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Post-Pussy Riot: art and protest in Russia today

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This article shows that resistance and a critical discourse continue in the arts, especially in visual art, in Russia under the present political conditions when free speech has been seriously circumscribed. When in May 2012 Vladimir Putin was reinstalled as president with a new authoritarian conservative agenda, it was expected that the situation for culture would change. This article addresses the question of whether a critical discourse survived in the arts under the new conditions. It presents the new political context for the arts, and provides examples of various artistic strategies of resistance/protest in Russian contemporary art by applying Jacques Ranciere's concept of dissensus. The focus is on visual art, although references are also made to the world of theater. The first section presents the new official role given to culture and the new state cultural policy as components of a reactionary backlash against the reform policies under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, and describes conflicts around art and art productions that followed from the new state policy. A second section gives examples of dissensus in art today by presenting artworks by Piotr Pavlenskii, Arsenii Zhilyaev, Stas Shuripa, and Anna Titova.

Keywords: Russian contemporary art; art and protest; Medinskii and cultural policy; Pavlenskii

Introduction

What has happened to the Russian art scene and to protest in art since the performance by Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in central Moscow on 21 February 2012? This action came to symbolize the divide between two epochs of Russian political development. After the mass protest that followed the announcement of the results of the December parliamentary elections, the members of Pussy Riot were filled with a euphoric belief that protest could have a real impact on Russian political life. Instead, their protest was one of the last acts of resistance before the pendulum swung toward the full extent of ultra-conservative reaction. By 7 May, Vladimir Putin had been reinstalled as president with a new authoritarian conservative agenda that would have far-reaching consequences for Russian politics and society.

This article discusses what happened to protest in the art world in the new political climate after May 2012. It might be expected that a conservative turn in policy would affect the arts not only with regard to freedom of expression, but also because the entire scale of official values had changed. A reinterpretation of art from a conservative standpoint often makes artworks controversial that previously would not have been considered so. It

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might be expected that the authorities would try to remove art's critical edge and promote more conformist art. The Russian art scene in the first decade of the twenty-first century had remained relatively free from state intervention even after government policy became more authoritarian. This relative freedom had been a precondition for the role art played in the years preceding the mass demonstrations of 2011–2012 (Jonson 2015). Now the situation could be expected to alter. This article asks: How did the political context of art change after May 2012? What characterizes the new official political agenda? How did state cultural policy change? Did a critical discourse on art continue under the new political conditions?

Pussy Riot and protest in Russian contemporary art

Pussy Riot was an exception in the Russian art world. Although recognized as an artistic act by the contemporary art community, the performances by the group carried open political messages, such as when they pleaded in the Cathedral for the Virgin Mary for Putin to be driven away. Protest had become a growing tendency within the Moscow contemporary art scene in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but most of that protest was in the subtle form that French philosopher Jacques Ranciere called "dissensus" (Jonson 2015), a definition derived from his concept of the "distribution of the sensible" by which he means "configurations of the sensory landscape of what is seen and unseen, audible and inaudible, how certain objects and phenomena are related and who can appear as a subject at certain times and places" (Ranciere 2004; Tanke 2011, 2). He calls *consensus* the established distribution of the sensible, while *dissensus* is the questioning of the established view – in the dispute over "what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given" (Ranciere [2010] 2011, 69). Dissensus in art becomes visible in art through the interpretation of the spectator.

In contrast to the politically outspoken performances of Pussy Riot, most of the protest in art during the 2000s was highly ambiguous – the critical component of these artworks was left open to interpretation. Most of this art could be categorized as *art of an other gaze,* a subtle form of dissensus in which the questioning of established concepts is sometimes hardly visible.[1] The artists often deny any political motifs or motivations, but art of an other gaze can function "subversively" through its mere "otherness." *Dissent art*, by contrast, is defined by its open disagreement with the official consensus. Its impact is often indirect rather than direct, and plays on phantasmagoria, the absurd, and laughter. It follows in the tradition of the "ontological anarchism" of the early avant-garde of the 1910s (Gurianova 2012), as well as the jokes, parody, and mockery of the Soviet underground Sots-Art of the 1970s and 1980s, but also the "anti-world" of the carnival culture of medieval times which laughed at everything sacred, established, and represented by the authority of the church or state (Iurkov 2003; Ozerkov 2009).

The third category, *engaged art*, in which Pussy Riot's performances are placed, contains openly political messages. Pussy Riot arrived at the peak of a process of politicization within society in general and the art scene in particular.

The context: the swinging pendulum of politics

Putin's openly declared conservative agenda looked like a full swing of the pendulum in the diametrically opposite direction to the reform efforts of Gorbachev and Yeltsin in the 1980s and 1990s. This reactionary swing had been coming for some time. Yet, even though Putin's policy had become more and more authoritarian over the years, it had lacked an explicitly ideological worldview. It was now time for this component to be spelled out.

