Manifesting Desire and Anarchy as Method: The Problem of Inside Pussy Riot

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Riot Days (2017/18) is a punk gig that stages the confusion, terror and interminable waiting of incarceration in Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime. Fronted by Pussy Riot member Masha Alyokhina, the staging of *Riot Days* blends film, music and testimony to foreground the need for revolutionary action (Hewert, 2017). The experience of the gig led me to reconsider some of the problems Pussy Riot poses for popular culture, namely: the aesthetic representations of subjugation; the dilemma of representing incarceration and the problem of spectatorship of prison from an abolitionist and anarchist perspective. These problems point to the role of a broad range of performance in understanding and accounting for resistance. By attending to the social issues through the example of 'punk' troupe Pussy Riot, I am furthering Elaine Aston's call to conceive of how shows, performance art and gigs can engender 'multiple, 'counter-hegemonic' performances as a resistant network lending its support to agitating for change' (2016: 17).

This concern leads me to think through confluence with my prior work on resistance and desire in the context of prison. I have investigated how prisons are sites replete with desire – constant, embodied longing for the 'not here' and the 'not now' (Muñoz, 2009). Most often, prison is characterized by regulated desire that I explore as full of resistant potential (Walsh, 2019). Alongside that, thinking of theatres as spaces of desire provokes activating how to imagine and manifest change of the status quo. Yet, it would be foolhardy to claim that performance *always* manifests the shift from desire to activism. Therefore, what is at the heart of this argument is my ongoing interest in understanding how performance attends to representations of the most brutal of narrative outcomes: incarceration.

In most mainstream cultural representations, prison is an end point, an outcome that curtails the character's onward story, rather than being a site for ongoing, embodied resistance that has multiple trajectories. The specific tension exposed by the examples deployed in this article is between authenticity and representation in the context of prison. In much artistic work dealing with incarceration, there is a strange sense of hiatus: as though prison time and space are unrepresentable. What I am interested in is what happens when performance attempts to embody and replicate the conditions of incarceration; and in particular, when the contract of spectatorship relies on participation in manifesting structures of power and domination. As such, the examples I consider here are chosen not as exemplars of artistic practice but to enable an understanding of the relationship between deviance, protest and arts-based resistance that is criminalised. My aim is to deploy the structures of feeling from punk and anarchism to invigorate a contribution to cultural criminology. To do so, I briefly consider the wider issues of state oppression in the post Cold-war context of Russia (Groenewald, 2015; Seal, 2013) although my aim is not to offer a close critique of Pussy Riot or its punk credentials. Rather, I am invested in conceiving of punk's role in manifesting desire. Following Marcus (1989), who highlights a tendency of 'damning God and the state, work and leisure […] the audience and itself' (1989: 6), this article proceeds from punk's approach as ideological rather than a set of subcultural orthodoxies.

Participatory performance, politics, and desire

Theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt observes, 'the debate about the value and indeed the definition of "political theatre"' has seen a 'turning away from a discredited "identity politics" to a

preference for participatory, non-didactic postdramatic theatre' (2010: 89-90). Participation in contemporary art practices is explored by Claire Bishop (2006; 2012), whose ongoing debate with Grant Kester (2011) highlights the terms of engagement of such participation. Toby Lowe (2012) distinguishes between their positions in the form of a spectrum of engagement that sees role of participants, authorship and ethics – from a collaborative, co-authorship in co-creation (Kester) to participation as means for the artist's intentions to be manifest (Bishop). Art forms that are predicated on participation are forged through what Bourriaud calls 'relational aesthetics' (2002). The participatory turn in performing arts has also led to significant changes in audience/ performer relations. Gareth White (2013) defines something as 'participatory' when an 'audience member becomes part of the onstage action' (2013: 5). Josephine Machon considers forms of performance that require audiences to become 'active participants, collaborators, and co-creators, moving into the realm of audience-adventurers' (Machon, 2013: 99). As Breel et al (2017) offer, this does not always entail that they concretely 'impact the work' (2017: 3). In the examples discussed, this mode is particularly participation with audiences who – most likely – have no shared identity with incarcerated people.

