

‘Fashion Attack’: The Style of Pussy Riot

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Abstract: This article examines the style of Pussy Riot in the context of the contemporary Russian fashion scene. Media representations of Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’ and its aftermath have focused on their style as an extension of western feminism and punk, but this is by no means the only layer of meaning contained in their ‘fashion attack’. Using images of Pussy Riot’s performances and the group’s own commentary on their style, which have been circulated on social media, this article traces Pussy Riot’s fashion aesthetic as part of a complex and evolving Russian tradition of clothes as rebellion. It considers, first, how Russian underground fashion provides a context and a vocabulary of protest fashion with which Pussy Riot engages, and, second, how the recent development of Russian ‘glamour’ politics has configured fashion as a key battleground on which to challenge Putin’s political hegemony. As such, this article engages with fashion both as a tool and an object of political protest and explores fashion as a form of dissent beyond the catwalk and internet.

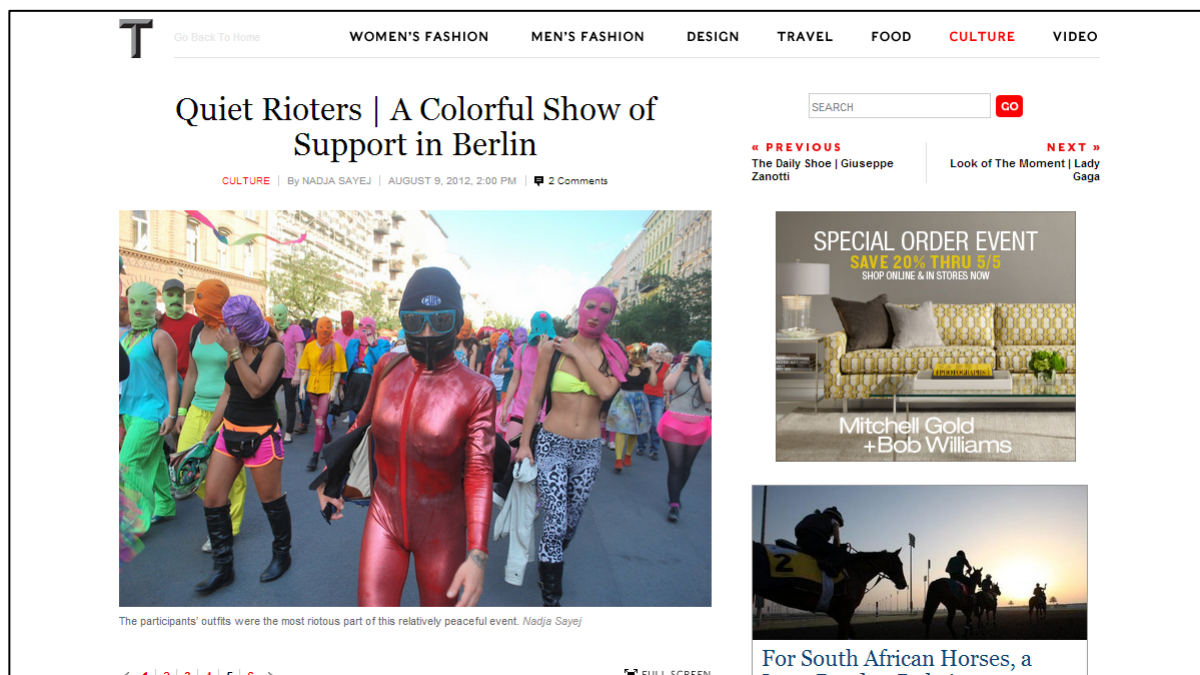
Keywords: Pussy Riot, fashion, counterculture, Putin, underground, feminism, social media, YouTube.

