

RUSSIA

# Art and Power in Putin's Russia

BY SASHA PEVAK

The separation between art and power in Russia's recent history has never been clear-cut. Soon after the fall of the USSR, contemporary art, namely actionism in the 90s, openly criticized society and entered the political sphere. This trend continued after Vladimir Putin's election in 2000.

Russian identity politics in the 2000s were based on four pillars: state nationalism with the Putin's "power vertical", the vision of Russia as a nation-state, Orthodox religion, and the myth of the Unique Russian Path, reinforced by the notion of "sovereign democracy" and the idea of the omnipresence of a fifth column inside the country<sup>1</sup>. The will to consolidate society around these values provoked, according to political scientist Lena Jonson, tensions between the State and culture, especially as far as religious issues were concerned. These issues were the cause of the trials against the exhibitions "Attention! Religion" (2003) and "Forbidden Art – 2006" (2007), shown in Moscow at the Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Centre.

The latter staged temporary events and activities based on the defence of Human Rights. For part of the national opinion, the Centre symbolized democracy in Russia, whereas for others it represented an antipatriotic element, all the more so because it was financed by foreign foundations. In 2014, the Department of Justice catalogued it as a "foreign agent," on the pretext that it carried out political actions with American subsidies<sup>2</sup>.

In 2003, the exhibition "Caution, Religion!", organized by Aroutioun Zouloumian, was vandalized by religious activists several days after the opening<sup>3</sup>. By virtue of Article 282 of the Criminal Code, the organizers of the exhibition were charged with inciting hatred and enmity and denigration of human dignity.

The exhibition "Forbidden Art 2006" (2007) was entirely developed in response to censorship, with works that had either been rejected from exhibitions or forbidden by Russian museums during the year 2006. Several works displayed Christian symbols, but did not openly attack the Church or religion. However, "Forbidden Art" provoked outrage in religious activists who appealed to the Court and demonstrated in front of the Centre with the objective of closing this "sewer, where anti-Orthodox, anti-government and anti-Russian elements are brought together to meet sponsors and take drugs."<sup>4</sup> The verdict in 2010 specified that the organizers were declared guilty of having a cynical, disdainful attitude towards the feelings of religious people<sup>5</sup>; and in the meantime, in 2008, the exhibition's curator Andrey Erofeev was dismissed from his post as curator at the Tretyakov Gallery.

The two exhibitions were exploited by the government as striking examples of blasphemy and attacks on the values of the Russian nation, meaning the values of Orthodox believers; these judgements were founded on the religious activists' interpretation of the works of art and the curators' intentions. The official press supported the accusations, insisting on the moral prejudice caused to society<sup>6</sup>. The trials took on an ideological character: they were supposed to send a univocal signal to institutions, to prevent similar actions, generate auto-censorship and give a symbolic blank cheque to extremists.

Erofeev's "Forbidden Art" was a political gesture, a protest against censorship. The scenography was explicit: the works were exhibited behind false walls, like inmates in cells and only visible through small openings. The exhibition forced the spectators to be in the position of voyeurs, looking at a "shameful" object through the keyhole. The presentation itself conditioned the visitors as much as the works submitted to the curator's intentions.

The controversy that followed was considerable and, according to Lena Jonson, the trial marked a point of no return in relationships between the State, Church and culture. The trial's verdict also prefigured the conservative direction Russian cultural politics were taking, and their increasing control over institutions. In this manner, from 2010 onwards, art drastically changed in order to escape from the State's domination over culture, before these orientations were officially formalized in 2012.

## Russian activist art

In 2014, curator Tatiana Volkova affirmed that a new generation of Russian activist artists was no longer interested in the existing institutions, and that public space had become their principal field of expression<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, these artists had committed themselves to social and political debates, and their performances were now in open conflict with the State.

Actions by the Voina Group, for example, took place in places of power with the objective of confronting the symbols of State authority. Consequently, *A Dick Held Prisoner at the FSB* (2010) consisted in painting a gigantic 65-metre phallus on Saint Petersburg's Liteiny Bridge. When the bridge was raised, the erect phallus faced the windows of the FSB (ex-KGB). To the astonishment of the artistic community, the performance was awarded the 2010 Innovation Prize for Contemporary Arts by the National Centre in Moscow – in the "visual work" category.

