 2013: 78) and not only as necessary precaution, rejection of individualisation and 'the worship of celebrity' (Bruce LaBruce in Neu 2013: 67). Also their style of colourful wide cloths and balaclavas can and should be considered within the context of Russian art and actionism, as a direct reference to the paintings of Kazimir Malevich (Yampol'skii 2012)⁷ or the poetry performances of Vladimir Mayakovskii with his popular 'yellow blouse of futurism'.⁸ Looking beyond the punk reference also means to reread Pussy Riot's presentation of female bodies within those colourful cloths. Artist

⁷ Philosopher Mikhail Yampol'skii argues that Pussy Riot are not only familiar with the paintings of Malevich and intentionally use their style of colourful faceless figures in order to translate them into their colourful cloth and balaclavas but also they materialise Malevich's ideas on the need of 'filling a church with art when religion degrades' in their 'Punk Prayer' performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral.

⁸ Not only Mayakovskii, but many other Russian futurists like Burlyuk, Kamenskii and Shershenevich were using bright and colourful cloth and make-up in order to provoke the Russian bourgeois public at the beginning of the 20th century. However, Mayakovskii's yellow blouse which was always wearing during his readings and which caused several scandals, became somewhat of a symbol of Russian futurism.

and activist Alexandra Neufeld analyses Pussy Riot's choice of attire as discussion of female gender roles, social norms and femininity within contemporary Russia. She argues that the brightly coloured thighs signal playfulness and childishness, while the usage of the balaclava makes individual age and hair style unidentifiable. The outfits also refer to the traditional 'home gown' (*domaschnii halat*), the kind of everyday clothes women, especially older and working class women, wear for reproductive work. These house skirts are loose and comfortable in contrast to middle-class female business outfits, which are supposed to be tight and sexy. This addresses the strict public and private distinction for women's choice of appearance as well as the question of age appropriation. Also the bodies of the performers are clearly gender-marked as female by those outfits, without sexualising them. As Pussy Riot state on their life journal in February 2014: 'We are anonymous, because we act against any personality cult, against hierarchies implied by appearance, age and other visible social attributes. We cover our heads, because we oppose the very idea of using female face as a trademark for promoting any sort of goods or services' (Pussy Riot 2014).

Within North/Western discourses Pussy Riot's clothes become identified within the framework of Glitter as well as a 1980s and early 1990s revival. As mentioned above, many activists as well as pop figures performing solidarity actions with Pussy Riot, stripped during their performances, sexualising their style: FEMEN, Madonna, Peaches etc. The most striking example of sexualisation and (North/Western) commodification of Pussy Riot's appearance is maybe the advertising campaign of the Berlin-based fashion label 'Blush', launched in February 2013 in order to support the incarcerated members (but most importantly to sell hip underwear): in a short video clip⁹ one can see a young women in a transparent negligee, high heels and woollen balaclava walking on the streets of Moscow and holding a 'Free Pussy Riot' poster on the Red Square, in front of the Saint Basil's Cathedral.

The Russian feminist critique around femininity, class issues and age are completely lost here. The female bodies of the Pussy Riot's collective are sexualised, commodified and exploited again: this time not by the Russian society, but by different North/Western agents in the name of solidarity and the allegedly common feminist agenda. Therefore, alternative readings necessarily need to consider North/Western biases and question the universality of North/Western values. Insofar, similarities and familiarities have to be revalued and questioned again, not to confirm Eastern otherness but to ask for hegemonies and power structures. Such solidarity, could avoid the recreation of a familiar global 'We' that is always already defined through whiteness, class and economic privilege as well as sex/gender binary and could in contrast open up alliances with other movements.

Other alternative and religious readings of Pussy Riot offers the Russian art scene itself. In March 2012 posters of the 'Pussy Riot icons' appeared as a political intervention on the streets of Novosibirsk, created by the Russian artist Mariya Kisileva (Figure 1). The name of the icon 'СВБД ПСРТ', is written above the two figures in the Early Cyrillic alphabet, familiar within the Russian context from the Orthodox Church, and can be decrypted as 'СВОБОДУ ПУССИ РАЙОТ': 'Freedom to Pussy Riot'. The image is a clear stylisation and feminist reclamation

⁹ Accessed 10 June 2014, <http://vimeo.com/63893700>.



Figure 1: Kisileva, M., 2012. *Ikona SVBD PSR*. [print] (photograph from Mariya Kisileva's private collection).

of the Russian Orthodox icon 'Our Lady of the Sign', self-confidently presenting Infant Jesus as a girl and the Holy Virgin as the feminist, Pussy Riot called for in their intercessory 'Punk Prayer'.

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