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Putin's slogan of "stability" was embraced in the early years of the century, and the authoritarian methods he introduced for handling crises and managing institutions met little resistance. Russian society during his first two presidential terms was characterized by "de-politization," whereby everything "political – whether pro-regime or anti-regime – was rejected by people who instead withdrew into the private sphere" (Erpyleva and Magun 2015). As the Russian political system became more authoritarian, politicians from the liberal wing were swept off the political landscape and liberal voices were excluded from the public debate, the public field of ideas was instead opened up to various authoritarian conservatives. All kinds of Orthodox religious, pro-Soviet, monarchist, Eurasian-imperialist, and old European radical-conservative ideas spread. The conservative groups that had started out at the margins during the 1990s and built their institutions in the early 2000s were much more visible in the public debate by the end of the first decade of the new century.

When the 2008 international financial crisis hit Russia, the Russian government had no clear strategic direction. There was no clear idea of how to develop the country and no meta-narrative to show the way.[2] In this vacuum, Russian society appeared to fall under the spell of a combination of indifference, cynicism, selfishness, and nihilism. The government oscillated between a desire for reform and rejection of reform. The crisis and the lack of a consistent government response triggered several processes in society. On the one hand, President Dmitrii Medvedev's call for modernization in September 2009 gave rise to hopes and expectations that a reform policy might be possible. This led to the mass protests after the declaration of the results of the December 2011 parliamentary elections, which further triggered the conservative reaction.

In November 2009, "conservatism" was written into the program of the United Russia Party (Bilevskaia et al. 2009). Boris Gryzlov, Putin's deputy as party leader at that time, declared that conservatism meant stability, development, spirituality, and patriotism but also fully corresponded with Medvedev's modernization ("Sokhranit i priumnozhit" 2009). In truth, Gryzlov's conservatism prioritized the status quo in order to prevent drastic and rapid social change, but Putin's support was falling and the regime needed a more "dynamic" conservative approach. Militant conservative meta-narratives had already been formulated within small "critical communities" of various shades of radical authoritarian conservative thought (Jonson forthcoming). Their voices were now being listened to.

Putin's efforts to formulate a concept that would unify the nation and legitimize the regime concentrated on formulating a collective identity of "we Russians."[3] Although the Orthodox Church played a crucial role in defining this concept and providing it with content, the ideational inspiration for its values and visions came from various sources. These can be traced back to Russian state conservative traditions of the Tsarist period (*samoderzhavie*, *pravoslavie*, *narodnost* – autocracy, Orthodoxy, nationality), the Soviet Stalinist period, but also to ideas of the radical-conservative tradition that had peaked in Europe in the inter-war period.[4] The ideas of Carl Schmitt, among others, had found their way into Russian political and academic circles. Among the major common denominators of these different strands, which were now recurring in Putin's new consensus, were: a priority given to the interests of the state, a belief in the nation and the people as a single whole, an authoritarian hierarchy, a strong leader representing the common will, patriotism and religion as moral-political guidelines, the choice of a "special path" for the country based on its unique traditions and values,[5] and, finally, an obsession with international plots and an ever-present external and internal enemy. The new Russian obsession with the "enemy" seemed to follow Schmitt's arguments.

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Putin's new presidential agenda was immediately felt and strongly influenced the political climate in the country. There was a clamp down on the protest movement. New laws were rushed through the Duma in the summer and autumn of 2012, and special state programs were set up to secure the implementation of policies to strengthen patriotic, religious, and moral-political values. Putin's speech at the Valdai Club in September 2013, where he reiterated the importance of identity in the spiritual, cultural, and national senses and called directly for the restoration of a cultural code ("Vystuplenie Vladimira" 2013) was endorsed by conservatives as a first positive step forward in the reintroduction of an official state ideology,[6] a concept which had been banned under the 1993 Russian Constitution.[7]

The new understanding of state cultural policy

Putin's words turned the political focus directly on to culture and its role in strengthening the new state worldview.[8] Drafts for guidelines for a new state cultural policy were presented in the spring of 2014 in order to create a framework for the Duma's upcoming legislation in the cultural sphere. The final version of "The Foundations for a New State Cultural Policy" was signed as a decree by the president in December of that year (Putin 2014). The progress of the document reflected disagreements within government. The decree was a modified version of a draft, published in May and written by a group in the presidential administration, which in turn had been a polished version of an initial paper prepared by the Ministry of Culture and published in April ("Minkultury izlozhilo" 2014; "Osnovy gosudarstvennoi" 2014).[9] The April paper had been written in highly ideological language and met with strong resistance. In spite of the more neutral wording and formulations in later versions, the major ideational pillars of the April paper remained.

The first pillar was the idea that Russia is unique. The April document bluntly emphasized this idea by declaring that "Russia is not Europe." This formulation was dropped from the May version after strong criticism from, among others, several members of the Russian Academy of Sciences.[10] The May document described Russia as a unique civilization but as part of world civilization, and as neither the "West" nor the "East" but bridging these two worlds. This formulation was maintained in the decree. The April document had described the specific Russian value set as a rejection of the "liberal-Western postulate" of universal values, and as consisting instead of a "united" national code of values characterized as "traditional," "conservative," and rooted first and foremost in Orthodox Christianity. Russia's uniqueness was emphasized also in the following versions but the specific Russian national mentality was now referred to as a unique "set of moral, ethical and aesthetic values" (Putin 2014). In spite of its sophisticated formulations, the final document strongly emphasized the role of Orthodoxy in forming the national value system.[11] The Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, portrayed Putin as a true defender of traditional European values, quoting his statement that many Western countries had abandoned their roots in Christian values (Iarotskii 2014).