This award gave rise to controversy because since its beginnings, Voina was disdainful of institutional art, qualifying it as "pathetic pseudo-liberal artistic masturbation with programmes"<sup>8</sup>. Faithful to their own logic, the group gave the total sum of the prize (400,000 roubles) to the Agora Association for the defence of human rights and political prisoners in Russia: "We made sure that the State ended up paying the State enemies. [...] After that, the State could no longer attempt to bribe us, since it was clear that whatever happened would always be used for our own interests."

## The Pussy Riot Case

The Pussy Riot followed the Voina Group; their *Punk Prayer* in August 2012<sup>9</sup> triggered a media frenzy. According to the Church, the *Prayer* represented an offense to religious believers<sup>10</sup> and was close to Nazism<sup>11</sup>. The trial was used as a pretext in Russia to reinforce Orthodox solidarity against the “blasphemers”. As a response to the *Punk Prayer*, a *Te Deum* was organized in all Russian dioceses in April 2012. Vladimir Putin, who had just been re-elected, modified the Criminal Code in June 2013, toughening penalties for public performances that showed disrespect to society in view of undermining the religious feelings of believers<sup>12</sup>.

In the West, the trial had become the symbol of the regime’s repression, and was perceived as a diplomatic affair. In August 2012, an article in *Le Monde*, “The conviction of Pussy Riot, worthy of the ‘Inquisition’,”<sup>13</sup> expressed the major powers’ indignation: “Outside Russia, the sentence was promptly condemned by the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, who claimed it was ‘disproportionate’; Washington asked the Russians to ‘revise the trial and make sure that freedom of expression is maintained’. The NGO Amnesty International esteemed that three members of the group were ‘prisoners of conscience, detained for the sole reason of publicly expressing their convictions.’”

The performance also made its way to the institutions of contemporary art. On the 21st June 2012, when the artists themselves were in the dock, the Palais de Tokyo (Paris) inaugurated “The Pussy Riot Case”, organized by Andrey Erofeev. His objective was to find a supplementary audience for the affair and to protect the group, thanks to one of the most prestigious French institutions<sup>14</sup>. Ever since then, Pussy Riot activity has remained inseparable from its political reach, media clamour and polemics, and the verdict of the trial revealed the state of Russian society and the relationship between power and opposition. Shedding this new light prepared the ground for Petr Pavlenski’s practices.

## The symbolic combat between artists and power

During the course of his performances, Petr Pavlenski pursued an actual dialogue with power. Its agents, the police, doctors and prosecutors, had become the actual motors of his work. “Their function is to neutralize an event, liquidate it, and clean the streets and public squares. But this forces them to serve an opposite goal. They start to construct the event. They become the authors themselves. My performances rely on them. Because these performances are reduced to a strict minimum. I simply sit or stand, without doing anything.”<sup>15</sup>

In 2012, in his first performance (*Stitch*), he sewed up his mouth in front of the Kazan Cathedral in Saint Petersburg to support Pussy Riot. Then in 2013, after the re-election of Vladimir Putin, the demonstrations in Moscow and the adoption of new repressive laws, he performed *Carcass*<sup>16</sup>: naked and rolled up in barbed wire, he was delivered to the entrance of the Parliament of Saint Petersburg. The artist didn’t move, and the performance was enacted

by the police who cut the barbed wire and handed Pavlenski over to a psychiatric hospital for a valuation of his mental state.

In 2014, after the victory of Maidan in Ukraine, Pavlenski performed *Freedom*<sup>17</sup> in Saint Petersburg. He erected improvised barricades with tyres and set them on fire. Accused of vandalism, he turned the trial to his advantage by taping all his conversations with the investigator on a dictaphone, and then publishing the retranscriptions. In these conversations, which are reminiscent of the dialogues between Raskolnikov and the detective in *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, the artist, by resorting to art history, tried to appeal to the persecutor's conscience in order to make him understand that it is not for the authorities to impose its interpretations of art. The dialogues are at times quite unexpected, revealing the system's absurdity; at the end of the second dialogue, for example, the investigator affirms that he is an «artist of justice.»