Contemporary British theatre companies have adopted this dynamic, adventuring audience in the form of what is called 'immersive theatre' (Alston, 2013; 2016), a form that can be critiqued as outsourcing the aesthetic labour to its paying audience in a form of hyper-neoliberalisation of 'experience' (Alston, 2019; Harvie, 2013). In this mode, spectators move beyond the traditional passive scopic form of relation to a more total experience of, and participation in, meaning-making in performance. Performance scholar Adam Alston suggests that an immersive theatre participant impacts the work as a result of being reframed 'not just as someone subjected to affect, but as someone who co-produces affect' (2016: 46). While such engagement ostensibly dismantles notions of authorial finality, immersive work has also been critiqued for domesticating participation; for claiming agency yet not critiquing the limits of agency in regimes beyond theatre spaces (Harvie, 2013); and for exploiting participants' labour (Bartley, 2017). Underneath these trends is a claim for authenticity that seems to lend theatre and performance legitimacy in relation to social change. In other words, such theatrical work seems to make claims to producing agency, legitimizing hope for social transformation that is predicated on a so-called empowered (or 'emancipated' *vide* Rancière, 2011) spectactor-participant. In the wake of these concerns, the questions that bleed through this material relate to the limits of participation in performance; how and whether representations can and do serve to dismantle state institutions such as prisons; and whether replications of cells, yards or gulags merely disintegrate any activist, anarchist potential in performance.

My aim is to consider how anarchy reads and resists punitive regimes in performance. In doing so, the argument seeks to augment the literature on hope (Dolan, 2001b; 2005; Duggan & Muñoz, 2009); utopia (Dolan, 2005; Muñoz, 2009); theatre's political force (Dolan, 2001a; Rai, 2015; Rai & Reinelt, 2014; Reinelt, 1998; 2010) as well as possibility of recuperating the radical in performance (Aston, 2016; Kershaw, 1992; 1999). This goes along with the 'performative turn' (Bishop, 2006) in which, for instance, we may seek to analyse social movements in *terms* of performance (Alexander, 2011; Bogad, 2016; Routledge, 2009; 2019; Shalson, 2017). To this end, I am not using Pussy Riot in any essentialist way to claim a particular kind of anarchic logic in their actions in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.[1]

[1] By this I am referring to the label of anarchism that can obscure the wider feminist artist/activist identification that is explicitly claimed by the troupe (Groeneweld, 2015; Schuler, 2013; Seal, 2013).

The viral 40-second performance from 2012 was not singular, either aesthetically or in terms of its performance tactics. Nonetheless, in terms of the specific context of Russia, this troupe offers an engaging example to understand the relation between performance, power and punishment. Firstly, the Punk Prayer offers the opportunity to engage with a specifically feminist inflected performance form that explicitly comes up against state oppression with the resulting two-year prison term served by troupe members Masha and Nadia. Secondly, the subsequent global profile of Pussy Riot actions highlighted forms of everyday resistance such as the struggle against Putin's dictatorial regime; the lack of separation between church and state; and the systemic oppression of women, LGBTQ people and minorities in contemporary Russia; as well as appalling prison conditions (Seal, 2013).

In the second part, I turn from the original actions of Pussy Riot to work that has been inspired by their spectacular visibility. My interest in the aesthetics and content of British theatre company Les Enfants Terrible's participatory performance are underscored by my interests carceral geography (Allspach, 2010; Gilmore Wilson, 2007; Moran, 2013; 2015), and in particular the value of performance to reflect issues emerging in cultural criminology (Seal, 2013; Walsh, 2019). Such issues include consideration of the spaces of punishment; the resonances of containment and the significance of moralizing, ethics and tutelage performed by incarceration. I therefore explore the role of theatre and performance to intervene in responding to the law, criminalisation and the spectacle of totalitarianism. After a section on the methodological contributions of anarchism, I construct a brief anarchic analysis of the original trial, then turn to two examples of performance staged in the UK – the first called *Riot Days* – a punk concert produced by Alyokhina using some of the material from her prison memoir; and the second, *Inside Pussy Riot* an immersive theatre work staged in the Saatchi Gallery and produced by Les Enfants Terrible, ostensibly in collaboration with Nadia Tolokonnikova (2017/18).

Anarchic Terrains

David Graeber's work (2002; 2004a; 2004b) offers a touchstone for all the competing, overlapping terminologies and terrains related to anarchist thought. Precisely because there are competing schools of thought that will take attention from the actual task of practicing anarchic thinking, I am not going to rehearse those histories of anarchism. For Graeber, anarchist thought constantly:

> expand[s] the focus of anti-authoritarianism, moving away from class reductionism by trying to grasp the "totality of domination", that is, to highlight not only the state but also gender relations, and not only the economy but also cultural relations and ecology, sexuality, and freedom in every form it can be sought, and each not only through the sole prism of authority relations, but also informed by richer and more diverse concepts (2004b: 4).