Since Pussy Riot burst into the global political consciousness with the staging of their provocative ‘Punk Prayer’ in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, commentators in the Western press have not stopped talking about what the group were wearing. In August 2012, Vivien Goldman in the *New York Times* wrote an article on the ‘style’ of Pussy Riot, which she described as a ‘collectively conceived fashion attack’ (Goldman 2012). Describing the video of the punk prayer, Goldman commented ‘All the elements are there: gaudy, ripped-to-fit minis and shifts in contrasting solid colours with bright tights, boots and those haunting balaclavas [...] the video proves you can always spot a Pussy Rioter in a crowd’ (Goldman 2012).

The simple and eye-catching nature of Pussy Riot’s clothing has been one of the major features of the publicity campaign surrounding the trial and imprisonment of three members of the group, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Mariia Alekhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich (although Samutsevich has since been released on appeal). Protesters copying the group’s style

have been seen all over the world (Image 1). Yet analysis of this ‘fashion attack’ has remained limited, and has focused on a particular subset of Western influences which include the anonymous feminist art group the Guerrilla Girls¹, and the punk band Bikini Kill and other bands within the so-called Riot Grrrl movement of the mid to late 1990s.² Members of Pussy Riot explicitly situate themselves within this set of influences: when being interviewed by the Western media, they frequently discuss Western third-wave feminism and punk as a major part of the construction of their anti-Putin, anti-patriarchy protest (Chernov 2012).³ To a Western eye, their style is instantly recognisable and ‘readable’, with its hints of punk and 1990s rave culture, and it therefore warrants only a brief mention by journalists before moving on to the more significant issue of Pussy Riot’s political opposition to Putin and the response by the Russian legal system.

Image 1: Protesters in Pussy Riot-inspired costumes, Berlin, 8 August 2012.



Source: <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/09/quiet-rioters-a-colorful-show-of-support-in-berlin/> (accessed 12 April 2013).

Reading Pussy Riot’s style in terms of the transplanting of Western anarchic punk into a repressed and ‘backward’ Russia has been a powerful tool in promoting the group’s message,

¹ The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous feminist art movement, founded in 1985, which stages protests against sexism in the international art world. They are famous for wearing gorilla masks to hide their real identities during their protest actions, and for their use of pseudonyms (‘Guerrilla Girls Bare All’ 1995).

² Riot Grrrl is an American feminist punk rock subculture, centred on Washington D.C., which involves punk rock music, art, self-published fanzines and political action. One of the most significant punk bands in the movement was Bikini Kill, active from 1990 to 1997, which ‘attempted to incite female participation and build feminist community via the punk scene’ (‘Bikini Kill: About’ 2013).

³ For a discussion of Pussy Riot musical performances, please see Polly McMichael’s essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

linking their actions to a global and historical network of anarchic, feminist protesters against the patriarchal status quo. In this essay, however, I hope to point towards some new ways of reading Pussy Riot's fashion within the Russian context. This essay will consider Pussy Riot's clothes, the context in which they wear them, and the various online discussions of the group's style, as a means to analyse the role played by fashion in the construction of their political message. The main focus of this essay, however, will be on the engagement of Pussy Riot with the traditions of Russian 'underground' or protest fashion, and how their aesthetic and political self-construction fits into a complex and evolving tradition of clothes as rebellion. It considers, first, how the history of Russian underground fashion provide a context and a vocabulary of protest fashion with which Pussy Riot engages, and, second, how the recent evolution of Russian 'glamour' politics has configured fashion as a key battleground on which to challenge Putin's political hegemony. Beyond this, it will trace how the internet as a forum for fashion dissemination and appropriation has changed the nature of countercultural fashion, focusing on the online representation of Pussy Riot's 2011 track *Kropotkin Vodka*.⁴ As such, this essay considers fashion both as a tool and an object of a new form of political protest, staged both offline and online and crossing the media boundaries.