In 2015, in *Threat*, his last performance in Russia, he set fire at night to the door of the Federal Security Service, aiming directly at the State and Vladimir Putin. After this performance, Pavlenski was merely sentenced for acts of vandalism. However, in 2017, the point of no return was reached when he was accused of rape and forced to leave the country with his partner.<sup>18</sup>

Pavlenski's art is spectacular. However, according to Andrey Erofeev, in this «competition» between the artist and power, the two entities have come together as one: «Putin is presented in the official media as an exceptional man, as may be attested by his performances – his microlight aircraft flights surrounded by birds, his underwater diving experiences, his bear hunting expeditions, etc. In the same manner, Pavlevski sculpts his image as a radical artist of Russian activism.»<sup>19</sup> For the art critic, this has been a battle between «two titanic showmen» who perform before millions of spectators. This rapprochement between power and actionism has been reinforced by the fact that the State has taken over culture of the spectacle, developed by actionists «who imitate leaders and their entourage, since the pro-government establishment has started to assimilate the performative forms of thinking and 'senseless behaviour.'» These were, according to the author, carnivals and buffoonery on military and geopolitical subjects which, by reason of their scope, have gone far beyond the artists' performances. «The State has decided to play punk,» concluded Erofeev, quoting Pussy Riot Nadezhda Tolokonnikova.

## Museum of Russian History

This show of force between the artist and power, as well as the game with the character of Vladimir Putin, provided the foundations for an exhibition organized by Arseny Zhilyaev at the Kadist Foundation in Paris. «M.I.R.: New Paths to the Objects»<sup>20</sup> [M.I.R. : Museum of Russian History] presented a fiction on the history of contemporary Russia, in which both pro and anti government elements came together.

In the fictional narrative of the exhibition, Vladimir Putin, in response to a crisis in contemporary culture, created an artistic platform, followed by the proposition, in 2024, of the programme «New Paths to the Objects,» which synthesized all the visual research that had taken place in Russia. One part of the exhibition was devoted to the works of Putin himself. For example, *The Bird Migration*, in which the President performed a flight in a glider, accompanied by Siberian cranes that he helped to find their migratory route. *The Inauguration* performance represented Vladimir Putin on Inauguration Day in Moscow. *The Deuce* was about the precarious conditions of life under neoliberal capitalism, staging in particular the imprisonment of the artists and singers Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, members of the group Pussy Riot; according to the text accompanying the work, the idea was to show how the most stable work can only be obtained in prison.

In «M.I.R.» Arseny Zhilyaev adopted an analytical, ironical angle, by proposing a speculation on the future of art in Russia. He presented the Russian cultural space as submerged by overflowing information and spectacular images coming from both the regime and the opposition. As Boris Groys resumed, «Zhilyaev does not seek to participate in this competition for media impact - [...] because he does not believe that either an artist or a politician could win.»<sup>21</sup>

## The foundations for a new cultural policy

In order to assure the control over the system of art in Russia, the outlines of a new cultural policy began to appear with the return of Vladimir Putin as President in 2012 and the nomination of a new Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinski. To compete against practices that appeared spontaneously, Medinski created his own version of contemporary culture – «a ‘patriotic’ duplicata or simulacra of vital artistic culture.»<sup>22</sup>

This mission is led by Medinski, until then a state official of the pro-Putin party, United Russia, renowned for his patriotism<sup>23</sup>. In October 2013, the Federation Council, through its president Valentina Matvienko, announced a new direction for society: «Russia has been in need of new standards in culture for some time now, because throughout the past ten years one has observed an increasing amount of foreign ideas.» Medinski followed in her footsteps, after visiting the 5th Biennale of Contemporary Art in Moscow, with this statement: «I was walking and thinking: why doesn't anyone cry out that the emperor is naked? Why should we believe that contemporary art is something abstract and cubist, twisted and bent, that resembles a pile of bricks? And what's more, financed by public money! Quite apart from the fact that for most Russians it's totally incomprehensible.» He also announced that he was going to reactivate an old Soviet institution called Rosizopropaganda (rebaptized Rosizo in 1994), to «make use of Russian culture in propaganda through the visual arts.»<sup>24</sup>