This sets up the possibility that performance in all its complexity – embodied concepts, witnessed in spaces that stage relations between publics – could exemplify anarchic unstable messiness by questioning these relations. On the other hand, as my understanding of the show *Inside Pussy Riot* will demonstrate, performance can also diminish and reduce how freedom is modeled, even as it attempts to represent it. This reductionist view is evident in the reliance on audience compliance resulting in the consumption of the Gulag in a seven-minute workfare simulation, discussed in the last part of the essay.

There are three major tenets that are evident across the different practices of anarchism,

including the belief that 'another world is possible' (cf. Graeber, 2004b); a desire to organize against the present; and a disposition that seeks to dismantle given power structures, including capitalism, state power, and its concomitant regimes of enforcement. For my purposes what is useful here is how anarchy reads and resists punitive regimes in performance. In the theatre, this manifests beyond narrative themes of revolutionary protest, and beyond what Jill Dolan sees as a utopian desire that leads the audience to collect together and to 'reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and to be with each other' (2001a: 455). For Dolan, theatre 'is a space of desire, of longing' (2001a: 456). Later, I will revisit Dolan's notion of the utopian performative alongside anarchism and dissensus (Rancière, 2015).

Desire is not merely a vague notion that correlates with enjoyment, nor is it satisfied when achieved; if understood as active and performative, can also lend itself to collective and concrete manifestations. Queer theorist Elspeth Probyn says sexual desire 'is a method of doing things, of getting places' (1996: 41). Anarchist J. Greenway develops this to say that 'for utopian theorists and theorists of utopia, desire in its broad sense is both method and movement' (2009: 154). In the article I take a wide -ranging view of anarchism beyond political theory, and part of what I want to further here is a sense of anarchism that can be modeled in performance terms. As a means of working through desire and anarchism largely drawing on the example of Pussy Riot, I challenge how we think *about* performance, and *do* performance analysis. 'Manifesting desire' or 'anarchy as method' concentrates on how anarchy is in process; must circulate as pedagogy; it must be a movement - it is by necessity 'practiced'. In this method, we see anarchy as possibility, as prefigurative; as imagination; as performative. Some of this necessitates the redefinition of the radical as historicizing, as promiscuous, as co-created, as non-hierarchical and as always becoming.

<Insert Picture 1: *Utopia*, Ministry of Untold Stories, Pic by Fenia Kotsopoulou>

This sets the ground for Dolan's (2005) and Jose Muñoz' (2009) proposals about utopia and the theatre that could prove productive for recuperating the radical in performance. Dolan says 'Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present' (2005: 5); proposing that this experience can result in 'a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense' (Dolan, 2005: 5). She offers that to think of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the "what if," rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the "what should be," allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, in itself, in process (2005: 13).

Such a view of utopia prevents it from settling into proscription, into the kind of fascism that inevitably attends a fully drawn idea of a better world. Angelika Bammer says that the difficulty faced by movements that work towards social change is "sustaining the very principle on which [they are] predicated, namely, the idea of the future as possibility rather than as preset goal. The difficulty, in other words, is to sustain the concept of utopia as process' (2005: 13). Similarly, Dolan insists on process, on the contingency of the future as desired, as manifested somehow in the aesthetics of the performance, but also in the pragmatics of gathering an audience in spectatorial configurations that model communities or publics. In her vision of utopian performatives, the future must remain *possibility*, rather than proscription.

> The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places – whether theaters or dance clubs – to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the "not yet" and the "not here" (Dolan, 2005: 20).

However, when we turn from the formal theatre to examples of performance that are part of everyday revolutions, the hopefulness of the utopian performative must be sustained by something more than possibility. That is, the *necessity* for change – even if it seems impossible – and for me this is prescient in what Muñoz calls concrete utopias, which 'are the realm of educated hope' (2009:3). Seeking an example of performance that does the work of building concrete utopias, that articulate what Muñoz terms 'the hopes of a collective, an emergent group', or even the 'solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many' (2009: 3), I consider the Punk Prayer and the litany of desires performed by Pussy Riot since their internationally significant actions in 2012.

Staging dissent: The Punk Prayer and Pussy Riot's trial

Pussy Riot's 40-second dance and Punk Prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was called 'blasphemous' and a trio was charged with 'hooliganism'. Kerith Woodyard demonstrates the translation of the term can also be 'holy foolishness' (2014: 269). The significance of their actions is best understood in the context of Russian traditions, the Orthodox church and existing practices of dissident art forms rather than viewed through the optics of Riot Grrrl aesthetics (Woodyard, 2014: 271). Van Ham describes the power of 'an ancient lineage of contrarian performance' (2009: 329). Put this way, 'holy foolishness' becomes a methodological counterpoint to powers that be – and in the context of Russia that refers to the dyad of church and state.