Pussy Riot's 'fashion attack' not only speaks to a Western aesthetic of protest, but also engages with the much more ambiguous role played by fashion in contemporary Russian culture. Pussy Riot belongs to a long tradition of underground fashion, or fashion as political protest, which has been developing since the late 1940s. In a culture that was predicated for many decades on uniformity of dress, clothing developed a political power to shock that was not seen (to the same degree) in the West. According to curator and anthropologist Misha Buster, the deficit of fashionable clothing in the late Soviet period led to an emergence of underground, DIY fashion trends⁵ which were 'wild and untamed, flaring up suddenly like a chemical reaction among the various underground creative groups, who had claimed a place on the rock scene, in squats and on official stages with lightning speed [...] In essence creating a fashion theatre for the new aesthetic, they balanced on the border between performance and fashion show' (Buster 2011: 7). These were the spiritual children of the *stiliagi*, the 'stylish ones', whose aping of Western fashions in the early 1950s caused such concern amongst the Soviet elites (Edele 2002; Fürst 2006). Fashion therefore developed in the USSR in tandem with a more complex and evolving subculture, commonly referred to in Russia as the 'underground' [*podpol'e*], which linked together clothing, music, performance and identity, and framed itself in opposition to the ideological and aesthetic dominance of the state. Buster has done much to publicise this 'underground' in recent years, chronicling alternative fashion subcultures from the 1980s in exhibitions⁶ and on his website (www.kompost.ru), a constantly evolving 'new archaeology' of informal cultural movements that combines subject essays and a vast photo archive.

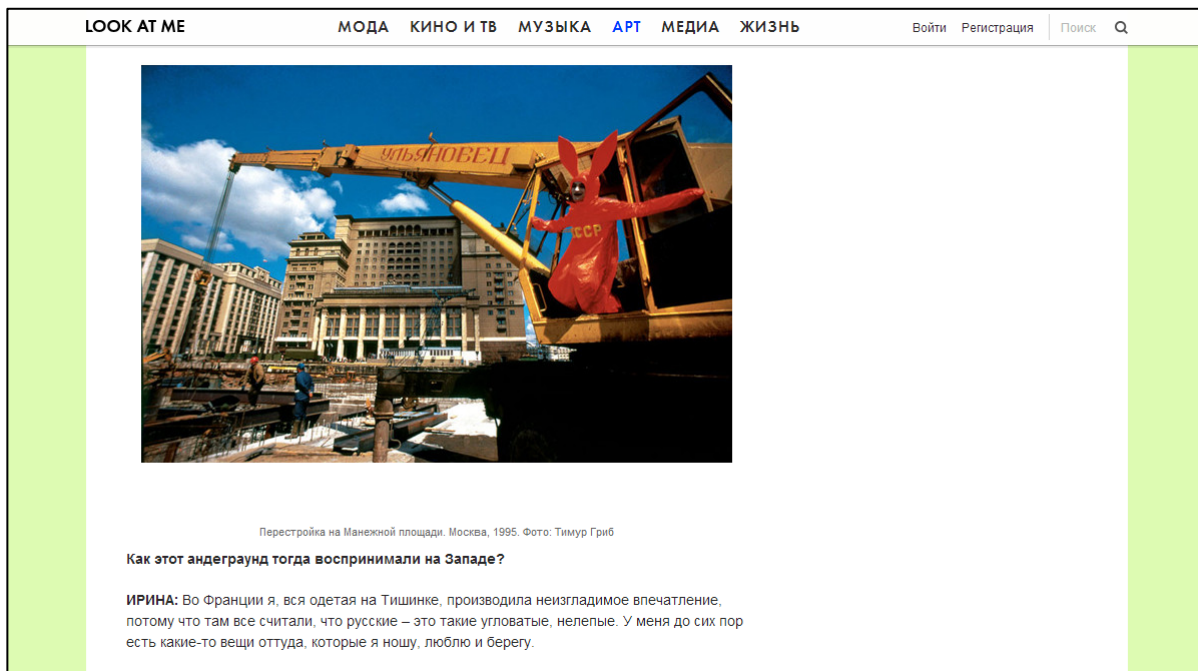
⁴*Kropotkin Vodka* (2011), targeted the 'sexist Putinists'; verses called on women to 'occupy the city with a frying pan' and described poisoning the Kremlin elites with vodka named after the Russian anarchist Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin ('Vtoroi nelegal'nyi tur', 2011).

