

Corporeal Canvas: Art, Protest, and Power in Contemporary Russia

by

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BA, University of Victoria, 2012

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the recent emergence of corporeal protest art in Russia.

Through analyses of cultural, social, and economic shifts in the post-Soviet Era, I observe how this corporeal turn reflects a significant cultural transition away from the literary text, which has traditionally held a role of major importance in Russian culture. Detailed analysis of the contemporary performances of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky are conducted in order to elucidate the social and political causes and implications of such a shift. Manifestation of oppositional discourse on the site of the human body is understood theoretically through Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics, Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque body, and Inke Arns' and Sylvia Sasse's theory of subversive affirmation. Interestingly, this artistic divergence has coincided with the rise of relative economic and social wellbeing in Russia – conditions that tend to foster the development of a burgeoning public sphere, now standing at odds with an increase in political repression. Oppositionists and protest artists are, therefore, exploring new and unconventional ways of expressing dissent. My study contextualizes these new methods of expression within the larger tradition of the cultural expression of political will, examining the ways in which these works are readable through Russian cultural norms and to whom they speak.

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Introduction

I am fifty years old and I have always lived in freedom; let me end my life free; when I am dead let this be said of me: 'He belonged to no school, to no church, to no institution, to no academy, least of all to any régime except the régime of liberty

– Gustave Courbet

It was alleged that Gustave Courbet, the French anarchist socialist and realist painter, was involved in the toppling of the historic Vendôme Column in Paris' Place Vendôme on May 16, 1871. Courbet was opposed to the situation of the war monument on the Street of Peace, and had previously proposed that the column be moved to a more suitable location. Whether he was present during the actual destruction of the column is unclear, but after the fall of the Paris Commune only a few days later, he was sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of 500 francs. Later, it was decided that the column would be rebuilt at the expense of Courbet, who went into exile in Switzerland, unable to pay the charges.

When Soviet-era avant-gardist Daniil Kharmis wrote the play *Elizaveta Bam*, he believed in the undeniably tangible impact that art could have on the world. Indeed, Kharmis and his contemporaries believed in the power of art to not only depict reality, but to shape it. Their literary works strove to create new linguistic systems that could cognize the world to a better extent than existing, flawed systems, thereby offering the reader the potential for a totally novel experience of reality. The absurdist quality of their writings simultaneously reflected and interacted with the absurdity of the world around them, and, by the 1930s, the last Soviet avant-garde poets were instrumentalizing language for the

relativistic destruction of objects (Ostashevsky xxv). At the same time, the Soviet Union was entering into an unprecedented period of oppression – the Stalinist Terror. Political purges soon became mass internments in the gulags and the mass murder of ordinary citizens. The absurdity of the avant-garde’s verses proved a particularly evocative reflection of the terrifying absurdity of daily life, and, in the early 1940s, the arrests and executions of these poets’ illustrated this absurdity in a way that has been extrapolated by Pussy Riot’s Nadezhda Tolokonnikova to link the political role of the dissident artist inextricably with that of the martyr (*Pussy Riot Closing Statements* 2012).

The continuing resonance of these works is indicative of the potentiality of culture – literature and art, to make an impression in the political realm. Exactly to what extent this is possible is difficult to determine, but the role of literature in Russian society is an unquestionably important one, an issue that will be discussed in Chapter 1. Of *Elizaveta Bam*, Kharms stated that, “verses such as these, having turned into real things, could be lifted straight from the page and thrown at a window, and the window would break” (qtd. in Roberts 132). The Soviet avant-garde poets engaged in the destruction and recreation of perceptions of reality through verse – the social and political agency achieved through cultural means likely greater than that which society could afford them.

The socio-political implications of art in Russian society comprise a central theme of this thesis. What exactly constitutes art will not be rigidly defined, as the works that are examined tend to fall outside of traditional artistic categories. During a police interrogation, contemporary Russian protest artist, Petr Pavlensky, cites Courbet’s toppling of the Vendôme Column as a work of art (De Winne, et. al “Interrogating Petr Pavlensky. A Play in Three Acts. [Dopros Petra Pavlenskogo. P’esa v trekh deistviakh]”).

His purpose is to legitimize his own action, entitled “Freedom” (“Svoboda”) which involved the burning of tires on a bridge in support of the Euromaidan protests. The underlying idea is that a destructive action *can* qualify as art – an expression of human creativity – and that institutional boundaries such as illegality aim to falsely erase this qualification and label them as simple vandalism, unworthy of further inquiry. Tellingly, after a lengthy series of interrogations that resembled more closely a philosophical debate on the nature of art than a cross-examination, the investigator quit his job to become a defense lawyer.

Pavlensky’s predecessors extend widely beyond Courbet and the Russian absurdist, Kharms. In the 1990s, Russia saw the emergence of the Moscow Actionists, a group who engaged in shocking, corporeal, and politically-loaded public actions. Their performances pushed the boundaries of what could be considered art: Oleg Mavromatti crucified himself, Oleg Kulik stripped naked and behaved like a dog, and Alexander Brener, amongst other things, had sex at the foot of a monument. At the same time, Russia’s literary culture was undergoing a monumental shift. A society once heavily reliant on the literary medium as a vehicle for political discourse was beginning to see this discourse residing less and less on the pages of the literary text and more on the bodies of performance artists in new, unconventional modes of expression.

The primary question that will be addressed in this thesis is as follows: Given that Russian cultural consciousness has historically dictated a literary medium, what has led to the emergence of such strikingly corporeal performance art in Russia, and what are its implications? To answer this question, I provide a historical background of the importance of literature and its producers in Russian society, before examining the shift

in this arena following the Soviet Union's collapse. Andrew Wachtel's *Remaining Relevant After Communism* (2006) provides an excellent study of the writer's loss of influence in the region, positing that not only economic shifts have contributed to this change, but also political: the appearance of nascent civil societies has arguably alleviated the social pressure on the writer to speak truth to power.

In Chapter 1, I examine contemporary conditions contributing to this notable artistic divergence, considering two major factors: a significant shift in the cultural realm, and the development of post-Soviet civil society. In *Nothing is True and Anything is Possible* (2015) Peter Pomerantsev dissects the Putin administration's methods of securing and maintaining power, deeming the current system of Russian government a "postmodern dictatorship," in which all authentic opposition is stifled, appropriated, or absorbed by the dominant power. In contrast, Dasha Filippova argues in "The Russian Terrorist," that opposition only represents a small niche of the Russian population and that Russians are proud of their democracy, claiming that "Putin supporters are the American '99 percent...'" the protest movement is [just] a tiny fraction, a small club where everyone knows each other and is indeed fringe" (2016). Elena Chebankova offers a sort of middle ground in *Civil Society in Putin's Russia* (2013). Chebankova suggests that the Kremlin's restriction of a public sphere is at odds with the coinciding economic growth and improvement of living standards in Russia, resulting in the bursting forth of civil society in the protest movement of 2011-2013, for which performance artists such as Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky served as the poster children. To this extent, I argue that corporeal protest art aims to carve out new spaces for the enactment of oppositional dialogue within a political system that has worked in a calculated way toward the

elimination of all such space. The ways in which this creation of space is being realized will be the subject of scrutiny in Chapters 2 and 3.

In Chapter 2, I examine the works of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky for their artistic efficacy and ability to speak through Russian cultural norms. Currently, there is little scholarly work in this area, especially regarding Pavlensky. This absence is likely due to the fact that the overtly political, shocking content of his performances often overshadows their artistic content. There is some scholarship, however, regarding the works of Pussy Riot and their artistic substance. In order to illustrate issues surrounding these works' domestic reception, I combine Valerie Sperling's analysis of the Pussy Riot case with Helene A. Shugart's theory of postmodern irony as subversive strategy, concluding that Pussy Riot faced a number of substantial challenges to cultural readability for their performance "Mother of God, Carry Putin Away!" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. I then invoke Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse's theory of subversive affirmation in order to understand what was effective in the case of Pussy Riot, arguing that in a similar way the efficacy of Pavlensky's work can also be understood. Additionally, Chapter 2 examines these artists' alignment with, and situation within, Russian cultural tradition in order to better understand their positioning within contemporary Russian culture.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I discuss the political implications of these works of corporeal performance art. Through the analysis of public opinion data, social media, and international and domestic media, I examine domestic reception and cultural impact in order to gain a better understanding of their respective political roles in Russian society. In this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I utilize public opinion data from the Levada

Centre, an independent polling centre in Russia. The Levada Centre provides data on a wide variety of topics and is considered to be one of the leading research centres in Russia. As alternate public opinion data is not generally available, these data play an important role in deducing domestic response, alongside social media and traditional media. Unfortunately, I could not conduct my own surveys or interviews in Russia. Future research on this topic would benefit from face-to-face interviews with oppositionists and random surveys of the population in order to better gauge public response to contemporary protest art.

In Chapter 3, I also investigate these performances' respective critiques of power, and ask: why must these actions be carried out in a distinctly corporeal way? Through the lens of biopolitics, I examine the body as the site of power negotiations, in order to better understand its efficacy as a medium for oppositional discourse and its potentiality in the political realm. At the same time, I observe how a series of issues related to the invocation of the body as a political vehicle arise throughout these processes of corporeal expression and critique of power. I conclude by examining corporeal and literary acts of dissidence as potentially complementary ways of enacting oppositional discourse.

My research aims to elucidate the political and social implications of a tremendous cultural shift in a country boasting one of the world's richest literary cultures. Thus, the findings in this thesis carry implications for not only the field of Slavic Studies, but for literary and cultural studies on a greater scale. Furthermore, as governments in the Western world tend more toward populist authoritarianism, my findings, particularly on the emergence of cultural means for the expression of political will, may prove applicable in a wider array of contexts.

Courbet's statement in the epigraph captures the universality of human aspiration toward freedom. Pavlensky's works are similarly oriented toward this goal. In order to achieve freedom, however, existing power structures that restrict and suppress must be exposed and dismantled. With this in mind, I commence discussion on the variety of ways in which the conflicting interests of the state and the individual are addressed within the cultural realm.

Chapter 1: Literature and the Development of a Russian Public Sphere

On November 9, 2015, Russian performance artist Petr Pavlensky doused the door of the Lubyanka with gasoline and set it on fire. The building houses the FSB, Russia's Federal Security Service, and was formerly home to the KGB – Stalin's Security Agency – and an infamous prison that was closed in the 1960s. Pavlensky remained standing in front of the burning door, hands clasped in front of his body, holding a gas canister as he awaited the arrival of authorities. This action marked the beginning of the artist's most recent political performance, "Threat" ("Ugroza"). The remainder of the performance played out over the next six months – in court rooms, and in a punitive psychiatric facility, where he was detained in solitary confinement. In the end, Pavlensky walked out of the courthouse with an \$8,000 fine for damaging a cultural heritage site, and a mandate of continued resistance: the fine will go unpaid as a matter of principle (RadioFreeEurope "Undaunted").

Pavlensky first gained notoriety when he sewed his mouth shut in front of St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral in July 2012 and staged a one-man rally in support of jailed activists Pussy Riot. "These are acts that are hard to distort," he reflected, "These acts define a certain political viewpoint and the message will always get through, one way or another, to its intended audience" (qtd. in Bennetts). Pavlensky's commentary regarding his early work underscores a major driving force behind its corporeality: using the human body as a canvas, he attempts to create a mode of expression free from external determinants. Effectively, the body becomes a space for autonomous expression, striving to transcend external mediation through the representation of extrinsic forces intrinsically. The majority of his subsequent performances have been notably corporeal,

uncomfortably visceral, and extremely shocking. In May 2013, the artist stripped naked, wrapped himself in a barbed wire cocoon and was placed in front of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg in an action entitled “Carcass” (“Tusha”). In November 2013, he stripped naked and nailed his scrotum to Red Square in an act entitled “Fixation” (“Fiksatsiia”). And, in October 2014, he stripped naked, climbed on top of Moscow’s Serbsky Psychiatric Centre¹ and cut off his right earlobe using a large kitchen knife in an action entitled “Segregation” (“Otdelenie”).

Pavlensky’s works are illustrative of an emerging trend in Russian art and activism – political performance art that is distinctly corporeal in nature. These works represent a significant divergence from the literary medium, which has historically functioned as the primary site for both official and oppositional discourse. How has this artistic shift from the text to the body affected the quality and character of subversive art and protest? And what does it suggest about current Russian social, cultural, and political conditions? In this chapter, I will briefly outline the history of Russian state-society relations in order to better understand the space occupied by these political acts of performance. Beginning with an examination of the role of literature in the shaping and facilitation of interactions between these two realms, I locate an arena in which culture and politics intersect, in order to extrapolate a critique of art and protest that is both politically and culturally encompassing. Through inquiry into the realm of Russian politics and culture, from early 19th century national revivals, to present-day, I will capture the progress and significance of the artistic shift from the text to the body,

¹ A psychiatric centre notorious for its usage as a space for the imprisonment of dissidents during the Soviet Era. The use of psychiatric facilities as a means of control for political non-conformists has re-emerged under Putin – for more on this issue, see Colborne, “Russia Targets Dissidents with Punitive Psychiatry.”

allowing for further analysis of this artistic shift's social, cultural, and political implications. An examination of the development of the Russian public sphere will provide the background for an understanding of power in contemporary Russia, integral to the construction of a framework for the critique of art, power, and protest in Chapters 2 and 3. What is important at this point is the centrality of literature in the constitution of a realm in which state and society interact – and the ramifications of such an important component of civic agency diminishing in authority.

Prior to the collapse of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union, literature functioned as the primary site for both official and oppositional discourse in Russia. In his analysis of the changing role of the writer in Eastern Europe, Andrew Wachtel describes the notion of a national identity established almost wholly on its reverence for the written word. His claim is rooted in the generation of Eastern European national awakenings, marked by their cultural and linguistic bases, rather than political – in which the nation's literary founding fathers are credited with the creation of a nation based on a shared national language and literary corpus. By the early 19th century, the native dialect had become a language utilized mostly by peasants and in the marketplace. A linguistic revitalization had to be undergone in order to set the stage for a linguistically and culturally based national revival. The language needed to be imbued with the power to not only express cultural and political thought, but to express the general truths of the people. The producers of literature undertook this task – becoming a source of national pride, a source of national identity, defending, in some sense, the nation's very right to exist (Wachtel 5). And, while advocates of nation-building often invoked the literary canon for nationalistic purposes, the strongest critique of the state concurrently came

from the country's greatest writers: Pushkin was repeatedly exiled by Nicholas I, Dostoevsky was sentenced to death by firing squad (which was later reprieved and commuted to a sentence of hard labour) by Nicholas I, and Tolstoy's works were personally censored by Alexander III. In the Soviet Era, the tradition of the writer as moral compass opposed to state power only intensified.

The status of literature and its producers in Eastern European society would not be drawn into question until the collapse of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union. The literary greats and the literary canon have been perpetually invoked as a source of national pride in both official and oppositional practice. Literature has been used as a legitimizing tool by regimes, but more often as a means for subversively undermining them. One need look no further than the tireless state-sponsored celebrations of the Pushkin Jubilee under Stalin, or the most widespread act of dissidence during the Soviet Era – the tradition of samizdat, in which forbidden literary works were copied out by hand and circulated among trusted circles. Writers and consumers of literature thereby risked their lives in the pursuit of truth through the written word, an endeavor manifesting in the notion of the writer as the conscience of the nation, an advocate and speaker of truth under oppressive regimes.

Literary activity has occupied an important place in the evolving relationship between the Russian state and society, and it is within this realm that the notion of the writer as nation's conscience resides. The majority of recent scholarly work on civil society draws on Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere is an informal space in which middle class individuals voluntarily join together to engage in critical and reasoned discussion, formulate common

interests, and ultimately influence state decision making.² While scholarly opinion lacks consensus regarding the origin and existence of a public sphere in Russia, Boris Gorshkov suggests that a public discourse with the capability of influencing Russian state-society relations is evidenced in late Imperial Russia, accompanied by a literary component, and transcendent of socio-economic precursors traditionally assumed to be necessary for its appearance. Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia have generally been viewed as having a poorly developed civil society, which is defined as a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity. Gorshkov's critical approach to Habermas' theory of the public sphere broadens Habermas' seminal definition to include the peasantry of Imperial Russia, thus introducing the possibility of the existence of civil society in a non-democratic, non-market environment to the Russian case. While Habermas observes the development of the public sphere coinciding with the rise of the bourgeois reading class, Gorshkov's study examines critical and reasoned discussion amongst the peasantry, including examples of peasant writings and the dissemination of literature in peasant communities. He concludes that peasant discourse, in fact, did involve a written component, and to a certain extent it contributed to the formation of public opinion in the mid-nineteenth century, in turn having some impact on government decision making (379-382). Accordingly, a literary common denominator remains in his critical appropriation of Habermas, while socio-economic parameters have been broadened. The expansion of Habermas' definition to include broader socio-economic conditions contributing to the emergence of a public sphere allows for the examination of state-society relations over the course of Russian history within a

² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

framework emphasizing civic agency. Ultimately, this sets the stage for a critical analysis of the contemporary Russian public sphere with due consideration to the development of civil society over time.