The troupe identify as an 'anti-Putin feminist punk band that carried out its media assaults on the country's major political Symbols' (Pussy Riot, 2013: 980). Their intent, evident in their statements in court as well as widely disseminated statements at the time of their arrest, was to draw attention to the imbrication of Church and State – in particular to the corrupt relationship between the head of church Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin. As one of the detained members, Yekaterina Samutsevich, put it in her closing statement at the trial:

> In the end, considering all the irreversible political and symbolic losses caused by our innocent creativity, the authorities decided to protect the public from us and our non conformist thinking. Thus ended our complicated punk adventure in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Yekaterina Samutsevich – closing statement at the trial (Pussy Riot, 2013: 976).

In the face of what Catherine Schuler calls the 'show trial' (2013), Samutsevich frames Pussy Riot's activism as 'innocent creativity' in an attempt to domesticate or even trivialize its performative force. Taking a different approach, the closing statement from defense attorney Violetta Volkova (Pussy Riot, 2013: 627) includes framing the intervention as activist:

> These women are recognized as political prisoners by international organizations such as Amnesty International, Memorial, and others. These women are not here now because they danced in church in the wrong clothes, in the wrong place, and prayed incorrectly, and made the sign of the cross the wrong way. They are here for their political beliefs. The words of the song, the words of the prayer that they performed—it is a political song, a

political prayer addressed to the Blessed Virgin.

Volkova's statement circulates on how the women are witnessed, framed or understood by external audiences, and her appeal to the international spectators highlights how political detainees are always marked by juridico-legal spectacles that can be interpreted differently on international stages. Her statement turns on the fact of 'recognition'; a call to relational spectatorship that speaks to an assumption of international recognition of the detainee's human rights. Against such international visibility of the action and the trial, these claims seem to have hardened the Russian state's response to the charge of 'hooliganism'; leading to two of the troupe members being sentenced to two years in the gulag.

Lizzie Seal offers that the post-Cold war context 'is crucial in making Pussy Riot palatable to the Western mainstream news media in ways they might not otherwise have been' (2013: 295). She shows that news coverage of the trial stages tacit approval of dissent for the troupe because they offer 'opposition to a non-Western state, which was the enemy of the USA and Britain' (2013: 297). Likewise, Groenewald signals the need for understanding Pussy Riot specifically as Russian performance of dissent (2015: 294) while recognising the hypervisibility of their actions points towards global ambivalence about Russian 'exceptionalism' (2015: 301). In this context, it is productive to consider the range of positions on staging dissent. Later, I draw attention to what the specifics of location, context and struggle can offer a wider sense of protest. Radical geographer Paul Routledge offers a means of understanding protests through spatial imaginaries. His approach is to think through how space relates to desire for change:

> individual and collective cognitive frameworks [are] constituted through the lived experiences, perceptions and conceptions of the world around them[…] They are also at work in transgressive political practices that challenge everyday understandings of places and frame certain protestors and their activities as 'out of place' (2017: 6).

This is a common aesthetic tactic of those working in insurrectionary or interventionist arts practices. The performative gesture, or the installation that does not belong draws attention to how power serves to exclude certain bodies through architectures, or infrastructures of surveillance. They manifest how spaces are characterised by denial, and also policed by violence. Creative occupation, the use of costume or unexpected tactics that resist these hegemonic spaces (as discussed by Larry Bogad, 2016) can be effective in the means by which they emphasise state brutality, and the restrictions of public space that are especially prevalent in restrictive state regimes. These tactics of activist artists are central to analysis of their effectiveness. The opening courtroom statement by Masha highlights the conscious aesthetics of the troupe:

> Tights and dresses are a part of the Pussy Riot image, and the balaclavas, identified in the indictment as "masks," are not a disguise, but a conceptual element of our image. Pussy Riot does not want the focus of attention on girls' appearances, but creates characters who express ideas (Pussy Riot, 2013: 359).

In her closing statement from the trial, Samutsevich, who was later released on appeal, said:

> I now have mixed feelings about this trial. On the one hand, we expect a guilty verdict. Compared to the judicial machine, we are nobodies, and we have lost. On the other hand, we have won. The whole world now sees that the criminal case against us has been fabricated. The system cannot conceal the repressive nature of this trial. Once again, the

> world sees Russia differently than the way Putin tries to present it at his daily international meetings (Pussy Riot, 2013: 976).