After these declarations, a certain number of government decrees were issued by the authorities. The foundations for a new State cultural policy<sup>25</sup> (2014) gave pride of place

to Orthodox culture, so it could be transmitted to future generations in order to cultivate feelings of patriotism and national pride. The decree on the new Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation<sup>26</sup> (2015) erected, as its name indicates, culture as an integral component of national security. The role of the Strategy of State Cultural Policies, until 2030<sup>27</sup> (2016), is also to prevent the risks of a «humanitarian crisis» linked to the degradation of society's intellectual and cultural levels, the devaluation and alteration of its values and the deformation of historical memory. The dilution of traditional, spiritual and moral values, «reinforced by cultural expansion and exterior information», represents, according to the document, a threat to national security and the nation's unity, as well as an attempt to falsify History. It should also guarantee the cohesion of cultural institutions on all levels.

In 2017, a memorandum from the Ministry of Culture<sup>28</sup> proposed to redefine the term «contemporary art.» It was suggested that all works created today, in all styles and media, were contemporary art, whereas art that addressed current issues should be called «actual art.» This initiative was perceived by the art world as an attempt to redefine the policies of public institutions and to enlargen their field of action.

## The Great Clean-Up

In just several years, the Ministry has changed the majority of museum and art centre directors: in 2013, Marina Lochak replaced Irina Antonova at the Pushkin Museum; in 2015, Irina Lebedeva, the director of the Tretyakov Gallery, was replaced by Zelfira Tregulova, former director of Rosizo, and a specialist in Russian avant-garde and socialist realism. In May 2016, an operation was conducted against the National Centre of Contemporary Art and its director Mikhail Mindlin. Firstly, Petr Pavlenski's *Threat* was short-listed in the visual arts category of the Innovation Prize, then withdrawn without any explanation and at the last minute by Mindlin. This decision was widely contested by the art world. In the meantime, on the 31st May, the police turned up at the Centre to search their offices, officially for an embezzlement case. Suspected of fraud, Mindlin was dismissed from his post. In the wake of these events, the Centre of Contemporary Art became one of the departments of Rosizo. Finally, in 2016, the founder of the Moscow Biennale, Joseph Backstein, was replaced by a board of experts coordonnated by the Ministry of Culture.

At the same time, the new State Art was never really clearly defined, even if Lena Jonson esteems that several blockbuster exhibitions destined to the general public could define its outlines<sup>29</sup>. The State did indeed seek to promulgate a certain type of historical narrative. The central role was now given to realistic art, namely social realism. However, the legitimacy of this narrative had to rely on including the great figures of non-official Soviet art in the 20th century.

Lena Jonson put strong emphasis on the tandem of exhibitions held at the Moscow Manege in 2015: «Romantic Realism. Soviet Painting, 1925-1945,» organized by the Ministry of Culture

and Rosizo, delegated to Zelfira Tregulova, and «Orthodox Russia. Russia Is My History. 1914-1945. From Great Shocks to Great Victory,» initiated by the Moscow Patriarch. For the first show, the organizers sought to upgrade the visual qualities of Soviet works of art. By exhibiting the works of the official Soviet painters and those of the regime's victims side by side, the aim was to relive the period of the great Communist dream. This approach was contested by the artistic community who saw an attempt at rehabilitating Soviet ideals. The second exhibition retraced the path of Orthodox Russia during the first Soviet period, and staged a combination that at first seemed paradoxical, between Stalinian and Orthodox art, which says a lot about the spirit of the contemporary cultural system installed by the authorities.

