

**ART CRIMES: QUEERING THE REVOLUTION THROUGH THE WORK OF PUSSY RIOT  
AND PETR PAVLENSKY**

by

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BA., Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Art History and Theory)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2020

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Art Crimes: Queering the Revolution through the Work of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky

submitted by Adrian Deveau in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in Art History and Theory

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## Abstract

With the flick of a match, Petr Pavlensky set fire to the Bank of France in Paris, scorching the façade of the Haussmann exterior while French police tackled the artist to the ground. The performance was more than merely a spectacular action, but a call-to-arms for the mass mobilization of the proletariat for global revolution. The artist group Pussy Riot's performance at Toronto Pride in 2015 also demanded structural change, as they travelled the parade route on a military tank laden with a dildo-shaped missile demanding the removal of Vladimir Putin from Russian office. Since inception, Pavlensky's performances are exemplary mobilizations of Pussy Riot's manifesto entitled "Commit an Art Crime," the main component to the group's performative acts. Art Crime becomes art *as* theory, enacting tactics of queer liberation through the form of the performance itself.

In my thesis "Art Crimes: Queering the Revolution through the Work of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky," I will analyze the concept of art crime as a liberational tactic through three frameworks of bodily performance: public intervention, social terrorism, and queer-femme labour. In the first section, I demonstrate the transformative properties of the art crime in Pussy Riot's performance at Toronto Pride, as well as the situation of Pussy Riot within the trajectory of Russian art. In section two, I apply the art crime to the performances of Petr Pavlensky, Pussy Riot's predecessor. Section three of the thesis will nuance the art crime within queer femme labour through witchcraft in *The Witches of Pussy Riot clean Manezhka*, molding a framework for revolutionary tactics through labour in lived experience.

## **Lay Summary**

This thesis analyzes the artist group Pussy Riot's concept of Art Crime, a performative action which aims to enact socio-political change through art itself. Art historical discourse lacks a comprehensive analysis of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky's performance situated in a theoretical context, whether through Marxist political economy or queer theory. Throughout the thesis, I will argue that the art crime is a necessary process of revolution against homophobia, global capitalism, and police brutality through utilizing three spheres of dissemination: public intervention, social terrorism, and queer-femme labour.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Adrian Deveau.

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\*All images have been listed but removed due to copyright restrictions

## Acknowledgements

The following thesis would be nothing without the mentorship and guidance from my inspiration, Dr. Erin Silver. Whether through continual support in connection to our mutually-shared global queer community – histories past and present – to words of encouragement when the institution aimed to silence, twist, and repress the labour and activism of grassroots LGBT+ movements only to claim it as their own. With complete admiration and honesty: Erin – without your foundational spark, there would be no fire. This project would also read very different without the eye of Dr. T'ai Smith, whose perspective provided an integral second look at my work with a constructive and necessary gaze. I also send my deepest thanks to Dr. Jennifer Kennedy for the wealth of knowledge and continuous encouragement you have given me throughout my studies

I would also like to thank the Faculty and Staff of AHVA who have with care and attention helped to shape my time at UBC. To Dr. Catherine Soussloff for her foundational seminar on Michel Foucault and the immaculate attention and support given to my writing, To Dr. Jaleh Mansoor for her invaluable seminars with Claire Fontaine and Eric Alliez, and to Dr. Julia Orell, Dr. Ignacio Adriasola, Dr. Joseph Monteyne, Dr. Michelle McGeough, and Dr. Ateya Khorakiwala for their facilitation of the seminars throughout my degree which have been so formative to my learning. My experience at UBC has also been so fruitful thanks to the work and friendship of Lanna Lastiwka, Kristina Parzen, and Emily Cadger.

But academia is only a sliver of the light which shined onto the pages of this project. To my family, who know how much they are loved, and which words cannot replace, and to my found family – Julia Carrie, Kendra Thompson, Tori McGuigan, Katie Glancy, Emily Thompson-Becker, Natalie Harmsen, and Isabela Jeronimo Do.

The binding of this thesis, the core, the strength, is only and purely from the efforts of the queer liberation movement, the black trans women, the fire, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Larry Kramer, José Esteban Muñoz, Xavier Dolan, and Nadya Tolokonnikova, who without their strength, I would live a very different life.



## **Dedication**

*To the queer youth who have paved the way. We hear you.*

## Introduction: Art Crimes

One month before the Moscow-based Pussy Riot members Nadya Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina rode a dildo-laden military tank during Toronto Pride (2015), Moscow police attacked a group of queer activists for protesting a Russian regulation banning same-sex couples from holding hands in public.<sup>1</sup> Challenging the same homophobic Russian regulation, performance artist and activist Petr Pavlensky wrapped his naked body in barbed wire and lay in front of the entrance of the Legislative Assembly in St. Petersburg (2013).<sup>2</sup> The cultural wavelength of the Russian protests evaded the popular mediascape, reverberating into the underground web of unclicked Google searches. The activists vanished into the ether of forgotten discourses of queer subjects whose existence remains but a fragment of embodied trauma under Vladimir Putin's regime.

The regression of the arrests mimic the disappearance of other newsworthy tribulations of queer people in Russia and Canada, from the murder of Vladimir Putin's political opposition leaders, to an uninvestigated string of murders in the gay village of Toronto, to threats by home-grown terrorists against queer people and people of colour in small town "Canada."<sup>3</sup> 2015 was

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, "Raw: Activists Arrested at Russian Gay Pride Demo," *YouTube* video, 1:14. August 2, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ingrid Nelson, "Artist for a New Age: Dissident Russian Performance Art and the Work of Petr Pavlenskii," *Russian Literature* 96-98 (2018), 286.

<sup>3</sup> In October 2019, an anonymous letter was found in student residence at Queen's University threatening attacks of homophobia and racism against the student body. Lines of the poem read "We'll scalp you all, We'll make you bleed, But don't worry, We'll bury you along with your precious flags." Queen's University denounced the poem and Kingston Police investigated the terrorist attack, but no public information was released on the matter and no charges have been laid. The attacker(s) are still at large at the University. I also place "Canada" in quotations to recognize the country as a colonial project, placing systems of governance onto Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island whose place in North American long predates European colonization. "Canada" is also an indicator of a constructed border space, designating a singular identity based on colonization, Christianization, and private land ownership. "Canada" is only an indicator of state-sanctioned territory rather than the designation of lived reality. See Steph Crosier. "Case of Hateful Poster Closed, No Charges Laid by Kingston Police." *The Kingston Whig-Standard*,

also the year that Toronto Police covered up the murder of Soroush Mahmudi, a hard-working father and immigrant from Barrie, Ontario, who was outed and murdered by Toronto's gay serial killer.<sup>4</sup> Mahmudi was one of eight men – predominantly men of colour and immigrants – who were selectively targeted and killed by the murderer. All of the eight men's disappearances were systematically ignored by the Toronto police despite previous violent crimes committed by the murderer. Toronto Pride was also the target of collective activism the following year, where Black Lives Matter stormed the front of the parade, halting the march until the Pride committee agreed to sign a petition advocating for the ban of all uniformed police from participating in future Pride parades. The cases of institutional corruption all bear a striking resemblance to hate crimes across Russia and the Caucasus, including the kidnapping and torture of queer people for forced conversion therapy and public shaming. Yet, on a global scale, the United Nations and major superpowers alike have failed to openly acknowledge the disproportionate murder of queer people, particularly trans women and queers of colour, including the murder of Muhlaysia Booker, a trans woman from Dallas, Texas and one of 24 known trans women murdered in the United States in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Trans women and queer women of colour, who have often spearheaded the queer liberation movement of past and present, are still the highest targeted group for hate crimes while the "liberated" white gay male basks in the glow of their newly-found power.

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January 21, 2020. <https://www.thewhig.com/news/local-news/case-of-hateful-poster-closed-no-charges-laid-by-kingston-police>.

<sup>4</sup> David Graham, "How Alleged Toronto Serial Killer Bruce McArthur Went Unnoticed," *The Guardian News and Media*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/23/bruce-mcarthur-toronto-gay-serial-killer>.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Dart, "Muhlaysia Booker: An Advocate against Trans Violence Is Mourned in Texas," *The Guardian News and Media*, May 21, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/21/muhlaysia-booker-trans-woman-death-texas-dallas-mourns-activist>.

From the onset of neoliberalism, the abstraction of the queer body into a reified commodity proliferates the identity formations of subjects under late capitalism. The extrication of queers from their labouring activism, designated by the 1990s co-option of queer identities into the legal frameworks of the state, signifies a formation of a new identity – the identity of the homonationalist.<sup>6</sup> The homonationalist, as conceptualized by queer theorist Jasbir Puar in her 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, is no stranger to the perpetration of crimes against humanity, subsuming the trauma of people of colour and women alike into a single image of the triumphant, liberated white gay male. Yasmine Nair and the Against Equality Collective also note the dangers of sublimating queer individuals into the state. Whether from losing the elusive, counter-cultural existence of queerness as a resistance tactic to western power systems or a distraction against ongoing social inequalities including lack of healthcare for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS who are not married, particularly POC at disproportionate rates, Nair argues that gay marriage upholds the conservative model of marriage in both an economic partnership with the state and forced monogamy rooted in Christian “values.”<sup>7</sup> The image is of the homonationalist everywhere, a refraction into the matrix of the image-laden political campaigns and tourism posters for the freedoms of queer people under

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<sup>6</sup> The term “homonationalist” originates from Jasbir Puar’s book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. In the thesis, I will be using “homonationalism” to signify the dichotomy between the Orientalized, abjected “other” with the idealized white gay male as signifier of western imperial nationalism. Puar states that homonationalism “marks arrangements of U.S. sexual exceptionalism explicitly in relation to the nation... the Orientalist invocation of the terrorist is one discursive tactic that disaggregates U.S. national gays and queers from racial and sexual others, foregrounding a collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism that is generated both by national rhetoric of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves.” (39) While I do not explicitly discuss Orientalism in the Middle East in opposition to American state politics, I do liken the homonationalist signifier to other oppressed queer groups including femme, trans, and POC members of the community who have been ostracized from the gay community from threatening capitalist reproduction.

<sup>7</sup> Yasmine Nair, “Against Equality, Against Marriage” in Ryan Conrad, Eds., *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*. Oakland: AK Press, 2014, 14-15.

neoliberalism. The idealized image of the white gay male reflects the stereotype imagined in Vladimir Putin's 2012 anti-gay propaganda law – a law which promotes violence against queer people by Putin's weaponized police force (полиция). The image of the homonationalist permeates the profile picture of Grindr users in Russia, straight-identifying catfishers who act as potential lovers in order to lure gay men into their homes and attack them on video. The videos of beaten queers in Russia, disseminated on the internet for public spectacle, challenge the image of the homonationalist in North America, a “free” gay man who can marry, love, and express himself openly. Across the globe, from Russia to Canada, the global epidemic of violence against women and queer POC (People of Colour) alike elide the systems of governance and justice, not represented in the liberated subjectivity of white gay men in North America.

Too often does violence against queer minorities come from a top-down dynamic of police brutality and government suppression. However, the global epidemic of queer violence does not go unchallenged. When the artist and activist group Pussy Riot stormed the field of the 2018 World Cup in Moscow wearing police uniforms and high-fiving players on the field, members were arrested by Russian authorities for 15 days. Pussy Riot's performance marked the largest exposure of the group to date, streaming the artwork protesting police brutality in Russia to 516.6 million people around the world.<sup>8</sup> After the performance was deemed permissible on legal grounds, the members of Pussy Riot were released; however, Pyotr Verzilov, long-time Pussy Riot collaborator and former member of the Russian performance art group *Voina* alongside colleague Tolokonnikova, was quickly hospitalized for suspected poisoning shortly

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<sup>8</sup> Sports Staff, “More than 3.5 Billion People Watched 2018 World Cup, Says Fifa,” *The Independent Digital News and Media*, December 21, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/2018-russia-world-cup-england-france-croatia-final-fifa-viewing-figures-numbers-a8694261.html>.

after his acquittal. As critic Masha Gessen of *The New Yorker* speculates in her article “We Now Know More About the Apparent Poisoning of Pussy Riot Member Pyotr Verzilov,” Verzilov was an easy target for Russian silencing techniques, not only for his participation in Pussy Riot’s performances but also for his investigation in the murder of three Russian Journalists in 2018. The three journalists Alexander Rastorguev, Orkhan Dzhemal, and Kirill Radchenko were investigating corruption in Central African Republic and the Russian business ties to the CAR uranium industry. During their fieldwork, the journalists were murdered by a group of “about 10 men.”<sup>9</sup> Their bodies were shortly discovered.<sup>10</sup> From Pussy Riot’s founding members Nadya Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich’s performance of *Punk Prayer* in 2013, to storming the field of the World Cup in 2018, Pussy Riot have administered injections of performance into the realm of lived realities through the usage of their artistic practice coined the “art crime.” Lacing together performance and reality, Pussy Riot’s art crime replicates lived experience and has lived consequences.