The second pillar was an instrumentalist view of culture. All three documents strongly believed in the educational and enlightening function of culture. Although the strident formulations of the April document were abandoned, the idea remained that the purpose of state cultural policy was to strengthen national values and the moral orientation of the individual through the use of culture. Culture was defined as the spiritual experience of the country and the "collection of moral and ethical values," which was to be handed on to future generations.[12] Fostering patriotism and national pride now became its major tasks (Putin 2014). Even though the formulations had been toned down in the decree, they still opened the door to a more militantly conservative approach to the role of culture.

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Culture was now given the task of fostering a worldview on patriotism and Orthodoxy through the education system (school curricula, history textbooks), the media, and cultural outputs (film, theater, the visual arts, etc.).

The need for a new conservative value system had been reflected in official statements in 2013. Valentina Matvienko, Chairman of the Federal Council, for example, declared that, "Russia has long since been in need of new cultural standards, since we have witnessed in the past ten years an intervention of ideas that are alien to our culture" (Samarina 2013). Thus, the ideas in the April draft were widely held and so were its words that references to the freedom of creativity could never legitimize "behavior that is unacceptable from the perspective of the traditional Russian system of values." Moreover, even if the final version rejected the April document's call for censorship – its request to cautiously scrutinize cultural products in order "not to accept the capitulation of Russian values to values alien to Russia" – the idea that a censorship function was necessary would soon appear in statements by senior state officials during the scandal around the opera production of *Tannhäuser* in Novosibirsk.

The annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 and the war in Ukraine further strengthened the new conservative paradigm. The enemy could now be expected anywhere, and Matvienko's words were therefore given deeper meaning and had greater consequences for the cultural sphere.

Thus, a new official consensus, in Ranciere's sense, found its form in authoritarian conservatism and the dynamics of society pressed further along this trajectory. According to the new official consensus, culture was now a major instrument for remaking people's worldviews and orientations. This was a completely new approach for post-Soviet Russia and contained flashbacks to the reactionary cultural policies of both Tsar Nicolai I and Stalin.

State cultural policy in practice

The distinctly conservative figure of Vladimir Medinskii was well placed for the position of minister of culture. A historian and the author of a series of books entitled *Myths about Russia*, his views were well known when he was appointed in May 2012. One critic characterized his views as Russian "Weimar *ressentiment*," that is, feelings of national indignation over the lost position of a once great power (Morozov 2012).

In contrast to his predecessors, who had left the cultural sphere to fend for itself, Medinskii actively intervened in cultural life. He embarked on a reorganization of cultural institutions. Citing economic efficiency and strict management, he merged, reorganized, or closed institutions, replaced respected directors with young, loyal managers,[13] and actively used the allocation of resources as a carrot or stick to persuade institutions to follow state policy. He demonstrated an interest in hands-on decision-making early on. The film sector became the first field in which he directly intervened and critics perceived this to be a model for how Medinskii intended to gain control over other cultural sectors too (Borisova 2012). His combination of appointing loyal people, steering the flow of monetary support, and setting up expert councils was seen as an effort to redesign cultural life according to the new conservative paradigm.

It was soon obvious that Medinskii was targeting the critical edge of contemporary culture. When it came to visual art, he did not understand it and he did not like it. Although the ministry continued to finance the lion's share of the Moscow biennale of contemporary art, and Medinskii opened the 2013 event, his words about its major exhibit received huge media attention: "I kept thinking: Why doesn't anyone shout 'the king is naked?'" He asked rhetorically:

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> Why do we, under the label of contemporary art, have to see something abstract – cubic, clumsy, in the form of a pile of bricks? And, moreover, it is paid for with public money! Not to mention that it is incomprehensible to the vast majority of the inhabitants of Russia. (Yablokov 2013)

Medinskii's deputy, Vladimir Aristarkhov, announced that the ministry planned to sponsor art that was beautiful and had a "positive impact on people" (Lapina 2014). His words appeared to be a clear indication of where the ministry was heading: toward favoring more traditional, figurative, decorative, and optimistic art (Kurdiukova 2014).

While the ministry prioritized academic and traditional folk art under this policy, it did not give up its support for contemporary visual art.[14] Instead, the ministry tried to widen the concept of "contemporary" art to denote all living artists,[15] and then took a selective approach to this wider group. Thus, a redefinition took place of what constitutes contemporary art and under what conditions the state would support art projects. The consequences of Medinskii's targeting of contemporary culture for cultural life were illustrated in 2014 and 2015 when conflicts developed around various theater productions. In April 2015, Medinskii intervened to fire the head of the Novosibirsk State Theatre of Opera and Ballet during a controversy over a production of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* in Novisibirsk. After the Metropolit, the bishop of the region, mobilized his congregation and took the theater manager and the director to court, accusing them of "offending the feelings of Orthodox believers," Medinskii criticized the head of the theatre and the director for "lack of respect for traditional values" and demanded that they apologize in public. When they refused, the minister fired the manager, Boris Mezdrich. In the spring of 2015, several theater productions based on classical Russian and foreign texts were criticized for deviating from established theater tradition of how these plays usually were staged, or for being in any sense "non-traditional" or "foreign" (Davydova 2015; "Institut naslediia" 2015).[16] A campaign was initiated against the Russian international theater festival "The Golden Mask" when in May 2015 Aristarkhov declared: "there is a theater festival which from year to year supports performances which obviously contradict moral norms, provoke society and include elements of Russophobia, despise the history of our country and consciously go beyond moral boundaries" (Arkhangel'skii 2015). The Golden Mask festival was soon reorganized to fall in line with state policy. Thus, conservative critics had successfully turned their focus on experimental and radical small theaters such as the Moscow theatre Teatr.doc, as well as the staging of classic texts at traditional theaters and opera houses.