⁵ For a discussion of Pussy Riot as DIY media, please see Vlad Strukov's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

⁶ Exhibitions curated by Buster include 'Street Style-80', VDNKh, Moscow, 30 April – 2 May 2010; 'Alternativnaia moda v Sankt Peterburge', Formula Gallery, St Petersburg, 3 February – 11 March 2012.

Image 2: The Laboratory of Experimental Fashion in Leningrad, 1988.

Source: http://www.kompost.ru/nt_al_ternativnaa_moda_do_prihoda_glanca_1985_1995.html (accessed 12 April 2013).

Image 3: Andrei Bartenev, 'Perestroika on Manezh Square', 1995.

Source: http://www.lookatme.ru/mag/art-design/other_art/122459-vystavka-alternativnaya-moda-do-prihoda-glyantsa (accessed 12 April 2013).

Pussy Riot appears to consciously play with the aesthetic tradition of this underground cultural 'scene'. Whilst the group's overall anonymity makes it difficult to concretely trace their influences, the association of Tolokonnikova with the anarchist art group Voina, in particular, demonstrates their connection to a wide network of non-mainstream artists across Russia. Their impromptu performances echo the 'flaring up' of fashion shows that Buster describes in the 1980s and 1990s, and their use of fashion makes explicit links to this heritage. A glance through photographs on Buster's website from a recent Moscow exhibition on alternative fashion in this period⁷ shows a number of looks that foreshadow Pussy Riot, both in terms of their aesthetic and the way they are presented: pictures by the Laboratory of Experimental Fashion from 1988 (Image 2) show a similar reliance on bright colours, and a tendency to climb on buildings that should probably be off-limits; a piece by the artist Andrei Bartenev⁸ from 1995 (Image 3) is strikingly reminiscent of Pussy Riot's juxtaposition of neon, absurdist clothing and grandiose Moscow architecture. Even those aspects of their 'look' that have been interpreted as particularly punk and 'Western', such as their bover boots and balaclavas, could equally be seen to have roots in 1990s alternative fashion, as images of collections by the Polushkin Brothers⁹ and the La-Re duo¹⁰ demonstrate (Images 4 and 5).

Aesthetically speaking, then, Pussy Riot fits into a long tradition of fashion as a counter-cultural protest against the status quo. This is hardly surprising; Pussy Riot belongs to an artistic scene that is hyper-aware of issues of artistic form and image creation, and sees fashion and costume as an integral part of the visual message they construct. Yet this is not simply a matter of echoing old styles, but playing with these ideas in the new media sphere to develop a much more profound commentary on the place of fashion in contemporary Russian culture. Pussy Riot's style, I argue, is not simply the use of clothing to draw attention to their critique of political power, but in fact a direct commentary, using the participatory media of the internet, on the ways in which fashion has become linked to that political power. The emergence of the new Russian politics after Putin became president in 2000 has seen issues of power, capitalism and fashion become increasingly bound up together. As Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov argue in their book *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic* (2011), 'Just as the early Bolshevik regime strived to educate the masses by raising their class consciousness through the introduction of new everyday practices, glamour is the post-Soviet didactic program intended to teach Russian citizens to be [...] "conspicuous consumers"' (Goscilo and Strukov 2011: 4).

⁷ 'Alternativnaia moda do prikhoda gliantsa, 1985-1995', Garazh, Moscow, 28 April – 12 June 2011. Curated by Misha Buster and Irina Meglinskaya.