In my thesis I will explore the concept of the art crime through the performances of Pussy Riot and their predecessor Petr Pavlensky, tracing performance not as a spectacular display or artistic invention but as a concrete action against the traumas of the lived experiences of women, queer people, people of colour, and the working class. Despite the promises of neoliberal liberation, violent attacks are swept under the façade of “freedoms” in the modern world. But modernity itself is built on oppression, the reification of the global elite for the violent sublimation of the working class. The art crime directly challenges the false dichotomy of

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<sup>9</sup> Masha Gessen, “We Now Know More About the Apparent Poisoning of the Pussy Riot Member Pyotr Verzilov,” *The New Yorker*, September 19, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/we-now-know-more-about-the-apparent-poisoning-of-the-pussy-riot-member-pyotr-verzilov>.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

national freedoms with lived realities. Throughout the thesis, I explore the mobilizations of art crime through three different frameworks: public intervention, social terrorism, and queer-femme labour. I will also utilize a transnational approach to my research, foremost since Pussy Riot perform their works across the world and through global social media networks, as well as to highlight the need for a global liberation from queer oppression under capitalism and neoliberalism. In mobilizing the term “queer,” I recognize the histories of violence associated with the word. In the past, “queer” has both signified a space of object belonging (queer as a label for something “odd”) and of violence (queer mobilized as a derogatory term). “Queer” does not always encompass the lived experiences of all LGBT+ peoples, from two-spirit individuals to non-western and non-monogamous sexualities. However, I employ the term “queer” as an umbrella term, a broad signifier for both LGBT+ individuals and those who do not associate with a formal identification of gender and sexuality conceptualized under the western colonial categories of identity. “Queer” represents the broad, the elusive, the bodily, and the spiritual experiences of individuals who elide the heteronormative cisgendered binaries engrained in contemporary culture. While the art crime could be argued as a broader project beyond queer liberation, specifically a project for political mobilization and class war, I specifically encompass class, gender, and sexuality into my discussions of queerness throughout the project.

Pussy Riot’s work has been well-documented by Masha Gessen in several books and articles including *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (2014) and many articles published in *The New Yorker* throughout the years of 2013 to 2020. However, I believe that Pussy Riot’s work lacks a critical analysis within art historical discourse for two reasons: Pussy Riot is cautious of a traditional academic reading of their performance, while their oeuvre’s boundaries are elusive, crossing disciplines between music, performance, film, art, and literature.

The work of Petr Pavlensky faces the same issue, where his performances have been well-documented but never fully analyzed within a context of queer theory and political economy. The concept of art crime has also never been fully analyzed – another signal of its ambiguity.

In responding to such gaps in the literature, this thesis aims to contribute to the horizontal empty field of queer performance in two ways: to investigate a critical analysis of the work of Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky through the lenses of queer theory and labour, as well as to flesh out the praxis of art crime in action through case examples from both primary artists. I will also inquire as to how, or how not, the art crime successfully enacts an attempt for social revolution, and if the art crime ever moves past a superficial display of activism. Throughout the writing process, I have engaged with Nadya Tolokonnikova in the public forum of her Instagram live sessions to make her aware of my thesis project and have been granted permission to read multiple theses written about her work. While several theses on Pussy Riot have been written, including “Unmasked and Unhindered: the Evolution of the Affect Generator in the Works of Pussy Riot” (2018) by Alicia Baca, in which Baca employs affect theory to analyze the transmission of the body as a site of communication, all of the thesis projects revolve around either the performance of *Punk Prayer* (2013) or utilize a legal framework to investigate limits around free speech.<sup>11</sup> The gap between Pussy Riot and an analysis of queer militancy is glaringly absent. To clarify Pussy Riot’s intentions of the art crime, I will consult the foundational source of “Rule No. 5: Commit an Art Crime” in Tolokonnikova’s *Read and Riot* (2018), Herbert Marcuse’s *The Aesthetic Dimension*, as well as the writings of Bertolt Brecht, Kevin Floyd’s

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<sup>11</sup> Alicia Baca, “Unmasked and Unhindered: The Evolution of the Affect Generator in the Works of Pussy Riot,” MA. Diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2018.



analysis of queer Marxism in *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, and Sylvia Federici's investigation of wicca and labour in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*.

### *The Art Crime*

In Pussy Riot's 2018 book entitled *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, Tolokonnikova outlines the essential properties of an "art crime" ranging from theoretical frameworks to material actions in three sections: Words, Deeds, and Heroes. In "Rule No. 5: Commit an Art Crime," Tolokonnikova states that to commit an art crime, one must break the fourth wall.<sup>12</sup> Citing Michel Foucault's call for artistic embodiment in his posthumous 1997 book *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, the group states that "art crime" must involve the mobilization of an act of protest into the act of bodily transformation by interjecting the lived experiences of minoritarian peoples into the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> For Tolokonnikova, the work of art is a crime, crime not as related to physical property, but as related to the socio-political formations of morality and economy which produce both the historical and contemporary oppressive legal codes and surveillance systems that deeply effects the lives of queer people living under their reign.

In his 1978 essay "The Aesthetic Dimension Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics," an essay which Tolokonnikova cites as one of the primary inspirations for art crime and a

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<sup>12</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*. San Francisco: Harper One, 2018, 81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

foundation for Pussy Riot's performances, Herbert Marcuse highlights three components for artistic revolution:

1. Art may be revolutionary if it represents a radical change in style or technique.
2. Art can be called revolutionary if it breaks the mystified social reality and opens a horizon for change.
3. Art that creates a realm in which the subversion of proper experience becomes possible.<sup>14</sup>

Tolokonnikova, who trained as a philosopher for five years at Moscow State University, expands upon the radical potential for social demystification in Marcuse within the rules for the art crime, asking “how can we break through the alienation of social existence, inauthenticity, and the human being as a thing among things? How can we create a radical response to reification... which militate against the possibility for human self-actualization?”<sup>15</sup> Art crime becomes art *as* theory, eliminating the intrinsic relations to class production through a new path for revolution – through the form of the performance itself. By utilizing the artwork as the basis for liberation, classist conceptions of proper language, writing, and theory are not necessary in modes of understanding, allowing the artwork to become the form of revolution without an inaccessible textual basis founded on privileged academic training – here, the ironies of inaccessible Marxist theories employed by academics to discuss the “people” are called into question. Drawing inspiration from Marcuse, Pussy Riot believe that the art crime can only be successful if it surpasses the dichotomy of the proletariat/bourgeois bifurcation (fig. 1).<sup>16</sup> For

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, x, xi, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Tolokonnikova, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, 53.

example, propaganda art can never be fully liberating because the artwork is always situated in the recirculation of class structures.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse breaks drastically from the tradition of Marxist aesthetics predominantly formed by The Frankfurt School throughout the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that in traditional Marxist aesthetics, the proletariat – acting in opposition to the bourgeoisie – would define the aesthetic forms of nature (a Kantian subjectivity, or “disinterested beauty”). The ability for art to evoke transcendental possibility is described by Marcuse: “By virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis-à-vis the given social relations. In its autonomy, art both protests these relations, and at the same time, transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience.”<sup>18</sup> However, with the rise of monopoly capitalism, the proletariat no longer represent “the people” but encompass the middle class as a working class.<sup>19</sup> Particularly in Russia from 1917 to 1989, the base-superstructure dichotomy was annihilated as the base proletariat took power, leading to communist fascism under Joseph Stalin until 1953. Regarding the proletariat as the only classification for “the people,” Marcuse writes: “to work for the radicalization of consciousness means to make explicit and conscious the material and ideological discrepancy between the writer and “the people.”<sup>20</sup> Here, one may think of socialist realism-turned-fascist

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<sup>17</sup> Theodor W. Adorno’s writings on aesthetics inform the Marxist aesthetic discourse, a foundation for the Frankfurt School’s ideology. In *Aesthetics*, a series of lectures spoken throughout 1950 to 1968, Adorno argues for a shift from the Kantian sublime experience of aesthetic subjectivity to a Hegelian reading of aesthetics, a symbol of artistic independence outside of the subject rather than of bourgeois aesthetic taste. While Marcuse also argues for the independence of the artwork outside of a subject, he also argues of the power of the natural state of the artwork – a signifier more aligned with the Kantian sublime rather than Hegel’s aesthetic discourse. Here is where I indicate a split between Marcuse and Adorno. Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetics 1958/1959*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Marcuse, ix.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

aestheticization. “Revolutionary art may well become the enemy of the People,” as Marcuse boldly claims, because revolutionary art may become the basis of a class aesthetic-turned-universal aesthetic.<sup>21</sup> On the aesthetic attribute of the work of art, Marcuse writes:

The radical qualities of art, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounds precisely in the dimension where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible.<sup>22</sup>

Only through the universal and public creation of a work of art *outside* of class bifurcation can the artist enact complete revolution. The main difference between Marcuse’s proposition and the art crime is the singularity of aesthetic composition; Marcuse is arguing for a completely new aesthetic outside of reality whereas the art crime is not concerned with “original” aesthetics but instead the impact of aesthetics on lived reality, or an aesthetic form realigned with a liberating consciousness. Despite aesthetic contradictions, the moment of the “subversion of proper experience” is where the art crime intervenes to evoke queer possibility in the blank space of emancipation.

Utilizing Marcuse’s call for a new artwork outside of a bourgeois categorization, Tolokonnikova sidesteps what an art crime *is* and demonstrates what an art crime *does*. In “Rule No. 5: Commit an Art Crime,” Pussy Riot’s thesis statement of the art crime is broad-yet-pointed: “Is what pussy riot does art or politics? For us, it’s one and the same – art and politics are inseparable. We try to make art political and at the same time enrich politics with developments in art.”<sup>23</sup> Differing from Marcuse, art is not a formal separation from politics but

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Tolokonnikova, 77.

the art crime bares the synthesis of art and politics throughout reality – unlike art as a *representation* of reality as Marcuse argues in “The Aesthetic Dimension.” While Pussy Riot may have misread the intentions of Marcuse’s essay, Tolokonnikova utilizes the foundations of the “aesthetic dimension” to both argue for the impact of art to prove the inseparability of art and life, and the liberating possibility of the artwork itself. Defining what an art crime does, Tolokonnikova writes that “art elevates us by giving us the most valuable capital in the world: the right and the confidence to ask disturbing questions about the very core of our animal, political, social existence.”<sup>24</sup> Art crime is not an isolated form, but an integration of art and lived reality which demystifies powers of corruption and reification.

The tactics of combining art and politics through the art crime are listed in a chart within the chapter, including kiss-in, die-in, car/motorcycle caravans, repainting, replacing, shopdropping, and refusing to accept absurd orders.<sup>25</sup> Art crime is not a singular revolutionary strike; for Pussy Riot, the art crime is a series of social disruptions to poke at abuses of power – a continual unfolding of social disturbance which enacts revolutions over and over again, each time ten-fold the power of the last. The outcome of the art crime, for Tolokonnikova, is to “destroy the fourth wall” by synthesizing the audience into the artwork, the true amalgamation of art and politics. Tolokonnikova refers to her predecessors who succeed in destroying the fourth wall through their own tactics, including Guy Debord, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean-Luc Godard. Despite its name, an art crime is not a social disruption against a specific legal codification, but against abstract laws of social mystification created to suppress minoritarian subjects. By

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

demystifying abstract laws of repression, including Putin's ambiguous anti-gay laws, Pussy Riot seek to discover the natural, animalistic forms of the human being – the animalistic neutrality of individual collectivism as a species one with nature.

Ending the chapter on art crime, Tolokonnikova recalls her heroes of the art crime and her experience with them: The Yes Men. The Yes Men are an artist collective consisting of Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. Enacting public acts of disruption through media manipulation, the Yes Men have produced films including *The Yes Men* (2003), *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), and *The Yes Men are Revolting* (2014). Evoking Guy Debord's lineage of the *Détournement*, the Yes Men adopt public images to call attention to social and political issues of corruptions of power. Tolokonnikova recalls her time meeting the Yes Men at a gala in Berlin, where the artists stormed the stage, each dressed as a polar bear, to protest the melting of the ice caps.<sup>26</sup> Tolokonnikova protected the costumed bears from security guards, even gaining support from Bianca Jagger who vocalized her support during the protest. While the Yes Men were forced off-stage during the performance, Tolokonnikova commends the efforts of the Yes Men and attributes their ambitions, writing, "if there are any superstars of the place where art and politics collide with irony and subversion, then the Yes Men are those stars."