The statement promotes visibility of the cause while reflecting on the political and personal implications for the accused. In this statement, she produces a scenographic distinction of scale: on the one hand the might of the nation state and its apparatus; on the other, the (feminised, miniature yet highly visible) bodies of the accused. This explicit opposition sets the tone for how the public understands the theatricality of the law in the context of political prisoners. The trial transcripts included in *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer for Freedom* (2013) promote a consideration of the trial as a 'show' of state power (Schuler, 2013).

> *What does it mean to be Pussy Riot?*
> We're not individuals, we're women in masks. We perform anonymously—all of the attention is on the songs. The artist isn't the object, his individuality should not overshadow the creation itself.
>
> It's an honor. Still...Masha, Katia, and Nadia paid a huge price for this.
>
> The very idea is that every person, every girl can be Pussy Riot. The idea of anonymity, of mutual interchangeability — the group doesn't have a constant structure. All you have to do to become Pussy Riot is to wear a balaclava. You don't ask anyone's permission. You put on the balaclava, at work, in the office, in a store, you go to the theatre in a balaclava—you organize your own personal rebellion (Pussy Riot pamphlet cited in Schuler, 2013: 9).

By dispersing the agency and meaning of revolutionary action from the specific bodies of the performance troupe, this pamphlet statement foregrounds the theatricality of the punk actions.

Contexts of performance and resistance

Routledge (2017) reminds us of the need to attend to the particularities of place when considering 'terrains of resistance' (2017: 5). He also notes that 'social movements frequently draw upon local knowledge, cultural practices and vernacular languages to articulate their grievances' (2017: 5). This is valuable in relation to Pussy Riot because the struggle to resist state power is not universally applicable, but the specificities of religion, gender relations, militarised police and the punitive regulation of anti-authoritarian practices are particular to post-Cold war Russia (Seal, 2013; Woodyard, 2015). There may be confluences with situations elsewhere, but a glib association with Tory England, for example, as in the immersive performance *Inside Pussy Riot*, fundamentally misses out on the specific harms perpetrated by the Russian State. Aesthetic forms that seek alliance-building ought not to make spurious connections that erode the particularities of culture and place, also explored by Groeneweld as a limit of transnational solidarity (2015).

In Routledge's discussion of five forms of protest, two in particular are valuable for analysis of Pussy Riot. Firstly, he offers a means of thinking about sites of potential: 'protests that seek to stimulate the imagination concerning future scenarios about how to live' (2017: 21). This consideration of protests hinged on potential is in confluence with Dolan's utopian performatives (2005). He expounds on sites of assumption:

> which attempt to change how people think and feel about particular issues and necessitate challenging underlying beliefs and the control of mythologies. The role of

> activism here is to hijack events or mass popular spectacles using the images and signs of popular culture (2017: 22).

Where the Punk Prayer and the trial of Pussy Riot members captured the imagination of international media consumers (Groeneweld, 2015), the subsequent two-year sentence served in the Gulag by two of the members was obviously less publicly visible. Nonetheless, the experience of both Masha and Nadia was documented in poetry, by supporters and collaborators and collected in memoirs of their prison experiences *Riot Days* (Alyokhina, 2017). Some of these poems have subsequently been staged as a punk gig – also called *Riot Days* – in which Masha and her collaborators sing, recite monologues to projections of images and documentation of Pussy Riot's antiauthoritarian actions and artistic interventions. The gig (which I watched in Manchester) highlights the embodied experience of incarceration for Masha – emphasising the pains of imprisonment – uses a DIY punk aesthetic to further amplify resistance against the regime. Critic John Robb from louderthanwar.com calls the feminist troupe 'pranksters', likening them to 'situationists working from the purest of punk template[s] where ideas and action counted for more than anything' (2017: online). The music and choreography work to stage desire for another world; and to signal revolt against the incarceration of political prisoners. Yet, it is important to note that claims of performance *as* resistance are not proven in terms of effects or outcomes. This is especially the case when punk music, poetry or performative actions are staged in the face or (or indeed in the wake of) totalitarian attempts to quash dissent.

Instead, what I want to highlight here is the specific importance of aesthetics in activist/ antiauthoritarian performance work. 'Manifesting desire' can help explore the value of aesthetics for critique of prison and incarceration and for furthering an abolitionist movement. Bogad proposes that there is the necessity to develop strategies beyond direct action, and conceives of how the aesthetics and tactics must be developed from below (2016). This is explored in relation to prison abolition by Jason Lydon, who says that:

> Conceptions of abolition come out of communities most impacted by the prison industrial complex and are told through stories of survival; in mediocre to amazing prisoner poetry; when resistance chants outside of police stations; and through the actions of thieves, sex-workers, saboteurs, and others considered criminal by the state (2012: 197).[2]

Lydon's point is that form and aesthetic is tied to direct experience of marginalisation and struggle, as incarcerated subjects seeking abolition: in other words, an appeal to the primacy of authenticity. This is in contrast to experiences of carcerality that is extrapolated and rarified in artistic practice. For abolitionists, the 'quality' of activist work is not as important as the political efficacy of the effort. Although I find a continuum of effort vs. aesthetic or use vs. ornament limiting, Lydon's engagement with where anarchy and abolition intersects with artistic practices allows for a productive framing of the work by Les Enfants Terrible, staged as an immersive production using testimonial materials from Nadia Tolokonnikova.