While it is difficult to discern exactly to what extent public opinion was capable of influencing state decision making in Imperial Russia, a more palpable measure of civic activity can be gauged in the artistic and literary output involving the public discussion of political issues. Yukiko Tatsumi investigates the development of the public sphere in late Imperial Russia through an examination of the role of art criticism, thick journals, and commercial publishing in the public discussion of political matters. Through an analysis of the art critic Vladimir Stasov, the political intent of his criticism and its dissemination, Tatsumi observes how political discourse, in the form of criticism, reached beyond the realm of the intelligentsia and out into mass circulation through the commercial press. In this way, a kind of political discourse was spread throughout a wider community, with the aim of raising awareness of national issues and encouraging debate regarding the future of the nation. Tatsumi argues that this way of engaging in political discussions contributed to the formation of *obshchestvennost'*, an indigenous Russian term broadly defined as “an active and progressive portion of society working on a wide range of public missions,” in other words, an imagining of the public sphere distinct to Russia³ (3). He concludes that late Imperial Russia exemplifies how a people who are denied a representative political assembly consequently utilize artistic and cultural avenues to express their political agency, ultimately encouraging the growth of political awareness

³ It is worth noting that the public sphere, as defined by Habermas, is generally considered a uniquely Western phenomenon.

and the development of a public sphere (29). Indeed, over the course of the 20th century and continuing in contemporaneity, cultural avenues have proven a viable means for the expression of political will in the absence of a representative political assembly or a civil society capable of granting civic agency to its members. Further, with a long history of totalitarianism and a current regime exhibiting increasingly authoritarian inclinations, the cultural realm offers a particularly promising arena for the examination of a Russian public sphere.

The aforementioned examples imply an inherent oppositional quality to the public sphere, which does not hold true in all cases. Soviet Russia, in particular, saw the integration of the public sphere into the state apparatus. The Bolsheviks imagined the public sphere as way to garner support through an idealized image of politically active citizens rallying around the Party (77). Under Stalin, civic agency survived in the form of partnerships between citizens and authorities in order to deliver services (123). At the same time, the constitution of a public self was largely carried out through literary means: individual, and later public reading became the universal way to participate in State activity. While Stalin famously viewed writers as “the engineers of human souls,”⁴ dissident literary activity simultaneously functioned as a sort of “intellectual safety valve” (Wachtel 25). Alongside ideologically-driven exploitation of selections from the literary canon, Soviet society upheld reverence for practicing writers through generous economic and social support. To be a state-recognized writer in the USSR often meant to

⁴ Writers played a vital role in the ideological inculcation of the Soviet population, reaching a peak with the introduction of the doctrine of socialist realism under Stalin. On October 26, 1932, during a meeting at Maxim Gorky’s house, Stalin said, “You are engineers of human souls... and production of souls is a most important task... That is why I propose a toast to [you,] the engineers of human souls” (Kemp-Welch 130-131).

be considered among the elite, but it is also worth noting the mass appeal of literature, which can be observed in the poetry readings of the 1950s, that would often sell out football stadium-sized venues (Laird xvii). At the same time, an underground literary culture was thriving. Dissident literary activity developed a strong tradition in the culture of Soviet kitchens – where trusted circles could discuss and circulate forbidden ideas and works, while outside of the USSR, the works and plights of dissident writers gained international attention.⁵

1968 saw a watershed moment for dissidence and activism in Eastern Europe. An open letter disclosing the unfair procedure used in the trial of four individuals involved in samizdat publication was penned by writers Larisa Bogoraz and Pavel Litvinov, handed off to a foreign correspondent, and published abroad in Western news networks. It was then broadcast back to listeners within the Soviet Union, signifying what one reporter described as “the first time in the history of the Soviet Union that two citizens of that country called openly upon their fellow citizens to raise their voices in protest against the government” (qtd. in Matsui 199). Yasuhiro Matsui connects this appeal with the re-emergence of an oppositional public sphere in Russia, which resulted in the appearance of a number of similar letters and public protests in its wake (199-223). While the emergence of an oppositional public sphere brought with it expectations of liberal democratic gains, what occurred in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, most notably under Putin, indicates more of a re-incorporation of the public sphere into the state apparatus than an increase in space for autonomous civic agency. The public

⁵ This was often achieved through the practice of tamizdat – in which dissident literature was smuggled out of the USSR and published abroad.

sphere in contemporary Russia will be discussed in further depth and detail at a later point in this chapter.

Through an examination of the development of the Russian public sphere, the fundamental importance of literary activity in the shaping of state-society relations becomes increasingly evident. At the same time, this study brings into relief a specific area in which culture and politics overlap and interact. Notably, reverence for the literary canon, and its inculcation in the Russian population, has proven instrumental in the construction of a Russian national identity. To this extent, Caryl Emerson asserts that, “When other identity begins to slip, Russians begin to recite all their Pushkin by heart” (“Shape of Russian Cultural Criticism” 367). It is worth examining, then, the dramatic shift and downgrade in the role of literature and its producers following the collapse of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union, a time distinctly characterized by a crisis of identity. This period was the watershed moment when Russians, for the first time, moved beyond quoting the classics to a corporeal expression of identity politics.

The collapse of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union was a traumatic event in which Russians experienced tremendous cultural, social and political upheaval. Writers were not immune to this trauma, and were faced with the reevaluation of their role in a changing society, largely for economic reasons. Generous state supports for writers were no longer available, the state-funded publishing industry collapsed, book distribution networks crumbled, and a newly available selection of consumer goods created unprecedented competition for literature in the marketplace. Wachtel claims that the development of fledgling civil societies, democratic governments, and market economies in Eastern Europe put an end to the socio-economic conditions that had

favoured literature and its producers for a century and a half, further arguing that writers were no longer required to defend the nation's very right to exist, and were no longer in demand as the voice of conscience in oppressive regimes (5). It must be noted, however, that the need for a voice of conscience under oppressive conditions did not disappear – it merely shifted under changing conditions. Wachtel's economic diagnosis provides a solid groundwork for the explanation of the shifting role of literature and its producers in Russian society, but his socio-political diagnosis is less convincing. In Russia, the civil society, democratic government, and market economy to which he refers appear increasingly deformed and simulative – less in the service of democracy, and more in the service of strengthening the Putin regime.⁶ A socio-political explanation of the shift from the text to the body must take into account the regime's nuanced and oppressive inclinations: a voice of conscience is in demand, but the cultural and political power once held by literature and its producers has significantly diminished.

In order to understand the shift in the predominant artistic medium of oppositional discourse, a conceptualization of the current Russian political climate should be established that facilitates the intersection of critique of power and critique of art. This framework will involve an assemblage of cultural and political theory. Political scientists have framed the Putin administration as a defective democracy,⁷ hybrid regime,⁸ or as electoral authoritarianism. In this case, Schedler's concept of electoral authoritarianism proves particularly valuable:

⁶ For the sake of this analysis, which highlights authoritarian inclinations in Putin's government, I will be utilizing the term regime.

⁷ Schedler, "The Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism"

⁸ Hale, "Eurasian politics as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin's Russia"

Electoral authoritarian regimes play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections for the chief executive and a national assembly. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than “instruments of democracy” (2).

In conjunction with the concept of electoral authoritarianism, Peter Pomerantsev’s concept of the postmodern dictatorship will be applied.⁹ In *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, Pomerantsev depicts the authoritarian invocation of democratic structures – and their consequent emptying of democratic substance – as an extremely postmodern-savvy invocation of dictatorial strategies. He deems terms such as “totalitarian” and “dictatorship” inadequate descriptors, maintaining that attempts to apply the framework of classical political scientific analysis miss the cynical, postmodern modes in which it enacts its deceit, while placing emphasis on the malleability of truth distinct to the postmodern era (Pomerantsev “Postmodern Dictatorship” 4).

Pomerantsev draws from postmodern theorists Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Frederic Jameson. Carrying echoes of Lyotard, he constructs his critique with the assumption of a particular status attributed to truth and knowledge in postmodernity. Lyotard’s theoretical assessment of postmodernity sees truth as the subject of pugnacious questioning, where no singular meaning is considered inherent – a multiplicity of meanings is assumed. Pomerantsev observes how the Putin regime has benefited from this characteristically postmodern fluidity of truth. Certainly, the

⁹ Peter Pomerantsev is a British writer, TV producer, and consultant to the EU. He is the author of *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*.

availability of a multiplicity of meanings lends well to political legitimization strategies that go beyond the propagandistic – it enables the regime to use the very language of that which challenges its power to cynically reinforce itself.

Pomerantsev's example of choice is found in an op-ed by Putin in the *New York Times*, in which the author makes use of Western-styled rhetoric in order to leverage a critique of Obama's handling of Syria. Published on September 11, 2013, the editorial reads like a taunt – chastising American activity abroad before cynically mocking the notion of American exceptionalism. It reads as cynical mockery in part due to Russia's own exceptionalist attitude,¹⁰ an attitude which is largely responsible for the shaping of Russia's homegrown brand of democracy. Quoting the Declaration of Independence, Putin uses quintessentially Western rhetorical language in a sort of inversion of Western accusations lobbied at Russia:

I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional." It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation... We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal. (Putin, "A Plea for Caution from Russia").

This invocation of Western rhetoric speaks the ideological language of its intended readership, stylistically situating itself within the dominant discourse, thus serving a legitimating function. At the same time, it co-opts the language with which an American

¹⁰ See *Russian Politics & Law* (2012) for a special edition on Russian exceptionalism, its origins, and usage in legitimating current policy.

readership would identify by articulating criticism of American actions and attitudes through the use of a document fundamental to American national identity. This co-option effectively juxtaposes the traditional truths assumed to be inherent in the language of the Declaration of Independence with the apparently contradictory practice of a government founded on those very truths. In doing so, it exposes a discernible incongruence and implies a flimsiness to the rhetoric, or a degree of hypocrisy in its usage. Taken to its extreme, this practice would suggest either the need for a reevaluation of American governmental practices, or a reevaluation of the Declaration of Independence. Evidently, Putin's op-ed did not cause an American crisis of identity, but it did exemplify the Russian President's ability to invoke ideological language in order to criticize actions and attitudes based upon that very ideology, and to do so through a reputable American media outlet. What can be gleaned from this case is the Putin regime's irreverent willingness and ability to co-opt and consume oppositional dialogue, rather than suppress it. In this way, oppositional discourse is cynically undermined and political space for authentic opposition is reduced. Pomerantsev sees this process as evocative of a thematic undercurrent of Putin's rule.

Taking the electoral authoritarian framework one step further, Pomerantsev's study of Russian society under Putin concludes outright that the Russian brand of democracy is a *fake*. With reference to Baudrillard, the concept of the postmodern dictatorship draws on the theory of the simulacrum. Baudrillard defines the simulacrum as an identical copy without an original. He defines the hyperreal as something artificial that comes to be more definitive of the real than reality. To Baudrillard, hyperrealism is the characteristic mode of postmodernity, in which the distinction between the real and

simulation are experienced without difference. Pomerantsev deconstructs the postmodern dictatorship's strategies of political legitimation into a series of simulacral components – fake copies of democratic institutions that act decidedly in opposition to their originals. These simulacral components include: fake institutions, state control over the media, rigged elections, state interference in private business, and show-trials, which ultimately contribute to the regime's ability to exert control over all narratives. To Pomerantsev, the Putin regime's implementation of democratic instruments – fake institutions – represents authoritarian simulation of democratic institutions in a definitively postmodern way.

Alongside the theory of the simulacrum, Pomerantsev evokes Jameson's concept of pastiche, in which copies of other's narratives are emptied of their meaning and used to create new forms. He charges the postmodern dictatorship with a heavy reliance on pastiche of democratic narratives, ultimately to be used as authoritarian implements. In this way, the political strategies outlined in Pomerantsev's definition of the postmodern dictatorship differ from traditional dictatorial tactics. They co-opt, rather than repress oppositional narratives, utilizing the language of opposition in order to legitimize itself, while also limiting political space for the existence of authentic opposition. They differ from traditional dictatorial tactics in that they function in a system that boasts multiparty elections, acknowledging the primacy of democratic legitimation, while simultaneously subverting it (Schedler 13). Structures such as fake elections and state-controlled media may be familiar to the Russian public, due to their Soviet Era genealogy, however, they function differently in the postmodern-savvy Putin era. It is worth examining the particularities of how these strategies function under the postmodern dictatorship, how they contribute to the limitation of space for oppositional discourse, and what makes

them distinct, in order to lay the groundwork for an analysis of contemporary political and artistic oppositionist response.

A striking example of the language of democracy subjected to authoritarian exploitation is articulated in Vladislav Surkov's¹¹ doctrine of "sovereign democracy" – broadly defined as the belief that Russia must develop its own formula for democracy in line with its own culture and traditions. Sovereign democracy rejects the universal model for democracy, in particular that laid out by the West, positing the State as the guardian of the nation, and tying the fate of the individual to the international status of the country as a whole (Richter 44). It exploits democratic terminology and creates simulations of democratic institutions, in a cynically postmodern emptying out of meaning that in turn allows the regime to utilize the symbols of democracy for its own political legitimization strategies. The following sections examine several democratic structures employed by the Putin regime as instruments of authoritarianism, and the particularities of their functionality as authoritarian implements in postmodernity.

Elections

International and scholarly opinion toward Russian elections has generally been marked by skepticism regarding their integrity as truly democratic instruments.¹² Genuine opposition toward central authorities stands at a clear disadvantage due to a number of factors, including, but not limited to: state control over media, the ruling party's establishment of opposition parties in order to take support away from competitors, restriction of public demonstrations, vote buying, threats, falsification, and a vertical

¹¹ Vladislav Surkov is the former chief of staff of the Russian government's executive office and a lead political technologist for the Putin regime.

¹² See White, "Elections Russian-Style."

power structure that exerts control through an electoral patronal system, in which power is generally exercised through patron-client relations.¹³ All of the aforementioned risks and challenges, at some time or another, have been marked by violence. The genuine oppositionist in Russia is well aware of the personal risk posed by their own political positioning.

According to the concept of electoral authoritarianism, the manipulation of the electoral process by authoritarian means deprives it of its democratic essence, thus allowing the regime to utilize it for non-democratic purposes. Evidently, Russian elections have been systematically manipulated to the point that they cannot be considered democratic. They serve a different purpose than the institution of popular consent. They do not operate as a democratic tool. While the establishment of multiparty elections legitimates the principle of political opposition, it does not do so for the purpose of instituting representative government. It legitimizes the principle of political opposition and risks a certain degree of organized dissidence in exchange for the availability of a legitimation tool that is utilized to strengthen the regime. According to Pomerantsev, the Putin regime utilizes elections to contribute to the image of the President as untouchable, not to lend the regime credibility (“Postmodern Dictatorship” 6). The apparent competition of the election is deceitful. It is postmodern in the sense that it invokes a democratic structure for non-democratic means, benefiting from a postmodern fluidity of truth. Democratic elections are reduced to a symbol – emptied of their meaning – and utilized for authoritarian purposes. The democratic election in Russia

¹³ See Hale, “Eurasian polities as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin’s Russia.”

has been considered by some to be an imitation of elections or a charade,¹⁴ emerging as a structure in postmodernity somewhere between Baudrillard's simulacra and Jameson's pastiche.

Civil Society and the Public Chamber

Habermas' definition of the public sphere involves individuals coming together to discuss and formulate common interests in order to influence state decision making. The Putin regime's vision for civil society is expressly different from this definition. James Richter asserts that the Kremlin's vision for civil society in Russia is to increase the effectiveness of state governance, an aim exemplified in the creation of the Public Chamber in 2004. Not unlike the function of rigged elections in electoral authoritarianism, this reimagining of civil society exemplifies a democratic structure subjected to systematic authoritarian manipulation, emptied of democratic substance, and utilized for non-democratic ends. The Public Chamber is an initiative that seeks to generate and contain popular initiatives, channeling them into strategies that contribute to the overall effectiveness of governance, effectively institutionalizing and depoliticizing civil society while simultaneously mobilizing it behind a "unitary state" (Richter 61). With little agency and no accountability to society, the 126 members of the Public Chamber are appointed either directly or indirectly by the Kremlin. Through the composition of its membership and the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals, perspectives, and issues, the Public Chamber functions to establish boundaries between the Kremlin-approved public sphere and "uncivil society," determining and depoliticizing

¹⁴ "For some, they were not 'elections' at all: for the jurist and former deputy Viktor Sheinis they were an 'imitation of elections', for Myagkov and colleagues they were a 'charade' that was heavily reminiscent of the party dominated exercises of the Soviet period" (qtd. in White 533).

acceptable versus unacceptable discourse, and attracting input from the populace in a manner that would not pose a threat to the regime (Richter 40-46).

