

# Pussy Riot



# Pussy Riot



As a feminist punk collective, Pussy Riot seems guided by the dictum that all protest art should be – as member Maria Alyokhina wrote in her memoir *Riot Days* – “desperate, sudden and joyous.” In a nod to the Guerrilla Girls, the masked, anonymous American feminist group, members of Pussy Riot are known for wearing brightly coloured balaclavas to conceal their identities. However, this hasn’t prevented many of them from being subjected to surveillance, detention, harassment, beatings, or imprisonment for their views and street actions.

Pussy Riot’s performances, music, and videos are characterized by playfully provocative and politically charged lyrics and actions. For over a decade, the group, formed in Moscow in 2011, has courageously, and with a wry smile, shone a light on the political repression and brutal injustices that the Russian regime inflicts on its critics through imprisonments, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, mysterious poisonings, and other means of suppressing dissent.

Pussy Riot gained massive international attention in 2012, when three of its members (Maria “Masha” Alyokhina, Nadezhda “Nadya” Tolokonnikova, and Yekaterina “Kat” Samutseva) were arrested and sent to remote prison colonies for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” after what amounted to an updated version of a Stalinist show trial with only a thin veneer of legality. More recently, the well-known Russian opposition leaders Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza have also been the victims of the Kremlin’s similarly stage-managed verdicts.

Pussy Riot’s “crime” was a performance of “Punk Prayer” (2012), a song protesting against Vladimir Putin and the collusion of church and state, in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Putin was about to be re-elected for a third term as president, following parliamentary elections viewed by many as fraudulent. The hastily edited video of the performance went viral and, compounded by the erudition and eloquence of Pussy Riot’s statements during the trial, the court case sparked a global outcry, instantly becoming a symbol of the struggle for free expression and political protest in Russia. Since then, Pussy Riot has continued to use its platform to speak out on issues related to feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, political corruption, the war in Ukraine, and authoritarianism both at home and around the world.

*Velvet Terrorism: Pussy Riot’s Russia* is Pussy Riot’s first survey exhibition and was initially staged at Reykjavik’s Kling & Bang art space. An encounter in Moscow between Pussy Riot member Alyokhina and Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson is at the origin of this project. Working closely with Alyokhina, Kjartansson curated the Reykjavik exhibition with Ingibjörg Sigurjónsdóttir and Dorothee Maria Kirch. He has described the feminist art collective’s work as having a “non-consensual relationship with the state.” Indeed, Pussy Riot has used the police state’s apparatus of repression and authoritarianism as a creative partner, engaging in an uneasy “dance with the devil.” The show amply documents both the variety of Pussy Riot’s actions and the reactions and punishments meted out by the authorities.



# Velvet Terrorism: Pussy Riot's Russia

Although this is a documentary exhibition featuring hundreds of photographs and dozens of videos, it begins with pure fantasy – a collaboration with Kjartansson, in fact – full of feminist punk contempt: a floor-to-ceiling video projection shows member Taso Pletner (who joined Pussy Riot in 2022, after the war started), filmed in Ragnar's studio, urinating on a portrait of Vladimir Putin.

The boisterous exhibition, consisting of too many cheekily courageous actions, cruel punishments, and moving accounts to fully summarize here, proceeds chronologically: calls for revolution and guerrilla concerts in luxury boutiques and bars where "Putinists" congregate in *Fuck You, Fucking Sexists and Fucking Putinists* (2011); demands for the release of all political prisoners on the roof of Moscow Detention Centre No. 1, *Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest* (2011), to the applause of hundreds of the detainees inside, many of them activists protesting the rigged state Duma elections of 2011; seizing a historic stone platform in front of the stunning iconic onion domes of St Basil's Cathedral in Red Square, where tsarist decrees and sentences were read, and performing with limitless rage *Putin Peed His Pants* (2012) in acid-hued costumes and balaclavas, while coloured smoke billows from flares. All this and more preceded *Punk Prayer*.