While the chapter on art crime covers a vast array of social actions and heroes, including the Yes Men, the concept poses a problem in its ambiguity of definition. Transparent in the boundaries between direct political strike, performance as spectacle, formalist composition, and theoretical statement, art crime is malleable as a tactic for multiple facets of political revolution. Art crime's ambiguities add to the political effect of confusion, an untraceable act of protest

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

which escapes the particularities of legal frameworks of Russian regulations including the 2013 anti-gay amendment “On the Protection of Children from Information Hurtful to their Health and Development.”<sup>27</sup> Ambiguity leads to annihilation, and annihilation leads to reformation. Pussy Riot’s tactic of confusion and ambiguity clearly reflects Tolokonnikova’s interest in Hugo Ball’s Dada Manifesto – a manifesto boldly claiming that “Dada means nothing.”<sup>28</sup> Using the same “nothingness” to blur the boundaries between art and crime, the tactic of ambiguity allows the art crime to supersede the “illegal” to enact processes of change without the silencing of political bodies, whether in Russia or Canada.

Pussy Riot and Pavlensky perform their art crimes across the world and some locations are highlighted throughout the thesis: Canada, Russia, and France. While Pussy Riot and Pavlensky are both from Russia, their performances highlight the sinister inequalities from social and legal forces perpetrated against LGBT+ people as a global problem. I argue that a queer revolution has no borders, that the art crime directly attacks global systems of oppression upheld by both neoliberal capitalism and fascism governments, oppressing queer people through various modes of operation but with the same violent outcomes. Canada’s history of queer oppression is glaring, most prominently with the “Fruit Machine” of the 1950s, a test which targeted gay men in the government in which the victim was subjected to biological exploitation through a test which would play gay porn and detect arousal from the participant.<sup>29</sup> If found guilty, the

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<sup>27</sup> Article 19, “Russia: Federal Laws introducing ban of propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships,” *Article 19*, web, June 2013. <https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/37129/13-06-27-russia-LA.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Hugo Ball, “Hugo Balls Dada Manifesto, July 1916,” *Wired*, Conde Nast, July 11, 2016. <https://www.wired.com/beyond-the-beyond/2016/07/hugo-balls-dada-manifesto-july-2016/>.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Knegt, “The Fruit Machine: Why every Canadian should learn about this country’s “Gay Purge,” *CBC News/Radio*, May 30, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/the-fruit-machine-why-every-canadian-should-learn-about-this-country-s-gay-purge-1.4678718>

individual would be outed and fired from their job for fear of Russian spying, part of a larger decade long sweep of queer people in the government workplace since queerness was seen as a threat to national intelligence secrets. Until 1969, homosexuality was outlawed in Canada. Men found guilty of homosexuality in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century faced the death penalty, while men and women found guilty in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century faced fines, jail time, and the label of a “dangerous offender.” France’s treatment of queer people was more complicated; while homosexuality was not outright illegal in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, William A. Peniston argued that sexual relations between young men were seen to be devious and were often used to justify an accused individual of a crime.<sup>30</sup> Here, the ramifications of “revolution” or the “art crime” are more than ideological concepts but interventions into direct lived realities of bodies which experience violent suppression on a daily basis across the world. The goal of this thesis is not to provide a framework of universal revolution, but rather an exploration of continuous tactics for social instability leading to the freedoms of minoritarian subjects through the artwork itself. However, it must be noted: the art crime has more at stake than Marcuse’s promises of aesthetic formality.

I will argue the socio-political impacts of the art crime throughout three chapters. Chapter One of the thesis will investigate Pussy Riot’s 2015 performance at Toronto Pride, a performance which I witnessed in person, situated within the larger history of Russian activist art as well as to offer an analysis of the power of performance within the art crime. I compare Pussy Riot’s art crime to José Esteban Muñoz’s disidentificatory tactics which queer POC embody as a survival tactic against racism and homophobia, as well as the performative function of Bertolt

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<sup>30</sup> William A. Peniston, “Love and Gay Death in Paris: Homosexuality and Criminality in the 1870s,” in Jeffrey Merrick, eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France*. London: Oxford University Press, 1996, 130.



Brecht's alienation effect to analyze the impact of the performance beyond the stage. The second chapter will shift towards the art of Pussy Riot's predecessor Petr Pavlensky and the importance of the body within the Marxist concept of reification. Throughout the chapter, I turn towards the potential power of queer artistic liberation rooted in the writings of the Frankfurt School and argue how successful (and unsuccessful) the reliance on objectification can be for minoritarian subjects as a mode of liberation. The final section, Chapter three, will fill the gaps of feminist activism left out by Pavlensky's work through Pussy Riot's wicca practices, specifically the performance group's New Year's Eve performance *The Witches of Pussy Riot Clean Manezhka* from 2014. Through analyzing the figure of the witch in the writings of Sylvia Federici, modern Russian policy, and institutional critique, I argue that by reworking queer femme artistic labour, a revolution occurs through the practice of queer life itself.

## Chapter One: Strikes to the System: Pussy Riot's Art Crimes in Toronto

“The magic of art is that it elevates your voice and amplifies it. Sometimes it happens literally, with a microphone and speakers. Art is a miracle-making machine. Art opens up alternative realities, and that’s extremely helpful when we have a crisis and multiple failures of the political imagination.”

- Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot's Guide to Activism*<sup>31</sup>

### *The March*

A queer breath reverberates through the streets of Toronto, the exhalation of a false liberation masked as a new life. Queer couples embrace in public, celebrating the long-awaited Supreme Court decision for the legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the United States. On June 28, 2015, two days after the United States legalized same-sex marriage across the country, the city of Toronto, in neighboring Canada, hosted its annual Pride Parade on Church Street. A renewed energy of hope, Pride Toronto displayed a concoction of rainbow floats, musclemen in tight swim shorts, drag performances, and adrenaline-spiking drugs. Traditionally a movement against the conservatism of 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism and forced heterosexual conversion, the parade ironically transformed into an antithesis of its origins – a multiplicity of political parties marching in tandem with Vogue beats co-opted from the queer, and largely POC, underground night clubs of New York City, parade floats sponsored by large banks, and the spectacle of celebratory sexuality to signify the safety of white cisgendered gays in the kingdom

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<sup>31</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, 75.

of neoliberalism. The spaces at Pride act as both safety nets and monetary extraction of its participants, collapsing the fantasy of queer cruising into the reality of capitalist exploitation. The specter of same-sex marriage also provided hope for Pride participants, aiming to find an alternative path through the dichotomy of gay death and heterosexual love. Toronto Pride came to embody the enemy of its activism, subsuming assemblage life into the margins of the month-long celebration for the homonationalist.

Despite the widespread commercialization of Pride celebrating the legalization of same-sex marriage, the 2015 parade inadvertently marked a stark shift in the consciousness of both audience and sponsor. The Pride committee invited Pussy Riot to be the Grand Marshals of the 2015 parade, granting the group full access to the front of the parade and special performance spaces throughout Toronto during Pride month. At the time of their Marshal status, Pussy Riot signaled to their elusive protests under Putin's regime, including the controversial *Punk Prayer* (2013) which landed the group a sentence of two years in prison for challenging Putin's governmental authority on the stage of the Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow.<sup>32</sup> Pussy Riot had also garnered international attention after releasing a video entitled "Putin will teach you how to love," documenting the public protest and arrest of the group in Sochi during the 2014 winter Olympics.<sup>33</sup> Opposing the traditional model of the "gay icon" as the Grand Marshall position, Pussy Riot were able to interject a renewed sentiment into the meaning of Pride that year – a flight towards a feminist intervention into the homocapitalist spectacle of masculinity at

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<sup>32</sup> Tolokonnikova, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Pussy Riot. "Putin will teach you how to love / Путин научит тебя любить Родину." *YouTube*, 19 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjI0KY19gWs>

Pride, a co-option of the crimes of the industrial military complex, and a sphere to reclaim Pride's original name in praxis, *(P)ersonal (R)ights (I)n (D)efense (E)ducation*.

Pussy Riot stormed the streets of Toronto with tectonic force, striking the foundations of queer embodiment from the talons of biopolitical accumulation. Despite the heavy rain, the parade started on time. Utilizing the opportunity for critical mass, Pussy Riot opened the parade by entering the event on a Russian military tank adorned with a large red missile in the shape of a dildo (fig. 2.1). The tank mimicked those in Putin's military force, adopting readymade vehicles of destruction for public queering. The red-hot dildo missile not only provided a humour to the phallic desires of gay pride, or as Tolokonnikova proudly wrote that "all women have cocks," but also queered the phallic supremacy of the industrial military order.<sup>34</sup> Queer militarization is also rooted in the underground subculture of "terrorist drag," a term analyzed by José Esteban Muñoz in his reading of the work of Vaginal Davis in his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*.<sup>35</sup> In a late-night performance within a queercore Manhattan Bar, queer performance artist and drag persona Vaginal Davis dressed as a militarized masculine character named Clarence. Davis has commented that Clarence represented the homoerotic desires within militarism, from the masculine ideal of the foot soldier to the phallic imagery of guns.<sup>36</sup> Guns, for both Pussy Riot and Vaginal Davis, symbolize a dichotomy of the phallic desires of masculine power

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<sup>34</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, "The Pussy Riot Column: It's Up to You to Make Politics Fun Again," *Vice*, July 7, 2015. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/article/4wbwjm/its-up-to-you-to-make-politics-fun-again-345](https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/4wbwjm/its-up-to-you-to-make-politics-fun-again-345).

<sup>35</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 103.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

unattainable through patriarchal identificatory categories of white male supremacy, but also continual threats to queer life at the hands of militarized white supremacists and their weapons.

Riding in on a dildo-laden military tank, members of Pussy Riot spoke through a large megaphone. Nadya Tolokonnikova addressed the audience as the tank drove through the parade, calling for the attendees to mobilize and aid in removing Putin's homophobic legal frameworks from the Russian judicial code. The members of Pussy Riot also wore rainbow balaclavas as part of their costumes, adding to the military aesthetic of the performance. With the adoring crowds cheering the group on, the tank moved through the parade circuit as the opening float – a stark transition between the rest of the parade consisting of the commercial banks, dancers, and advertisements on large trucks. The group “Pride Ukraine” followed closely behind Pussy Riot's tank, bathed in the shadow of the mammoth vehicle paving its way through the streets. The inclusion of Pride Ukraine in Pussy Riot's performance was no coincidence. In 2014, Ukraine was the target of Russian violence and encroachment through Putin's regime which continues to enact terror attacks against the country.<sup>37</sup> Pussy Riot's tank held symbiotic solidarity with queers on a global scale: a protection of Ukrainian LGBT+ people through the militarization of the activist groups, as well as the defuncting of Russian power through the co-option of their occupational weapons of war.

The Pride performance also transferred from the physical into the virtual. The audience recorded the tank through handheld cellphones, posting the performance across social media platforms. The performance simultaneously became an image, refracting the queered military

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<sup>37</sup> Max Fisher, “Everything You Need to Know about the Ukraine Crisis,” *Vox*, September 3, 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/3/18088560/ukraine-everything-you-need-to-know>.

intervention across the Instagram/Twitter/Facebook newsfeed of anyone tracking the hashtags of “Pussy Riot,” “LGBT,” or “Toronto Pride.” After opening the parade on a moving tank, Pussy Riot took to the mainstage to continue the momentum of the Pride performance. Tolokonnikova continued her speech on the stage, stating that it is time to hijack the military machines of war for queer radical protest – a reference to their usage of tanks in recent performances.<sup>38</sup> Further, Tolokonnikova urged the group to “take to the streets” to “fuck Putin.”<sup>39</sup> While Tolokonnikova only spoke to the audience about abuses of power in Russia, Pussy Riot views the public sphere as a medium for political mobilization, a mobilization, which, a year later, was reflected in the Black Lives Matter protest at Toronto Pride in 2016. Tolokonnikova states in “Rule No. 6: Spot an Abuse of Power,” the medium of the streets is essential in revolution. For Pussy Riot, “the streets are our veins. Walls – skin. Roofs, Windows – eyes. Trees are lungs. Benches are butts. Traffic is a burp. We’re becoming the town we’re living in.”<sup>40</sup> Activism in the street is the true medium of the performance, transcending language and geography to seep into the bodies of the audience – Nadya’s voice the paint, the street the canvas.

The speech continued to elaborate on gay rights in Russia, the surveillance of the police state, and a statement against the false fears of queer propaganda.<sup>41</sup> The crowd cheered throughout the passionate speech, sparking isomorphic solidarity between audience and spectator, Russian and Canadian. A week prior to Pussy Riot’s performances at Toronto Pride, the group crashed the main stage at Glastonbury Festival in England. Utilizing a smaller military truck, Nadya Tolokonnikova and fellow Pussy Riot member Masha Alyokhina stood on the roof

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<sup>38</sup> DeathKult999, “Pussy Riot Toronto Pride 2015.” *YouTube* video, June 29, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Tolokonnikova, 114.