The Public Chamber exemplifies the shrewdly postmodern co-option of democratic structures in order to reduce space for authentic opposition. At the same time, more overt examples of suppression of autonomous actors within civil society also contribute to this reduction of space. These modes of suppression are enacted in conjunction with chauvinistic sentiment in order to simultaneously eliminate threats to the ruling ideology and strengthen nationalistic ideology, reinforcing the need for a strong central authoritarian power as guardian of the nation. These more overt examples of suppression include: government crackdowns on NGOs, requiring registration as “foreign agents” of all that receive foreign funding, and reserving the right of the Federal State Registration Service to shut down any organization at any time. In contrast with more overt methods of reducing political space for opposition, the Public Chamber stands as a notably postmodern exemplification of governmental hostility towards an autonomous civil society. It delineates approved public discourse from that which threatens the authoritarian equilibrium, and casts the latter as the product of dubious foreign influence. At the same time, it exemplifies the Putin regime’s postmodern invocation of symbols of democracy, subjection to systematic authoritarian implements, and usage for non-democratic purposes.

Media

State control over Russian media has contributed significantly to the limitation of space for authentic opposition to the ruling power. The contemporary Russian brand of state control over the media is different than traditional totalitarian control, in that it

allows a few independent media outlets to remain in operation, serving several purposes: the depoliticization of opposition, a claim to some sort of democratic legitimation, and, in cases where independent media is subject to harassment – to draw a line in the sand and demonstrate the potential consequences.

According to Gel'man, the few independent media outlets that remain in operation are firmly nestled in the “peripheral status” of the “hopeless, ‘niche’ opposition” (514). Any independent media outlet that poses too great a challenge to the regime is harassed into submission.¹⁵ In this way, Russia is able to boast independent media while maintaining control over the flow of information, relegating a small degree of approved independent media to the gutter. The regime is able to exemplify what falls outside the realm of acceptable discourse through the sequestering of unacceptable reportage. At the same time, state-run media plays a major role in the depoliticization of oppositionists and in the incitement of fear in the Russian population. Oppositionists are portrayed as madmen, bogeymen, and threats to national identity. While show-trials have long been utilized to generate fear in the Russian population,¹⁶ the postmodern exploitation of media is used to restrict space for oppositional discourse, depict oppositionists in a manner that excludes them from the realm of the political, and to generate the perception of external threats to Russia’s sovereignty.

Furthermore, state control over media has contributed to the plausibility of information warfare as an official political tactic to a degree unparalleled in nations that possess a variety of independent media. Information warfare involves the deliberate

¹⁵ See Nemtsova, “Life for Russia’s Liberals Just Got a Whole Lot Worse.”

¹⁶ Show-trials, serving mostly propagandistic purposes, were a common practice of the Stalin regime.

flooding of the media landscape with false information – much of which is notably absurd. This strategy is utilized to lend credibility to official policy and practice, especially in instances exhibiting gaps in justification. A case study of the Ukrainian Crisis, in which information warfare was utilized to destabilize and influence Ukraine, exposes how the spread of misinformation was used to obscure public and international opinion regarding the situation (Darczewska 5-6).

Biased political reporting on the part of state media is a standard manipulative tool of electoral authoritarian regimes. During elections, state media continually fail to meet legal requirements for the creation of equal conditions for all candidates (White 535). Gel'man observes that the “monopolist information supply” meets low demand for alternative media sources, reflected in a large share of respondents evaluating the 2007-2008 national elections as “fair” despite proof of widespread fraud and manipulations (510). The low demand for alternative media sources can be seen as reflective of the familiarity of the Russian public with the authoritarian exercise of control over both media and elections. Indeed, state control over media is not a new or uniquely Russian development. Gel'man views state media control as integral to maintaining the authoritarian equilibrium, and it is no bold claim, nor is it specific to electoral authoritarian regimes, that state control over information channels bolsters the propaganda machine. Increasingly, Russian media qualifies as a simulation of a democratic institution, where pluralism is recognized in theory, but not in practice.

State Interference in Private Business

A recurrent theme that can be observed amongst the democratic structures employed by the Putin regime as instruments of authoritarianism is the way in which they

demonstrate the regime's ability to exert control over all space for political discourse and activity. Not unlike state control over media, state interference in private business serves as demonstrative of this kind of power – a warning to would-be oppositionists. In the case of state interference in private business, this kind of deterrence is carried out in the economic realm. For example, the high profile case of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was stripped of his assets and jailed on false allegations, exhibits the Putin regime's willingness and ability to quash any ideological and political discourse that is not compatible with its own. It exemplifies free market economic incompatibility with the dominant economic and ideological arrangement. High profile cases of oligarch detentions on false charges, suspicious deaths of upper-echelon business owners, and numerous lower profile cases of harassment, violence, and detention all point toward a governmental system that does not guarantee equal political and economic rights to all members of society (Chebankova 18). The state's nominal confirmation of property rights is effectively negligible and subject to corruption, due to a structure that favours state authorities over property owners. Elena Chebankova identifies the absence of socio-economic and political justice in Russia as a source of discontent amongst Russians, who want a society that could provide equal political and economic rights to all its members. She suggests that this desire was effectively articulated in civic activity in the post-electoral December 2011 and May 2012 protests (18-19).

In *Civil Society in Putin's Russia*, Chebankova argues that the Kremlin's restriction of the public sphere and civic activity is at odds with the coinciding economic growth and improvement of living standards – circumstances that, according to Habermas, tend to give rise to a burgeoning public sphere and civil society. Chebankova

observes this tension manifesting in a number of challenges to the development of a Russian public sphere: a rise in political conformism and individuation, civil society coming to be increasingly defined by its silent nature, and the realization of oppositional sentiment in restrictive political settings shaped to contain civic agency. At the same time, she suggests that economic growth has given rise to liberal hopes and expectations, paralleled by the lower middle class' involvement in civic activity as the most viable means of addressing problems that they are unable to resolve through contact with state officials. Chebankova ultimately advocates for cautious optimism regarding the potential for the development of an associational realm, while recognizing the limits of this potential largely due to the restrictions of a suppressed public sphere:

These movements and associations will need to enter an 'ideological marketplace', an operational arena or a viable public outlet for articulating their demands and expressing their concerns. Thus, they will force the government to alter its policies towards stifling the public sphere and will want to expel the state from its operational realm. The force with which that takes place will depend on the level of imbalance between the accumulated associational activity and the repression of the public sphere (164).

Chebankova sees Russian civil society set in motion in the mass protests following the parliamentary elections of 2011. Indeed, the magnitude, persistence, and character of Russian protest in the following years is illustrative of the rapidly growing tension between public demand for civic agency and the restrictive nature of the public sphere. Oppositional discourse, once carried out on the pages of the literary text, now emerges through alternate avenues, responding directly to the oppressive postmodern modalities

of the Putin regime. The shift away from the text as the dominant discursive medium carries with it largely economic reasoning, but the subsequent manifestation of oppositional discourse on the site of the human body is indicative of something much more complex.

In the next chapter, I will conduct a theoretical analysis of the artistic workings of contemporary Russian protest art. I will examine these contemporary works' situation within tradition in order to gain a better understanding of their functionings and reception within Russian society. At the same time, I will examine how they mark a departure from tradition, creating new forms and spaces for cultural and political expression. Throughout this chapter, the ordinary citizens' deprivation of political agency and the concurrent diminishment of literary culture's relevance have become abundantly clear. Yet, this does not fully explain the transition of oppositional discourse from the literary text to the human body. The next two chapters will unearth and scrutinize the new modes and methods of expression that artists such as Pussy Riot and Pavlensky seek to forge, the consequent political and cultural implications, and the unlikely roles occupied by their literary antecedents.

Chapter 2: Nerves of an Era

As a means of revolution, it is almost certainly a futile endeavour; but as art, there is no clearer image of Russia in 2016 (Sneider 2016).

Petr Pavlensky did not incite revolution upon nailing his scrotum to Red Square. The burning of the Lubyanka's door did not cause mass social upheaval. As discussed in Chapter 1, these acts are justifiably situated within state-society relations due to their overtly dissenting and contentious nature. In this chapter they will be examined primarily as political works of art. While an outright delineation of the political and cultural realms does not serve the purpose of this analysis, this chapter foregrounds the artistic and expressive mechanisms at work in the performances of Petr Pavlensky and Pussy Riot in order to gain an understanding of their inner functionings, setting the stage for an in-depth critique and analysis of their reception in domestic and international culture. This chapter works with the assumption that while these works carry apparent political content and ramifications, they function equally as artistic representations of contemporary Russian society. While an audience may or may not consider these actions to be artistic, as consciously creative instances of expression enacted by self-identified artists, they will be considered and analyzed as artistic depictions of contemporary Russian life. Further discussion regarding public reception and framing as artistic or otherwise will be conducted in Chapter 3.

Pavlensky classifies his work as “political art,” or actionism, but not as “art about politics” (Sneider). With this label comes deliberate alignment with the Moscow Actionists, a group of performance artists who began practicing in the 1990s, forming in reaction to the text-centric and densely intellectual nature of Conceptualism (Jonson).

Beyond the nomenclature, Pavlensky also follows stylistically in the Moscow Actionist tradition. The Actionists engaged in spontaneous, aggressive, loud, and often naked performances, generally in public places, with the artistic aim of social provocation. Oleg Kulik became famous for his naked, aggressive performances as a chained up dog. Alexander Brener, a favourite of Pavlensky, notoriously donned boxing gloves and shouted at the Kremlin, challenging Yeltsin to a duel (Sneider). While their works foregrounded critique of power, they were primarily artists who dealt with political themes, driven by artistic, rather than political motivations (qtd. in Jonson). With this in mind, it is worth recalling that the subject of this analysis necessitates the breakdown of the binary of art/politics. Consequently, each expressive method and mode of representation finds itself as complementary to, or constitutive of a critique of power. At the same time, these methods of expression fall within their own respective traditions and will be considered within these traditional contexts in order to understand how their form and content is concurrently shaped by cultural precedents and contemporary phenomena.

Through an examination of absurdity, postmodern irony, the grotesque, aesthetics of pain, and subversive affirmation, analyses of Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as well as the works of Petr Pavlensky will be conducted. These theories have been chosen due to their presence within Russian cultural tradition or as emerging trends in Russian culture, their suitability as frameworks for the critique of power in Putin's Russia, and their ability to contribute to an understanding of the distinct corporeality of the works. Within these frameworks, I ask: What do these performances say about Russian culture? How do they express it, and is it effective? And what cultural and political implications are involved in the usage of these artistic mechanisms? The

answers to these questions will ultimately allow for a critique of their reception through domestic and international cultural norms.

On November 10, 2013, Petr Pavlensky enacted his now infamous performance, “Fixation,” in which he stripped naked and nailed his scrotum to Red Square. Of the six high-profile actions that he has performed since first gaining notoriety in 2012, “Fixation” is likely the most shocking, most visceral, and most widely discussed. In an artist’s statement, Pavlensky makes clear the intent to shock, declaring that “Fixation” is “a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference, and fatalism of Russian society” (qtd. in Walker). Indeed, the increasingly shocking corporeality of subversive art and protest responds in part to a kind of societal familiarity with and acceptance of authoritarian practice, subsequent disinterest in individual political participation, and Putin’s generally high rate of approval.¹⁷ The styles and forms with which this artistic embodiment of shock manifests are varied and multifaceted, positioning themselves within Russian cultural traditions but also emerging in new, notably corporeal forms. These styles and forms include: the grotesque, pain, absurdity, postmodern irony and laughter, and outright contention, and their precedents originate in a number of different movements linked by the commonality of dissidence.

Most immediately evident in Pavlensky’s corporeal works is the element of the grotesque, concentrated in shocking acts of self-harm carried out on his stark, naked body which is placed in conspicuous locations. In the most basic sense, the placement of the

¹⁷ According to the Levada Centre’s annual publication, *Russian Public Opinion for 2013-2015*, Russians, by and large, identified economic stability as their primary political concern. A majority felt that the suspension of elections and freedom of the press would be justified to maintain economic stability. In some or all situations, a majority of respondents agreed that a strong authoritarian leader is necessary for the people. Additionally, a majority of respondents indicated that they feel as though they have no personal influence over Russia’s political and economic life, and a strong majority indicated they have little to no willingness to increase their own political activity (40-70).

naked body outdoors during the Russian winter and the accompanying act of self-mutilation is transgressive of cultural norms. In an artistic sense, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body helps to understand the symbolic content of this grotesque enactment. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin examines the notion of the grotesque in the works of Francois Rabelais. The grotesque body, while lacking precise formal character, involves the making of the human body into something "ugly, monstrous, [and] hideous," challenging dominant notions of unity and completeness in a way that degrades, and "brings down to earth," thus manifesting the subject in flesh (25). An integral component of his theory of the carnivalesque, the grotesque body is one method in which the experience of the carnival in medieval folk culture imagines an upsetting of power relations and rebirth in an alternative realm, characterized by and through community and disruptive laughter. Through the depiction of disfigured forms, the grotesque creates another world, which, according to Bakhtin, is simultaneously destructive and regenerative. Through bodily participation in the construction of another world, the potentiality for an alternative reality is made real in corporeality (20-48).

Nailed to Red Square, sitting atop the Serbsky Psychiatric Centre, or wrapped in barbed wire in front of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, Pavlensky appears gaunt, exposed, and bleeding. Here is the grotesque human figure: baring flesh in sub-zero conditions and mutilating parts of the body, yet maintaining utter composure, sitting stone-faced and still. It is primarily the act of self-harm that introduces the grotesque element of bodily transformation into the performance. This act contradicts notions of the sacredness of the body and willfully inflicts pain and destruction upon itself. In its transgression of the sacredness of the human body, the act of self-harm makes palpable

the subversive component in a way that could not be achieved by simply appearing naked and performing some other act. In a basic sense, it subverts the natural human impulse to avoid pain and injury; in a Bakhtinian sense, it challenges notions of human wholeness and the aesthetic prioritization of beauty that corresponds with whichever set of values and beliefs is dominant in that time and place. Symbolically, it is an act of self-victimization representing the state's perpetration of harm. At its foundation, the presentation of the grotesque body is an act that subverts dominant cultural and political values. It emphasizes a particular part of the body and transforms it in a way that challenges widely held perceptions of beauty and unity. It symbolically captures an intangible idea – the subject of its critique – within this body part, and in this act of making palpable the untouchable lies an act of degradation. Theoretically speaking, this sort of grotesque enactment is degrading to a whole set of cultural norms and values, an effective mode of subversion within an artistic world that addresses problematic power structures. Practically speaking, the grotesque is shocking, and, fundamentally, poses challenges to readability through cultural norms.

On October 19, 2014, in an act entitled “Segregation,” Petr Pavlensky stripped naked and sat atop the Serbsky Psychiatric Facility before cutting off his right earlobe with a large kitchen knife. This particular act lends well to examination within the framework of Bakhtin's grotesque body because, through embodiment, the work effectively transfers the thematized subject – the repression of dissidents through punitive psychiatry – to the material level. While authorities may deny that punitive psychiatry constitutes part of official practice, international observers argue to the contrary, and

perhaps in this veiled form the need for a tangible representation is heightened.¹⁸

Through the lens of grotesque bodily transformation, the practice of imprisoning dissidents in psychiatric facilities – a kind of severing off from society – is symbolically made flesh in the severing of the earlobe, and in doing so, this instrument of the dominant system is degraded from an abstracted allegation to a palpable symbolic representation in flesh. The action itself is ugly and upsetting, resulting in both a transference of this ugliness to the subject of critique and a challenge to dominant aesthetic notions of beauty. By challenging dominant notions of beauty, the performance inherently takes on a broadly subversive stylistic quality, while also generating discomfort in the audience, thereby challenging indifference to prevailing modes of power.

Concurrently, in another act of degradation, a connection is opened with the dominant power by placing the disfigured body within its jurisdiction, as opposed to within a sanctioned gallery space or other private location. When the authorities arrive, they stand below, bewildered, as Pavlensky is positioned on top of the roof, naked and covered in blood, in sub-zero temperatures. They pile mattresses at the base of the building, apparently encouraging him to jump down, before taking to the roof of the centre and forcibly removing him. Incorporation of the authorities degrades the dominant power. In one respect, the very act of casting the authorities as actors in his performance removes them from the realm of the untouchable and places them within Pavlensky's own set of parameters. The general appearance of the authorities – bewildered and incompetent – furthers the act of degradation. Stoic, stone-faced, and composed,

¹⁸ According to Human Rights Watch, the use of punitive psychiatry is not necessarily on the rise. Instead, it is being used in high profile cases to target critics of the regime in order to associate dissidence with mental illness, thus reducing the credibility of oppositionists' opinions while simultaneously intimidating others from voicing criticism of the government (Colborne).