The official buzzwords when criticizing art exhibitions and theater productions were "offending the feelings of religious believers"[17] and "violating traditional Russian values." The first term had already been applied in most major conflicts around art in the 2000s. The second now became code for cultural productions accused of anything from "homosexual propaganda," to being "immoral" (by showing nakedness) or "vulgar" (by using street language or swearing). Accusations of being unpatriotic often followed accusations of "painting too bleak a picture of Russian social life" (*chernukha*), thereby "distorting" Russian reality by discussing the dark sides of Russian history or criticizing historical figures.

Medinskii explained his behavior by claiming that state cultural policy was in line with the opinions of the broad mass of the population. Art paid for by taxpayers was not supposed to create tension or conflict in society – people do not like controversial art. Instead, such art has to be appreciated by a broad section of the population (Medinskii 2015). Medinskii's major concern was political in the most direct way. This was obvious when in the summer of 2015 he stated how important it is to create a loyal cultural

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intelligentsia to avoid a situation in which the intelligentsia ends up at the frontline of criticism of the regime. As examples, he mentioned the February Revolution of 1917 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in August 1991, when each time the intelligentsia had turned against the regime (Kobrin 2015; Medinskii 2015).[18] The state, he said, is obliged not only to financially support culture but also to ensure that "the moral values of the Russian civilization" are upheld (Medinskii 2015). In addition, he announced a new policy of selecting loyal cadres in the cultural sphere:

> We have to focus on people who harmoniously unite creative, business-like and managerial skills, who are capable to solve not only administrative tasks but also to sense the environment where it takes place. Moreover, there are the tasks of the state cultural policy – to understand them and be able to put them into practice … . (Medinskii 2015)

In other words, to Medinskii the major issue was how to create a loyal, pro-regime cultural sphere.

Conservative aesthetic ideals on their way, or anything goes?

It seemed almost to be a statement of a new state aesthetics when on 4 November 2015, the Day of National Unity, the Manezh exhibition hall in central Moscow opened two new exhibitions. The main one, "Orthodox Rus. Russia is My History, 1914–1945: From Great Shocks to the Great Victory," was organized by the Patriarchate's Committee on Culture and by the private Fund of Vasilii the Great. The exhibition provided an overview of the life of the Church and of the greatness of Russia's successes and victories during these years, as well as the price in terms of human suffering. The second exhibition, "Romantic Realism: Soviet Painting, 1925–1945," for which the Ministry of Culture and the State Exhibition Centre (ROSIZO) were responsible, was shown in the basement of the Manezh. Most of the famous painters during the years of the Stalinist Grand Style of Socialist Realism, such as Alexander Gerasimov, Isaak Brodskii, and Alexander Lakhtionov, were exhibited together with painters who had been forced into the margins during these years, among them Alexander Labas, Alexander Deineka, and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (Gulin 2015).

Exhibiting art from this highly complicated period without texts to explain its function and the context in which it was produced prepared the way for a murky mental soup of nostalgia, which made many art critics highly skeptical about the exhibition. Without an understanding of the purpose or the logic of the exhibition, one art critic concluded: "The content, concept and general purpose of 'Romantic Realism' are impossible to explain in terms other than ethical and aesthetic blindness – or by bureaucratic slyness and cynicism. A complex combination of all four factors is possible … " (Diakonov 2015). The three curators – among them the director of the Tretyakov Gallery, Zelfira Tregulova, and the theater director, Eduard Boiakov – were accused of "presenting the art of the Stalin period as a beautiful myth and making it the object of romantic fantasies." Diakonov concluded:

> One can hardly think of a worse way to serve Soviet art. Instead of the possibility of examining it in detail, you find here an affectionate sealing of the socialist-realist myth which has become a completely harmless 'guilty pleasure,' and this is nothing but a plain disservice. (*Kommersant* 2015)

State policy toward the arts followed the new directives. State financing for the 2015 Moscow biennale of contemporary art was cut by almost half ("Minkultury vydelilo" 2015). Financing for contemporary art projects and state art centers was reduced in favor of financing conservative projects by traditional institutions, or artists who competed

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according to criteria such as who was able to attract the largest number of visitors. The Moscow contemporary art scene, however, remained dominated by private sector galleries, which guaranteed a certain degree of openness to controversial contemporary art. As a result, art in state and private sector establishments developed along two parallel but separate lines (Kurdiukova 2015). Nonetheless, both state cultural policy and the general political climate had a negative impact on private sector venues, which also tried to avoid controversial exhibitions.