<sup>41</sup> DeathKult999.

of the truck to confront a male member of Pussy Riot dressed in military gear.<sup>42</sup> Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina started to attack the character of the soldier while placing a rainbow balaclava over his head, once more queering the military aesthetic and defuncting its hegemonic control over minoritarian bodies.

While Pussy Riot's renegade performances garnered acclaim from audiences in Toronto and Glastonbury, the evocative imagery is a grim reminder of the intervention of militarized forces into queer spaces. From the onset of the mobilization of queer activism, police and state governments have effaced the voices of queer people with arrest, violence, and death. Reflecting on the origins of Pride during the police raids at the Stonewall Riots of '68, Marsha P. Johnson's brick also held with it the lives of the countless trans women who have been murdered and erased from institutional and legal histories. Johnson, alongside fellow activist Sylvia Rivera and Stormé DeLarverie, were pioneers of the gay and transgender rights movement but subsequently became silenced by the rise in homonationalist visibilities and deep-seated transphobia in the queer community during the 1980s.<sup>43</sup> Their histories, until recently with the release of the documentary *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), had been systematically erased from the canon of gay rights through the blatantly clear transphobia and racism within the gay community.<sup>44</sup> Ontario's history of queer oppression was not unchallenged either, including the

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<sup>42</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, "The Pussy Riot Column: It's Up to You to Make Politics Fun Again." *Vice*, July 7, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Gillian Brockell, "The Transgender Women at Stonewall Were Pushed out of the Gay Rights Movement. Now They Are Getting a Statue in New York.," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/06/12/transgender-women-heart-stonewall-riots-are-getting-statue-new-york/>.

<sup>44</sup> While the film *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* received critical acclaim, controversy stirred when transgender filmmaker Reina Gossett accused director David France of stealing her idea, a film titled "Happy Birthday, Marsha" in which Gossett was actively seeking funding. See: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-marsha-p-johnson-doc-reina-gossett-david-france-20171009-htmistory.html>

August 28, 1971 “We Demand” rally on the steps of Parliament Hill in Ottawa, in which protestors occupied the public space with signs advocating for the rights of LGBT+ peoples – the first major public display of gay rights activism as a collective group in Canada.<sup>45</sup> Despite the public activism against homophobic regulations, Ontario police continued to raid queer spaces, specifically the Toronto bathhouse raids under the name “Operation Soap” in 1981. Similar silencing tactics occurred in Chechnya, where gay men are arrested and placed in concentration camps, subject to conversion therapy, torture, and in some cases, death.<sup>46</sup> The monumentality of Pussy Riot’s references throughout Toronto Pride and Glastonbury heighten the experiences of women, queers, and people of colour across the globe – individuals whose bodies are valorized for reproductive control and affective accumulation in exchange for complete world domination by the global solidarity of the neoliberal bourgeoisie.

Locating the significance of the performance in Russia, Pussy Riot joins a global network of queer affectivity – a group which can strike the base of capitalist and social exploitation despite geographical borders. The basis of Pussy Riot’s intervention at Toronto Pride was to advocate against Russia’s 2012 amendment “On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development.” Russia’s 2012 anti-gay propaganda Law was passed by the state Duma on June 26<sup>th</sup>, strategically suppressing queer visibility in public, whether it be holding hands, kissing, or displaying queer signifiers. The legislation, signed by Vladimir Putin, stated that the bill ended the distribution of "propaganda" of "non-traditional sexual relations" to

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<sup>45</sup> “August 28, 1971 – We Demand.” On the Bookshelves. Web. 2011. <http://onthebookshelves.com/wedemand.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Rachael Revesz, “Chechen Authorities 'Round up' More than 100 Gay Men,” *The Independent Digital News and Media*, April 3, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/chechnya-gay-men-detain-arrest-round-up-chechen-human-rights-watch-ramzan-kadyrov-a7664486.html>.



minors.”<sup>47</sup> Guised under the protection of children from “homosexual propaganda,” the law was a limitation on free speech and the public visualization of queer people across the country. The law also mediated interactions between user and interface, where followers of Putin would create fake dating profiles to lure gay lovers and kidnap them for humiliation and torture during forced conversion “classes,” made public through the circulation of the recorded attacks on the internet.<sup>48</sup> Following the legalization of the propaganda law, queer protestors in Russia took to the street to vocalize the anger towards legal discriminations. Mass arrests have occurred throughout the following decade with imprisonment of protest groups and Russian artists performing in solidarity, including Pussy Riot and Petr Pavlensky. Putin’s law made queer individuals a target on both private and public wavelengths, controlling the self-discipline of Russian citizens in public space as well as a deeper, private self-censorship within the unconscious of the individual. Trauma and fear are reified into legal frameworks, dictating the livelihoods of LGBT+ peoples throughout Russia and the Caucasus.

While oppressive laws and social codes forcibly create an invisibility over minoritarian peoples, Muñoz argues that minoritarian identities can utilize their categorizations for queer public intervention, the same tactic that Pussy Riot utilized in their art crime. In his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz describes the power of public intervention through the story of Pedro Zamora. Zamora was a cast member on the reality television show “The Real World” and the first openly HIV+ actor on television to

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<sup>47</sup> Stephan Polsdofer, “Pride and prejudiced: Russia’s anti-gay propaganda law violates the European convention on human rights,” *American University International Law Review* 29, (5), (2014), 1070.

<sup>48</sup> Oliver Carroll, “In Moscow, Gangs Are Setting up Dates with Gay Men to Attack Them and Steal Their Money,” *The Independent Digital News and Media*, April 16, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/gay-hunters-russia-moscow-apps-gangs-homophobia-a8865376.html>.

visualize his struggles associated with the disease. At the time of Zamora's public statement about his HIV status, AIDS had been systemically repressed in the United States under the leadership of Ronald Reagan. Until 1985, already four years into the health crisis and with thousands of deaths recorded, Reagan had never even said the word "AIDS" in public<sup>49</sup> Zamora's public coming-out was as much a personal liberation as it was political. In his introduction to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz suggests that "*disidentification* is meant to be the descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides and punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normal citizenship."<sup>50</sup> Muñoz mobilizes Michel Foucault's discussion of ethics to disidentify Zamora from the homophobia around him. Muñoz argues that "works on the ethics of self ultimately allows us a new vantage point to consider larger games of truth that organize the social [sphere]," allowing one to envision a possibility of belonging outside of the chains of homophobia."<sup>51</sup>

While disidentification is a process that Muñoz relates to the body, Pussy Riot mobilize disidentification towards the social impact of a work of art. The adoption of the readymade in Pussy Riot's performance is disidentification made manifest, a reflexive inversion to restructure positions of power by replacing the base of the homophobic majoritarian sphere with minoritarian queer liberation. Pussy Riot removed the weapons of war from the act of repressive violence and turned the weapons against their original holders, arming queer activists with the tools of their own oppression. By disidentifying the weapons from their political context, Pussy

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<sup>49</sup> Talhia Burki, "AIDS—from Anger to Hope," *Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 15, no. 1 (2015): 26-28.

<sup>50</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

Riot evokes Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect by blurring performance and reality.

Tolokonnikova references Brecht as the inspiration for "breaking the fourth wall" in the art crime, citing Brecht's quote: "Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it."<sup>52</sup> Brecht's theory of alienation, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, is the mode of separation used in theatre to distinguish the audience from the performance – a separation which allows for a critical insight into realms of aesthetic and political analysis in the space between vision and stage.<sup>53</sup> Differing from Marx's concept of alienation, the alienation of the audience from the performance allows the spectator to clearly see the events onstage not as a narrative lineage but as a succession of events for which the audience can criticize meaning or construct an art "more real than reality itself" as Marcuse argued in "The Aesthetic Dimension."<sup>54</sup>

On a surface level reading of Brecht and the art crime, the ironies are clear: while Brecht argued for the separation between audience and performance to evoke a third space for critical analysis, Pussy Riot wants to break the fourth wall by conjoining the audience into the performance. Pussy Riot and Brecht, while both aiming for political critique, approach the processes from completely opposite spectrums. Tolokonnikova evokes Brecht's method of performance in her writings on the impact of art, transforming the audience from a passive spectator to an active critic. Tolokonnikova writes: "We feel disconnected from reality. How can my little action possibly make any difference? If I could unite five or ten people through art, if I could make them believe in their power, that's my prize and that's my victory."<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> Tolokonnikova, 82.

<sup>53</sup> Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, "General Introduction" in Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn, eds., *Brecht on Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Marcuse, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Tolokonnikova, 82.

amalgamation of spectator with performance bridges the gap between criticism and lived experience from the outside-in, whereas Brecht's alienation effect reflects criticality through the play from the inside-out. By breaking the fourth wall through bodily interaction, however, Tolokonnikova enacts criticality through a uniquely queer process – a synthesis of Brecht's dramatic performance and queer life.

The trajectory of Pride as a social disruption has always had tangible striations through the queer body, evoking the canonical North American second wave feminist phrase “the personal is the political.” Brecht was not talking about activism but about an art which can reflect on social disruptions at a distance. Pussy Riot, however, fills such distance through their performance. *Verfremdungseffekt* is first identifiable in the readymade, utilizing signifiers of political oppression well-known to the audience for queering. The appropriation of the tank creates a distance between the tank signifying Putin's regime and Pride, allowing for the audience to reflect on the still-present dangers of being queer in Russia and the violent consequence associated with the 2012 bill. Through militarizing Pride with the tank, Pussy Riot also evoked the trajectory of the militarized body in past Prides across the world, from Marsha P. Johnson's stone-throwing at Stonewall in 1969 to retaliation directed at armed police at Prides across the European Union.<sup>56</sup> By integrating lived experience and the signifier of political repression back into social space, Pussy Riot evoked affective embodiment into the performance – an affective embodiment reified from the late-capitalist Pride parades of sterilized floats and liberal political propaganda. Pussy Riot remodels Brecht's process for a queer audience,

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<sup>56</sup> Janice M. Irvine and Jill A. Irvine, “The Queer Work of Militarized Prides,” *Contexts* 16, no. 4 (November 2017): 32–37. doi:10.1177/1536504217742389.

tethering the distance between audience and art separated through relationality as anchored by the readymade. The appropriation of existing signifiers of Russian society breaks the fourth wall, consciously reversing the public idea of visibility with the “invisibility” of disruptive queer activism.

### *The Impact*

Pussy Riot’s public display of activism lays bare the mystification of abstract laws of self-censorship, visualizing the art crime in an act of performance. The 2015 performance was not a singular outlier in the trajectory of Russian and European art, but an extension of the radical reworking of both Suprematism and post-Soviet performance. In the chapter on art crime, Tolokonnikova cites two inspirations for Pussy Riot’s performances: Oleg Kulik’s *Mad Dog* performances (1994) and Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915).<sup>57</sup> Kulik’s performances, first performed in Russia and re-enacted in the United States, otherwise entitled *I bite America and America Bites Me* (1997), symbolized a public act of defiance (fig. 2.2). In Kulik’s performance, the artist stripped naked and acted as if he was a wild dog by urinating on trees, jumping on cars, and even biting one participant who came too close to the performer.<sup>58</sup> The goal of Kulik’s animalistic transformation was two-fold: a return to the most bare form of life – the animal – as theorized by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*; and a political commentary on the wild disorganization of political uniformity in post-1989 Russia.<sup>59</sup> Kulik’s self-transformation to the dog was part of the larger movement of “Moscow Actionism”

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<sup>57</sup> Tolokonnikova, 76-78.

<sup>58</sup> Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Routledge, 2015, 28.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout the 1990s, an inspiration for Tolokonnikova in the art crime.<sup>60</sup> Kulik's aim to synthesize the human back into the animal was deemed "inspirational" by Tolokonnikova in the book.<sup>61</sup> Kulik was also a major supporter of Pussy Riot during their arrest, calling for the Russian Government to free the artists since Kulik was also the victim of political censorship through his performances as the wild dog.<sup>62</sup>

Situating Pussy Riot into the larger trajectory of Russia's aim for aesthetic transformation, Tolokonnikova boldly states that the symbol of Russia is not Putin, but rather Malevich's *Black Square* (fig. 2.3). The author writes, "If Russia is to collude with the world, it should be done by means of art, not with nuclear power, tanks, or financing Trump and Le Pen. And I believe that Kazimir Malevich's Black Square, not Putin, should be the symbol of Russia."<sup>63</sup> The nuance between revolution and aesthetics, or the visualization of revolution as a spectacular event rather than a structural process, is a slippery distinction. While "revolution" and "aesthetics" are not binary concepts, aesthetics often takes center stage as the vessel for revolution in the art world, the same reification of aesthetic subjectivity Theodor Adorno argues against in *Aesthetics 1958/1959*.<sup>64</sup> From a trajectory of aesthetics, the quote is immediately confusing since, as Boris Groys argues, the *Black Square* is counter-revolutionary in its reflection not of a disruptive society but of a stable one, that being the post-Lenin revolution.<sup>65</sup> Groys writes of the ironies of Malevich's *Black Square* as a symbol of revolution, instead

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<sup>60</sup>Tolokonnikova, 76.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. Note: in the original text, Tolokonnikova wrote her sentence "And I believe... symbol of Russia" in bold, black font.