Pavlensky's appearance gives the impression that *he* holds power in this interaction, and in this provocation a carnivalesque upsetting of power relations emerges.

Another instance of the carnivalesque upsetting of power relations is evident in Pussy Riot's famous performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. First, the women's positioning on the ambo – an area upon which women are usually forbidden – signals a blatant irreverence for existing hierarchal structures. At the same time, the group reimagines themselves as the holders of power in this situation, broadcasting their message in a way that is fundamentally transgressive of societal norms. Their colourful costumes and satirical take on prayer infuse the performance with laughter, which, according to Bakhtin, offers the potential to transcend the fear that is generated by the dominant power. Whether this enactment of carnivalesque laughter is successful is questionable, however. In order to develop community through laughter, the audience must partake and include themselves in the mocking (Robinson). But, the public's response was not to incorporate themselves in this imagined world where women chant punk rock slogans in a cathedral and call for the Mother of God to become a feminist – thus, the creation of an alternative world inclusive of the audience was not fully realized.

Nevertheless, the Bakhtinian spirit of the carnivalesque can be observed at play in Pussy Riot's and Pavlensky's dialogues with power. The dynamic at work in Pavlensky's actions, in particular, can be readily simplified as depictions of contemporary Russian power relations: the act of self-harm casts Pavlensky in the role of victim and the state in the role of the aggressor. The authorities have no opportunity to select their role in Pavlensky's performance: contrasting the injured and exposed body of the artist with the armed and uniformed police officers, it is clear who is the aggressor in this situation.

While Pavlensky may bear power in the role of director of the performance, he is cast as the subject of repression in the world that he has created. Evident in this dualistic role of director/actor is a peculiar kind of tension between empowerment and subjection that will continue to present itself throughout this analysis, posing implicit problems, and perpetually eluding resolution. Perhaps this is a peculiarity that is inherent in all political art to some degree: in the act of claim-making one is simultaneously empowered and subjected to the potentiality of any response.

Before the grotesque body and the carnivalesque, Bakhtin's writings conceptualized an aesthetics of pain reliant on the creation of distance between the audience and the sufferer in order to evoke a particularly productive kind of empathy. In contrast with the grotesque body's suitability in envisaging the subversive elements of Pavlensky's self-harm, understanding his self-harm from a Bakhtinian aesthetics of pain proves valuable in laying the groundwork for a critique of his works' reception and cultural readability. In other words, it helps to understand some of the complications that arise from the distancing effect produced in tandem with the act of self-harm. According to Bakhtin, in order to express empathy toward a suffering person, "outsideness" from this person must first be achieved. Prolonged identification with the sufferer prevents the establishment of an external perspective, a position only from which an effective gesture of assistance can occur. From this external position, Bakhtin optimistically posits that the "clear blue sky that enframes him becomes a pictorial feature which consummates and resolves his suffering" (qtd. in Emerson "Shklovsky's *Ostranenie*" 643). While somewhat counter-intuitive, according to Bakhtin, this kind of distancing fosters empathy. Caryl Emerson logicizes this claim in the following way: "A cry of pain needs a

word of consolation or a gesture of assistance, not another helpless cry of pain” (Emerson “Shklovsky’s *Ostranenie*” 643). The framing of the sufferer against the sky enables the viewer to offer some sort of gesture of alleviation, whereas continual identification with the sufferer causes the viewer, in turn, to be overcome by suffering and therefore unable to provide this mitigating gesture. Yet, this logic is nestled within a critique of the theory’s apolitical character, drawing in Hayne’s commentary on the fact that Bakhtin’s framework does not include a critique of the power structures that have caused the pain, and Frank’s note that this distancing prevents the development of community needed to generate strength and dialogue (Emerson “Shklovsky’s *Ostranenie*” 643-44). Indeed, Emerson notes that Bakhtin’s concept of requisite “outsideness” as a precursor to the alleviation of suffering differs from his later work involving the grotesque body, which emphasizes a connection to the universal, albeit in a transgressive way. While the grotesque body helps to understand the stylistic methods of subversion at work in Pavlensky’s performances, within a Bakhtinian framework of pain, the intent behind the shock and distance from the viewer created in Pavlensky’s performances can be understood as two-fold: as a revelatory mechanism and as evocative of a particularly productive type of empathy.

Through the presentation of the suffering body and the accompanying practice of distancing, the audience is encouraged to expand their field of vision to include that which surrounds the suffering body – the systemic causes of the suffering. At the basis of this performance is an injured, vulnerable, and exposed human body that is at once deserving of help and repulsive. At the same time, Pavlensky’s appearance – shaved head, calculated and composed posture, and grim facial expression – seems to deflect any

gesture of assistance. In fact, his actions are hardly innocuous: the acts of self-harm, public nudity, and destruction are shocking, violent, and clearly transgressive of cultural norms. In “Segregation,” after cutting off his earlobe, he continues holding the alarmingly large kitchen knife, and in “Carcass,” the barbed wire cocoon prevents passers-by from approaching too closely. It could be argued that this distance is necessary in order to prevent the embroilment of the audience within the pain on display, or, alternately, in terms of Brechtian estrangement, to disallow an uncritical performance within which to disengage, simultaneously offering a heightened understanding of the conditions represented in the performance.¹⁹ Either way, these actions are designed to challenge audience identification with the performer, and whether the intent is to encourage a critical attitude and self-scrutiny in the audience or to position the audience in the role of helper, a concurrent challenge to readability through cultural norms is produced.

Just as the Bakhtinian aesthetics of pain provides a framework for the understanding of self-harm in Pavlensky’s works, the corresponding critique helps to understand the complications of these works’ functionality within Russian culture and society. While the performance may be designed to position the audience in such a way as to invoke some kind of awakened, powerful, and empathetic experience, Haynes’ and Frank’s respective critiques argue that through distancing, a practical resolution to

¹⁹ According to Brecht, theatre generates a detached state in the audience, creating a hypnotic and homogenizing effect (188). In order to create theatre that generates a critical attitude in the viewer, identification with the characters must be challenged, thus encouraging the viewer to examine the peculiarity of his own behavior (190). Walter Benjamin provides this understanding of Brecht: “The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. But ‘represent’ does not here signify ‘reproduce’... Rather, the first point at issue is to uncover those conditions... This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted” (*Understanding Brecht* 18).

suffering cannot truly be achieved. The overt political content of Pavlensky's performances makes inapplicable one criticism to which Bakhtin is subjected – an indifference to power, but allegations of failure to sufficiently generate dialogue and community, necessary for the alleviation of suffering, still stand. There is a difference between the individual suffering in a hospital bed and the type of sufferer that Pavlensky posits himself to be, but at the heart of this criticism lies the question regarding the efficacy of distancing and estrangement.

Fundamentally transgressive of dominant cultural norms and heavily reliant on shock, disfigurement, and degradation, Pavlensky's works navigate a whole set of complications arising from distance and estrangement, most notably the question as to whether a community fostering strength and dialogue could possibly develop around a figure who deliberately creates such distance from the audience. In Russia's liberal art sphere, Pavlensky's nomination for the Innovatsiya Prize supports the idea that some sort of community and conversation has emerged surrounding his works, however nominal, exclusive, or niche it may be. In the realm of the political, Pavlensky deliberately creates dialogue with the state and authorities, and in international media, he is often depicted as either heroic or the symptom of a sickly political system.²⁰ But, to a broader Russian public, the distance is created and sustained. Outsideness, in this case, does not enframe the injured actor against a clear blue sky. It likely does not frame the action as a work of art at all, a fact that is not lost on the artist himself. This is, in some cases, also true of the

²⁰ On Twitter, Gessen prefaced her New Yorker article, "The Artist Who Stumps Putin" with "In which I fucking love Petr Pavlensky" (@mashagessen 2015). In *The Calvert Journal*, Jonathan Platt described Pavlensky as a lone remaining hope ("The Body Politic" 2014). Meanwhile, prominent gallery owner Marat Guelman declared Pavlensky's works to be committed in desperation due to the "not normal" situation of the country (qtd. in Gessen, "Self Mutilation on Red Square").

acts of vandalism. Notably, while standing trial for vandalism charges resulting from an action that involved the burning of tires on a bridge in support of Maidan, Pavlensky hired three prostitutes to testify in his defense. The three stated that they did not consider the action to be art, but desecration. According to Pavlensky, this proved that “the prostitutes, the judges, the witnesses, the politicians, [and] the prosecutors are all equal” (“Russian Jail”). He views this as an exemplification of politically and socially constructed restraints, which must be fulfilled in exchange for the ability to satisfy one’s own needs, in this way making needs into a political instrument, with the capability of preventing society from freedom of thought and action. The nature of power, according to Pavlensky, is not determined by class division, but determined by needs, and the unfavourable testimony from the three hired witnesses aids in the deconstruction and exposure of systems of power. But, to whom is this message directed? It seems that, as works of political art, the acts of vandalism and self-harm fail in many cases to elicit an effective gesture of assistance from the general public.

While the invocation of a Bakhtinian aesthetics of pain may serve better to illustrate the shortcomings of Pavlensky’s performances, Brechtian estrangement can serve to illustrate some of their potential successes as works of political art. In his stone-faced submission to police at the scene of the Lubyanka’s burning door, Pavlensky refuses to portray any relatable emotion, carrying echoes of Brechtian refusal to allow audience identification with the performer. As an act of estrangement, the artist’s apparently unemotional state, when observed, would encourage the viewer to examine the entire scene, allowing for the playing out of power dynamics to become apparent. According to Brecht, the inability to identify with the performer would also encourage

the viewer to look inward and examine their own peculiar behavior. While the invocation of bodily existence – something common to all humans – is in one sense relatable, through the unlikely placement of the naked body in a location like Red Square, and the subsequent act of mutilation, it is made strange. Effectively, it is a shocking act that demands attention, and in its strangeness, is also demanding of inquiry. Through situation in a public space it offers the opportunity to generate public dialogue. In this way, the thematic content is revealed by presenting it in a strange and uncomfortable manner, therefore making it into something about which to be critically aware. Yet, as discussed regarding the concept of outsideness, the potentiality of estrangement in the creation of public dialogue is questionable: to encourage the audience to take a few steps back in order to see the bigger picture is to risk driving the audience away entirely.

At this point, it is worth taking a moment to examine the placing of the body in a public space, and the separate act of violently disfiguring that body in a public space. This delineation will contribute to a broader understanding of the reasoning behind the invocation of self-harm in Pavlensky's performances, and his non-corporeal works provide ample material to contrast with his corporeal performances. It will address to what extent these acts theoretically contribute to the constitution of a public sphere, laying the groundwork for an examination of these performances' political implications, as well as their reception. This analysis requires a nuanced investigation into Russian notions of public and private life with due attention to their development and complexity. Differing notably from Western concepts of public and private life, many of these concepts formed and were transformed during the Soviet Era into a multifarious entanglement of categories: common, social, state, personal, partial, and individual. To

conduct a thorough investigation of all of these categories goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but a basic understanding of the different shades of Russian public and private life will contribute to a deeper understanding of the situation of political art carried out in a public setting, its aims, and how it is received by audiences.

Oleg Kharkhordin's examination of private life in Soviet Russia uncovers two different types of private life emerging in tandem with the construction of a Bolshevik self – one subjected to the public gaze, and one that remained hidden (343-344). In English usage, both concepts are encapsulated in the term private life. In his examination of the emergence of *chastnaia zhizn'* – private life cordoned off from the public gaze – Kharkhordin discusses the process of dissimulation: the concealment of thoughts, feelings, and character, in this case related to what could be considered political transgression in the public gaze. This process of concealment proved to be instrumental in the construction of the Soviet individual, and, as the Stalinist Terror ushered in a new moral order, the delineation between the two types of private life heightened. Effectively, Kharkhordin argues that dissimulation contributed to the concealment of many horrific absurdities, both officially sanctioned and otherwise, referencing the lack of intervention in known occurrences of rape, murder, and cannibalism due to the treatment of *chastnaia zhizn'* as an untouchable realm.

And, while it must be noted that the subject at hand is contemporary and not Soviet, the impact of historical precursors in the shaping of currently held attitudes is perceptible. To this extent, little scholarly work exists on conceptions of public and private life in post-Soviet Russia. In a contemporary context, these concepts generally seem to translate into wavering inclinations to partake in or abstain from civic activity,

largely related to material wellbeing but they do not speak so much as to the social implications of these attitudes.²¹ Nevertheless, the body placed in a public space must traverse a realm marked by dissimulation and an accompanying aversion to political involvement.²² To a certain degree, through lingering notions of *chastnaia zhizn'*, the audience is potentially habituated to the concealment of subversive sentiments, and is generally reluctant to increase their own political involvement. Thrust into this realm is a violently disfigured body, illustrative of the horrific absurdities concealed through processes of dissimulation. In making these horrific absurdities public, the performance challenges the validity of such dissimulative processes, particularly within a context of power relations. The disfigured body – posited as the victim of oppressive state practice and the societal attitudes that perpetuate oppressive practice – when placed in a public space, challenges conceptualizations of private life that enable the occurrence of horrific acts, official or otherwise, in perpetuity, free from intervention. It also challenges what Pavlensky refers to as “apathy, political indifference, and fatalism,” or what Chebankova envisages as a private phase in the cycle of political involvement, by uncovering and presenting the apparent impact on the individual (25).²³ However vividly or innocuously this mindset is framed, to Pavlensky, the violent acts that they serve to conceal are real, painful, and deserving of public scrutiny. To this extent, the placement of the body in a public space for the enactment of political art attempts to create a public dialogue. As

²¹ Elena Chebankova transposes these concepts into a socio-political analysis of the roles that public opinion plays in state decision making (2010).

²² Dissimulation can be defined as concealment. In this instance, it is particularly the concealment of any oppositional sentiment felt toward dominant cultural or political norms.

²³ This explanation appeared in an artist’s statement accompanying “Fixation” (Walker, “Why I Nailed My Scrotum to Red Square”).

discussed, through these performances, the creation of public dialogue is carried out to varying degrees of success. Symbolically, the subsequent disfigurement of the body in public is a bringing forth of subjects that would otherwise remain hidden, repressed, or excused. Broadly stated, “the repression of dissidents” is an obfuscation that also serves to conceal the actual horrific treatment of human beings. It could be argued that this is illustrative of a shortcoming of language, but it could also serve as an example of the power of language as a political instrument. In an oppositional sense, corporeal expression emerges as a more powerful mode of expression. In this case, the effective conveyance of content does not reside in the literal, susceptible to manipulation through various mediating processes and censorship. The representation of oppressive state practice in a self-injurious act highlights its violent qualities, simultaneously carrying shades of the absurd. And, to an individual subjected to such repressive practices, it is not unreasonable to believe that absurdity could emerge as a definitive characteristic of one’s lived experience, while linguistic forms – especially the mundane language of bureaucracy and the corrupted language of mainstream media and politics – serve to conceal the senseless violence to which oppositionists are subjected.

The notion of absurdity, for the sake of this analysis, primarily refers to the ridiculous, nonsensical, or illogical. It also relates to a short-lived literary movement in the Russian avant-garde. As this analysis anticipates an examination of these performances’ readability through Russian cultural norms, consideration of the corresponding Western literary movement is minimal. The term Russian absurdism refers to a group of avant-garde writers and performers who were active in the 1920s and 1930s and who are most commonly referred to as OBERIU, or The Association for Real Art.

Coined retrospectively, the application of the absurdist label has been met with some contention by scholars in recent years due to the fact that it emphasizes characteristics that align with postwar European literature, downplaying semblance to preceding movements in the Russian avant-garde (Ostashevsky xiii). As students of radical members of the modernist movement, OBERIU functioned with the aim of the intuitive attainment of knowledge inaccessible to perception and reason. They viewed language as a way in which a sort of false reality was constructed and perpetuated, and therefore set about in the destruction of “protocols of semantic coherence and linguistic realism” through the use of apophasis, discontinuity, destruction of relations between objects, and the rejection of numerous other traditional literary techniques (Ostashevsky xv). Their works – written, publicly read, performed, and punctuated with tricycles and circus tricks – foregrounded experimental methods of subverting the effective conveyance of content. They were deemed counterrevolutionary, resulting in sentences in prison camps and internal exile for some members. Tellingly, the absurdity of their works – inexplicable and incomprehensible – can be seen as reflective of the absurdity of the situation within which they lived: following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Alexander Vvedensky, one of OBERIU’s founders, was accused of plotting to remain in occupied Kharkov after being unable to force his way onto a train of evacuees. He died on a prison train following his conviction. The group’s other founder, Daniil Kharms, was re-arrested due to an earlier conviction of agitation for defeat based on a political reading of a story he had penned for children. Kharms died of starvation in a punitive psychiatric facility.