Not long after serving their two-year prison sentence for *Punk Prayer*, Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova, with other members of Pussy Riot, travelled to Sochi to perform their new song "Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland" (2014). The video documents Pussy Riot's attempt to film

a new music video in Sochi during the Winter Olympic Games and documents a brutal assault at the hands of Cossack militiamen as the police stand by and do absolutely nothing.

Following the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine, *Free Sentsov* (2017) consists of three Pussy Riot actions in support of Oleg Sentsov, the acclaimed Ukrainian film director and outspoken critic of the invasion who was imprisoned in Russia under false terrorism charges: in Siberia, a banner unfurled on a bridge near the remote penal colony where he staged a 144-day hunger strike, then an action in New York with the help of PEN America, and finally an attempt at an action near the Lenin statue in Simferopol, Crimea, which he was accused of plotting to bomb. Sentsov was recently released in a prisoner exchange with Ukraine and is fighting with the Ukrainian army.

In April of 2018, Russian authorities started blocking the Telegram messaging app. A protest was organized to demand the constitutional right to private correspondence at the headquarters of the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation), where coloured paper airplanes were launched in the direction of the entrance. The Telegram logo is a paper plane.

In 1991, the Russian art group E.T.I. (abbreviation for Expropriation of the territory of art in English) staged an action, *Text on Red Square*, protesting the enforcement of a ban on swearing in public places by spelling out, with their bodies lying down in the square, the most widely used three-letter expletive in Russia. In an homage to E.T.I., Pussy Riot protested Putin passing a law



2



3



4



5

that allows him to run twice more for the presidency, potentially keeping him in office until 2036, by spelling out the numbers with their bodies on the same paving stones in 2036 (2020).

The somewhat playfully titled *Arrest Carousel* (2021) belies what must have been the dread and panic of being detained for weeks at a time and released only to be immediately detained again for two more weeks.

Emulating how Russian police can suddenly intrude uninvited into citizens' lives, four Pussy Riot members disguised as policewomen and policemen burst onto the pitch at Moscow's Luzhniki stadium, interrupting the World Cup Final 2018 match between France and Croatia, which was being watched by over a billion TV viewers around the world. Just before being dragged off by security, one of the invaders managed a delightful high-five with French superstar Kylian Mbappé.

Trolling Putin is a serious business. For his sixty-eighth birthday in 2020, Pussy Riot impersonated municipal employees and installed rainbow flags on five of the most heavily guarded buildings in Moscow, including the Russian Supreme Court. *Rainbow*

*Diversion* (2020) called out Putin's, and the state's, endless demonization of homosexuality.

The exhibition includes documentation of Alyokhina's notorious escape from Moscow in a food-delivery uniform made with her partner Lucy Shtein, after they both spent a year and a half under house arrest and in different Moscow police stations and jails. Leaving her phone behind as a decoy, she first crossed into Belarus, where, with a friend's help, she secured a travel document to enter Europe.

Against the tragic backdrop of seemingly endless Russian aggression in Ukraine, there is added urgency and poignancy to Pussy Riot's sustained fight for human rights, political reform, and anti-war activism. In addition to enabling visitors to view for the first time the group's inspiring, mostly little-known performances, the exhibition encourages a deeper investigation into Soviet history and contemporary Russian politics and protest culture, as well as the group's aesthetic links to Fluxus and a wide range of other figures and movements, such as painter Kazimir Malevich's costumes, Bikini Kill's music, Vienna Actionism,