One major question was whether conservative aesthetic ideals would now fully determine what was to be financed and permitted by state and municipal cultural institutions. It was obvious that the state wanted a loyal art scene but it remained an open question whether an aesthetic standard would be spelled out for a figurative, traditional, or decorative art. Many have highlighted the postmodern eclecticism of Russian society in the 2000s, and the fluid conditions that made it possible for skillful regime spin doctors such as Vladislav Surkov to cynically manipulate political actors and processes in the service of those in power. This preparedness to use and exploit whoever and whatever as long as the political aims of the regime were respected is brilliantly described by Peter Pomerantsev in his book *Nothing is True, Everything is Possible* (Pomerantsev 2015).

If the regime was prepared to accept and exploit whatever was useful, it would not be surprising if the regime supported the use of language, forms, and genres capable of attracting a young generation but not to the liking of all older conservatives. In fact, state and municipal money was spent on street art, festivals of graffiti, and art actions, which might not be expected of a conservative regime, as long as they dealt with regime-loyal topics such as "Crimea is Ours" (*Krym Nash*).

An interview with Eduard Boiakov in October 2015 seemed to provide a hint about such a new direction. Boiakov, the creator and leader of the experimental and trendy Moscow theater, *Praktika*, had played an important role in developing contemporary theater and new Russian drama in the early 2000s. He had followed Marat Gelman to the city of Perm in an attempt to expand the reach of contemporary culture into the provinces. In 2013, he was appointed the head of the State Academy of Art in the city of Voronezh, a position he held until May 2015. In the October 2015 interview, he presented himself as a "new conservative" – and an Orthodox (Christian) – who welcomed the new state cultural policy, and declared himself loyal to the state's wider policies, first and foremost the annexation of Crimea which he enthusiastically endorsed (Koval'skaia 2015). Declaring that "[t]he quintessence of our culture lies in religious art," he stressed that the arts needed a new language in the wider communicative sense of the word. An infrastructure of contemporary art now existed and so did its methods and techniques. Therefore, the emphasis should now be on the ideational content. He rejected what he called "the liberal civilizational paradigm" and the values of Western curators, and argued instead in favor of a matrix of Russian values. Although he was of the opinion that the aesthetic code of today is universal, he warned that a contemporary aesthetic language might come under threat in the struggle for the "right" content of values: "The danger seems to me as a patriot that when fighting against single sex marriages we may also throw out a contemporary language, a contemporary code and a contemporary design" (Koval'skaia 2015). Boiakov, however, said he saw a way out of this dilemma.

The "new conservative" Boiakov is an example of how the political wind in Russian society had changed. It came as no surprise when later in October Boiakov was appointed curator of the No. 66 Kultura pavilion at the VDNKh exposition center, which was originally built for a Soviet-era permanent exhibition on the successes of the planned economy. The new project, named Kultprosvet, is supported by the Ministry of Culture

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and ROSIZO, and will be completely dedicated to contemporary theater, film, music, and visual art (Palatkina 2015).

In the interview, Boiakov singled out one artist, Aleksei Morozov, he considered representative of a new and interesting direction in art – a young and talented artist whose sculptures of neoclassical forms, references to contemporary life, and interesting mix of materials seemed to respond to the need for both beauty and creativity. While Morozov's art works were open to various interpretations, they at the same time seemed to avoid transgressions into controversial criticism. Was this a sign of a new conservative aesthetic in the making?

It also seemed no coincidence when Ivan Demidov, a well-known conservative who had previously been close to Vladislav Surkov and was later Medinskii's deputy minister of culture for a time, was appointed head of the Fund for the Development of Contemporary Art. Initiated by the Kremlin in June 2015, and under the supervision of Viacheslav Volodin in the presidential administration, the fund was registered as a public organization to be financed by private means (Nagornykh 2015). Its purpose is to initiate and support projects in the visual arts, film, and theater, in "the search for a new language" that is appropriate for society, he said repeating the words of Boiakov on the need for a new language of the arts ("V poiske novogo" 2015). Demidov declared the main task to be to "create a dialog between contemporary art and society in a constructive discourse" in order to avoid collisions with groups in society.

Thus, the purpose of the new state cultural policy seems first and foremost to be to redirect the content of art to make it more in line with the new conservative paradigm, using the argument that the tastes and preferences of the wider population must be taken into consideration. In other words, a "democratic" argument is being used against art that the authorities consider too controversial, too innovative, or to contain "alien values." How far the authorities will go in spelling out an official standard of conservative aesthetic ideals remains an open question. Conditions for the arts could not but be affected in the new situation.

Protest in art under the new conditions

How can a critical discourse on contemporary art survive when the space for open critical discussion is circumscribed and in the atmosphere prevailing in wider society an artist can easily be branded a representative of the internal enemy or a fifth columnist? Three different artistic strategies are presented below under the broad concept of *dissensus* in art. Each illustrates a strategy that corresponds to the three categories of dissensus art presented above.