<sup>64</sup> Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetics 1958/1959*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Boris Groys, "Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich," *E-Flux* 47 (2013), accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>

arguing that Russian Suprematism is the antithesis of a new order and instead sets the framework for communism in Soviet Russia – the base for social life after 1917. In an article published by *e-flux* called “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich,” Groys argues that “Suprematism operated in favour of the post-Soviet state. Thus, one cannot speak of the Avant Garde of the Soviet period as being revolutionary since the Russian Avant-garde art was not directed against the status quo.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, while Malevich wanted his *Black Square* to symbolize a constant deconstruction of an “end-goal,” whether it be the manifestation of a society or a stable aesthetic, Groys argues that Suprematist sentiments of reformation seeped into the Stalinist project of the destruction of human life.<sup>67</sup> Malevich’s *Black Square* represented a shift in formal composition, always enacting destruction as a contingent force on the horizon of politics, in favour of the communist groundwork of fascism which soon would constitute the Russian social formation post-1917. Malevich’s intentions failed, collapsing into social stabilization rather than into reformation. If Malevich’s *Black Square* symbolized a destruction of form and politics but, as Groys argues, Malevich turned the base of communism into fascism, why would Tolokonnikova suggest the *Black Square* to be the new symbol of Russia if, indeed, Pussy Riot is arguing *against* the continual ruin of human life and a stability of Russian politics?

Turning towards destruction as the Suprematist goal, or, as Groys argues, that Suprematism leaves behind the “image of destruction,” the complete annihilation of form stemming from Malevich pre-1917 evokes Pussy Riot’s interest in Kulik’s performances which eradicate all social signifiers of the tame to return to a natural state of the animal.<sup>68</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

meaning of Pussy Riot's art crime here shifts drastically; instead of an initiation of a communist society with Malevich's movement into the post-Lenin revolution, the art crime has two avenues: first, leaning towards Groys's statement that "Revolution is the radical destruction of the existing society," and going *beyond* social formation and into an end goal of the body's animal existence as a natural being.<sup>69</sup> Pussy Riot ask for a return back to natural life itself, an element reflected in Tolokonnikova's active practice as a Wiccan and in her fascination with Oleg Kulik's *Mad Dog*. Shifting the art crime into a call for reformation to the natural, Pussy Riot's immediate targets are repressive regimes that destroy the "human" in the subject, bare life in peak form. The human as representative of life itself destabilizes regimes that create a dichotomy between the human and non-human, particularly through homophobic policies or occupation of territory through violent colonization. Malevich's enthusiasm for leaving behind the "image of destruction" is clear in Pussy Riot's performances in which the readymade destroys all meaning of Putin's power as Russian president and instead provides power to queer people in Russia. Returning to Tolokonnikova's wish for the *Black Square* to be the symbol of Russia, the Russia of Pussy Riot is a Russia of continual political destruction, allowing for the return to nature to supersede the post-1989 political repression of United Russia. Pussy Riot reterritorializes the readymade into political action, the *Black Square* piercing the ground with lived experience.

Revolution in Groys's analysis is from a historical outlook, a view to the past events and the lineage of political manifestation. However, Pussy Riot's revolution is a process – a series of tactics aiming for a liberation to-come. Revolution, then, might be conceived as a realization of a horizon line. Joshua Clover observes in his introduction to *Riot. Strike. Riot.* that "Riots are

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*



coming, they are already here, more are on the way, no one doubts it.”<sup>70</sup> Malevich’s work then is a *Black Square* in-formation and Suprematism as a way of imagining a horizon for the Russian avant-garde as a process rather than a concrete aesthetic. Situating Malevich within the broader historical Avant Garde pre-1917, Nina Gurianova notes in her book *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Avant-Garde* that “the beginning of the Russian Avant Garde movement was determined by and coincided with an arousal of historical consciousness and an awareness of historical transitions beyond nationality.”<sup>71</sup> Pussy Riot can be seen as an interlocutor between the same historical consciousness and “awareness beyond nationality” arising from the pre-revolution avant-garde through their global performances and advocacy against the police state outside of Russia. Pussy Riot, as read through Malevich’s Suprematism, are artists who not only create works which speak to the present but also create clear paths for events-to-come. Despite Pussy Riot advocating for revolution in Russia, queer liberation does not stop at a nation’s constructed borders.

Pussy Riot’s emphasis on events-to-come, mobilized from Malevich’s *Black Square*, emerged at the following year’s Toronto Pride Parade. In 2016, Black Lives Matter (BLM) delayed the Toronto Pride parade by 30 minutes, demanding for the removal of uniformed police from marching in the parade.<sup>72</sup> The group’s Toronto chapter, cofounded by Alexandra Williams, sat in front of the parade minutes before it started, calling for Toronto Pride’s president Mathieu

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<sup>70</sup> Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*. New York: Verso, 2016, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Avant-Garde*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 25.

<sup>72</sup> “Toronto Pride Agrees to List of Demands after Black Lives Matter Toronto Halts Parade for 30 Minutes | CBC News,” *CBC/Radio Canada*, July 4, 2016. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/pride-parade-toronto-1.3662823>.

Chantelois to sign the group's list of demands for the following year's parade.<sup>73</sup> The demands included the removal of uniformed police from marching in the parade, as well as other initiatives around Black leadership and representation within the organization. In an interview with the CBC, Williams exclaimed that "Pride Toronto has shown little honour to Black queer/trans communities, and other marginalized communities. Over the years, Pride has threatened the existence of Black spaces at Pride that have existed for years."<sup>74</sup> The stage-in highlighted the rumours of a "gay serial killer" in the village, sparked by several disappearances of gay men whose cases were neglected by Toronto police despite public outcry. The Black Lives Matter protest also symbolized transcendental possibility, mimicking the public outcry by queer activists in Russia against Chechnya's gay concentration camps and the uninvestigated disappearance of queer people across the country. The recirculation of Suprematist ideals as a conscious awakening in both Pussy Riot's performance and the Black Lives Matter sit-in reterritorializes the abstract liminal form into direct social action, militarizing the human as a continual challenge to political repression. Evoking the formal tactics of destruction from Malevich's *Black Square* and seeing the project through lived reality in Kulik's *Mad Dog* performances, Pussy Riot's Pride intervention displays the tactics for the human to regain its status as a free, liberated being through process rather than through a definitive end. A common thread emerges throughout the art crime, where the vessel of the body in liminal space – and not the performance as historical fact – is the medium through which the art crime penetrates the system. Where Pussy Riot's performance ends, the crimes of Petr Pavlensky begin.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*

## Chapter Two: Fires of Tyrannical Value, Bodies of Dereification: The Crimes of Petr Pavlensky

“What I’m doing is turning the tables,  
drawing the government into the process of making art.  
The power relations shift, the state enters into a work of art,  
And becomes an object, an actor.”  
- Petr Pavlensky<sup>75</sup>

### *The Crime*

With the flick of a match, Petr Pavlensky set fire to the Bank of France in Paris, scorching the façade of the Haussmann exterior while French police tackled the artist to the ground. The performance was more than merely an action of spectacularized attention, but a call-to-arms for the mass mobilization of the proletariat for global revolution. Pavlensky’s performance was not a singular event, the artist having previously performed the bank burning entitled *Lighting* one-year prior in Moscow (2015) which culminated in his arrest by Russian police and exile to France (fig. 3.1). From nailing his testicles to a public square in opposition to police oppression to slicing his ear off to protest Russia’s harmful policies around psychiatry, Pavlensky is no stranger to public crime.<sup>76</sup> The artist also garnered international criticism for his 2013 performance *Tusha*, where he lay naked, wrapped in barbed wire in a St. Petersburg public square, protesting the silencing of queer people through Vladimir Putin’s 2012 anti-propaganda

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<sup>75</sup> Fernanda Eberstadt, “The Dangerous Art of Pyotr Pavlensky,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/magazine/pyotr-pavlensky-art.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Ingrid Nelson, “Artist for a New Age: Dissident Russian Performance Art and the Work of Petr Pavlenskii,” *Russian Literature* 96-98 (2018), 286.

law (fig. 3.2). The performance revealed the ironic disorganization of policing bodies, with Pavlensky's wife filming police officers standing around his body asking questions including "what do we do with him?" and "Is this illegal?"<sup>77</sup> *Tusha* was also an extension of the abject body intersecting with lived experience, a striation through violence against queer people with the invisibility of Putin's seemingly abstract laws looming over the public unconscious. By manifesting bare life in visual form, Pavlensky's work blurs the boundaries between performance and crime, a dichotomous entry point into the possibility of queer liberation through strikes to political regimes.

Pavlensky rose to art world fame in 2012 for his performance *Shov*, where the artist sewed his mouth closed in a public square – a clear reference to the queer silence of David Wojnarowicz's *Silence = Death* (1989) – holding a sign stating "Pussy Riot's performance replays an action by Jesus Christ (Matthew, 21:12-13)" (fig. 3.3). The sign referenced Pussy Riot's attempt at revealing the corruption in Russian Catholicism in their infamous performance *Punk Prayer* at Christ the Savior Church in Moscow. After the performance, Pavlensky garnered an endorsement from Pussy Riot, with Tolokonnikova exclaiming that "what I hate in [my own art] looks magical, integral, and organic when it is done by Pavlensky."<sup>78</sup> Tolokonnikova has gone so far as to state that Pavlensky has "the brains, the conscience and the balls of our era."<sup>79</sup> Since conception, Pavlensky's performances are exemplary mobilizations of Pussy Riot's Manifesto on art crime, a main component of the performative acts by the queer feminist art

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<sup>77</sup> Petr Pavlensky, *Pavlensky – Man and Might*, film, dir. Irene Langemann, Germany: Lichtfilm in co-production with SWR/ARTE, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Fernanda Eberstadt.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

collective. However, differing from Pussy Riot's own performances of the art crime, Pavlensky enacts violence against both his own body and the body of the state – real-world explorations of the manifesto. A palpable example of the literal attacks against the framework of legal property, particularly in *Lighting*, Pavlensky makes tangible a manifestation of revolutionary ideology through anarchy – the burning of money, the burning of class itself. In this section, I will analyze Pavlensky's two core performances, *Lighting* and *Tusha*, and navigate how Pavlensky both enacts and limits attempts at queer liberation.

### *The Performance*

On the night of October 16, 2017, Pavlensky lit the match. His partner and the mother of his two children, Oskana Shalygina, stood by his side, documenting the performance in order to disseminate the spectacular event across the global network mobilized by the internet. The inspiration for Pavlensky's burning, which shattered the storefront windows of the bottom floor of the bank, directly intersects with the lineage of political uprisings throughout European history. The bank Pavlensky targets in his performance is the Bank of France at the Place de la Bastille – the same location of the Bastille Prison destroyed in the French Revolution. Accompanying the performance was a text written by Pavlensky which stated that the figure of the bank is the symbol of “modern-day tyranny and central bankers the new despots.”<sup>80</sup> Following the performance, Pavlensky was arrested by French authorities and placed in prison for four months while awaiting trial.<sup>81</sup> Pavlensky was accused of “property danger involving risk

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

to others” but charges were never laid, and the artist was freed.<sup>82</sup> While *Lighting* seems to evoke a spectacularized aesthetic of uprising, the performance is part of a longer history of Actionism, particularly Moscow and Vienna Actionism, one of many ideological frameworks which the art crime encourages throughout the processes of revolution. The primary elements of Actionism, a movement of performance art emerging from Vienna in the 1960s which focused on the body as a vessel to transcend the human to the non-human, foregrounds Pavlensky’s performances of the natural body.