Inside Pussy Riot: Performing labour and the limits of authenticity in immersive performance

[2] Lydon says' it takes more than articles, hand-holding, or hand jobs to build these relationships and to create effective strategies for winning when strategizing to abolish the prison industrial complex, many more voices are needed at the table. Transgender women of color, working-class faggots, and anarchist dykes, who are all directly targeted by police surveillance and criminalization of their lives, need to be prioritized as experts on the violence of the prison industrial complex' (2012: 199).

Upon arriving at the Saatchi Gallery in West London, individual audience members are canvassed for their most strongly held political views by means of a pre-show questionnaire. The premise appears to be that we are there to take part in a political action in a holy site – a temple with stained glass panels that seem to reference British politicos and Grenfell Tower. The aesthetic is colourful, consumable and cheerful. As participants, we quickly become drawn into staging a 'protest' with fabricated placards that we wield half-heartedly in the chapel, where we are captured, and undergo police interrogation. Then, in a humiliating few minutes, we are subjected to the ritual degradation of a plant in the audience by a shouting female police officer. Eventually, we are taken into a prisoner-processing area in which we are admonished, given overalls and taken into a workshop to simulate prison work.

Until that point, participants were bewilderingly compliant with the power games of the authorities. There was little sense of resistance, though the coercion of 'playing along' required by forms of immersive theatre meant that we were thrust into scenarios of prison labour. In the gulag workshop, where there were piles of pins that needed sorting, or bronze coins that needed to be arranged, prisoners (participants) were seated next to one another to complete their tasks. These are characterised by mundanity and repetition along with meaningless instructions. In this and the subsequent spaces, participants are firmly cast in the role of prisoners, being humiliated, shouted at and made to do meaningless activities. Nonetheless, audiences smile at one another, not enduring much in their few minutes of the regime's simulation. We play along, but never particularly understand the futility of menial prison workshop labour. The experience is strangely apolitical, bizarrely lacking hope, and certainly not including space for resistance. It is a piece that hints at, but never approaches, desire for change. In addition, as Adam Alston points out, the trappings of the tycoon Saatchi's commercial interests attached to the production are in direct opposition to the show's performative resistance of 'oppression' (2019: 239) resulting in a form of 'cognitive dissonance' (2019: 240). The institutional and funding contexts of this immersive work expose the weakness of the claims of participation by implicating 'participating audiences in the ideologies it opposes' (2019: 249).

Sarah Bartley engages with the political performativity of unemployed bodies undertaking work in participatory performance, she acknowledges arts practices that rely on unpaid labour 'risk reinforcing what feminist scholar Kathi Weeks has called the 'reification and depoliticization' of work (2011: 140, cited in Bartley, 2017: 68). *Inside Pussy Riot's* prison workshop is not, however, meant to incorporate audience/participants as labourers whose actions contribute to the meaning of the production. In that sense, their labour required is symbolic, cursory and strategic: it is a theatrical trick designed to inform empathetic bonds between the spectators and the gulag detainees who must endure similar mindless work that has little value. Criminologist Loïc Wacquant offers a critical perspective on how understandings of incarceration are bound up in other neoliberal modes and regimes.

> The theatricalization of penality has migrated from the state to the commercial media and the political field *in toto*, and it has extended from the final ceremony of sanction to encompass the full penal chain, with a privileged place accorded to police operations in low-income districts and courtroom confrontations around celebrity defendants (Wacquant, 2010: 206).

Wacquant's critique here alludes to the ambiguity of regimes of visibility. This suggests that when prison comes into view via celebrity trials, there is a focus on the cult of personality rather than on the issues related to conditions of incarceration. Furthermore, Seal's perspective from

cultural criminology demonstrates how Pussy Riot fits 'a particular post-Cold war narrative, in which the West can embody progressive freedom and democracy, and Russia can be castigated for old fashioned repression and authoritarianism' (2013: 299). In this sense, then, Pussy Riot's strategic mediated hypervisibility as celebrity defendants highlights the tension of global audiences of totalitarian 'exceptionalism' (Seal, 2013) that risks depoliticisng the specific issues of women's criminalisation in Russia, the conditions of incarceration and the ongoing repression of dissent.