⁸ Andrei Bartenev became involved in alternative fashion and costume in the late 1980s. In his work, he often places himself in fantastical neon costumes against a backdrop of drab Soviet buildings and sculpture (Buster 2011: 81).

⁹ The Polushkin Brothers (Kolia and Alik) trained and worked as atomic scientists before starting to make clothes. They are best known for their 1993 collection 'Fash Fashion', which played with fascist clothing styles (Kostrova 2011).

¹⁰ The La-Re Duo, active since the early 1990s, experimented with creating wearable fashion on an industrial scale, something that had not been possible in the Soviet period (Buster 2011: 70).

Image 4: Collection by the Polushkin Brothers, 1995.



Source: http://www.kompost.ru/nt_al_ternativnaa_moda_do_prihoda_glanca_1985_1995.html (accessed 12 April 2013).

Image 5: Image from the ‘Eyelashes’ collection by the La-Re duo, 1995.



Source: http://www.kompost.ru/nt_al_ternativnaa_moda_do_prihoda_glanca_1985_1995.html (accessed 12 April 2013).

This trend has been identified as a key factor in the emergence of glossy magazines and global fashion brands in Russia. Djurdja Bartlett has argued that after the fall of socialism, the very rich had an extremely negative image in Russia, and that Vogue magazine was introduced with the explicit aim to teach the new elites in Russia to consume 'tastefully' and to think of themselves in terms of status and display. The goal was to connect 'the new economic capital possessed by the Russian super-rich to a new symbolic capital' (Bartlett, 2006: 196); in other words, to develop an elite in form as well as in content, and to make ordinary Russians admire and aspire to the status of the new rich. The figurehead of this new politics of glamour is, of course, Vladimir Putin, who, according to Helena Goscilo, 'appears as a glamorous, elite sexual icon, whose image dominates the country's landscape' (Goscilo 2011: 31). As a result of this conscious intertwining of the new Russian political and economic elites with the symbolism of 'glamour', the fashion industry in Russia has become symbolically linked to the world of economic and political power.