The usage of fire as the medium of annihilation situated Pavlensky within the realm of the natural, a hope for the art crime reflected in Tolokonnikova’s interest in Actionism and Suprematism through Oleg Kulik’s *Mad Dog* and Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*. The meaning of fire as a mode of destruction is two-fold: the chemical composition of fire – the mixing of gas and oxygen particles – needs a combustion point to fuel the destructive element, in Pavlensky’s case, the match – human artistic labour. Second, Heraclitus described fire as being the primary element in which the world is made, both a force for creation of life and the destruction of life. Fire is also a signifier in contemporary art as a tool for political strikes, from Claire Fontaine’s *America Burnt/Unburnt* (2014) to Douglas Gordon’s *Self-Portrait of You + Me* series (2007-2011). The significance of Pavlensky’s arson of the bank is clear: by setting fire to the symbol of class struggle and “modern-day tyranny,” fire makes visible the objectification of life once in the abstract– the bank made visible as the symbol of greed and political corruption. Pavlensky also backs up the claim of his use of destruction as a force of performance, stating, “if there was a scale of expression, with opera at one end and terrorism at the other, political art is

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

closer on the scale to terrorism than opera.”<sup>83</sup> Pavlensky’s *Lighting* illuminates invisible structures in the midnight of exploitation: *reification*. By using fire as the vehicle for social terrorism, reification – a process which continually invalidates queer labour through the silencing of LGBT+ art and activism – is undone through the usage of queer artistic labour reinstated with its use-value.

Before Georg Lukacs formulated a streamlined theory of reification in *The History of Class Consciousness*, Karl Marx loosely defined the term as “the social character of men’s labour [that] appears to them as... a relation between the products of their labour.”<sup>84</sup> Expanding on Marx’s diagnoses of capital relations, Lukacs states that reification:

...requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange, the separation of the producer from his means of production, and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism that tend to replace “natural” relations more plainly by rationally reified relations<sup>85</sup>

The traditional model of reification demands a separation of the worker from their product, immediate in the fascist dehumanization of Stalin’s Soviet project. However, Lukacs’ definition of reification becomes flaccid when imagining a possibility for dereification, or reification as a liberatory model. In Kevin Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*, Floyd’s analysis of reification provokes a framework for queer liberation through tactics of physical disruption rather than the abstract theoretical concepts which queer theory has often failed to manifest in tangible form. Although the arguments throughout *The Reification of Desire* seems to be an overinterpretation of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, Floyd continues the flight

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The History of Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968, 86.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

of homosexual liberation through reification in his rereading of Marcuse and queerness. Floyd argues that the transformation of a subject into a passive commodity through objectification reclaims the sexual body from the active capitalist sphere, returning the materiality of the body to its original form closely found in nature – an objective being living in the amoral and sensorial natural world. For Marcuse, Floyd notes, reification through objectification is inseparable from desire – a term Marcuse adopts from Freud called the “performative principle.”<sup>86</sup> By objectifying oneself through reification, the body is the receptacle of pleasure and desire, a synthesis of subject with queer bodily desire. Floyd writes: “In sexually objectifying itself, in abandoning productive activity and giving itself over to the passive experience of pleasure, the ego becomes conscious of the material substance of its own body.”<sup>87</sup> By recognizing the pleasures of the objectified body, the queer subject can fully control one’s own desires, and in turn, queerness itself.

Following the historical materialist analysis of Marx’s *Capital* and Marcuse’s pseudo-Freudian reading, Floyd recuperates reification as liberation by promising:

a moment of instrumentalization [with] a transcendence of instrumentalization as such. Only by passing through objectification, Marcuse suggests, does the body again become a free, non-instrumentalized subject – only in suffering the most extreme reification does it triumph over reification.<sup>88</sup>

Lukacs believes that dereification is a near impossibility. However, Floyd reclaims the objectified body from the capitalist reproductive sphere whereby queer subjects can now control their reified trace of the self in commodity form. Floyd’s reification triggers a process of

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<sup>86</sup> Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 124.

<sup>87</sup> Floyd, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Floyd, 125.



exploitation while simultaneously rerouting queer labour into a path of liberation by utilizing objectification to shake the foundations of silenced queer actions – which is also seen as a *dereification* or a reclamation of the new body liberated by passing through reification to another sphere of existence, the objective natural world. Marcuse even states that reification “promises a oneness with subject and object, of humans with nature.”<sup>89</sup> Although ironic, Floyd insists that by becoming fully subservient to objectification, the placement inside the system can help for the queer activist to dismantle the system from the inside-out. The impenetrability of capital is penetrated by itself, creating the formation of a reversal in power and a true reclamation of the queer body. Marcuse’s call for objectification, then, is an inherently queer process.

Introducing the reclamation of the body into the realm of use-value, the crux between the money form and queer labour, is made visible by the symbol of money as an indicator of life. By obliterating the symbol of the money form, reification becomes a worthless process, no longer able to alienate the worker from positions of power. The subservience of queerness to the value of heterosexuality, both in the realm of economic and personal realities, is dismantled once queer subjects belong to the realm of reification-made-useless. Drawing on Puar’s figure of the homonationalist, the neoliberal subject possesses money but attributes their work and personal life to state power – an allegiance to the long life of state control rather than to the universal liberation of queerness from the state itself. Challenging positionalities including the homonationalist, Floyd implies that the subject must utilize their positionality through direct action to challenge the systems of economic and state power which construct the mechanism of

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

reification, or else the process of reification will supersede the liberatory objectification process. In turn, once the queer worker has passed through reification, they have a clear aim at a systemic target, a target which Pavlensky utilizes and places on the figure of the bank.

Pavlensky's *Lighting* is foremost an attempt to dereify the money form, a form of value attributed to heteroreproductive models of life which silences and devalues queer existence. Pavlensky dereifies the symbol of value through attacks to the value form (money or stored value), an indicator of heterosexual patriarchy, and instead returns to his own anarchical philosophies of foraging and communal wealth.<sup>90</sup> Through targeting the bank as the mediator of human relations through representative capital, the incineration of the apparatus makes way for direct connections for the worker to their value – value outside of credit, of interest and debt embedded in the global banking system and the war economy. Pavlensky having been charged with “property damage involving risk to others” for *Lighting*, the art crime is performed in full form. Pavlensky targets an apparatus of social and bodily repression, the Bank of France, the placeholder of historical bourgeois accumulation as a vessel for reification – in France, the accumulation of wealth through sky-high taxes and in Russia, the matrix of post-socialist capitalism fed through the occupational war-machine of Putin's state. Pavlensky's *Lighting* aims for dereification head-on, utilizing artistic labour – unpaid and objectified – as the vessel to destabilize the global market of valorization through the international banking system – systems of wealth engrained in the history of land privatization, the reliance on women's domestic labour as an invisible force in market expansion, and the dehumanization of the colonial worker.

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<sup>90</sup> Fernanda Eberstadt.

Pavlensky's mobilizes his bodily artistic labour against the banking apparatus, devaluing capitalist labour relations in an attempt to shock the market with the incineration of the money form and destroy stored representative value from the top-down. Bodily labour – mobilized as a synthesis between the producer and the product (the artist and the artwork) – becomes the vessel for a queer revolution, simultaneously providing queer individual with access to money while also destabilizing value as a signifier of the heterosexual binary.

The destruction of a bank façade is one mode of revolutionary tactic laced throughout the art crime's larger project of socio-political destruction; a tactic rooted in the obliteration of form within Malevich's *Black Square*. However, it is a near-impossibility to enact the eradication of class chains on a global scale. The liberation of queerness cannot happen on the superficial level of distributing money to other LGBT+ peoples. Neoliberal capitalism is so entrenched in lived reality that a complete global revolution is needed to overthrow the tyranny of value, including the apparatuses of the façade of social media, predominantly owned by alt-right sympathizer Mark Zuckerberg, which Pavlensky utilizes to showcase his work outside of Russia.<sup>91</sup> If the bank is a façade of valorization, all reflections must be shattered in one swift strike to the mirror of neoliberal operation – mirrors of commodified labour production (social media and “brand deals”) as masks for the invisible accumulation of mass profit, clearly elaborated in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1968). In a market statistic extracted and foregrounded by Marianne Williamson, the United States alone owes slaves 500 billion dollars in reparations for

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<sup>91</sup> Alex Shultz, “AOC to Mark Zuckerberg: ‘You Would Say White Supremacist-Tied Publications Meet a Rigorous Standard for Fact-Checking?’,” October 24, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/aoc-grills-mark-zuckerberg>.

trauma and 400+ years of free labour.<sup>92</sup> Market accumulation is only one form of reparation, but bodily violence, racism, misogyny, and homophobia will still exist outside of class chains. Set fire to a bank, but also set fire to the systemic oppression of the police force, Wall Street's criminal accumulations, private property, the war-machine, and the state itself. This is not to argue that violence is not capable of change but that violence, as argued by Franz Fanon, must be a *psychic* and *subjective* transformation alongside the destruction of tangible structures including the credit economy.

Although Pussy Riot encourages active engagement and protest against dominant systems of power, Tolokonnikova defies the traditional Marxist revolution theorized by Lukacs and Marx and then reflected in Pavlensky's artistic aim in *Lighting*. In a letter between Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Zizek written while Tolokonnikova was in prison for her *Punk Prayer* performance, Tolokonnikova states that she is weary of totalizing logic:

With regard to the techniques that the global economy's intellectual and ad-industry core has developed for escaping static identities of subjugation, my feeling is that we need to find a way of joining this game without checking our beliefs at the door. We can definitely profit from the ping-pong being played between an egalitarian-emancipatory "deterritorialization" and the postmodern, capitalist one. But we have to stay brave, energetic, and stubborn – we can't walk away from the fight. Sparring is how you build endurance, how you learn to be quick on your feet and develop a sense of humor. Unlike the old Left, we can't just reject capitalism out of hand – we'll get further by playing with it, teasing till it's been perverted.<sup>93</sup>

The dereification of value through anarchy is certainly a concrete example of revolution, yet it fails to acknowledge the ongoing social oppression of bodies outside of the class chains – bodies

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<sup>92</sup> P.R. Lockhart, "Marianne Williamson Presents the 2020 Democratic Primary's First Reparations Plan," Vox (August 7, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/8/7/20759067/marianne-williamson-reparations-slavery-2020-primary>.

<sup>93</sup> Slavoj Zizek and Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Comradely Greeting: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj*. New York: Verso, 2014, 88-89.

which are intrinsically subject to violence even from the working class itself, the crux of Trumpian violence in the United States and homophobia in Russia under the reign of Putin's working class supporters. Similarly, Pussy Riot's hijacking of social media networks, including the virtual mobilization of their performance at Toronto Pride, reflects Tolokonnikova's hope for the in-between state of activism rather than a static "old Left" tactic of the complete annihilation of capitalism. Pavlensky's earlier work, *Tusha*, managed to nuance lived experience with dereification as outlined in Floyd's argument as well as Tolokonnikova's encouragement for "Ping-pong," a prime force for the queer bodily subversion of reification itself.

*Tusha* transcends class dynamics through the use of the body, striding past the boundaries of class-related art to a return to natural form itself – a primary method of artistic revolution which Marcuse outlines in his second point in "The Aesthetic Dimension:" "Art can be called revolutionary if it breaks the mystified social reality and opens a horizon for change."<sup>94</sup> Pavlensky's performance directly challenged legal frameworks which define acceptable behaviours of Russia's "citizens," including the anti-gay propaganda law of 2012. For *Tusha*, Pavlensky sat in a Moscow Public Square and wrapped his naked body in barbed wire while his wife recorded the performance. Immediately recalling the totalizing form of the body as the most natural state of being, both in Kulik's *Mad Dog* performance and Floyd's analysis of Marcuse, Pavlensky aimed to mediate the state's control over the freedoms of being, transcending all structures of life to form a universal bond between all beings.

The performance evokes Giorgio Agamben's commentary on the sovereign body of the Nation, stating that "It is not possible to understand the "national" and biopolitical developments

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<sup>94</sup> Marcuse, x, xi, xiii.

and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man's bare life... in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty."<sup>95</sup> While Agamben is referencing Nazism's amalgamation of the human and the state, Russia's anti-gay laws maps out the borders between the Russian "citizen" being equal to the Russian "man." With concentration camps rearing their ugly head in the Caucasus, queer people in Russia are stripped of their ability to be free "citizens," correlating with their freedom to be an individual "man." The body as bare life is a signifier of the site of deviousness for Russian authorities, and queerness, a bodily spectacle but also a deviant sexual vessel.