Works of e*ngaged art*, that is, art with an open political message, became rarer against the background of political repression and the political climate after 2012. Piotr Pavlenskii (born 1984), however, is an exception. His action in setting fire to the main entrance to the Federal Security Service (FSB) Lubianka headquarters in November 2015, and staying put until the police arrived to arrest him, was particularly striking (Moslenta 2015; "Petr Pavlenskii" 2015). The artist explained that he considered the Lubianka building to be a symbol of the terrorist threat posed by the FSB to the population (Buranova and Shevchenko 2015), and that setting the door on fire was like throwing down a gauntlet in the face of the FSB (Diakonov 2015; Shur 2015). Watching his action on the Internet, people were struck by what appeared to be a total absence of fear of any physical pain or of any reprisals by the authorities.

Pavlenskii first appeared in public in July 2012, just before the verdict was announced in the case against the members of Pussy Riot, when he sewed his lips together outside the

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Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg ("Stitch"). In May 2013, he wrapped himself in barbed wire outside the local parliament building in St. Petersburg ("Carcass"). He explained this action as a metaphor for "the existence of the human being in a repressive legislative system, where any movement provokes a harsh reaction by the law, which burrows itself into the body of the individual" (Stoliarchuk 2013).

His action in November 2013 ("Fixation"), when he nailed his scrotum to the cobblestones in Red Square, made his name better known in wider circles. The artist explained this as a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference, and fatalism in Russian contemporary society ("Otpetyi moshonnik" 2013). In his action in February 2014 ("Freedom"), he set tires alight in the Palace Square in St. Petersburg, creating the impression of a Russian Maidan Square in an act of solidarity with the demonstrators in Ukraine, and had it documented on the Internet ("Delo v otnoshenii" 2015).

Even if people were initially struck by the unbelievable way in which he used his body and looked at him as an insane, sensation-seeking masochist, many in the art community recognized in him the tradition of "art actionism" and believed that his actions fell within the field of contemporary art (Gelman, 2015; "Prikolotit sebya" 2015). Pavlenskii explained his actions as a statement by which, with the help of "auto-aggression in relation to the body," he turned his body "into a model of the social" where "I show, using myself as an example, what is happening to the other" (Chuviliaev 2013).

Pavlenskii became a headache to the authorities (Kashin 2015). He acted outside the field of politics, but his actions carried a clear political message: his acts were violent, but he hurt no one but himself; he was polite and respectful of the work of the authorities, while at the same time despising their policies. He acted alone without any organization behind him, but he seemed to fear nothing. When he was prosecuted for "vandalism," he himself demanded to be prosecuted for "terrorism" in order to follow state logic when sentencing the Ukrainians Aleksander Kolchenko, the anarchist who set fire to the door of United Russia's representation in the Crimea, and the film director Oleg Sentsov, who was sentenced to 20 years in jail for planning terrorist acts (which he denied). Pavlenskii gave a vivid illustration of the lone individual to which nothing remained but his desperate struggle against repressive state machinery. This was his image of Russia in 2015.

Around Pavlenskii a scandal developed in spring 2016 that reflected how deeply divided Russian society had become and how political conflict had entered the arts sphere. When he was nominated to the prestigious Russian contemporary art prize Innovatsiya and shortlisted by a solid majority of the expert committee, he was all of a sudden taken out of the contest by the director of the institution hosting the prize – the State Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA). Obviously, the director had had to give in to pressure from the Ministry of Culture. As the scandal developed, the director was replaced and NCCA lost its institutional autonomy and was engulfed into the larger organization of ROSIZO. But Pavlenskii got the attention and to many he became a symbol of resistance.

Artemii Zhiliaev (born 1984) is solidly anchored in the Russian community of contemporary art, a winner of the Innovatsiia art prize and a follower of the school of Moscow Conceptualism. He uses museum space to search for new forms of art intervention. In various projects, he has tried to inscribe the protest movement into the museum context and into the history of the revolutionary workers' movement in Russia in the early twentieth century. Examples include the exhibition "A Pedagogical Poem: Final Exposition of the Archive of a Future Museum of History" ("O upushchennykh" 2012), together with Ilya Budraitskis, at the Historical Memorial of the Workers' Uprising of 1905 in Presnia (November–December 2012) and "Museum of Proletarian Culture: Industrialization of Bohemia" at the New Tretiakov Gallery (July–September 2012) ("III Moskovskaia" 2012).

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Zhiliaev's project "M.I.R.: New Paths to the Objects" (2014) was an example of *dissent art* (M.I.R. 2014). In it, he moved away from his previously subtle and highly intellectual form of dissensus in art. The M.I.R. project used razor-sharp irony but kept its distance from any direct political message. It "musealized" Russian contemporaneity in a fake exhibition of the fictitious Museum of Russian History (M.I.R.). Zhilyaev starts from the assumption that Putin and his image-makers are working in a way similar to performance artists in contemporary art. Putin is thus presented as an artist using his own body, repeatedly redesigning his image in the public sphere, staging performances in order to gain the attention of the media, and indirectly also achieving a political effect.