6



8

# ARREST CAROUSEL

MOSCOW, 2021

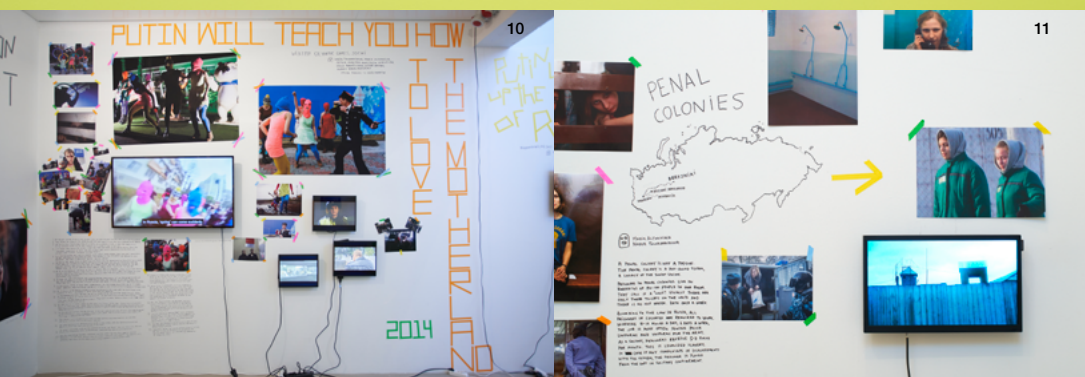
MARIA ALYOKHINA, LUCY SHTEIN, NIKOLAI NIKULSHINA, ALEXANDER SOFEEV, PAVEL KROMENYAK







9



Moscow Romantic Conceptualists, Oleg Kulik, Alexander Brener, the Collective Actions Group, and Sasha Baron Cohen – for humour.

For over a decade Pussy Riot has been fighting against oppression and tyranny in Russia – specifically against Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism, corruption, and political repression. Putin's recent failed attempt to kill, by poisoning, his nemesis Alexei Navalny – whose name he makes a point of never speaking – is a shameless encapsulation of this. (The Kremlin denies all involvement.) Although Navalny is not a saint, his self-sacrifice is astonishing, as he is now languishing in a Russian penal colony under bogus charges with a shockingly long sentence, after voluntarily returning home following medical treatment in Germany. Alyokhina protested the imprisonment of all political prisoners, including Navalny (and was sentenced to house arrest, with an electronic ankle bracelet, for an Instagram post), and Pussy Riot previously protested the imprisonment of Navalny's brother

Oleg (*The Ball*, 2014), taken hostage by Putin to silence his brother.

This period also saw Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas region in 2014, culminating in Putin's brazen declaration, in February 2022, of a "special military operation" in Ukraine, a country he insists is an integral part of Russia. In reality, it is an outrageous all-out war and unconscionable aggression against an independent neighbouring state, causing untold death and destruction and the forced flight of millions of civilians. Propaganda warfare also rages, as press freedom is curtailed and false narratives abound, and for the first time in decades the spectre of nuclear conflict makes an ominous return. As incredulity, indignation, and disgust mount around the world, Pussy Riot's actions courageously confront this fascism and, through their open defiance of injustice, inspire us all.

**John Zeppetelli, Director and Chief Curator**

FREE THE THOUSANDS OF POLITICAL PRISONERS!  
STOP THE CRIMINAL WAR IN UKRAINE!  
SLAVA UKRAINI!



The exhibition *Velvet Terrorism: Pussy Riot's Russia* is organized and circulated by Kling & Bang, Reykjavik.

A SELECTION OF  
HISTORICAL EVENTS  
IN RUSSIA SINCE 1991

1991	<b>DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET UNION</b> Russia becomes independent as hundreds of thousands of people take to the squares shouting democratic slogans. Former Soviet republics leave the USSR and become independent states. Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus form the Commonwealth of Independent States.	1999-2000	<b>VLADIMIR PUTIN BECOMES PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA (first term)</b> Boris Yeltsin resigns as president of the Russian Federation; as a result, ex-KGB officer Vladimir Putin becomes acting president and is elected in 2000. His first act is to bring back the USSR anthem.	2004	<b>SECOND INAUGURATION OF PUTIN AS PRESIDENT (second term)</b> Centralization of power is intensified and, contrary to the federal structure, the Russian Federation cancels the elections of regional heads, which are replaced by their direct appointment by the president.	2011	<b>PUTIN ANNOUNCES HIS BID FOR A THIRD PRESIDENTIAL TERM</b> The Russian Orthodox Church joins the pro-presidential campaign. Putin begins to use the church to legitimize his "presidency." The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, a former KGB agent, campaigns for Putin. Protests begin across Russia.
	<b>COLLAPSE OF THE COMMUNIST BLOC (END OF THE IRON CURTAIN)</b> Borders open, state ideology is abolished, and freedom of speech and private ownership are proclaimed.				<b>ORANGE REVOLUTION IN UKRAINE</b> Several weeks of protests take place in the aftermath of the run-off vote for the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, which is marred by massive corruption, voter intimidation, and electoral fraud involving the Kremlin-backed candidate.		<b>FORMATION OF PUSSY RIOT</b>
2008	<b>DMITRY MEDVEDEV BECOMES RUSSIA'S PRESIDENT</b> Unable to legally serve a third consecutive term, Putin formally hands over power to his partner, Medvedev, and becomes the prime minister.	2012	<b>PUTIN BECOMES PRESIDENT</b>	2012	<b>MARCH OF MILLIONS</b> On the day of President Putin's inauguration, demonstrators express their disapproval and frustration regarding the election's apparent fraud and lack of integrity.		
					<b>BOLOTNAYA CRIMINAL CASE</b> The largest criminal case against participants in a protest movement. Hundreds of people are detained at the March of Millions, and seven people later receive a prison sentence.		