Pussy Riot’s Nadya Tolokonnikova discussed the influence of the OBERIU poets on their own ways of thinking about art and power during the closing statements of the

Pussy Riot trial. In a sort of apotheosizing of the artist, she discusses the realization of artistic depictions of power in life and death:

Purged in 1937, Alexander Vvedensky wrote, “The incomprehensible pleases us, the inexplicable is our friend.” ...The highbrow and refined works of the OBERIU poets and their search for thought on the edge of meaning were finally embodied when they paid with their lives, which were taken by the senseless and inexplicable Great Terror. Paying with their lives, these poets unintentionally proved that they were right to consider irrationality and senselessness the nerves of their era. Thus, the artistic became an historical fact (*Pussy Riot Closing Statements* 2012).

Tolokonnikova’s closing statements align Pussy Riot with Russian avant-gardist tradition, specifically the Russian absurdist movement. Her commentary underscores the absurdity of a socio-political situation marked so profoundly by oppression and senseless violence that daily life comes to be defined by the nonsensical. At its essence, Tolokonnikova sees the role of the dissident artist as inextricably connected with that of the martyr, because the creation of political art challenges dominant ideals – political, social, and aesthetic – and the consequent response of state and society potentially serves to depict even more vividly what is expressed in the artistic work. That is to say: the performance, the poem, or the tricycle trick carries the potentiality of becoming a microcosmic representation of a greater artistic depiction of oppressive circumstances, manifested in the life and death of the artist. Inevitably, this type of exemplification involves a degree of self-sacrifice on behalf of the artist, and in this respect, the examples of Pussy Riot and OBERIU are extreme, but not unique. While the stylistic potential for

comparison between Pussy Riot and OBERIU is not immediately compelling, something about Tolokonnikova's statement rings true: Pussy Riot and their Soviet predecessors seem to share an underlying attitude toward an artist's role in society, including the notion of the artist's life and death as a vivid representation of a time and place. And, with an eye toward shared notions of the artist as martyr, a stylistic constellation surrounding this notion begins to come into relief, with a notable impact being the provocation of the culture in which they live – disrupting, upsetting, “hitting a nerve.”

An immediately evident similarity between OBERIU and Pussy Riot is the shared element of performance. The works of OBERIU, while primarily literary, often involved readings, theatrical performances, and film screenings, all of which were marked by absurdity. These events were provocative, contrary to Viktor Shklovsky's accusation that they “don't even know how to throw a good scandal!” (qtd. in Ostashevsky xvii). In a basic sense, this illustrates a circumvention of the literary realm due to inaccessibility resulting from cultural policy. Not unlike the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky, OBERIU's performances were upsetting to the status quo in both aesthetic and political terms, exemplifying the difficulty of delineation between these two realms: a transgression in the realm of the former could be experienced as a transgression in the realm of the latter, carrying with it major repercussions. Whether it be solely the fact of their transgressive nature, or their attempts to make real the senseless violence characteristic of the Stalinist Terror, they were not received warmly by officials. They also received pushback from audiences, who were often displeased with the challenging nature of their performances. In this regard, Tolokonnikova aligns herself with OBERIU, asserting that: “Pussy Riot are Vvedensky's students and heirs. His principle of the bad

rhyme is dear to us. He wrote, ‘Occasionally, I think of two different rhymes, a good one and a bad one, and I always choose the bad one because it is always the right one,’”

(*Pussy Riot Closing Statements* 2012).

Evident in this statement is not only the acknowledgement of the shortcomings of dominant, or pleasing aesthetics, but also an underlying acknowledgement of the shortcomings of linguistic conveyance in general. For OBERIU, flawed linguistic conveyance also included logic and classification systems. Their early work involved the dismantling of the kind of language they viewed as inadequate, alongside attempts to create statements that could adequately elucidate the world in a way that could not be achieved by normative language.²⁴ In effect, the OBERIU poets utilized language – albeit abnormal – to subvert the language that was inextricably tied up with flawed ways of seeing the world, simultaneously destroying old systems and creating new ones. Fundamentally, OBERIU, Pussy Riot and Pavlensky address a corrupted system of representation by employing artistic innovation that simultaneously invokes old systems and constructs new ones. This invocation of apparently problematic systems alongside the generation of new styles posits significant potentiality for readability through cultural norms, which will be the subject of discussion at a latter point in this chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Russia’s electoral authoritarian regime is heavily reliant on the co-option of democratic language for non-democratic usage. This mechanism is, in part, enabled by a certain status attributed to truth distinct to the

²⁴ Ostashevsky utilizes this term to describe what OBERIU refers to as “human language” – the object of their critique (xxi).

postmodern era, understood by some as a crisis of representation.²⁵ The postmodern crisis of representation can be framed in both cultural and political terms. Either way, the cultural and political ways of speaking enabled by this fluidity of meaning are instrumental to the Putin regime's rule, and are unavoidable as a condition of postmodernity. Here rests potential reasoning for transition away from the traditional medium of the literary text in the expression of oppositional sentiment: language, democratic in particular, is no longer a reliable tool for the expression of truths that contradict the authoritarian grand narratives of the state. Democratic language has been corrupted to the point that it is used to achieve non-democratic ends. It is worth noting, however, that prevalent linguistic deceit is not a new development. The OBERIU poets attest to this fact in their poetic destruction of existing linguistic systems and their simultaneous attempts to construct new, functional ones from the remains. Through artistic transition to the body, Pussy Riot and Pavlensky also attempt to create new forms of representation while at the same time undermining old forms. The transition from the formerly predominant medium of the literary text to a relatively unfamiliar medium – the body, spurns traditional form. It is a move away from a primarily linguistic format to a medium that is potentially less susceptible to manipulation by external forces. The body's placement, dress or lack thereof, and the transgressive stylization of their movements and positioning decidedly oppose traditional modes of conveyance. While they are not

²⁵ Generally speaking, this means that in postmodernity, modes of reading and representation are marked by the possibility of a plurality of valid meanings and interpretations. According to Maxine Greene, the postmodern crisis of representation can be understood and interpreted in multiple ways: pessimistically, as the impossibility of objective reading and representation of meaning and experience, or opportunistically, with an eye toward agency, as an opportunity to create individual narratives that are not dependent on representation so much as they are creation and innovation (“Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representation” 208-218).

necessarily immune to co-option, they do attempt to create new methods of communication, free from external determinants, while deliberately aligning themselves within the Russian avant-gardist tradition.

Alignment within the Russian avant-garde tradition serves to reinforce the credibility and value of contemporary practitioners of protest art in both artistic and political terms. Tolokonnikova's statement focuses on the artists' potential as artistic innovators in their ability to not only create representations of current socio-political conditions, but to themselves embody these conditions, thus inscribing their own representations into the historical record. And, tellingly, the avant-gardists did offer, in all their absurdity, vivid depictions of an era so profoundly marked by terror that much seems to elude comprehension. Thus, the accompanying artistic movement expresses the general impression of this era in ways that are often difficult to comprehend. While the members of Pussy Riot can be easily placed within the tradition of dissident artists who have faced persecution at the hands of the Russian state, their self-alignment with OBERIU serves less to frame them as victims of a Stalinist Era-style terror than it does to emphasize their agency as political artists with an inherited and somewhat martyr-like responsibility. It is not to say that there is no contemporary air of uncertainty, senseless terror, or systemic violation of human rights in today's Russia, but rather that the work of Pussy Riot decidedly targets the contemporary faces of these familiar themes.

Placement within a tradition not only serves a legitimizing function, it also serves to build readability through familiarity. The question of whether these new, corporeal forms of performance art are readable through Russian cultural norms must therefore consider what artistic elements remain unfamiliar, especially as cultural products within

the postmodern era. And, while it is all too tempting to frame the oppression evident in contemporary Russia in postmodern terms, the ways in which these postmodern conditions are exploited by oppositionists are also deserving of attention.²⁶ Pussy Riot tread unapologetically in this realm – their performances feature a pastiche of Western-styled punk rock, brightly coloured costumes bordering on the cartoon-like, Orthodox-styled chanting, and styles and attitudes borrowed from the aforementioned Russian avant-garde. While some of these influences and styles may be utilized in order to invoke shared values and beliefs, others function more cynically as satire or irony. To some, they invoke laughter, which, returning to Bakhtin, can be a vital tool in the creation of community. The following discussion will focus on postmodern irony, an artistic technique that plays an important role in the piece, holding a palpable impact on cultural readability and the capability of elucidating the subsequent state response.

Pussy Riot's notorious action took place on February 21, 2012. Five members of the group entered Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior and performed a "punk prayer," which was later posted on the internet under the title, "Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!" The performance involved feminist critique of the Putin regime and the Russian Orthodox Church, while also criticizing the interconnectedness between the two, however, the action did not enjoy resounding support with the general public, nor did it necessarily resonate with Russian feminists (Sperling 233). In a postmodern framework, the group's use of irony as subversive strategy emerges as one possible reason for public ambivalence toward the performance. Postmodern irony, with its multiplicity of

²⁶ In "A Personality Cult for the Postmodern Age" Cassiday and Johnson discuss Putin's popularity as less of a return of the cult of personality and more of an example of Putin's astutely postmodern political positioning, and, to a certain extent, as simply a prevalent image in postmodernity (in Goscilo *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* 2014). See also: Pomerantsev's "Postmodern Dictatorship" (2013).

meanings, risks, at the very least, the chance that the audience may not “get it” – the potentiality for multifaceted critique equally matched by the potentiality for internal contradiction (Shugart 435).

The group’s implementation of postmodern irony is reliant on an incongruence that disguises a deeper congruence in order to bring about a multiplicity of meanings. Through an apparent disparity, the performance draws comparison between a Western-styled punk-infused protest and a Russian Orthodox Church Service. The incongruence emerges in the loud, unwieldy, and defiant nature of their performance – an overt challenge to Orthodox tradition. The group’s bright dresses and balaclavas oppose traditional conservative images of femininity and emphasize combativeness. The foregrounding of punk music is unceremonious and abrasive, and the choreography composed of fist pumps and high kicks is decidedly confrontational. On the surface, the action can be superficially read as a juvenile jab at authority, flying in the face of traditional Orthodox conservatism, and certainly runs the risk of being dismissed as trivial mischief without theoretical basis. Through the action’s congruence with a Russian Orthodox service, however, a multilayered critique can be observed. It is not simply a juvenile affront to conservative values – it is an allegation of corruption and oppression launched at the Church and the state through the appropriation of their respective symbols, implemented as social provocation. Interestingly, the group frames their main demand in the form of a prayer:

Mother of God, exorcise Putin

Exorcise Putin, exorcise Putin...

Patriarch Gundiai believes in Putin

It'd be better to believe in God, you bitch (qtd. in Sperling 233-34)

At this point, the music transitions to the style of a hymn and the choreography shifts from aggressive punching and kicking to ceremonial bowing and the making of the sign of the cross. The lyrics give voice to the group's main charge: the merger between the Church and the regime (Sperling 236). The explicitly stated lyrical criticism is reinforced by congruence with Russian Orthodox symbols. Through their own usage of these symbols, Pussy Riot invokes a postmodern irreverence for their meaning, co-opting them in a way not unlike the alleged corrupted usage of the symbols on behalf of the Church and the state, and, in doing so, highlighting the alleged hypocrisy of the subjects of their critique. Based solely on the action's incongruence, Pussy Riot's performance may superficially appear as an incoherent and poorly planned attack, but through the action's congruence, a multilayered, arguably feminist critique of the Putin regime and the Church can be observed. It is further worth noting the performance's timing, which coincided with the lead up to Putin's third election, following in the wake of the poorly disguised violation of Russia's presidential two-term mandate – a particular suitable time to raise corruption-related concerns.²⁷

In order to understand domestic reception of Pussy Riot's notorious church performance, a brief examination of Russian attitudes toward feminism is warranted. Valerie Sperling's case study of gender norms and patriarchal hierarchy in Russia examines feminism as an opposing narrative that has been repeatedly oppressed. The

²⁷ During which Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev switched roles, with Putin serving as Prime Minister and Medvedev as President.

Putin regime consistently demonizes and depicts feminism as a threat in a way that can be exploited to legitimize the regime's power. Sperling argues that feminism, in its inherently democratic emphasis on the importance of choice, poses an ideological threat to Putin's increasingly authoritarian regime. In broader terms, the authoritarian regime that emphasizes uniformity across all platforms is fundamentally challenged by the democratic overtones of feminism's foregrounded plurality. Sperling emphasizes the political implications of this imposed uniformity, asserting that patriarchal hierarchy and gender norms embody and influence the way that citizens perceive the public sphere and how power should be distributed (295).

Feminism threatens a number of ways in which the regime legitimizes and reinforces its power, including: Putin's machismo-based public image, the misogynistic conceptualization of the political arena as a space only available to particular types of men, economic factors, such as women as a cheap source of labour, and women's primary role in the family as child-bearers and child-rearers. The threat of feminism is also felt by the Church, which has significant interest in how the state responds, particularly with regard to any state-sponsored implementations that promote "public disapproval of abortion, contraception, and homosexuality" (Sperling 274).

The historical basis for the systemic misogyny that Sperling observes is deeply rooted, involving the Soviet Era "double duty" imposed upon women, in which women were expected to labour in the workforce and simultaneously bear responsibility for all duties in the home (50). She maintains that this attitude still permeates Russian consciousness today, and is a major contributor to the nebulous idea of traditional family values – which essentially ensures the necessitation of women's subordination to men –

upon which the Church bases much of its lobbying for increased restriction of women's rights. Historically negative attitudes toward feminism, including the Soviet ban – as it promoted values seemingly detrimental to the collective, alongside state restriction of opposition, have created an environment that is especially hostile toward the idea of feminism. Still, Sperling offers: “Feminism, with its critique of gender norms and of obligatory heteronormative behavior as well as its ideological embrace of the importance of choice could provide an antidote to the increasingly restrictive politics offered by the Putin regime but only if feminists could find the political space in which to do so” (300). Under the restricting conditions of the Putin regime, which attempts to disallow any real space for an authentic opposition, how are feminists to find this political space?

Strikingly, Sperling's analysis draws attention to the reinforcement of gender norms and use of homophobia in oppositionist critique of the regime, including that enacted by self-identified feminists. One of her main charges is regarding the lyrics of Pussy Riot, which she claims make use of gender norms and homophobic denigration in their criticism of the Church and regime's interconnection (236). In this way, she addresses the fact that this type of systemic sexism runs deep – and that oppositionists run the risk of reinforcing the very structures that they criticize by actually making use of them. Her analysis addresses issues with Pussy Riot's performance that include the use of homophobic and misogynistic reification of gender norms, particularly with regard to their lyrical content, for example, the aforementioned usage of the gendered term “bitch” to undermine the Patriarch as a subordinated female. As discussed, Russian feminists have been divided on whether they consider Pussy Riot's action to be feminist in concept or ideology. One way of understanding this internal contradiction and the consequently

divided domestic reaction to the performance is through the lens of postmodern irony and its inherent complications.

Helene A. Shugart's analysis of postmodern irony as subversive strategy points to the risk of the unintentional reification of the very constructs that a work seeks to resist in the implementation of complex subversive strategies (454). Shugart argues that "Postmodern irony... is characterized by multiplicity, instability, inconsistency, and paradox... and if the meanings generated by postmodern irony are multiple and inconsistent, then the derivation of meaning on the part of the audience – the crucial element of irony – is rendered complex indeed" (435). In the instance of Pussy Riot, the superficial understanding of the action solely based on its incongruence – as a juvenile jab at authority – could likely be experienced as offensive and disrespectful, or trivialized as mischief and dismissed. Furthermore, a requisite for the audience's understanding of the postmodern irreverent usage of Russian Orthodox symbols would involve a familiarity with the technique of postmodern pastiche, otherwise, the irony – upon which a layer of meaning is based – is lost. And, with respect given to the feminist criticism that the action has garnered, the multifaceted nature of the performance further challenges audience perception. The performance draws on a characteristically postmodern pastiche, presenting the opportunity for multiple (mis)interpretations: it is Western-styled, it self-identifies as feminist, it criticizes corruption and interconnectedness between the Church and state – but, in practice, the ways in which these meanings are evoked, at times, cause contradictions within the work itself, and risk reifying the subject of criticism.