In this logic, a whole series of exhibitions devoted to different versions of realist art took place in important Russian museums between 2015 and 2016. In 2015, «Russian Realism: 21st Century», at the Museum of Russian Contemporary History, brought together a selection of contemporary works of art along with works from 1920-1930, whose common ground according to the organizers was «interior unity of the realist method and its readiness to respond to current issues.»<sup>30</sup> In 2016, «Russia: Realism. 21st Century»<sup>31</sup> followed at the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, along with monographic exhibitions of official Soviet painters such as Alexander Guerassimov at the State Historical Museum, and Tahir Salahov, followed by Gely Korzhev, at the Tretyakov Gallery. In 2017, the blockbuster exhibition «The Thaw» at the Tretyakov Gallery was devoted to the period 1953-1968. This era after the death of Stalin, named «The Thaw,» enabled the greatest non-official Soviet artists, who were opposed to the regime and to State art, to emerge. But once again, the organizers chose to put aside these political controversies of the past for the benefit of a harmonious, softened version of History.

## The carrot and stick strategy

«A campaign of recruitment and seduction through the masters of non-conformism,» according to Andrey Erofeev, has been spearheaded by the State.<sup>32</sup> Erofeev stated that if the artist Ilya Kabakov managed to stand up to this campaign, Erik Bulatov «was drawn into the intrigue.» He became an academician and received the Order of Friendship from the Russian president. When he was presented with his medal in 2015, the Russian ambassador in France stated: «When one looks at Erik Bulatov's paintings, one is reminded of painting in the 1920s, at the very beginnings of contemporary art. We may be proud that contemporary art was born in Russia, that it comes from us, and Erik Bulatov continues these traditions.»<sup>33</sup> Several months earlier, in September-October 2014, Bulatov's most important retrospective had taken place at the Moscow Manege, Erofeev indicated.

Since 2000, the State, by combining actions of intimidation, repressive methods and the carrot and stick strategy, has progressively widened its control over the cultural world in Russia by systematically applying such policies from 2012 onwards. The «undesirable

elements» have been wiped off the landscape: several artists and other cultural actors have been brought to justice, imprisoned, forced to emigrate, or kept far from institutions, financial sources and information flow. Others have been instrumentalized by power; some have left the system, and in spite of the expanding official cultural policies, have become radicalized through political opposition, or have led independent initiatives, which were nonetheless too marginal to attract the attention of the authorities and the general public. Through this new system with *populist* exhibition policies, the State has sought to promulgate its own version of 20th century art history in Russia, and a particular type of historical narrative.

If works of the past, including non-official Soviet art, have often been pawns in the game, the most recent performance by the Pussy Riot group was based on an artist from this era to pass on a political message. On the 15th July 2018, during the World Cup Football Final in Moscow, the group enacted a performance entitled «Policeman enters the Game,» a tribute to the non-official Soviet artist and poet Dmitri Prigov. Disguised as policemen and policewomen, four members of the group entered the field, several of whom saluted the players. The security services managed to rapidly subdue the artists. In spite of their extremely furtive appearance on the field and almost no direct media coverage of the action, countless videos circulated on the Internet. According to the Pussy Riot Manifesto, their goal was to create a symbolic confrontation between two figures: the heavenly policeman who «protects baby's sleep» and the earthly policeman who «persecutes political prisoners, imprisons people for 'reposts' and 'likes.'»<sup>34</sup> The group's demands were to:

- «1. Let all political prisoners free.
2. Not imprison for “likes”.
3. Stop Illegal arrests on rallies.
4. Allow political competition in the country.
5. Not fabricate criminal accusations and not keep people in jails for no reason.
6. Turn the earthly policeman into the heavenly policeman.»

Unlike their *Punk Prayer*, which took place anonymously in a church before being relayed on the Internet, the performance took place during an enormous media event, and benefitted from the presence of the Croatian, Russian and French presidents. This moment of glory for Vladimir Putin, for whom the World Cup was a chance to restore Russia's image, was also to become the moment to reveal the ludicrous relationship between art and power in Russia. Intended as a political slap in the president's face, the performance, however, only resulted in minimal sentences for its organizers. Unless it predicts a new turn in the relationship between art and power in Russia.

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