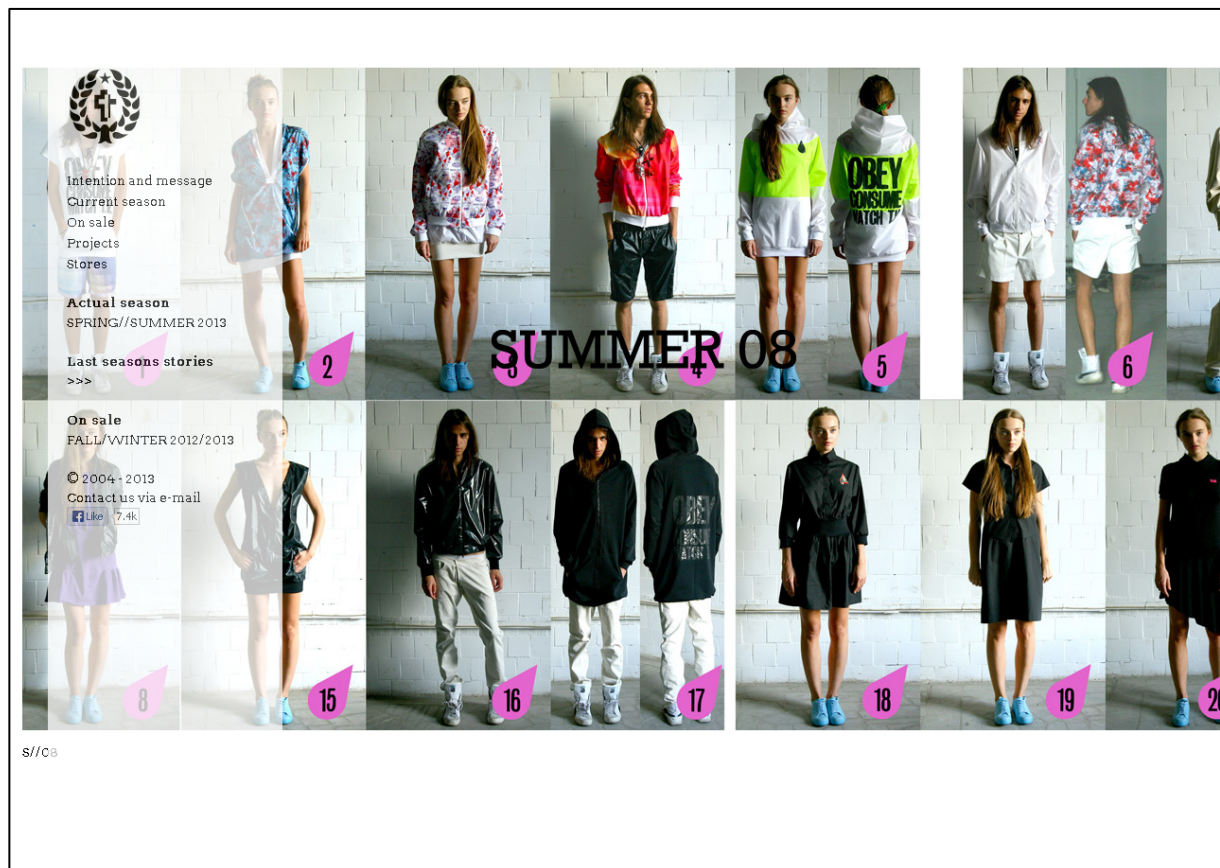
As a consequence, countercultural fashion has begun increasingly to frame itself in explicit opposition to the 'politics of fashion'. One early example of this new wave of 'political' fashion-producers was the collective White.Trash.for.Cash, founded in Moscow in 2004 by a group of six young designers.¹¹ The clothes produced by White.Trash.for.Cash embodied an anti-glamour, streetwear aesthetic that prefigured Pussy Riot's shapeless neon dresses (Image 6). Yet the significance of White.Trash.for.Cash's fashion lay in its explicit self-representation as both anti-fashion and inherently political. A press release from 2007 read: 'We are the Russian White Trash, we originate from grey everyday Russia which suffers from dirt and dullness. Trying to escape from this, many people get obsessed with Trends, simply because they are afraid to make a wrong step, which doesn't fit to the glossies' propaganda' (White.Trash.for.Cash 2007). As such, these designers set themselves against the politics of 'ubiquitous glamour' (White.Trash.for.Cash 2007). In January 2008 the collective held an alternative fashion show that was, quite literally, 'underground', in a grimy, disused Cold War bunker below Moscow's Taganskaia metro station. According to Maksim Kushnarev, a member of the group, the choice of location was intentionally provocative and sought 'to show our opposition to the whole fashion scene in Russia' (Wall 2008).

Whilst this fashion show consciously echoed the traditions of late-Soviet countercultural fashion, the work of White.Trash.for.Cash also demonstrated the emerging power of new media to create a new form of fashion counterculture. The 'underground' fashion show was publicised across a range of online platforms, including the collective's own website, their LiveJournal site, and several videos on YouTube in which footage of the fashion show was cut together with shots of young crowds and backstage parties, overlaid with a thumping rock track (Kushnarev 2007). This active engagement with the internet allowed the group to publicise their niche fashion product to a wider audience, thus breaking the boundaries of the catwalk and challenging the hegemony of the major fashion brands. At the same time, the use of new media changed the nature of this counterculture; in the participatory sphere of the internet, the meanings attributed to the clothes themselves were continually re-narrated and re-appropriated, both by the designers themselves and by the internet users who engaged with

¹¹ The founding members of White.Trash.for.Cash were Maksim Kushnarev, Marina Galkina, Natasha Bul'en, Katia Karamzina, Mariia Seregina and Vladimir Kovanovskii.

them. Unlike late Soviet countercultural fashion, therefore, in which meaning was either imposed by a state wary of stylistic difference, or limited in its resonance to a small subcultural ‘world’ (Pilkington 1994: 3), this new form of countercultural fashion has the power to construct a form of aesthetic and political protest that is globalised, multifaceted and participatory.