Based on their action in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Pussy Riot are faced with a number of major challenges to their artistic and political efficacy: historically-

ingrained Russian hostility toward feminism, an authoritarian climate with little political space for authentic opposition, their decidedly pro-feminist stance backed up with seemingly weak and even internally contradictory ideological and conceptual feminist positioning, as well as the inherently risky implementation of postmodern irony. The charge, “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” with which the group was convicted serves a depoliticizing function whilst framing the action as an encroachment on an untouchable entity, crystallizing the centrality of religion in law.²⁸ This religious framing is buttressed by the accompanying sentence of “offending the feelings of religious believers,” essentially turning a perceived threat to Orthodoxy into a potentially prosecutable offence. On the one hand, this effectively brings about the group’s main allegation: that the Church and the State are inextricably linked, and that the influence of the former over the latter is visible beyond any superficial efforts at concealment. On the other hand, this suggests precarious positioning for oppositionists – in order to speak sensibly through Russian cultural norms, the voicing of concerns must somehow be compatible with a culture that is deeply connected with the Orthodox Church. From an oppositionist’s perspective, the incorporation of Orthodox culture is quite possibly undesirable, or even outright impossible. With this in mind, it is worth considering the revolutionary versus artistic potential of these works – to make a concession in the realm of the political may constitute a gain in the artistic, and vice versa. Thus, political efficacy and artistic efficacy may be considered separately in order to appreciate their

²⁸ Bernstein discusses a number of ways in which Pussy Riot’s performance was effectively depoliticized. Most succinctly, the judge’s final indictments stated: “The claim of the defendants that their performance was political and not motivated by the hatred for Russian Orthodox believers cannot be accepted as valid. As all the prosecution witnesses stated, there were no political claims in the church. No names of politicians were uttered.” (qtd. in Bernstein).

strengths and weaknesses; in the artistic depiction of Russian society, a sacrifice may be necessitated in the realm of an action's political potential, its cultural readability, or even a sacrifice on behalf of the artists themselves.

It may be that Pussy Riot's fundamental incompatibility with an Orthodox society renders them subject to a harsher response from state and society than an artist like Pavlensky, who somberly references the Bible, drawing on ascetic tradition and the tradition of the Holy Fool. His first performance involved sewing his mouth shut and standing in front of St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral while holding a sign reading "The action of Pussy Riot was a replica of the famous action of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:12-13)." In this verse, Jesus chased the money changers out of the temple, saying "My house will be called a den of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." Pavlensky's comparison thus exploits religious scripture, devoid of irony, in contrast with Pussy Riot's boisterous spectacle in the church, while delivering a similar kind of institutional critique.

Pavlensky's self-styling as a Holy Fool has not eluded commentary on academic and journalistic levels, both domestically and internationally. In Orthodox tradition, Holy Fools engaged in public provocation, expressed disdain for authority, and feigned insanity. In this way, they exposed systemic hypocrisy through profane actions in order to deliver a higher truth. According to Sergey Ivanov, Holy Foolery must always involve elements of provocation and aggression – the latter of which is defined as a disruption to "the status quo in personal relations which is perceived as hostile by the person at whom it is directed" (*Holy Fools* 9). While Ivanov observes how it has become fashionable to observe elements of Holy Foolery in any number of contemporary transgressive works or

movements, by this description, it would be hard to deny Pavlensky's alignment within such a tradition. In this light, Pavlensky's works could emerge as potentially more capable of speaking through Russian cultural norms, however, they equally risk misunderstanding due to their aggressive and provocative nature. Indeed, the Holy Fool was often subject to persecution for his actions, and this kind of provocative behavior is only considered Holy Foolery if the observer believes what "lies beneath is sanity and high morality, even pious intent" (*Holy Fools* 1).

Regardless of readability through cultural norms, political circumstances contribute to the state's reaction to Pavlensky to a large extent. The state must inevitably take into account the immense level of global attention garnered by the Pussy Riot case, a process through which the group attained much of their public support, despite Pussy Riot's detractors vocalizing that they must not be martyred (Bernstein 228). Nevertheless, in the wake of his actions, Pavlensky gained international notoriety, particularly following "Fixation." Tellingly, many commentators observed his works' effectiveness emerging through the incorporation of the authorities and state response. Similarly, there emerges a degree of artistic and political efficacy in the aftermath of the Pussy Riot performance. Over the course of their detention and legal proceedings, not only did the group's allegations of interconnection between the Church and State become apparent, but public opinion toward the group also began to change.

Unlike Pussy Riot, who fled after their performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a requisite of Pavlensky's performances is that he remain on scene until apprehended by authorities, thus incorporating the subsequent state and legal response into the performance. Following the burning of the Lubyanka's door, Pavlensky was

taken into custody and charged with vandalism. Over the next six months, he was detained in solitary confinement in a psychiatric facility despite prior psychiatric assessments in which he had been declared mentally fit (Human Rights Watch, “End Artist’s Forced Psychiatric Confinement”). The incorporation of the detention process reveals through his own incarceration the institutional practice of punitive psychiatry that had been thematized in an earlier performance atop that very centre, “Segregation,” during which he severed his ear.

In the courthouse, Pavlensky becomes the director of a theatre of sorts, in which the state, the legal system, and ultimately, Russian systems of power are exposed for their oppressive and hypocritical machinations. While the actual political ramifications of these actions are not so easily determined, the unmasking of violence hidden by the mundane language of bureaucracy functions as a notably vivid artistic depiction of contemporary conditions. This unmasking process occurs over the course of many months, perhaps speaking more to those who consume independent media and an international audience, rather than to the general Russian public.²⁹ Take, for example, the trial surrounding Pavlensky’s most recent work, “Threat.” When the artist was arrested for the burning of the Lubyanka’s door, he was already facing charges for burning tires on a St. Petersburg bridge in February 2014 in support of the Euromaidan protests in an action entitled “Freedom.” For the burning of the door, the artist demanded that he instead be charged with terrorism, an act of solidarity with Ukrainian director Oleg Sentsov, who had been sentenced to twenty years in prison for terrorism charges

²⁹ In a poll conducted by the Levada Centre in 2015, a strong majority of respondents had heard little or nothing of Pavlensky’s action, “Threat,” likely indicating a lack of coverage in state-run media (“Petr Pavlensky”).

associated with the alleged arson of a United Russia office in Crimea.³⁰ Through instigation with the oppressive authoritarian state, Pavlensky argues that the Russian government is the truly terroristic entity – inciting fear and terrorizing the population through its usage of anti-terrorist law and rhetoric. In an artist’s statement accompanying a video of the performance, Pavlensky states: “The Lubyanka’s door on fire is the gauntlet that society is throwing down in the face of a [governmental] terrorist threat” (qtd. in Gessen “Stumps Putin”). The image of the thrown-down gauntlet indicates the initiation of a duel – the burning of the door is just the beginning. In the wake of the international uproar surrounding the Pussy Riot case, the authorities must be aware of what is at stake in their dealings with Pavlensky: this action directly challenges the power system and threatens to dismantle the bureaucratic façade behind which it is veiled.

In spite of the martyr-like quality of his actions, Pavlensky spurns the label of hero, viewing it as an exclusionary term that separates him from humanity (Pavlensky “Russian Jail”). At the same time, self-identification as a terrorist is a move that goes decidedly against dominant ideals and values – namely, that of the prevailing power structure. In a piece for *Artslant*, Dasha Filippova examines how this kind of self-positioning is one of Pavlensky’s many radical moves outside of cultural norms, alongside public nudity and arson. The subsequent drawing out of the power structure, therefore, does not so much aim to depict the oppression of an innocent protester as much as it serves to expose the restrictive machinations of power. It is a revelatory process aimed at the masses who support the existing system through conformity. At times, the

³⁰ Sentsov is considered a political prisoner by Russian human rights groups. The charges have been questioned due to the extraction of evidence by torture (Human Rights Watch “Crimea – Keep Quiet or Else”).

message is surprisingly successful. During Pavlensky's interrogation in 2014, he recorded his conversations with the interrogator and later published them as a set of philosophical dialogues on the role of the legal system, the state, and art in Russian life. The absurdity of the scenario culminates at the end of the exchange, in what has been observed in domestic and international media as a Kafka-like play, with the interrogator quitting and deciding to become a defence lawyer (De Winne, et. al "Interrogating Petr Pavlensky. A Play in Three Acts").³¹

Alongside the general air of absurdity, an image of power in contemporary Russia can be observed taking shape in the theatre-like courtroom. Inke Arns' and Sylvia Sasse's theory of subversive affirmation articulates well how this kind of performance works. In subversive affirmation, artists and activists, "take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and... affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them... There is always a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite" (1). Within this framework, Pavlensky's subjection to the ruling ideology functions as a kind of affirmation, and the subversive component is brought about through the state response to his action. In "Threat," Pavlensky plays into the official narrative in the role of a terrorist, by setting the headquarters of the Federal Security Service on fire and then submitting himself to authorities. The destabilizing element evident in the state response consists of the apparent flimsiness of the anti-terrorism laws that are proven inconsistent between two cases in the subsequent court

³¹The publication of Pavlensky's interrogation is reminiscent of the samizdat publication of the transcripts of poet Joseph Brodsky's 1964 trial for parasitism. These transcripts were circulated and read as a kind of absurdist play, during which the judge accused Brodsky of not being employed as a poet due to the fact that he did not belong to the Union of Writers. Famously, Brodsky replied that he had been made a poet not by the Union of Writers, but by God (Vigdorova "The Trial of Joseph Brodsky").

proceedings. At the same time, Pavlensky actually mobilizes the authoritarian police state through provocation – the initial act of arson and the subsequent antics in the courts take the mobilization of the authoritarian police state ad absurdum.

In order to make an argument for the readability of subversive affirmative practice through Russian cultural norms, it is worth briefly examining the case of Pussy Riot due to its high-profile nature, the semblance of subversive affirmative practice, and to the availability of public opinion data. When Pussy Riot enacted their famous performance in 2012 inside Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, public opinion of the action was not particularly favourable toward the group. It was when members of the group were apprehended by police, held in detention, and sentenced to imprisonment in forced labour colonies that their intended criticism came to light – the connection between the Russian Orthodox Church, the state, and the legal system (Sperling 379). Notably, public opinion toward the state’s reaction was not entirely sympathetic, and the state’s response – to charge the young women with “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” a sentence that could carry up to seven years in prison – made blatant their critique of the Church’s influence on the state and legal system. According to a poll conducted in July 2012 by the Levada Centre, a majority of respondents believed that the punishment was excessive or that such actions should not be prosecuted in criminal proceedings at all (*Russian Public Opinion* 2013-2015 117). It must be noted that due to the fact that the group fled after their performance, the action does not fully fit the parameters outlined in Arns’ and Sasse’s theory. In a sense, the three were involved in the unwilling affirmation of their own critique. But, through their subjection to detention, legal proceedings, and imprisonment, the group illustrated their argument regarding the Church’s connection

with the state and influence on the process.

Subversive affirmation functions as a revelatory process in that it uncovers and exposes particular impulses of its subject. In performances like those of Pavlensky, direct engagement with and mobilization of dominant power systems can prove particularly effective. This type of process can occur less overtly in literary and theatrical works. Arns and Sasse trace subversive affirmative practice as far back as the literature and performances of the OBERIU group, who utilized poetic language and performance to undermine those very modes of representation in a simultaneously destructive and regenerative process. Beyond subversive affirmative practice on the pages of the literary text, there occurred an engagement with the dominant power that came to be illustrative of the critique of power evident in their works. Implicit in Pussy Riot's self-alignment with the OBERIU poets whose lives and deaths illustrated the thematic concerns of their works rests the kind of artistic representation that becomes real in its political engagement through direct engagement with power, a dialogue that transcends artistic barriers to understanding and enters into the realm of the political. To a large extent, the subversive affirmative practices evident in the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky contribute to both artistic and political efficacy – as well as, potentially, readability through cultural norms. Inevitably, this involves its own set of tensions, particularly relating to the corporeality of the performance, evident in the tension between submission and empowerment. These issues will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Eugene Ostashevsky is a leading scholar and translator of the OBERIU group. His work unearths and examines the technical and cultural mechanisms and impulses surrounding the late Soviet avant-garde. At the same time, he asserts the presence of a

peculiarly impalpable element that cannot be elucidated through the political and cultural circumstances surrounding the lives and deaths of these artists – it is something within the realm of the artistic that allows their works to resonate. While similarities in circumstance, attitude, and style may align today’s political performance artists with their avant-garde predecessors, it is worth briefly reflecting on Ostashevsky’s assertion regarding the singularity of the OBERIU movement:

How they lived and died ultimately doesn’t explain how they wrote: otherwise, plenty of other people would have written the same way. This is why their work is not a historical curiosity; this is why it can speak to us, even if from a neighboring world. (xxix)

Similarly, to view the contemporary emergence of corporeal performance art as solely the product of a political system, artistic tradition, or particular cultural circumstance constitutes an erasure of the agency of the artist. The antidote is simple: to study political art within an artistic framework can offer an understanding of that which allows the works to resist reduction to political symptom, that which allows the works to speak differently than a historical document, and that which allows for potentially revolutionary methods of making and conveying meaning. It is difficult to say whether the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky will have the same ability to speak to future audiences as the OBERIU poets. But, it seems, as innovators who have made their own inscriptions in the historical record through artistic means, there is certainly potential.

This chapter has addressed the ways in which the actions of Petr Pavlensky and Pussy Riot stand as simultaneously artistic and political, aiming to voice opposition in the political realm through artistic performance involving the body. At the same time, they aim

to paint a picture of Russian society through new artistic means, informed but not defined by tradition. To examine their meaning in Russian society requires an understanding of the artistic mechanisms at work in addition to their cultural precedents. Through the process of this analysis, the following impulses and themes have emerged in the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky: shock, provocation, critique of power, and a sacrificial undercurrent. And, while much of this is achieved through new, notably corporeal means, these works simultaneously align themselves within certain artistic traditions. The next chapter will discuss cultural reception, complications, and political implications of these works, examining their potentiality to forge new methods of expression and scrutinizing the realities of their revolutionary potential.

Chapter 3: Politics Gives Me the Blues

A 2013 Levada Centre poll asked participants to what extent they agree with the following statement: “Politics gives me the blues.” 59% of respondents agreed in some capacity, while 31% disagreed with the statement, and 9% found it difficult to answer. The question gives no insight as to why, nor what exactly it is about politics, nor whether it is any specific type of politics that produces these feelings. It simply affirms that a majority of Russians have feelings of sadness associated with what they consider politics. What is it, then, that drives certain individuals to actively engage in a system that widely produces such feelings of malaise? A Levada Centre poll in the same year showed 80% of respondents were unwilling to increase their political participation, the most prevalent reason being that “politics are not for the common public.” Additionally, 84% of respondents indicated that they did not believe it possible for people like themselves to influence government decisions (*Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015* 40-70). In a country with such widespread aversion to political participation, it is an abnormality for one to interject themselves into the uninviting political realm. Public opinion seems to indicate little confidence in the individual’s right or ability to take part in the political arena. Still, protest persists in spite of ubiquitous political pessimism – but to what effect?

This thesis has thus far examined the recent emergence of corporeal protest art in Russia as a notable divergence from the traditional medium of the literary text. This shift can be attributed in roughly equal parts to the cultural, socio-political, and economic shifts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is notably demonstrative of the contemporary conditions simultaneously fostering and threatening the development of a Russian public sphere. The artists engaged in these works tend to be liberal, white, cis-

gendered, and middle-class. Their works speak to liberal oppositionists not unlike themselves, concurrently aiming to shock the predominantly pro-Putin public as well as disrupt the systems of power within which this public is subsumed. The previous chapter examined these performances primarily as works of art, analyzing their respective artistic mechanisms for efficacy, orientation within tradition, and potential to speak through Russian cultural norms. What remains to be examined are their respective critiques of power, which will be naturally followed by scrutiny of these performances as political acts. Additionally, their reception and impact in both Russian and global society will be examined and extrapolated into a theoretically based analysis of the body as an effective space for critique of power through the lens of biopolitics.

This chapter will build on the previous chapter's examination of these works' ability to speak through Russian cultural norms and artistic traditions in order to gain an understanding of their political role in Russian society. Through the examination of public opinion data, domestic media, and social media, I will examine how Russians have been interpreting and understanding these works. In analyzing these data, I ask: How does this information reflect these performances' readability through cultural norms? What does it say about contemporary Russian attitudes, media, and power structures? How can this information be used to comment on these performances' overall efficacy as artistic and political acts? And how does this compare to traditional and contemporary literary dissidence? Finally, I examine some fundamental issues within this type of protest art, beginning with a peculiarity that has presented itself throughout this thesis: the tension that exists in martyrdom, and ending with a critique of these artists' instrumentalization of power structures reminiscent of those scrutinized in their own

performances. I conclude by positing the idea that corporeal and textual enactments of dissidence need not be mutually exclusive – in fact, they function more effectively in tandem, providing a supplementary channel that is already well-established by tradition, and potentially offering some possible solutions to corporeal protest art's inherent complications.

