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Pussy Riot's Moscow Trials:
Restaging Political Protest
and Juridical Metaperformance

Milo Rau

When punk activists 'Pussy Riot' were sentenced to two years in a penal camp in the summer of 2012 for their unannounced appearance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, it sparked protest rallies across the globe. But this was just one event of what has been ten years of show trials against artists and dissidents. The project 'The Moscow Trials' attempted to inject impetus into rigid Russian circumstances through the form of political theatre. In Moscow's Sakharov Centre a court was set up in which a three-day trial show provided the stage for the exponents of Russia's cultural war. In a re-enacted show trial with the most important exponents of the Russian cultural war, 'art' faced up against 'religion'; 'dissident' Russia against 'true' Russia. There were no actors on stage; instead there were real-life protagonists: artists, politicians, church leaders, lawyers, and a judge. A lay court made up of six Moscow residents was intended to reach a verdict: for or against democracy, for or against artistic freedom.

The images of the kangaroo court set up to try 'Pussy Riot' could be seen in all media outlets that summer. All over the world, support movements were founded. The singer Madonna called for the release of the activists and Nobel Prize-winner Elfriede Jelinek condemned the trial in a pamphlet posted on the Internet as the 'end of all democracy in Russia'. A five-minute appearance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow was enough to sentence three of the activists of 'Pussy Riot' to two years' imprisonment. On what grounds? Offending the feelings of believers, blasphemy, and agitation against the Russian nation. A judgment which was met with horror in the West.

But what appears to be a sudden epiphany of an authoritarian theocracy has a long prior history. It begins with the election of Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister in 1999. The former KGB agent secured his

1 control by closing ranks with nationalist and extremely orthodox
 2 circles. The chaotic, but liberal conditions which were present under
 3 Gorbachev and Yeltsin quietly began to disappear. Those artists in
 4 particular who did not want to fall into line with the new politics of
 5 regime loyalty and Russian orthodoxy quickly came to the attention
 6 of a system in which the law, the secret service and the media all work
 7 together closely.

8 With the destruction of the exhibition critical of religion 'Caution!
 9 Religion' in 2003 and the trial of the curators that followed, the point of
 10 no return was reached. With the authorisation of the state, the Moscow
 11 patriarch called for the 'expulsion of demons' and the 'salvation of
 12 Russia'. After a show trial, the exhibition's curators barely managed to
 13 escape being sentenced to hard labour, with one of the main defend-
 14 ants taking his own life. As a result, dissident artists and activists were
 15 repeatedly forced to go either abroad or underground, much like the
 16 recent activists of 'Pussy Riot'. 'This trial was the death of critical art,
 17 it has destroyed the milieu in which we were able to live', said cultural
 18 philosopher Michail Ryklin in a subsequent interview.

19 In the form of political theatre, 'The Moscow Trials' retraced the steps
 20 of this story of a state- and church-driven campaign against incon-
 21 venient artists. In the style of a courtroom drama with an open end,
 22 cross-examinations, summations, and disputes on the sidelines of the
 23 trial were designed to bring about a disturbing and conflicting image of
 24 today's Russia: are Putin's cultural policies violating freedom of opinion
 25 and human rights? Or is it indeed art which is violating the feelings of
 26 believers? Who is the offender, who is the defender?

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28 **An interview with Milo Rau on 'The Moscow Trials'**¹

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30 The event 'The Moscow Trials – Milo Rau meets Michail Ryklin' took
 31 place at the 2014 lit.COLOGNE. The conversation with the Russian
 32 philosopher Michail Ryklin did not merely offer cinematographic
 33 snapshots into Rau's work on The Moscow Trials but also provoked
 34 reflections on the societal circumstances and the restricted nature of
 35 artistic work in Putin's Russia. Following this conversation, journalist
 36 and German scholar Lea Fiestelmann spoke with Milo Rau about his
 37 practical work, his foundational theatre-theoretical approaches, and the
 38 current situation in Russia.²

39 **Lea Fiestelmann: How can we situate The Moscow Trials in terms
 40 of genre? Could we call it a reenactment?**

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Milo Rau: No, not really. I have really only done one production which
 I would refer to as a reenactment. Hate Radio is a completely fictional

1 piece, Breivik's Statement is a reading. The Last Days of the Ceaușescu is
 2 really the only reenactment, because it constituted an attempt to recon-
 3 struct an event in an equally complete fashion as had been done in the
 4 media and press. The Moscow Trials are a retake ('Wiederaufnahme'), not
 5 a repetition. It concerns not the simulation of a juridical process, but its
 6 opposite: the enabling of a process, which was not possible when it was
 7 originally conducted. Obviously, also a reenactment tries to be and to
 8 achieve more than merely technical documentation or repetition. Theatre
 9 is more than merely a medium for the transmission of information –
 10 even if it sometimes happens to do so.