Limitations of representing prison: Manifesting desire[3]

The context of performance and resistance leads to what is at the core of my critique – which is a sense of the limitations of representing prison conditions in relation to what that can *do* for revolution or abolition. This is because simulations (such as the *Inside Pussy Riot* installations) do not allow for desire, not least because time spent in each location is limited and audiences are never allowed to stay in the conditions of incarceration. This is not to suggest that it is only in durational work that the possibility of desire is to be found; but rather the force and urgency of changing such conditions requires a different kind of engagement with the idea of prison. Further, I strongly resist a binary of aesthetics versus 'effective' activist resistance that relies on normative claims. The very purpose of turning to modes of cultural production is to challenge the daily repression that tyrannical regimes, austerity or other oppressive conditions impose on the human imagination. For me, from the vantage point of cultural criminology, it is important to view aesthetic forms that seek to intervene in any way with deviance, criminalisation and punishment as potentially contributing towards greater visibility of the issues endemic to carceral states. This shifts us towards arts *in* and *as* activism.

In their immersive mode of performance, Les Enfants Terrible pose sanitised aesthetic experiences that propel participants into spaces, affects and modes of relation that are designed around the difference between 'knowing' and 'experiencing'. For critic Holly Williams in *The Independent,* this is reflected in the aesthetic framing by Les Enfants Terrible, which she calls 'deliberately non-ominous and feminine' (2018: online). Drawing on the allure of authenticity that predominates in participatory forms, critic for *The Guardian* Hannah Jane Parkinson says:

> The show is strongest when the horrific testimonies of real prisoners leak through the speakers. And a call-to-arms monologue from Tolokonnikova is inspiring. It's just that the juxtaposition of the absurdist, circus atmosphere in a show that bills itself as "not for the faint-hearted" doesn't really work – people end up laughing at genuinely funny bits rather than nervous-giggling out of fear (2017: online).

In the context of prison, and the incarceration of Pussy Riot members for creating insurrectionary art interventions, anarchic desire manifests itself in the building of a movement, or the consequence of visibility for their cause that is forged by their incarceration. The critics' insistence on the power of the 'real' imprisonment at the heart of the show is what engenders a hope for revolt. Yet, *Inside Pussy Riot*'s immersive pastel prison is more inviting than revolting. If in pursuit of imagining a world in which totalitarian legal systems incarcerating 'holy fools' is

[3] Another performance that is worthy of critical attention is Pussy Riot's collaboration with Belarus Free Theatre: *Burning Doors*. See Belarus Free Theatre (2016) and Mark Lawson's review for *The Guardian* (2016).

absurd and abhorrent, this performance falls short. What is essential for anarchists is the concept of non-alienated production, to which *real revolution* owes much, according to Graeber:

> Surely there must be a link between the actual experience of first imagining things and then bringing them into being, individually or collectively, and the ability to envision social alternatives—particularly, the possibility of a society itself premised on less alienated forms of creativity (2002: 73).

Pic 2: artistic response to Pussy Riot, Walsh, 2019.

This poses a challenge for performance itself which can manifest desire as a hopeful site for the proliferation of actions yet-to-come. Muñoz says that 'the "should be" of utopia, its indeterminacy and its deployment of hope, stand against capitalism's ever expanding and exhausting force-field of how things "are and will be"' (2009: 99). It is this mode of politicised becoming through resisting the hegemonies of prefabricated culture and commodified subculture that are particular to punk epistemologies (Clark, 2003).

The critical reception of *Inside Pussy Riot* reveals the hope that audiences are looking for in representations of suffering. Audiences appear to want to imagine freedom as a welcome relief from prison's harsh realities. Williams' critique in *The Independent* finds a problem in the satirical aesthetic that she feels undermines experience of incarceration. 'Sending up power is, of course, a potent way of puncturing it – but the rapid leaps from snarling at oppressors to telling how women genuinely suffered is step-change that doesn't come off. It actually feels a little disrespectful' (2017: online). Similarly, Anna Winter in *The Stage* refers to a moral imperative to 'do justice' to Pussy Riot members' suffering, saying 'Tolokonnikova's own words are drowned out by barked orders'. Her approach here signals a privileging of 'real' voice of the formerly incarcerated Pussy Riot member with the theatrical trappings of Les Enfants Terrible's stylistic misfire: 'The circus aesthetic of the courtroom, with its elaborately made-up, cackling judge and giant nodding dog, doesn't really do justice to the grimly repressive realities of the Russian state' (2017: online). One wonders whether a representation could ever hope to simulate the grim facticity of brutality, containment and mundanity of prison conditions. Indeed, as Alston goes on to show, 'desire for protest, albeit highly sanitised, is corralled into a setting that supports its objects of critique' (2019: 249).