To begin, analyses of these performances' domestic reception must take into account Putin's exceptionally high approval rating in order to understand the socio-political circumstances within which these actions are performed and how they impact domestic response. According to a Levada Centre poll, from December 2016 to May 2017, approval of Putin's activities ranged from 81-84%, substantially higher than any western leader in the same time period. This rating has been relatively consistent since 2000, withstanding the occasional decline ("Putin's Approval Rating" 2017). These circumstances colour the role and function of protest art in the political realm, and, as discussed in Chapter 2, influence their form and function as artistic works. Most notably, these works function in a fundamentally transgressive manner in both artistic and political terms. That is to say, neither Pussy Riot's nor Pavlensky's protests were carried out in a manner compatible with dominant political or artistic norms, nor did they speak to a sympathetic majority. In no case would it be a normal or innocuous action to nail one's scrotum to Red Square, nor could a punk rock protest held in an Orthodox cathedral be performed in a manner compatible with Orthodox tradition. Moreover, it is worth reiterating that anti-Putinist, anti-Orthodox, and feminist messages generally resonate with just a small fraction of the Russian public. To what extent a broader critique of power resonates is dependent on the issue with which it is coupled. When paired with a

Western democratic narrative it is met with hostility, likely because Russians define their political system as a type of democracy distinct from the West.³² Some success, however, has been found in the mobilization of young, technologically savvy Russians behind a banner of anti-corruption.³³ The works of Pavlensky and Pussy Riot, however, are reliant on disruption, rather than mobilization of a vast and sympathetic base. They carry the intent to shock the wider public both in artistic form and political content. When considering the greater pro-Putin public, their works have revelatory goals, to arguable degrees of success. As discussed in Chapter 2, particular artistic attempts to expose systemic injustice have proven incompatible with Russian cultural norms: postmodern irony, religious transgression, grotesque shock, while others have functioned more successfully, particularly subversive affirmation in its ability to mobilize and expose oppressive machinations of power. Indeed, the critique of power as an abstraction, made tangible through self-sacrifice, emerges as potentially more effective than the blunt critique of a very popular president. In fact, when framed as corruption of a system in which the majority have faith, critique of power becomes much more politically resonant to the wider public.

Pavlensky's works thematize power in a broader sense than the targeted works of Pussy Riot. They speak of the instrumentalization of fear, apathy, censorship, psychiatry, and law as brutal and exploitative ways of controlling large groups of people. His works are distinctly Russian, but they offer the possibility of extrapolation onto a global stage

³² Results from a 2014 Levada Centre poll indicated that 84% of respondents believed that Russia requires a style of democracy substantially different from Western democracy (*Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015* 53).

³³ In March 2017, prominent oppositionist Alexei Navalny released a film targeting Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The film, entitled "Don't Call Him 'Dimon'" ("On Vam Ne Dimon") alleges that Medvedev has embezzled approximately \$1.2 billion. Following the film's release, Navalny organized mass protests in at least 80 cities across Russia, with tens of thousands of people taking part.

through their broad themes. Theoretically, they advocate for the oppressed individual, criticizing the power structure that produces such oppressive circumstances; but, is this really the message as read by the Russian public? And are these messages even intelligible given the shocking and grotesque medium through which they are delivered? Unfortunately, discernment of a domestic consensus on Pavlensky through analyses of media coverage and public opinion data may prove to be a futile endeavor. As discussed in Chapter 2, Levada Centre findings have suggested a lack of coverage in Russian media. What Russian media coverage does exist varies widely – from mouthpiece of the regime to MediaZona’s attempts to provide an alternative voice to state-run media. Social media postings range from humorous to reverent, with businesses even comically invoking images of Pavlensky. Russian travel agency, Aviasales.ru, advertised on Twitter the “wrong way and the right way to keep warm in November” (“kak sogret’sia v noiabre – nepravil’no, pravil’no”) contrasting an image of an African beach with an image of Pavlensky standing in front of the Lubyanka’s burning doors. This entanglement of domestic reactions is best viewed as a mosaic – it cannot be reconciled into one. At the same time, it suggests a degree of public familiarity with Pavlensky’s work – enough that the image would be sufficiently and widely recognizable, in order to be effective as an advertisement. And, while the advertisement and Pavlensky’s message may differ in tone, it seems that Pavlensky’s art should be considered within the realm of mass culture, rather than solely as an exclusive and elite fringe action.

It is perhaps within the art world that the most palpable iteration of controversy surrounding Pavlensky’s work can be observed. When “Threat” was nominated in 2016 for the visual arts category of the Innovatsiya Prize – the state’s top art prize – the

organizers removed Pavlensky from the shortlist due to the work's violation of the law and cause of material damage, prompting the resignation of several members of the selection committee in an act of protest and ultimately resulting in the cancellation of the category (Lewis "Russia Cancels Top Art Prize"). In 2011, however, Voina was awarded the same prize for their painting of a 65-metre penis on the Liteiny drawbridge in St. Petersburg. When the bridge rose, the painting of an erect phallus pointed at the Federal Security Services headquarters. The disparity between the Ministry of Culture's reaction to these two situations is reflective of the official limits on political content in art. Voina's work can be playfully relegated to the realm of humorous social engagement while "Threat" risks serious political legitimization, threatening impermissible entry into the realm of the political.

Domestic response to Pussy Riot's action in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is significantly easier to gauge than the domestic response to Pavlensky. As discussed in Chapter 2, Levada Centre findings suggest that while a majority of Russians held negative attitudes towards the members of Pussy Riot, the majority also felt that the potential 7-year prison sentence was too extreme (*Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015* 117). The same polls also suggest that a majority of Russians believed that the Orthodox Church and its believers were the target of the action, and that it was for this reason that they were being criminally prosecuted. In this respect, the state's attempts at depoliticizing the group's overtly political performance seems to have succeeded. Incompatibility with Orthodoxy in conjunction with artistic techniques that failed to speak through cultural norms point to the performance's artistic inefficacies and the consequent barrier to the effective transmission of their political messaging. Yet, in the

subsequent court proceedings, an incidental political side-effect manifested: the exposure of a power structure with the potential to step beyond the boundaries accepted by Russian society.

Over the duration of the Pussy Riot trial, the group received an immense level of attention in domestic and international media. Much of this dialogue was centred on the bodies of the group's members. Anya Bernstein discusses this phenomenon in "An Inadvertent Sacrifice," examining how both their supporters and detractors exercised discourse on the site of the women's bodies, which "became instrumentalized as a medium of communication between conflicting parties" (237). Bernstein examines the reactions of members of the arts world, Orthodox clergy, TV personalities, intellectuals, and politicians, finding commentary ranging from the playful suggestion of a "fatherly pinch" to serious debate on the suitability of corporal punishment.³⁴ Whether supportive or detractive, Bernstein observes the prevalence of the body as a communicative medium between conflicting parties. Proponents of corporal punishment argued that this would effectively enact a kind of social death upon the group – the humiliation would diminish the political seriousness of the performance and the group would subsequently be forgotten. But, the trial had already taken on a sacrificial tone and dialogue had already begun to manifest on the women's bodies. Thus arose tension between the sacrificial impulse of the state and the increasingly apparent need to prevent the group from being martyred. The former enacts itself on the body in the name of vengeance, in order to

³⁴ Orthodox clergyman Andrei Kuraev wrote of Pussy Riot in his blog: "I would offer them some bliny, pour them a cup of honey wine, and invite them to come back for the forgiveness ceremony. And if I were a layman elder, I would also give them a fatherly pinching. . . To bring them back to their senses...." (qtd. in Bernstein 223-224).

represent power, and in order to issue a warning to the public. The latter threatens political legitimization of the action and the subsequent making of the group into heroines. Bernstein argues that the sacrificial undertones of the Pussy Riot trial, inextricably connected with the instrumentalization of the women's bodies, are exactly what proved to be the strongest challenge to the Russian government.

Bernstein's take on the case of Pussy Riot sees the instrumentalization of women's bodies as communicative media for different kinds of discourse. Comparison with Pavlensky can serve to elucidate differences determined by gender and religious content, while similarities can be examined in order to gain an understanding of the body and its relation to power. With respect to domestic reaction, the most prominent differences between Pussy Riot and Pavlensky are the elements of sexualization and the gendered notions of requisite punishment. These issues became apparent in the sexualized images of Pussy Riot that circulated online – images that were, as Bernstein notes, often produced by the group's supporters (226). Perhaps more overtly, the Orthodox clergyman's recommendation of a "fatherly pinch" is reflective of a particularly prominent view of women: sexualized, subservient, and barred from the political arena. Unsurprisingly, domestic reaction to Pavlensky does not exhibit the same attitudes: detractors generally refer to him as a madman and vandal, supporters revere him as a hero and artist, and very little of this dialogue is centred on his body. What discussion does centre on the body is generally with reference to his gaunt, Christ-like appearance, or whether or not he actually drove the nail through his scrotum. Pavlensky is not subjected to the same kind of gendered corporeal instrumentalization as Pussy Riot, a reflection of attitudes surrounding gender in Russian society.

With due respect to their differences, the shared element of corporeality between these works of protest art will be examined in order to determine their political implications. Giorgio Agamben's theory of biopolitics will be applied, as it offers a return to the commonality of the human body as the site for oppositional discourse using a fundamentally corporeal critique of power. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben discusses an obscure figure in Roman law who is stripped of his legal status and expelled from the political community. Central to this concept is the Ancient Greek distinction between two particular kinds of life: *zoe* (natural life) and *bios* (qualified life). Homo sacer resides somewhere in between *zoe* and *bios* – he is barred from the political community by law, thereby occupying a position marked by paradox. He is excluded from the protections of the law by the law itself. This peculiar position is referred to as bare life, a type of life that emerges in ejection from the realm of the political, concurrently involving a degree of political implication in his vulnerability to sovereign violence, thus resulting in a paradoxical type of inclusion through exclusion. Upon expulsion from the political community, having lost all rights, homo sacer is, first and foremost, constituted of his biological reality. It is solely within his body that power resides and upon which it is inscribed (1-12). Homo sacer serves as a useful model for the functionality of modern power which manifests in and expresses itself through control over the human body.

Agamben sees contemporary politics as characterized by this kind of reduction to bare life. The sovereign creates bare life through the exception, which increasingly becomes the rule. Agamben sees the first “normal and collective... organization of human life founded solely on bare life” in the concentration camp, in which “power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation” (97). The camp, as a state of

exception, is an ever-present condition existing within the contemporary political order, an instance of cross-pollination between democracy and totalitarianism, an aporia marked simultaneously by inclusion and exclusion. According to Agamben, in the contemporary political order, “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (115).

The application of Agamben’s biopolitical explanation helps to elucidate the manifestation of oppositional discourse in corporeal performance art. The problem posed by the reduction of space for authentic opposition in contemporary Russia is answered by oppositionists’ arrival at the site of the human body like the arrival at ground zero of a power conflict, where power negotiations can occur free from external determinants. The body comprises the most basic constitution of a human being, and it is also the most basic site upon which power is exercised. It offers up the rawest exemplification of power, and represents this power in a particularly truthful way. The body becomes not only a space for the expression of oppositional discourse, it strives to represent this discourse in unmediated terms, free from external determinants, thereby responding to complications of representation associated with the distinctly postmodern fluidity of truth. Thus, the corporeal canvas offers the possibility of a physical staging of truths resistant to external manipulation and falsification, and the potentiality of confronting sovereign power transcendent of mediation.

Pavlensky’s acts of self-mutilation are metaphorical representations of the effects of oppressive power systems on the individual. These kinds of metaphor are particularly apt in biopolitical terms in that they constitute a reclamation of the body on behalf of the individual, an inscription declaring the individual’s own ability to partake in the political community despite exclusion from this realm. To a certain extent, this seems to work in

artistic terms: in “Stitch” (“Shov”), sewing his mouth shut serves to illustrate the position of the censored artist, in “Fixation,” the nailing of the scrotum represents Russian fatalism, political apathy, and existential suffering, in “Carcass,” wrapping himself in barbed wire becomes illustrative of restrictive Russian laws, and in “Segregation,” the severing of the earlobe represents state usage of punitive psychiatry. These metaphors are explained respectively in their accompanying artist’s statements, and, as discussed in Chapter 2, are complicated by an entanglement of artistic devices and invocation of tradition.

The political function of corporeal protest art can be generally understood as a method of empowerment in a political system from which oppositionists have effectively been excluded. These protest actions operate as a sort of inversion of the power dynamic observed by Agamben and Foucault, in which the sovereign carries out a performative exemplification of power on the body of the individual.³⁵ With respect to Pavlensky, the critique of power carried out on the body functions essentially as a claim to a political voice in a system that has closed off all other avenues. In a greater sense, these works’ enactment in public spaces suggests that the staging and deciphering of the body is attempting carve out a new public space for political dialogue, and in doing so, it is seeking to forge a new kind of public sphere. The transition of oppositional discourse from the text to the body could be understood in part as a sort of reconstitution of a public sphere that was once anchored predominantly on the pages of the literary text. As this

³⁵ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines the history of the modern penal system, the notion of punishment and discipline as political tactics, and the ways that power relations have influenced the development of punishment. Importantly, he discusses the treatment of the body as a site for the negotiation of power and concludes that in modern society, the body acts as an intermediary through which power is exercised, however veiled by a linking of social nodes (hospitals, schools, penitentiaries) that control social space.

particular kind of body politic grounded in public reading culture diminishes in relevance and efficacy, artists and oppositionists are exploring new and untraditional modes of expression.

With reference to Foucault, the body as the site of particularly powerful witnessings to truth can also be understood as an inversion of the biopolitical power dynamic in which the sovereign exemplifies an excess of power on the body of the individual. In the case of Pavlensky, he acts as both the sovereign and the criminal. Through the act of self-harm, the truth of the crime is inscribed onto his body. The crimes, in this instance, are the variety of oppressive ways in which power manifests itself. Following the act of self-harm, he becomes positioned as the victim, and the corporeal enactment inherently takes on a quality of self-sacrifice. Subsequently, interactions with the state become overshadowed by the potential for martyrdom of the performer. Foucault examines how the modern penal system aims to eradicate the glorification of the criminal that historically arose from instances of public torture. I argue that the performer's body-centred action combines with submission to the law to oppose this kind of sequestering, deliberately invoking a martyr-like quality and glorification of the injured body. Ultimately, in this position, the artist is empowered in a way that enables him to directly challenge the state. Thus, he enters into the realm of the political in a way that can no longer be accessed through the literary avenues that were once an important vehicle for speaking truth to power.

Political empowerment through corporeal enactment has achieved a certain degree of success in that it has enabled Pavlensky and Pussy Riot to directly challenge the state in a way that likely could not happen through other communicative media. The

playing out of this dialogue inevitably involves self-sacrifice, and from this arises a fundamental issue: the evident tension between submission and empowerment. At the very least, this means that this type of performance is likely unsustainable. In 2016, Moscow Actionist Anatoly Osmolovsky speculated that the career span of an actionist generally could not exceed seven years. This idea is supported by the artistic trajectory of members of the Moscow Actionist group: Alexander Brener left Russia, Oleg Kulik has taken to sculpture, and Osmolovsky is now working with wood (Sneider). Developments in the world of contemporary protest art also seem to follow this trend: Voina has disbanded, FEMEN have relocated to Paris, Pussy Riot's Nadezhda Tolokonnikova primarily makes music videos, and Maria Alyokhina, along with other Pussy Riot members, has founded the independent media network, MediaZona. Pavlensky has not carried out an action since "Threat" in 2015, likely due to the seven months he spent in detention following the action. The most recent development in this story is that Pavlensky and his partner, Oksana Shalygina, have been accused of sexual assault, have fled Russia, and have been granted asylum in France.

Recent circumstances surrounding the Pavlensky case highlight another fundamental issue emerging from this kind of protest: the potentially harmful effects of hero-worshipping associated with prominent figures of the protest movement. While Pavlensky has verbally spurned such a role, he has, nonetheless, been relegated to it. The accuser, Anastasia Slonina, a well-known actress at St. Petersburg oppositionist theatre, Teatr.doc, claims that Pavlensky and Shalygina assaulted her and her partner. Much of the liberal public is alleging that the accuser is a government plant. For example, the well-known curator, Marat Guelman, publicly claimed that this case is a provocation

organized by the FSB in order to ruin Pavlensky's reputation, a statement that effectively likens the accuser to the regime (Raspopina). Ultimately, this points towards issues of idolization that are not necessarily something new, but, nevertheless, are at work in tandem with persistent sexism and patriarchal attitudes in shaping the cultural situation of these new forms of protest art. This particular case seems to have uncovered a deep-seated patriarchal impulse that effectively translates to disbelief of the accounts of sexual assault survivors, demonstrating its troubling prevalence across ideological boundaries. Particularly due to the sacrificial nature reinforced by the corporeality of these performances, the potential for problematic idolization is intensified.