In three exhibition rooms in the colors of the Russian flag, the red room was devoted to what Zhiliaev called the new official religion in the name of the spiritual awakening of humanity – the Church of the Cheliabinsk Meteorite of February 2013. The blue room was dedicated to Putin and his artworks. Putin was described as having "personally taken on the task of establishing an artistic platform to unite humanity around high moral values" and for this purpose published his artistic manifesto, "A Call for Stability from Russia," in the leading US theoretical art magazine *October*. There follows a presentation of Putin's various "performances," well known to the audience from media coverage, but now couched in the language of contemporary art. Among the "performances," there is Putin flying with the Siberian white cranes, playing with tigers, on a fishing expedition, and driving a Lada in Siberia. Here, Putin's actions are written into the history of Russian conceptualist and actionist art. The final room, the white one, was dedicated to a fictitious official project proposal of a "Bolotnaia Battle Park Complex" to be located in the same square where the police on 6 May 2012 assaulted a peaceful demonstration, and later accused the protesters of being on the payroll of foreign powers with the aim of undermining Russia. The fictitious complex was to include an eco-park containing the various animal species saved from extinction by Putin, new buildings among which were the above-mentioned Museum of Russian History and a branch of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, and a sculpture group. In the square, a group of living sculptures would "reflect the significant chapter of Russian history – the deeds of the heroic defenders of the Motherland fighting for its freedom against the foreign invaders during the Great Bolotnaia Battle of 6 May 2012." To complete the ironic nod, it was also announced that the park would be equipped with free Wi-Fi.

Zhiliaev's project thus captured many of the characteristics of Russian contemporaneity in an ironic mirror. Although the booklet describing Zhiliaev's project was for sale in small intellectual bookshops in Moscow, the project "M.I.R.: New Paths to the Object" was not exhibited in Russia but instead found life outside of the country.

Stas Shuripa and Anna Titova are examples of dissensus in the subtle form of *art of an other gaze*. They are both solidly anchored in the Russian community of contemporary art and followers of Moscow Conceptualism. Shuripa is not only a well-known artist but also an art theorist and member of the editorial board of the art journal *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*. Titova was represented at the Venice Biennale in 2011. They formed the "Agency for Singular Research" (Agenstvo singuliarnykh issledovanii) in 2014 and presented it as "a platform for critical analysis and discussion of current issues in art and artistic discourse." The projects "Observatorium" (at Manifesta 10 in 2014) (Titova and Shuripa 2014), "Apocalyptological Congress" (in 2015), and "Park Dystopia" (at the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2015) were presented as works by the Agency.

The Agency pretends to present fragments from an archive on events from periods of the unclear past, which might just as well be of the present or the future. In any case, the documentation of the events is both incomplete and not systematized, and therefore the

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"researchers" at the Agency must do their best to draw conclusions on what has taken place. "Observatorium" was presented as the "research on methods of the instrumentalization of images and the construction of factuality in global communication networks." The focus of the Agency is on "transformations of reality through the mass production of images and techniques of observation and interpretation." Attention is paid to the "tension between the incessantly growing amount of data and the capacities of the habitual schemes that determine our perception of everyday life." This tension, it is argued, "nurtures various 'conspiracy theories,' which, at first glance, offer simple answers to the challenges of a complex and mutable space for information flows" (Shuripa and Titova 2014).

The exhibition "Apocalyptological Congress" presented photographs of fragments of the fictive archive of the organization and the careful planning for a congress that never took place. The exhibition followed the structure of a congress for experts in the study of the apocalypse. An outer layer was dedicated to apocalyptology as a discourse and institutional system, and the inner layer to presentations on theories of "the end of the world." In line with the ideas of the overall project, the exhibition illustrated both how the Agency had apparently reconstructed what had been an organization plan, and how the theories of the apocalypse were built around signs interpreted according to rigid but well-known and preformulated schemes, in this case about the end of the world.

The audience could interpret the exhibition as a criticism of dominant narratives in contemporary Russian political debates, which very often follow rigid and closed tropes with regard to content and argumentation. It is hard not to read references to Russian history into the text presented in large print at the exhibition:

> It's time to clarify for oneself that behind the historical events, the scale of which blind us and make us wax poetic about them, actually stood a struggle between meta-historical monsters: that's why the specific positive results from these historical epics are so ambiguous.

The exhibition "Park Dystopia" claims to be built on the archive of a catastrophe said to have taken place in Moscow in 1954, when the city was destroyed by a meteorite and the Soviet utopia crashed. The citizens remained unaware of the event, as the state was able to move them out of the city "with the help of pressure, deception, or in an unconscious state." A new Moscow was built, but still today whole neighborhoods only consist of false facades as decoration. According to a decision said to have been taken immediately after the catastrophe by a closed session of the United Nations Security Council, the secret of what had taken place was to be kept by all member states. Thus, a series of major historical events in the 1950s and 1960s, including the neo-avant-garde in visual art, the Cold War, space exploration, and the grand project of reversing Siberian rivers, has been played out as sketches in a global spectacle in order to distract people from knowledge of the harsh reality. In the vast crater left at Moscow's previous location, a super-secret international research center was set up for the study of "the spontaneous curvature of timelines, recursive fractualization of 'the end of history,' superconductivity of the past and the gravity of the future."