For me, this attests to the core paradox at work in immersive performance about protest: the form's proximity encourages audiences to dwell within the imagined context. Without politics, or the 'edge' of other forms (including punk gigs), the form risks what critic Andrzej Lukowski calls the aesthetic domestication of revolutionary action in *Time Out*, saying 'It's not so much Pussy Riot's suffering being laid bare as pop culture's embrace of that suffering' (2017: online). This leads me to the enduring questions of whether, and in which ways, representations serve to dismantle state institutions such as prisons. The role of theatre, gigs and exhibitions is not generally burdened with the pressure of toppling regimes, but they can engage with the structures of feeling and resistance to a public not necessarily engaged in that struggle.

Thus far, I have attended to the performative dimensions of Pussy Riot's trial; considered the punk show *Riot Days,* and then offered a critical interrogation of *Inside Pussy Riot* in terms of the promise of utopian performatives discussed by Dolan (2005). This final section draws out my thinking, via these works of performance, variously constituted around aesthetics of protest, punk and participation.

Manifesting desire is a process. Pussy Riot's punk and DIY aesthetics and constant revisiting of their core themes of anti-dictatorship and antifascism relies on a collective artistic process with a range of collaborators. If manifesting desire is a process, it means we are able to labour through performance to manifest resistance. Just as with sexual desire, it circulates between objects, imagination and longing, occasionally also located in experience. Desire in and of itself is a process and does not only get satisfied in resolution. My critical project has been to consider the limits of participation in performance to reach beyond a critique of aesthetics. Instead, I have used the performance form to draw on anarchist thought, I have urged for the validity of the ambiguous, processual 'becoming' rather than engaging with fixed or definitive proof of revolutionary change. In the terms of performance, then, forms and aesthetics that expose this ambiguity are worthy of critical attention.

Pussy Riot's 'hooligans' emerge via 'holy foolishness' (Woodyard, 2014) not merely as avatars for activism that make a sexy headline image, but because resistance must be put into practice. Their imprisonment and subsequent rise to prominence in artistic collaborations exemplifies the anarchist processes of networks of solidarity and the need for practices to extend beyond a core group for real change to be possible. *Manifesting desire* is a practice – it does not happen overnight and must be rehearsed, re-staged, revised and re-imagined through labouring on the skills, aesthetics, and tactics that it adopts.

Expanding my introductory critical framing of participation and its relationship with authenticity, the hypervisibility of Pussy Riot members' incarceration means that there is a kind of unquestioned centrality of the prison experience of Nadia and Masha. This lends a circuit of logic: the initial punk prayer resisted a punitive regime; the punitive regime proceeded to mete out excessive punishment; and therefore the resistance is lauded as valid, courageous and necessary. Where a less obvious moralising circuit occurs is when the experiences are replicated on stage and in the gig while not also attending to the institutions, regimes, and monetary systems that enable the circulation of global art commodities.

The consideration of how power is produced as a mode of relation between spectators and artistic interventions is arguably at the centre of punk scholarship (Clark, 2003). In this article, I consider three very different forms of performance with a connection to Pussy Riot to develop a consideration of power, punishment and spectacle. What remains to be interrogated is the question of whether representations *can* and *do* serve to dismantle state institutions such as prisons, or whether replications of gulags merely disintegrate any activist, anarchist potential of performance. This is unlike the domestication of revolution discussed by Williams in *Inside Pussy Riot* who says the play 'suffers from a common ailment of immersive theatre: audiences want the play to go well, and know there's no real peril, so they play along' (2017: online). Although the critical responses to Les Enfant Terrible here prevail upon the tension between authenticity and aesthetics, I do not wish to replicate an anti-theatrical prejudice (Barish, 1985). Rather, I consider the three modes of performance as fulfilling different paths in to manifesting desire that sets the ground for anarchy as method. When circulated on prison and an anarchist, abolitionist critique of representations of incarceration, performance aesthetics must open up space for resistance that is messy, complex, and in process. The alternative – when violence, state coercion and totalitarianism are fixed installations to be visited and consumed – does little to manifest desire.

Live work:

Inside Pussy Riot. Produced by Les Enfants Terrible, (Saatchi Gallery, 2017)

Riot Days. Produced by Pussy Riot, (UK Tour, 2017/2018)

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