11 **Were there any rehearsals in the traditional sense for this particu-**
 12 **lar form of theatre at all? Or did all negotiations emerge and take**
 13 **place spontaneously on the stage of the Sakharov-Centre?**

14 There was a long preparatory phase with many conversations
 15 beforehand. An indictment was formulated, and therefore logically
 16 also a defence. We also agreed on precisely who we were going to
 17 invite. Equally, we made clear arrangements about speaking time
 18 and the whole ritual in itself. There was also a real court procedure
 19 (*Prozessordnung*). The whole process was extremely disciplined and
 20 organised according to Russian legislation, but what was being negoti-
 21 ated and answered remained unclear. Neither I nor the participants of
 22 each side knew anything of the content of each speech. It was the only
 23 proper and sensible way of conducting the trial so that its outcome
 24 would remain open and free.

25 **There was much resonance to *The Moscow Trials* outside of Russia,**
 26 **also in the context of the lit.COLOGNE. How do you evaluate its**
 27 **effect on Russians?**

28 Personally, I think that art is universal! The 'Black Square' by Kasimir
 29 Malewitsch, for example, is not merely meaningful to Russians, even
 30 though he hints at orthodox faith. I am an artist 'of the West', and
 31 even if some of my actors were Russians, my art is directed at Western
 32 audiences – and this is how it is being perceived. At the same time, there
 33 were strong reactions from Russia, as the piece and the film were also
 34 shown in Moscow. I believe that the impact of Pussy Riot on Russian
 35 society is distinctly different from the one it had on, say, Germany or
 36 Switzerland. Obviously Pussy Riot did not manage to transform Russian
 37 society. My project also didn't change the society as a whole. Rather,
 38 I sought to serve its depiction. My project – and therefore also the
 39 practice of Pussy Riot – evoked and made visible something which pre-
 40 viously lay hidden. *That is what political art does: making things visible!*
 41 And that's precisely what The Moscow Trials are doing. Suddenly you
 recognise all kinds of different positions and roles. What the trial has

1 really achieved was wonderfully described by the court clerk – who is
2 also the real director of the Sakharov-Centre. He said that to him, The
3 Moscow Trials were basically like a surreal daydream in which all the
4 people involved in the actual Pussy Riot trials were in one room and
5 talked to each other. With some of our recordings – for example the
6 instance when the priest and the artist together regard an art-book –
7 people actually thought they were a fake collage. Such compositions
8 of commonly contrasted and conflicted voices are what I have aimed
9 to achieve.

10 **Was it difficult to convince these people to collaborate on this**
11 **project?**

12 Yes, it was very difficult. But it worked in the end and that's what
13 matters.

14 **You have said before that your work is characterised by contrasts**
15 **and paradox. Amid all the talk about hyperreal reenactments and a**
16 **surreal art world, where would you situate your work and its effect**
17 **on these discourses?**

18 I think that this has changed, even during the process of our project.
19 There are always enormous contrasts, for example if you regard our
20 film about the Ceaușescu and that on the theatre project. In general,
21 I would say that the difference between things that happened in the
22 past and those that exist in the present exists only in a physical sense,
23 but not in our collective behaviour! We saw that at today's screening
24 of our film on The Moscow Trials: the rules by which the orthodox
25 priests acted derive from the 16th century – and they are currently
26 being reanimated for political and social reasons. When we screened
27 our Ceaușescu trial in Bucharest, it may be something that took place
28 20 years ago, but it showed very well how Romania still functions today.
29 The people who were in power then still run the country today. And
30 that becomes evident to everyone in the audience, who, up until this
31 point believed that a true revolution had taken place. But it obviously
32 did not lead to a societal transformation.

33 That's what really interests me. It doesn't make sense for me to
34 re-enact a Knights Tournament from the 12th century – except it could
35 really say something that is still relevant and present for me today. I am
36 not interested in that which is past. If someone learns something about
37 history from my work, I am obviously happy, but it's not my principal
38 aim. In my work, the connection to the past functions differently.

39 **At the start of this year, you participated at a plenary discussion**
40 **entitled Act Now. You said that political theatre, which does what**
41 **cannot be said, also creates situations in which you can no longer**

1 **situate yourself. I am thinking about the Cossacks who stormed The**
 2 **Moscow Trials. For them, this may be the case. But is it also the case**
 3 **for a western audience? Their opinion will not really be changed**
 4 **based on a performance, will it?**