Pavlensky's own critique of heroism anticipates its manifestation: "In military terms, hero is the highest distinction. I am a part of my people, and I do not want to be separated. *Glorification of a hero means his exclusion*. A hero always carries responsibility. Heroization means segregation. I cut off my earlobe, I put it to death, and amputation is death. The same thing is with heroization" ("Russian Jail," author's emphasis). Pavlensky describes a kind of social death through separation from society, somewhat reminiscent of his recent exit from Russia and subsequent silence. What is missing from this critique is the power associated with the hero role. In a demonstration of power not unlike that which he critiques, the artist himself instrumentalizes his glorified role in order to safeguard himself from the allegations of assault. To his followers, Pavlensky is the innocent victim of the regime. There is little acknowledgement of the possibility that he could, in fact, be the aggressor. He is insulated from critique by his privileged role. This occurrence, to a certain extent, constitutes a reification of the oppressive structures thematized in the artist's works by

the artist himself. In a peculiar way, it illustrates the applicability of these critiques across varying contexts.

Literary Companion

Inquiry into domestic response has resulted in the need to revisit my initial assumption that oppositional discourse in Russia is facing a major shift in medium. In fact, it is becoming increasingly evident that the shift away from the literary text to the human body does not constitute a complete erasure of literary culture from Russian society. Rather, corporeal performance art functions more effectively with reference to literary culture, and is often understood domestically in such a way. Various social media postings suggest that a literary companion to these performances helps to make sense of their message. When Pavlensky could not stand trial due to his confinement in a psychiatric facility, Twitter user GogolsWives responded with the following Tweet: “Before the law. Kafka. Pavlensky.” (“U vrat zakona. Kafka. Pavlenskii.”). Comparisons between Kafka and Pavlensky have been fairly common in domestic and international media, as well as in social media, largely due to overlapping themes in their works: In both, a central image is the individual crushed by an oppressive bureaucratic structure, unveiling the notion of profound violence masked by bureaucracy. This particular instance resembles, uncannily, Kafka’s parable entitled “Before the Law,” a highly concentrated example of the bureaucratic power-holder wielding his power in an absurd, inexplicable way. The parable is about an individual who awaits entry into an unexplained realm – the law – from which he is perpetually denied without explanation. He waits indefinitely, giving gifts to the gatekeeper, but is continually denied entry, until eventually he dies.

When Pavlensky was ultimately charged with “damaging a cultural heritage site” for the burning of the Lubyanka’s doors, because “leading figures of science and culture were imprisoned there,” another nod to the Kafka-like absurdity appeared in Russian social media. Oppositionist Andrey Shipilov quipped on Facebook: “Kafka – a dish that Russians eat in the morning...” (“Kafka – eto bliudo kotoroe russkie kushaiut po utram...”) exemplifying the usage of literary comparison to draw out familiar themes from this newly emerging form of corporeal performance art, therefore granting these performances a degree of cultural readability. At the same time, this posting implies a mundane quality to the absurdity of the situation. Similarly, Noah Sneider has observed that in Russia, Foucault would feel banal. “It is no revelation that vlast’ is everywhere,” Sneider posits, extrapolating commentary on Russian society through the homonymy of the term, meaning both “power” and “government” (2016). Perhaps Pavlensky’s critique of power is, in fact, redundant. Perhaps it has already been more effectively iterated by the literary greats.

While Pavlensky’s performances work to circumvent traditional literary trappings, his manifestos, writings, and interviews circulate in that very medium. His most recent publication, *On Russian Actionism* (“O russkom aktsionizme”) appeared in 2016, and, prior to this, he published a periodical entitled *Political Propaganda* (“Politicheskaja propaganda”). Pavlensky cites literary influences that include Tolstoy, Kafka, and Camus, but there is a notable absence of contemporary writers from this list. One possible reason may be the dissonance between Pavlensky’s stone-faced approach to power, and the crudely ironic, sometimes cartoonish depictions of Russian society evident in contemporary Russian literature. In “Political Issues in Russia’s Literary

Discourse,” Andrey Makarychev examines four contemporary writers: Dmitry Bykov, Zakhar Prilepin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Viktor Pelevin, and their depictions of the state, society, and opposition in post-Soviet Russia. Identifying an ironic approach in a number of the works, he concludes that contemporary Russian literature tends to pessimistically portray Russian political life as an area in which “ineffective yet inescapable power” is exercised simply for its own sake. He also claims that these contemporary literary works are inherently resistant to the Putin-Medvedev regime’s ideological tenet of “conservative modernization” through their commitment to traditional form (247). Perhaps the lack of contemporary Russian literature in Pavlensky’s list of influences is indicative of a formalistic – and possibly political – divergence between contemporary oppositional literature and contemporary protest art. If contemporary oppositional literature can no longer capably speak truth to power, it is possible that it can no longer capably preach to the choir, as well.

But, this dearth of contemporary Russian literature in Pavlensky’s canon does not exempt him from treatment in the works themselves. Viktor Pelevin’s most recent novel, *iPhuck 10* (2017) contains a scene in which two characters discuss Pavlensky’s works. Tongue-in-cheek commentary on the categorization of his imprisonment as a work of art entitled “Cock Held in Captivity by the FSB” (“Khui v plenu FSB”) is followed by outright satire, during which the characters discuss a series of prints depicting guinea pigs mimicking his works. In a sort of postmodern irreverence addressing postmodern tropes themselves, the guinea pigs are described with an ear cut off, pierced with a silver nail attached to a tiny cobblestone from Red Square, and carrying cardboard signs reading “Free Pussy Riot,” around their necks. According to the narrator, although Pussy Riot

were free at the time, the international art market demanded “resonant and recognizable cultural codes” (“no mezhdunarodnyi art-rynok tekhn let treboval rezonanskikh i uznavaemykh kul’turnykh kodov”). For this same reason, the English edition of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova’s correspondence with Slavoj Žižek was used as mats in the guinea pigs’ cages. At the very least, Pelevin’s postmodern treatment of Pavlensky’s works exemplifies the latter’s absorption into mass culture. At the same time, it is illustrative of the postmodern rejection of grand narratives – in this case, the oppositional grand narrative that has insulated Pavlensky from criticism amongst the liberal public. In a strange comparison with President Donald Trump, Pelevin’s irreverence for the protest artist hero shines through: “Pussy Grab #3” is the fictional Pavlensky’s latest action that has forced him to flee Russia, a brazen and nearly instantaneous commentary on the sexual assault allegations that forced the real Pavlensky to flee several months earlier.

The disparity between contemporary oppositional literature and contemporary protest art elucidates the strengths and weaknesses of these respective forms. The emergence of corporeal performance art as a notable divergence from the literary text can be understood, in some ways, as a response to the shortcomings of contemporary literature. At the same time, protest art draws on a vast amalgam of traditional literary works in the formation of new modes of expression, eliciting familiar themes that have been treated repeatedly over time by the literary greats. For this reason, traditional – not contemporary – literature proves a useful companion for the understanding of corporeal protest art. In the case of Pavlensky, Kafka has proven particularly suitable. Yet, recently, protest art has been treated by contemporary literature in a manner that highlights an unexpected contemporary literary strength. Alleviated of the former responsibility of

“nation’s conscience” and empowered by postmodern conditions, writers now have the relatively uninhibited potential for expression, which could, ultimately, allow for a reimagining of literature’s subversive power and a re-emergence in the cultural realm.

This chapter has examined, predominantly, the political functions of the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky, particularly in a domestic sense. Through the use of public opinion data and domestic media sources, I have observed how these works generally speak to a specific demographic of liberal oppositionists, concluding that attitudes surrounding the case of Pussy Riot, while not necessarily supportive, indicated that the state had reacted excessively. Attitudes toward Pavlensky were notably difficult to reconcile into one unified whole. Through the lens of biopolitics, I have explored the corporeality of these performances as a response to the postmodern plurality of truths, as a method of claiming a political voice, and as a way of carving out a new public sphere. I have also observed the glorification of the performer through corporeal enactment, and the subsequent martyr-like effects, simultaneously effective in their ability to create dialogue with the state and potentially problematic due to the effects of reification of the very subject of critique combined with unconditional support within the oppositional realm. I conclude that the invocation of traditional literary culture remains evident, particularly in the way that audiences understand these corporeal works, while at the same time addressing the potentiality for contemporary literature as a powerfully irreverent artistic form.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined cultural, social, and economic shifts in the post-Soviet Era that have contributed to a major cultural transition away from the literary text, which has traditionally held a role of major importance in the communication of official and oppositional political discourse. These conditions have interestingly coincided with the rise of relative economic and social wellbeing in Russia – circumstances which tend to foster the development of a burgeoning public sphere, now standing at odds with an increase in political repression. Oppositionists and protest artists are, therefore, finding new and unconventional ways of expressing dissent. My study contextualizes these new methods of expression within the larger tradition of the cultural expression of political will, examining the ways in which these works are readable through cultural norms and to whom they speak. I have also observed several inherent issues arising from these new forms of artistic protest, and argue for continued examination of these works with consideration to their literary predecessors as possible ways for understanding their role, function, and reception within Russian society.

Five years after their famous protest in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Pussy Riot remain active both domestically and internationally, effectively functioning as a dynamic and complex cultural object. As an internationally recognized symbol of resistance, their brightly coloured balaclavas signify steadfast opposition in the face of a repressive regime. While scholarly and journalistic attention focuses extensively on the impacts of their famous church performance, their story continues to be leveraged and transposed into different social contexts. Speculation regarding the intentions behind their famous punk performance may continue in perpetuity, but with continued inquiry into the

persistence of Pussy Riot as a complex cultural tool, a deeper understanding of contemporary agency, culture, and power can be gained.

While the revelatory practice enacted by the protest artists in this study is, to varying extents, an effective method of conducting institutional critique, these works do not always offer a practical alternative to the dominant power that they aim to expose. An alternate reality to the repressive world presented in Pavlensky's works is not immediately self-evident in the acts of self-harm and destruction, nor is there necessarily a practical response to be deduced from Pussy Riot's performance in the church. Systematic issues can be exposed by subversive affirmative practice, but cannot necessarily be solved this way. Herbert Marcuse's critique of late capitalist society warns of protest that is ultimately subsumed by the dominant system, asserting that "such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative. They are rather the ceremonial part of practical behaviorism, its harmless negation, and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet" (14). And, while Putin-era Russia cannot be categorized as late capitalist society, the consumption and suppression of oppositional narratives by the dominant power is demonstrative of something notably similar to that observed by Marcuse. As an antidote, he proposes a theory of totality that acknowledges the possibility of alternatives. The way to liberation is through two-dimensional thought – critical negation of prevalent repressive structures that must ultimately be enacted in practice – essentially necessitating a move from theory to praxis. Further work in this area could employ a Marcusean framework for the critical examination of the works of Pussy Riot and Pavlensky in order to conduct a more pragmatic analysis while still remaining theoretically based. This framework could also

be applied to these performers and their works in a global context in order to better understand their functionality as dynamic cultural objects in a constellation of differing political climates.

Moreover, immediate domestic concerns necessitate further scrutiny of art and protest in the Russian context. In the months leading up to the 2018 Russian presidential election, whether the country's political system will effectively exclude any and all authentic opposition remains a central question. In the meantime, crackdown on opposition in the country is increasingly evident: Alexei Navalny, believed to be the opposition's most plausible presidential candidate, is legally unable to run due to charges of embezzlement. That said, Navalny claims that this will not prevent him from running. At the same time, oppositionist artists are facing increased rates of suppression: oppositionist theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov was recently detained on charges of embezzlement, raising concerns surrounding the state's repression of dissidents and a slew of commentary in international media. Analysis of the apparent re-emergence of Cold War-style reporting, in addition to more nuanced instances of othering, would help to build the foundation for a de-Westernized approach to Russian politics, culture, and society as it is investigated in the Western world. It is additionally worth noting the applicability of these analyses to Western contexts. With the recent rise of authoritarian populist governments in the West, one can look to Russia to gain a deeper understanding of how these types of governments function in the postmodern era. To this extent, my study contributes to a greater understanding of art and protest under contemporary electoral authoritarian governments. For further reading on this topic, see Arkady Ostrovsky's *The Invention of New Russia*.

Further research on the topic of contemporary Russian protest art would undoubtedly benefit from an approach that considers the influence of class and ethnicity on its performance and reception. Particularly within a corporeally based theory of power, these considerations would provide a worthwhile departure point for future studies. As signalled by the discernible impact of a performer's gender on public response toward the performance, the ways in which public response is tempered by class and ethnicity are especially deserving of attention and will contribute to a more complete understanding of the culture and society within which these performances are enacted.

The role and function of these performances in a global context is also worth further investigation. This issue has continually presented itself over the course of my study, reaching an apex in the appearance of Pussy Riot in Vancouver, B.C. at the Rickshaw Theatre on November 21, 2016 for a ticketed event entitled "A Conversation with Russia's Controversial Punk Band." The crowd at the Rickshaw Theatre expressed an acute awareness of the potential for the future delimitation of democratic freedoms in a Western context. While negation of dominant repressive structures through free assembly may exist as a normative democratic exercise in Canadian circumstances, the Russian case exemplifies that these circumstances are subject to change. Indicating their desire to transpose Pussy Riot's brand of activism into new situations, many audience members expressed a desire to incite political action, and a need to assert the current norm that allows for these types of discussions to occur relatively freely. While the assertion of a democratic norm, in Marcusean terms, is indicative of a kind of domination that incorporates all authentic opposition, it is at the same time an act of defending what

could be an important prerequisite for the bringing forward of two-dimensional discourse regarding an alternative future.

In the five years following their famous action in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Pussy Riot have advocated for human rights on an international scale, while maintaining their status as Russia's most controversial punk group. It is perhaps within the tension between subversion and normativity that this notion of controversy resides, and with further scrutiny of these performances, more contradictory instances will likely be unveiled. While Pussy Riot's appearance in Vancouver contained both subversive and normative elements, it brings to attention the advancement of repression with increasing urgency, suggesting the need to negate the repressive societal apparatus in conjunction with the need to defend existing liberties that allow for oppositionists to converse and act. The subversive quality of corporeal protest art hinges on the audience's ability to move forward, identifying and negating prevailing modes of repression. At the same time, the increasing possibility of a regression of norms poses an argument to be had with Marcuse. In a time when oppositional freedoms are being threatened, the sold-out appearance of Pussy Riot in Vancouver acknowledges that a vital step toward autonomous theory and praxis is to assemble, assert, and defend the right to do so. In this way, corporeal protest art is an assertion in a very basic physical sense. Through embodied presence, a fundamental component of political and cultural agency is safeguarded in the right to occupy space. Within this realm, the central image of a heroic person speaking truth to power remains resonant and transcendent across media and cultures, illustrating a vital link between the literary greats of the past and the protest artists of current day: a hero behind whom supporters can be mobilized and rallied.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama famously argued that with the end of the Cold War, humanity was approaching its final form of governance: Western liberal democracy (“The End of History?”). Yet, this teleological assertion did not seem to hold up – in 2014, Fukuyama revised his hypothesis, at least in practical terms, and acknowledged that it is possible that not all nations would necessarily take that route (“Still Stands Democracy”). At the very least, his initial assertion constituted a deprivation of human agency and the erasure of human imaginings of an alternative future. Jacques Derrida more succinctly argued that Fukuyama’s statements constituted the erasure of “innumerable singular sites of suffering” (*Specters of Marx* 106). In order to rectify these instances of suffering, future alternatives must be imagined, discussed, and implemented, and a diversity of voices and experiences must be included in the conversation.

In “Why We Must Protest,” Masha Gessen discusses the importance of protest in a time when democratic freedoms are being curtailed. She explains that “the choice to protest... is the choice to take control of one’s body, one’s time, and one’s words, and in doing so to reclaim the ability to see a future.” The works discussed in this thesis lay claim to the freedom to be physically present in a space and to express differing visions for a future. To suppress or ignore these actions constitutes complicity in the erasure of particular voices from the political arena. To listen and attempt to understand these actions helps to foster the creation of a space in which the exchange of political discourse is a possibility, ultimately granting the individual the ability to play an active role in the imagining and shaping of their own future.

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