# Espace M: A space for reflection, participation, and conversation

This project space has been created to encourage visitors to engage critically with the different issues raised by the exhibition *Velvet Terrorism: Pussy Riot's Russia*.

**Have questions following your visit of the exhibition?** Espace M brings together a selection of resources available for consultation. These resources are intended to help you further explore the ideas and themes present in the exhibition. In addition, they offer avenues for reflection on some of today's urgent social issues.

**Need to express yourself?** You're invited to discover the different participatory elements in the space that encourage you to express your opinions and ask questions. As the responses accumulate, they will form a record of the visitors' collective experience of the exhibition.

Espace M is also a space that hosts public events and regularly includes the presence of members of the art mediation team to encourage and enhance conversations about the exhibition. Visit the Musée's website for more details about coming events.

Created to offer a convergence between cultural **M**ediation and the **M**useum experience, this dynamic space invites the public to participate in the conversations and debates provoked by contemporary art.

*Espace M was created by Ohisse: Atelier de design social in collaboration with the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.*

2013	<b>"MAD PRINTER"</b> A term used to describe the rapid pace at which the Russian parliament introduced repressive laws in 2013, such as the repression of discussions of LGBTQ+ topics, increased punishment for participating in unauthorized protests, and the censoring of websites without a court order. Massive protests ensue.	2015	<b>MURDER OF BORIS NEMTSOV</b> One of the key leaders of the protest movement is killed the day before he is due to lead an opposition march protesting against economic conditions in Russia and the war in Ukraine. The pro-Putin president of Chechnya is deemed responsible for the murder but is never prosecuted.	2018	<b>PUTIN WINS HIS SECOND CONSECUTIVE (FOURTH OVERALL) PRESIDENTIAL TERM</b>	2021	<b>AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION</b> Putin proposes amendments that will enable him to reset his presidential terms and potentially remain in power until 2036. The revised constitution is printed before the voting results are confirmed.  <b>OPPOSITION LEADER ALEXEI NAVALNY RETURNS TO RUSSIA</b> Returning after recovering from a poisoning attempt, Navalny is arrested immediately upon arrival at the airport. A major protest rally in support of him takes place, leading to a criminal case against several key members of his team and two Pussy Riot members.  <b>PREPARATION FOR WAR</b> Throughout the second half of the year, Russian military troops and equipment are amassed at the Ukrainian border and in the annexed Crimea.
2014	<b>SOCHI OLYMPIC GAMES AND DOPING SCANDAL</b> The Winter Olympics are marred by a massive doping scandal. Investigations reveal a state-sponsored doping program, implicating numerous Russian athletes in using performance-enhancing drugs to gain unfair advantage.  <b>ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA BY RUSSIA AND BEGINNING OF THE WAR IN DONBAS</b> Russian forces take over Crimea. This sparks the biggest East-West conflict since the Cold War, and the US and its European allies impose several weak economic sanctions.  <b>BOEING MH-17</b> Pro-Russian separatists request an anti-aircraft missile system from the Russian military command. A missile launched from this system shoots down the civilian aircraft Boeing MH-17, instantly killing 298 people.  <b>RESTRICTION OF THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST</b> This law enables the criminal prosecution and imprisonment of peaceful protesters for up to five years.	2017	<b>INCREASED CYBER-SURVEILLANCE</b> New laws restrict internet freedom and require communication platforms to provide the Federal Security Service with access to encrypted messages and citizens' personal data without a court order.  <b>DECRIMINALIZATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE</b>	2019	<b>INCREASED SANCTIONS AGAINST PUBLIC GATHERING</b> The first major protest of the year takes place in front of the Parliament and leads to several arrests. Known as the Moscow case, it is the first criminal case against protesters since the Bolotnaya case.	2022	<b>BEGINNING OF THE RUSSIAN WAR IN UKRAINE</b> The beginning of the war is marked by a series of gruesome events, including the massacres of civilians in the towns of Bucha and Mariupol. As the Russian army occupies more territory in Ukraine, over six million refugees are displaced globally.  <b>MILITARY CENSORSHIP IS INTRODUCED</b> New articles in the criminal code permit eight-year prison terms for individuals who use the term "war" instead of "special military operation" to describe the war in the Ukraine. Hundreds of people become political prisoners for their anti-war stance. Approximately a million people are forced to leave Russia.