Pavlensky's performance is a direct threat to the biopolitical control of Russia's grasp on the citizen's body. Russia's continual pre-occupation with its people's body, body as a signifier of property-as-value-producer, is washed away through Pavlensky's return to queerness as the crux of human form. Queerness is a tactic which Floyd acknowledges as a totalizing force of the "natural," an elusive form which is malleable to the shape of the revolutionary tactic – in Pavlensky's case, the objectification of the human body. Pavlensky's naked body is a universal one, desubjectivized and then objectified. Wrapped in barbed wire, slicing away at his bare skin, Pavlensky's body became fully tangible as receptor of objectivation and malleability in its removal of hierarchy, the barbed wire mimicking Putin's violent subjective laws of forced heteronormativity. Pavlensky is nothing more than his body, an eradication of all chains of subjection under Putin's power. The metal wires digging into the skin evoked a haptic quality, allowing the viewer to sympathize with the violent acts of government subjugation onto the

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<sup>95</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Complete Homo Sacer*. Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, 107.

queer body. Evoking Kulik's universal, animalistic body, Pavlensky aims for a universal objectification of the body – a return to the body as a purely natural form which must be freed from its political chains, visualized through the barbed wire.<sup>96</sup> Pavlensky's tortured body suffers what Floyd calls "the most extreme form of reification" to free itself, where police cut off the chains of the barbed wire and the artist's body is freed.<sup>97</sup>

Pavlensky's body enters reification by fully embodying the physical as the only form – a complete commodification of the body to pass through reification (violence from the barbed wire, a tool for state security and imprisonment) into the sphere of the natural form (the naked body freed only after passing through the barbed wire). The liberated body, passed through reification, is now susceptible to queer pleasure. *Tusha*, meaning "carcass" in Russian, evidences the most simple form of Agamben's bare life, highlighting the destructive subjectification inflicted on queer bodies which tear open deadly wounds on both the psyche of the individual via adherence to the ideal of heterosexuality and the body by forced conversion through arrest and torture in Russian prisons and Chechnyan concentration camps. By objectifying the body, Pavlensky allowed for a queer ownership over one's natural form, a form free of subjectivation and sexual repression.

However, to sacrifice one's body for performance is a space of privilege. To have the ability to use one's body as a vessel of creation and still be freed by police lays bare the innate subjective importance of the white male body – the antithesis of Pavlensky's aim for *Tusha*. The disproportionate violence inflicted on Black queer bodies, as well as Indigenous peoples and

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<sup>96</sup> Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia*. New York: Routledge, 2015, 28.

<sup>97</sup> Floyd, 125.

women, is systematically abused by both the public and the law enforcement policies which falsely claims to protect them. With deeply engrained racism and homophobia experienced in daily life by POC, queer and trans people, bodies are not elusive, transient vessels for universality in a space of simultaneous global oppression. The “universal body” is *not* universal. While Pavlensky’s aim to universalize the objectified body is attempting liberation, liberation only comes to those who have historically been recognized as bearers of supremacy. The bodies of those in the minoritarian sphere, such as Black and trans bodies, experience violence every day and do not have the same space to enact violent objectification on their bodies for a mere *attempt* at liberation. There is little hope that a police officer would cut the wires off of Black and queer bodies as well. *Liberation for whom?* Performative violence is not a spectacle, but a lived reality which Pavlensky fails to acknowledge in his work.

Violence is only useful for those who are able to spark the fires of violence and crawl through the flames unscathed – a flawed tactic enforced by the art crime. Pavlensky’s performance takes the most extreme aspects of revolution, violence against property and the body, as the primary entry point into his anarchic principle. The ironies of Pavlensky’s performance also rear in the definition of “property,” where the artist targets property as a built environment or a system of concentrated wealth but fails to acknowledge the objectification of women’s bodies as property throughout Russia at the turn of the Soviet Union – an objectification of the female body as the site of the future work force through reproductive control and continual accumulation of state value. Floyd and Marcuse also enact the blind-spot to their argument, defining the objectification process as they pertain to male-male sexual relations as opposed to femme relationships, further engraining the misogyny in traditional Marxist



analysis as the liberation of man and the submissive reproductive control of women as the catalyst of the work force.

Despite my attempts to mobilize Floyd's argument in *Lighting* and *Tusha* while adhering to the qualifications for an art crime, I must also acknowledge that Pavlensky evokes the same cyclical violence which the artist is trying to escape. Violence is only useful if all minoritarian bodies are included in the revolutionary process. The white male body is the same body Pavlensky employs for accelerationist goals, which is also the same body of the oppressive base of Putin's Russia. The reliance on the body as a mediator of subjectivation also has historical striations into fascist aesthetics, from the idealized white muscular "Aryan race" in Nazism and Stalin's socialist realist depictions of workers in the Soviet Union. Violence has become much more than a tool for framing the artwork; it has long been a tool for terrorism and fascism. While bodies have been used for queer liberation, including die-ins and marches, acts of protest deeply rooted in queer activism during the AIDS crisis, bodies which experience violence on a daily level have much more at stake than performance art. The body: ashes of loved ones whisked away in the Washington winds and onto the steps of the White House, physical sites of longing and desire only to be kidnapped and tortured in concentration camps, or abject spirits who speak past the living body and into the ears and lungs of those fighting for liberation. Queerness is not a symbol for spectacular aesthetics, but an embodied and felt life. Pavlensky, despite his intentions, may be opening the flood gates for his own drowning.

## Chapter Three: The Witches of Pussy Riot: Wicca and the Mobilization of Queer-Femme Labour under Fire

Labour is a living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time.

- Karl Marx<sup>98</sup>

Feminism is a liberating tool that can be used by male, female, transgender, transsexual, queer, agender, anybody. Feminism allows me to say: I behave how I like and how I feel, I deconstruct gender roles and play with them, I mix them up voluntarily. Gender roles are my palette, not my chains.

- Nadya Tolokonnikova, Be a (Wo)man<sup>99</sup>

### *The Spell*

A contradiction: despite Pussy Riot's adamant attempts at activating the emancipatory promises of witchcraft in the fight against Vladimir Putin's political suppression, a coven of witches dedicated their 2019 "circle of life" spell to the protection of the Russian state and Putin's solidification in presidential reign.<sup>100</sup> In a Moscow ballroom adorned with old wooden

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<sup>98</sup> Bruno Gulli, *Labor of Fire: The Ontology of Labor between Economy and Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005, 61.

<sup>99</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, 209.

<sup>100</sup> The contradiction occurs because Wicca has no central ethical framework surrounding a monotheistic God, meaning that Wicca follows a set of principles laid out by the wiccan practitioner rather than a code of ethics from a God source. Witchcraft is a manipulation of natural elements outside of inherent moral grounding and ethics, unlike other religions including Christianity. While wiccans often advocate for the usage of manifesting good intentions, harm reduction, and positive outcomes, such as Pussy Riot and the Canadian artist group FASTWÜRMS, Wicca can also be used in unconventional ethical frameworks as Polyn utilized for the concretization of Putin's position of power.

floors, white ornamental gilding, and large windows streaming in light, dozens of witches cloaked in black capes stood around their leader Alyona Polyn while she casted a circle to pass their magic energy into the wellbeing of Russia, and in turn, the wellbeing of President Vladimir Putin. Polyn was asked in an interview why the witches were conducting the circle for Putin, to which she responded, “I associate a rally as people walking with signs and chanting something with little result. This is a concrete action, a magical act at improving the quality of Russia on planet earth, and of course, to help the president.”<sup>101</sup> Unlike the abstract attempts at political change through performance art or temporary public rallies, witchcraft is used here as a protection of authoritarian rule. However, witchcraft in Russia has not always been so optimistic of its outcomes. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1997, Sasha Lebyodkin and his nephew attacked 22 year old Tanya Tarasova with a hammer and harmed her entire family in their sleep under the guise of a “witch hunt” for cursing his family through black magic.<sup>102</sup> Despite historical shifts in Russian politics from the 1917 Revolution, to the reign of terror under Stalin, to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the age-old belief in the power of witchcraft haunts Russia’s unconscious, a force beyond comprehension, planted into the deep-seated lore of mother Russia’s dark underbelly.

Foremost a manipulation of natural elements to manifest changes in social reality, witchcraft is a practice which bypasses structural frameworks of subjectivation to recall one’s relation to the most basic instinct – the human body in the natural world. When Putin accused his opposition leader Alexei Navalny of crimes against his campaign, it is no surprise that Pussy Riot turned to witchcraft as the mode for political protest. Pussy Riot’s 2014 performance *The*

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<sup>101</sup> Global News, “Russian witches send Putin special “circle of power” energies,” *YouTube* video, 1:24. February 5, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLNdSnSdlPc>

<sup>102</sup> Michael Specter, “In Modern Russia, a Fatal Medieval Witch Hunt,” *The New York Times*. April 5, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/05/world/in-modern-russia-a-fatal-medieval-witch-hunt.html>.

*Witches of Pussy Riot Clean Manezhka* is a short one-minute video released by the group online, protesting the arrest of Navalny on empty charges against Putin's totalitarian political regime (fig. 4). At 7pm on New Year's Eve of 2014, Pussy Riot members conducted a cleansing spell and took to the streets at Manezhka Square to clean up the damage of Putin's political crimes. In the video, Pussy Riot members lit flames, shaved their bodies, and dressed in luxurious jewelry bathed in the red light of candles. The witches took to the streets with broomsticks in hand, using the power of the moon to illuminate the snowy stone square. Brushing away the snow and grime, the witches swept the dirt built up on the Russian public square. The video ends with the group flying off into the sky on their broomsticks, ending off the year cleansing Russia for the new year to come. Manezhka Square was also the location for major protest events in Russian history, including the celebration of the October Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Union.

During the performance, the witches chanted "Clean. Fair. Word. Deed." all signifiers of the arrest and trial of Navalny – an arrest made on empty claims of political corruption. The 2014 performance *The Witches of Pussy Riot Clean Manezhka* reflects Pussy Riot's emphasis on the transformative properties of witchcraft. The use-value of queer-femme labour is reterritorialized into the realm of the natural, cleansing the evil spirits of Putin's regime by replacing the abject with positive queer feminine energy. Taking Tolokonnikova's writings on the demystification of politics and a complete return to nature through art in *Read and Riot*, witchcraft is the primary force in the creation of a new human movement. The feminist wiccan movement, for Tolokonnikova, is the guiding force behind protests and art crimes. Tolokonnikova states:

Magic, witchcraft, and miracles are crucial in any fight for justice. Major people's movements, like the universe itself, don't work according to simple linear logic. The non-linear logic of these social movements requires activists to be attentive,

sensitive, grateful, and open-minded creatures. They are pirates and witches. They believe in magic.<sup>103</sup>

The witch is a symbol not without connotation throughout the history of capitalist development and political corruption. The labouring figure of the witch, described by Sylvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2014), is the antithesis of the development of the modern western world – a woman outside of the forced normativity of state-sanctioned reproductive control, capital accumulation through the invisible labour of housework, and an elusive individual outside of the subjectivation of Christianity.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici traces the lineage of the witch hunts as a pivotal event in the shift from the commons and the rural peasantry to the privatization of labour and the primitive accumulation of capital into the nation-state. Dating from 1532, the witch has been a symbol of the enemy of liberal individuality – the figure often described as a woman who begs for food and money, and when turned away, curses the family for their neglect to share goods (a prime function of the newly-privatized commons in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe after the transformation of the feudal class).<sup>104</sup> The fear of the witch haunts the countryside of Europe and Asia, a symbol of violence against women's bodies and the heart of misogyny in the attack against Tanya Tarasova. Tolokonnikova's suggestion of "non-linear logic" evokes the parallels of Federici's analysis of the witch hunts. With the privatization of the commons throughout 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, the peasantry was forced to expend their labour power for the newly reformed mercantile class in the shape of the bourgeoisie as replacements for the feudal commons system.

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<sup>103</sup> Tolokonnikova, 11.

<sup>104</sup> Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2014, 166.

With the control of labour as the catalyst for profit without access to the goods the worker is producing – or what Marx deemed “primitive accumulation” – the witch represented everything the European bourgeois were trying to destroy: a woman outside of the reproductive role of the domestic household, the crutch for the reified private business sphere, and the modern day symbol of an independent woman outside of the control of the state.

Pussy Riot’s performance against state sanctioned persecution reflects Federici’s observation on the rise of the witch-hunts as a tactic for political oppression against the privatization of labour, control over women’s bodies in downturns of populations from colonial genocide and plagues, and the elimination of the commons:

Witch hunting was also instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women’s bodies, their labour, their sexual and reproductive power were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources. This means that the witch hunters were less interested in the punishment of any specific transgression than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behaviour which they no longer tolerated and had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population.<sup>105</sup>

Putin’s anti-gay laws are not only seen as a deeper control of Russia’s citizens but also a catalyst for a state-promoted boom in reproductive population, a similar tactic which targeted the eradication of the witch. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia’s population has declined drastically.<sup>106</sup> To rebuild the apparatus of the newly formed capitalist system post-1989, Putin’s anti-gay laws forced citizens into monogamous heterosexual relations, prompting a surge in higher birth rates to sustain Putin’s capitalist enterprise into a life-long project. The valorization of homosexuality, and, more broadly queerness, as an apparatus for reproductive economic

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>106</sup> Matt Rosenberg, “Population Decline in Russia,” *ThoughtCo.*, September 2, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/population-decline-in-russia-1435266>

accumulation is referenced in the opening lines of Federici's *Wages against Housework*: "Homosexuality and Heterosexuality are both working conditions... but homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the end of work."<sup>107</sup> Aside from cultural analysis, Putin's political censorship of his opponents also reflect the transition during the witch-hunts which Federici outlines as a symptom of the changing tides of economic reform and privatization. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening up of global capitalist markets, Russia is forced to privatize the Soviet-era "commons" workforce to match the valorization of commodity forms through the interlocutor of the freestanding money-form – a money form based on the value of the "naturalized" currency rate, or the market as a natural realm which cannot be changed by human intervention.