5 No, I don't think so either. And that's fine. As I said, my experi-
 6 ence was: I travelled to Russia as a sceptic person and I returned as a
 7 European. That also became clear to me just now as I was contemplating
 8 about the project. The European and Nato politics currently conducted
 9 in the Ukraine is incredibly stupid and completely ahistorical. There
 10 is absolutely no reason to start a quasi-invasion on Russian territory.
 11 Why? What the fuck? That only leads to further problems – and they
 12 have already taken place. Putin has just pinched the Crimea and the
 13 Ukraine is turned into the pawn of the European imperial idea. At the
 14 same time, I am supportive of the concept of Europe. I support human
 15 rights, individual freedom, and, to some extent, equality of chances.
 16 These things should apply to orthodox men and lesbian women alike.
 17 The above values should apply to all persons, without differentiation.
 18 And that's what is at risk of disappearing in contemporary Russia. It
 19 seems as though everyone who does not conform with Russian politics
 20 would somehow have to be killed, socialised, or coordinated. In the
 21 light of such developments, I want to create things that make them
 22 visible, that expose them. On the other hand, I have also already made
 23 probably about 20 plays about Europe, in which I expose what's going
 24 wrong in Europe. Sure, I am not always entirely objective, but I am a
 25 realist. I want to show the things as they are. In my films, the fascists
 26 talk three times as much as all the liberals taken together – simply
 27 because it interests me. I wanted to make visible what is not visible in
 28 the western media. At the end of the day, I obviously disagree with the
 29 fascists, but that becomes evident in the film.

30 **What is your opinion on the referendum in Switzerland [in which**
 31 **more than 50 per cent of the population voted for tougher immigra-**
 32 **tion laws]?**

33 I was totally against the initiative and entirely in favour of an open
 34 Switzerland. At the same time, I received requests from business unions,
 35 because they needed cheap labour forces. But I am not uncritical of
 36 globalisation. It's all a hotchpotch of opinions in which you begin to
 37 understand why some people desire to wall themselves off from the
 38 outside world. In principle, however, it's inhuman.

39 **Your project 'Was ist Unst?' [an absurd wordplay on the phrase**
 40 **'what is art (Kunst)?], you demand a repetition of the present by**
 41 **means of the past for the future. What are some of the central**

1 **elements of the past, which we have not yet overcome, but which**
2 **are absolutely central for our future?**

3 Think of George Orwell: when the agency in *1984* rewrites history,
4 they do so for the future, because what is being declared as the past in
5 the 'now' is becoming that which we will later remember as our past.
6 In the present, we have the power over our past. In the 'now', we have
7 the power to determine the rules for what and how we remember.

8 In Russia, faith is being replicated for the future in a strange way. For
9 example, there is a discourse about whether the Russians have always
10 been an insanely orthodox society, whose faith has been suppressed.
11 In truth, the Russian Revolution only broke out because the Tsar sup-
12 pressed Russian society *alongside* the orthodox church. Some 20–40,000
13 churches have been destroyed because the people couldn't take it any
14 more. The same happened in the Spanish Civil War. There, too, the
15 church was a powerful apparatus of suppression. And then came a time
16 in which the church and faith had been suppressed. That may have been
17 an existing phase in history, but it's not central to the Russian tradition.

18 Everything is politically defined. The entire time, we live in a defini-
19 tion of the past and we define it for the future. We teach our children
20 and in the future they will conceive of the past what we now conceive
21 of as the 'real past'. What I am trying to say is that a real re-enactment
22 is an act for the future: it only seems as if one speaks about the past. It
23 happens in the now and takes place for the future.

24 When I still wanted to work on the Moscow Trials of the 1930s and
25 when I spoke about it in the Sakharov-Centre, someone stood up and
26 said that, while the topic may be interesting, I could perhaps also speak
27 about the fact that ten million orthodox priests had been deported and
28 killed by Stalin. Then someone else stood up and said: 'Yes, it's true that
29 Stalin killed some ten million people, but they were not priests. They
30 were all kinds of people: atheists, communists, people from all milieux'.
31 This person said that he was fed up with people constantly talking
32 about Stalin's deportations as if the people concerned were only ortho-
33 dox priests, because it is simply not true. This was only one instance in
34 which I noticed how much the past is fought over territory – based on
35 ideological reasons in the here and now and not because one story was
36 more convincing than the other.

37 This is precisely why the factual argument in documentary art is
38 always going to be a difficult one. One might even go as far as saying
39 there is no documentary art. Art is always concerned with something
40 other than facticity, because 'facts' are always already politically valued
41 and revalued.

1 **Notes**

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1. www.the-moscow-trials.com; www.international-institute.de; www.theaterneumarkt.ch; In cooperation with: Deutsches Nationaltheater und Staatskapelle Weimar, Institute for the Performing Arts and Film/Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Konzert Theater Bern, Gessnerallee Zürich, Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora, Memorial Russia, Sakharov Center Moscow, Goethe Institute Moscow, Fruitmarket Kultur und Medien GmbH. Sponsored by funds from the 'Kulturstiftung des Bundes' (Federal Cultural Foundation) and the 'Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien' (Federal Governmental Department for Culture and Media).
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