Conclusion

Protest in art continued in spite of the turn to an ultra-conservative, authoritarian official paradigm after 2012. State cultural policy took on the task of reconstructing the cultural field for the purpose of educating the population and forming its values according to this conservative worldview. The arts were now looked upon as an instrument for this purpose rather than having a value in itself. The hunt for "enemies" and for "offenders"

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of the Orthodox belief and so-called traditional Russian values aggravated the political atmosphere in society. Although contemporary art to a large extent is exhibited in private venues, it could not but be affected by the new turn in policy. The conditions for free expression were circumscribed and state financing of contemporary art was further reduced.

In this new situation, an *art of engagement*, open and direct protest became rare. Piotr Pavlenskii therefore became an outstanding exception. *Dissent art* using irony and laughter, here exemplified by Arsenii Zhiliaev, continued to exist, but in a minefield as conservatives adopted direct and literal interpretations of art. Under the new laws, irony became a weapon that could easily recoil. A critical discourse continued first of all in the subtle form of protest of *art of an other gaze*. Stas Shuripa and Anna Titova were here chosen to represent this direction.

The authorities seemed to have no clear idea of what kind of "contemporary art" would fit their conservative worldview. A dogmatic understanding of aesthetic conservative ideals was predominant in the Ministry of Culture, although this understanding seemed clearer with regard to what was to be proscribed rather than what was to be prescribed. The presidential administration, on the other hand, seemed more prepared to eclectically play a cynical game of supporting any language of forms, genres, styles, or aesthetic ideals as long as the content served the political cause. With people in the administration such as Volodin and Demidov acting as patrons of contemporary art, it seemed improbable that this game would allow genuine critical discourses in art even if experiments in form and style were tolerated.

Taking into consideration the dynamics of society, where conservative radicals are becoming more powerful and pushing the official conservative agenda along an even more reactionary trajectory, it seems probable that the contest over aesthetic ideals will intensify.

In the meantime, a subtle but critical discourse in art continues in the background, keeping a low profile and exhibiting in venues away from official watchdogs, biding its time until it can once again play a crucial role in society's discussions on the country's future.

Notes

1. The categories come from Jonson (2015).
2. Compare how this lack of meta-narratives was mirrored in Russian fiction of the time. See, for example, Ågren (2014).
3. Boris Yeltsin had already set up a commission to work on the concept of a "national idea" for Russia. In Putin's time, this task became much more urgent.
4. See Bracher's overview on the European authoritarian-conservative tradition since the late nineteenth century in 1991. On Putin's declaration on conservatism, see "Prezident vzial" (2013).
5. Compare the German concept of "Sonderweg," the fatal trajectory of Wilhelminian Germany to Nazi Germany.
6. One commentator said: "We hope the Valdai speech will be the first step in formulating a state ideology, without which national unity and a genuine Russian revival would be impossible." Stepanov (2013), on the patriotic news agency site *Russkaia narodnaia liniia*.
7. Article 13 of the Russian Constitution declares that "No ideology may be established as state or obligatory one."
8. A meeting between Putin and the Council on Culture took place in November 2013, during which the 2014 Year of Russian Culture was announced and priority given to assisting cultural development in the regions, see http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/19353. See also www.mkrf.ru/proekty/list.php?SECTION_ID=47243. As a follow-up to the concept of a civilizational code,

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a document on the development of culture and tourism to 2020 was adopted on 27 December 2013.

9. The May draft was prepared by a group under the head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov and Vladimir Tolstoi, presidential adviser on cultural affairs and director. The April version was prepared by the Ministry of Culture.
10. Twenty-three members of the Russian Academy of Sciences immediately reacted first and foremost to the main proposition that "Russia is not Europe." They argued that the document was based on the idea of a compulsory ideology, in direct violation of article 13 of the Russian Constitution which prohibits any state ideology ("Akademiki RAN raskritikovali" 2014).
11. Although the final version emphasized the key role of Russian Orthodoxy, it acknowledged the contributory roles of other religions and non-Russian ethnic groups on Russian territory.
12. See also the formulations at the Presidential Council on Culture and Art in December 2015, "Zasedanie Soveta pri Prezidente po kulture i isskusstvu" (2015).
13. On this conflict, see Nicodemus (2014).
14. See the criticism in "Minkult otorvalsia" (2014). For the report, see "Gosudarstvennyi doklad" (2014, 120–133).
15. See the formulation in the ministry's report of 2013, "A promising direction of the development of contemporary art in Russia is traditional folk culture" ("Gosudarstvennyi doklad" 2014, 132).
16. See Marina Davydova's analysis of the conservative criticism of innovative theater productions in Davydova (2015). For the investigation by the Likhachev institute of whether theater productions deviated from the classical "norm," see "Delo v otnoshenii" (2015).
17. "Offending the feelings of believers" can be interpreted as the criminal act of instigating splits between groups of people on the basis of their religious, ethnic, or social belonging, according to article 282 of the Criminal Code which is part of the legislation against extremism. The organizers of the art exhibitions "Beware! Religion" in 2003 and "Forbidden Art" in 2007 were convicted under article 282 in 2005 and 2010, respectively. The verdict against Pussy Riot in 2012 was based on article 213 of the Criminal Code, on organized hooliganism.
18. Compare the criticism of Medinskii's statements and unclear references in Kobrin (2015).

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