Pussy Riot adopts the historically vilified figure of the witch as a reclaiming of the figure against capitalist privatization and forced reproductive rights over the female body throughout European development. In a 2020 tour across North America, Pussy Riot set up 19 concerts and pledged a portion of their proceeds to be donated to Planned Parenthood, an organization which aids in access to abortion clinics which are on the verge of closing under Donald Trump's presidential reign.<sup>108</sup> In the 2014 performance at Manezhka square, Pussy Riot's impact was twofold: a mobilization of the historically persecuted practice of witchcraft and a mobilization of queer-femme labour as a mode for artistic healing. Pussy Riot's usage of the broomstick as a tool for cleaning reflects the art historical trajectory of institutional critique. Institutional critique, a

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<sup>107</sup> Sylvia Federici, "Wages against Housework" *The Power of Women Collective and the Falling Wall Press* (April 1975): 1. <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/sylvia-federici-wages-against-housework/>

<sup>108</sup> Nanne Buurman, "Engendering Exhibitions: The Politics of Gender in Negotiating Curatorial Authorship," *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 6 (2017), 120.

term coined by Hans Haacke, took aim at the structures of museum spaces which enable classism, misogyny, and racism through the institution's funding bodies, display methods, and curation.<sup>109</sup> Haacke, primarily employing institutional critique in the 1970s in a period of heightened anxiety from the Vietnam war and arts organizations deeply sympathetic to donating to the war-machine (Hans Haacke, *Solomon R Guggenheim Board of Trustees*, 1974), reflected artistic labour from producer of institutional artwork to artwork which exposed the institution.<sup>110</sup> The deep distrust in the power of the institution also transcended geographic borders, where in the 1970s, the people of the Soviet Union also questioned the value of labour amidst a decade of economic stagnation.

Throughout institutional critique, artistic labour is the vessel for social and political upheaval. The emblem of "cleaning" is the basis of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' seminal performances of maintenance art throughout the 1970s, a key work in the canon of institutional critique. In *Hartford Wash* (1973), Ukeles sweeps, dusts, and mops the Wadsworth Athenium museum unannounced, highlighting the invisible feminized labour necessary in sustaining museums and the art world. Despite institutional critique spanning from the 1970s to the mid 1990s, the conditions of systemic oppression and monetary extraction for funding corrupt political campaigns brushes into the 2010s when Pussy Riot produced *The Witches of Pussy Riot Clean Manezhka*. Adapting Ukeles' symbol of the broomstick, Pussy Riot utilized domestic tools for their own cleaning of Moscow. The performance challenged political corruption through the practice of witchcraft, adopting feminized labour as the crutch of the baselines of

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<sup>109</sup> "Institutional Critique: Art Term," Tate Modern. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/institutional-critique>

<sup>110</sup> Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, Eds., *Art Since 1900: 1945 to the Present*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011, 591.



post-Soviet capitalist production. Pussy Riot's performance provided power for the historically villainized figure of the witch while also destabilizing Putin's reliance on invisible labour for his political campaign, reterritorializing housework as a vessel for healing Russia and cleansing the crimes of Putin's regime from the planet – the antithesis to Polyn's "circle of life" spell later performed in 2019. Queer-femme labour bypasses aestheticization, tracing performance as a material process of reworked revolutionary use-value.

### *Queer-Femme Labour, A Revolutionary Process*

In an interview with Jacobin magazine, student organizer Miriam Frank declares that "queer liberation is a labor issue."<sup>111</sup> From the origins of queer liberation, it has been the work of trans women of colour to change the tides of freedom. Pussy Riot's adoption of invisible labour through concrete forms of solidarity by practicing witchcraft is the hinge of the art crime's mobilization from abstract representation to tangible change in the base. Ultimately a reworking of work itself, *The Witches of Pussy Riot Clean Manezhka* utilized artistic labour as a tool for direct political resistance, reterritorializing women's work subordinated within Putin's capitalist war machine. By using labour – the foundations of capitalist production in the fascist regime of Putin's Russia – the artwork strikes the matrix of global capitalism. Pussy Riot's performance visualizes queer femme labour as the invisible beam of Putin's emerging capitalist post-Soviet enterprise, while also challenging the traditional masculinized proletariat as theorized by Lukacs

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<sup>111</sup> Miriam Frank and Meagan Day, "Queer Liberation Is a Labor Issue," June 28, 2019, [https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/queer-liberation-labor-movement-pride-month?fbclid=IwAR2q63OU94\\_66hYc7u\\_MyoPYReD9rjRG14hg5M4Vs8oXJvSr0tJ9x\\_RihNg](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/queer-liberation-labor-movement-pride-month?fbclid=IwAR2q63OU94_66hYc7u_MyoPYReD9rjRG14hg5M4Vs8oXJvSr0tJ9x_RihNg).

and Marcuse. As Holly Lewis notes in her book *The Politics of Everybody*, “Solidarity is not a condition that results from mature humans learning to accept diversity; it is a political recognition that our futures are tied together.”<sup>112</sup>

Often the hopefulness of queer feminist liberation overshadows tangible tactics of analysis to destabilize systems of power. However, the utilization of queer femme labour – or the replacement of queer femme labour rerouted for economic collapse rather than R>G (rate-over-growth) capitalist production – must be closely analyzed to make substantial change in the field of queer art and queer theory. Putin’s reliance of the reproductive model of capitalism for the expansion of both political and economic control over Russia relies heavily on a unified people, a people which the subversion tactics of queer activism sidesteps in the formation of white nationalism. However, as Frank notes:

Two weeks ago, I got out of the subway at Union Square and saw one of the big banks. They had neon rainbows all over the ATM machines, and I thought, “I’ve been marching all of these years for that? Of course not!” This is capitalism, this is the United States of America, and if anyone can make a buck off of it, they will.<sup>113</sup>

Another clear materialization of Frank’s experience is reflected in the 2015 Pride Parade in Toronto, where Pussy Riot directly utilized their space in the parade to disrupt the industrial military complex’s production of war machines but even further, to interject anti-capitalist mobilizations of artistic revolutionary labour within the train of spectacular rainbow floats sponsored by big companies. Even Pavlensky’s spectacular bank-burning was deemed to be “destruction of property,” while the millennia of the colonization of land and slavery in which

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<sup>112</sup> Holly Lewis, *Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection*. London: Zed Books Ltd., 2016, 257.

<sup>113</sup> Frank and Day.

the economic structure of the Bank of France is built on is labelled a history of the past. Through queer femme labour itself, Pussy Riot rerouted the platform of Pride against itself in two ways: by illuminating neoliberalism as an apparatus for continual class oppression through the façade of human freedoms including gay marriage; and by decommodifying the war commodity for queer revolutionary strikes through artistic labour.

The invisible labour of closeted queer people in Russia and feminized domestic labour of the household are not singular events. The United States' economy, aside from an omnipresent investment into oil stakes, child sex trafficking, and arms manufacturing, relies on the invisible labour of undocumented immigrants for mass commodity and agricultural production. Similar to queer silencing in Russia or the unpaid labour of feminine domestic work, undocumented labour both drives economic boom since undocumented immigrants cannot fight for better working conditions or higher pay without threats of being deported. The globalized invisible labour force often escapes unionization, as Frank acknowledged in her interview, but with the unification of global invisible labour can an avenue against political suppression in the United States, Canada, and Russia open up for further tactics of change, including community unionizations which would defund the military policing complex, queer solidarity to challenge Putin's homophobic silencing, and feminist advocacy against global violence. Further, witchcraft itself adopts domestic labour, or labour forces deemed "unproductive," which include queer-feminist wiccan labour, for a tangible shift in commodity production through expending labour for revolutionary tactics or political protests instead of feeding replicated commodity or resource extraction labour processes into the state apparatus. Witchcraft is a practice of peace and healing, unified with the universal natural base, a spiritual manifestation of horizontal equal being. Queer femme labour is not singularly a unionizing force of disruption, but part of a larger process of labour retaliation to

shift structures of power whether in Canada the “strong and free,” or in the face of more broadly fascist supremacy (too often one and the same system).

Pussy Riot adopts their platform as artists and musicians to spark the kindling of global revolution – a processes of artistic performances, uprisings, and education – to “open up alternatives” in the “failure of political imagination.”<sup>114</sup> The art crime provides a platform for labour to be rerouted into a path of possibility – a possibility made tangible in the reworking of existing political and economic frameworks to accelerate its speed of collapse. Revolution does not happen overnight, and the event is not singular. The revolution will manifest in many performances, many protests, many uprisings. The streets are the gallery, the art is the protest. The art crime, whether it be through Pussy Riot or through their audience, *Read and Riot* in hand, must be a universal liberation on a global scale, a revolution not of a singular ideology but of a singular unification against the fascism of the global police state and late capitalist reification. As Tolokonnikova ends her book:

All rules, including those on these pages, may be (and possibly should be) thrown away. These rules should be treated just as another Pussy Riot Punk Prayer, which I have performed to open myself up to a miracle, a (failed) attempt at being a revolution. A rigid interpretation of any rule or advice kills the spirit of freedom, and it’s the last thing that should happen.<sup>115</sup>

Referencing Tolokonnikova’s own attempt at a failed revolution, I do not claim that a singular performance can enact a swift revolution. But I do advocate for letting the performance occur, to refract into the spectacle, to penetrate the social conscious of ideology and let the artwork itself,

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<sup>114</sup> Tolokonnikova, 75.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

an artwork mobilizing queerness, mobilizing feminism, mobilizing people of colour, mobilizing Indigenous sovereignty, mobilizing immigrant families, mobilizing anti-capitalism, to cast the spells for the end of fascism – an ultimate hex of revolutionary proportions.

## A Conclusion, A Call-for-Action

The final hero of Tolokonnikova's *Read and Riot* is bell hooks, a pillar in Black feminism and social activism. Tolokonnikova admires hooks for her argumentation that inclusion is the mode of change, and writes in tribute that "there are no mass people's movements without sincere dangerous commitment to loving those around you and, thereby, a readiness to sacrifice yourself for their sakes."<sup>116</sup> Perhaps hooks's most profound piece of writing is her 1990 essay "Marginality as Site of Resistance," where she instructs: "only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation... marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators."<sup>117</sup> Tolokonnikova mobilizes hooks's call-to-action throughout the practice of the art crime: liberation for all or liberation for none. Despite the global spectacle of the image network, often times seen as a distant, far-off space only mediated through a commodity screen, the performance gains a second life. The margin is no longer contained to the body of the performance but can penetrate the worldwide network of resistance and rework the supremacist network for its collapse.

Throughout the thesis, I have demonstrated the essential components of the concept of the art crime, a concept slippery in definition yet powerful in potential. Whether it be through public interventions with the readymade in Pussy Riot's performance at Toronto Pride, Pavlensky's radical bank burning for the annihilation of the class system, or the reworking of witchcraft for the revaluation of labour, the art crime is a work-in-progress. Revolution ebbs and

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<sup>116</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, 230.

<sup>117</sup> bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990, 343.

flows with the changing tides of political and social movement. However, the time of postmodernism is a time where the tides have flooded the shorelines, washing away the groundwork and the base of our balance, forcing us to continually hold our heads above water before our inevitable drowning. While this project aims to contribute to the “in-progress” discourse of art history, lived experience cannot be theorized but only expressed, refracted, performed, learned, unlearned. Peaceful advocacy with the oppressor is a false dichotomy – peaceful protests are acceptable because peaceful protests can be ignored. Whether or not the art crime is a liberational device, one thing is certain: the Revolution is queer. The Revolution is Black. The Revolution is feminist. In the aftermath of the strike, revolution *must* pass into the hands of the people. Pussy Riot encourages the audience to become revolutionary with their statement “Anyone can be Pussy Riot.” Attacks to the system provide the possibilities of the art crime to extend into the realm of lived experience – when the performance ends, one must enact the ultimate strike.

## Figures



Figure 1. Adrian Deveau. *Diagrammatical Comparison of the Aesthetic Dimension and Art Crime*. 2020.



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