Research and development by Masha Salazkina and Yulia Glushneva, with the participation of Maria Alyokhina.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**Conversation between Maria Alyokhina and Ragnar Kjartansson (English) (\$)**  
Wednesday, October 25, 2023, 6 p.m. at Gesù (1200, rue de Bleury)

**Exhibition walkthrough (English)**  
With Maria Alyokhina and John Zeppetelli, curator of the exhibition  
Thursday, October 26, 2023, at 5:30 p.m., at the MAC

PERFORMANCES

**Pussy Riot: Riot Days (\$)**  
Wednesday, November 1st, 2023, at 8 p.m. at Rialto Theatre (5723, av. Du Parc)  
Show presented by the MAC and Pop Montréal  
riotdays.com  
Tickets available at: www.popmontreal.com

**Extreme As Commonplace**  
A multimedia performance by the BANAL collective  
Thursday, February 22, 2024, at 6 p.m., at the MAC

ART WORKSHOPS

**Show Off Your Voice:** workshop/tour for teenagers and adults (12 and older) (\$)  
Saturday, November 4, from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. or 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.  
Saturday, December 2, from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. or 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.

**Creative Moments:** Workshops for adults (\$)  
Tuesday, November 28, from 1:30 to 4 p.m.  
Wednesday, November 29, from 1:30 to 4 p.m.

**Tandem Workshops/Group Visits**  
School groups (free)  
Community groups (free)  
Adult groups (\$)  
From November 1 to December 21, 2023

ART MEDIATOR IN THE GALLERIES

An art mediator is present in the galleries to exchange with visitors on the issues raised by the exhibition and answer questions. Bilingual interactive tours are offered without reservation during these periods (included with admission).

SCHEDULE

Thursdays and Fridays	Saturdays and Sundays
Presence of an art mediator from 4 to 7 p.m. Interactive tour at 5:30 p.m.	Presence of an art mediator from 2 to 5 p.m. Interactive tour at 3 p.m.

Tours are also offered with a reservation for groups of 10 or more.  
Reservations and information at 514 847-6253 / reservation.education@macm.org  
Please visit the Musée's website for more details and other events to come.

ACCESSIBILITY

Many resources are available online, as well as on-site at the Museum. Please ask the welcome desk for the large-print texts and a tactile map of the exhibition.

ALSO ON VIEW

August 24, 2023 – March 31, 2024  
**Anna Binta Diallo, Fluid Fossils**  
Mural at MAC PVM

September 7 – November 5, 2023  
**Cyprien Gaillard, Nightlife**  
At Cinémathèque québécoise (335, boul. de Maisonneuve Est)  
Co-presented by the MAC and the Cinémathèque québécoise.

December 12, 2023 – February 25, 2024  
**Jeremy Shaw, Phase Shifting Index**  
At Fonderie Darling (745, rue Ottawa)

For more information, visit [macm.org](https://macm.org)