Image 6: White.Trash.for.Cash Spring Summer 2008 Collection.



Source: <http://whitetrashforcash.com/our-stories/> (accessed 3May 2013)

Countercultural fashion is thus becoming a new, inclusive and overtly politicised form of ‘antifashion’, clothing which rejects the central traits of the contemporary fashion system – the power of the brand, the constant cycle of trends, and the use of fashion to develop an individual ‘look’.¹² White.Trash.for.Cash explicitly states that their clothing is ‘anti-label’: ‘The clothes we wear should be an instrument of our own self-expression, where and who we are is above and well beyond the needs of the designer for recognition and notoriety, or the commercial agenda of the label’ (‘Message’ 2013). Descriptions of Pussy Riot’s fashion choices similarly echo this broader rejection of mainstream fashion, and place the emphasis on the group as a visual collective. ‘Bullet’, one of Pussy Riot’s members, has argued that

¹² Fred Davis has defined ‘antifashion’ as a conscious opposition to fashion itself: ‘whatever form antifashion takes it must via some symbolic device of opposition, rejection, studied neglect, parody, satirisation etc. address itself to the ascendant or “in” fashion of the time’. (Davis 1992:161)

'The principle of our image is that no personality should stand out in the show, and no identity of a particular girl can be recognized [...]It's very important to us that there are no designers or labels to fetishize around us, because we do everything ourselves' (Goldman 2012). Inevitably, aspects of their aesthetic derive from the illegality of their performances; members of Pussy Riot never wear the same outfit twice, just in case they are identified by it, and they consider it more important to be able to run fast than to look good. At the same time, their clothes purposefully disrupt the narrative of fashion as elitist, individualising, money-dependent and linked to power. According to Vivien Goldman, who interviewed Bullet, 'she cheerfully advises us to steal from smart boutiques, if you can't find what you want in thrift shops, flea markets, or in a friend's closet' (Goldman 2013: 140). In this way, the clothes themselves echo the participatory practices of the internet, in which cutting, pasting and appropriating are commonplace.

This development of interactive and politicised counterculture that explicitly engages with and targets fashion can be seen to play out in one of Pussy Riot's early public 'actions', a series of performances that took place in November 2011 to publicise their new song, *Kropotkin Vodka* (2011). Pussy Riot's choice of locations for their performances was telling, targeting, in their usual flash-mob style, the heart of the Moscow fashion scene. The group performed on the roof of a Jaguar exhibit in Stoleshnikov Pereulok, the pedestrian street which houses the flagship stores of major national and international fashion brands, such as Denis Simachev and Cartier. They took over the 'concept store' Podium at 14 Kuznetskii Most, a building with a long and illustrious fashion history (Image 7): a pre-revolutionary fur emporium, the building became the site of the Soviet All-Union House of Fashion in the 1940s (Bartlett 2007: 184). They even stormed the catwalk at a fashion show attended by the artist Nikas Safronov, disrupting the event and setting fire to the stage (Image 8). The group brought only basic clothes to the locations themselves, choosing to steal the necessary objects to complete their looks from the boutiques themselves. Yet whilst these performances can be easily read as targeting the fashion industry, the predominantly anti-Putin political overtones of this protest were crafted after the fact, through its narration and appropriation in new media. A music video for the song showed a montage of the performances which both highlighted and disrupted the image of the brands targeted by the group; the logo of the Denis Simachev concept store is seen half obscured by smoke, for example (Image 9). The group also released an extended 'manifesto' on LiveJournal to accompany the video, which narrated the events surrounding each performance and explained to readers how the song should be understood, as a 'musical occupation of the glamour locations of the capital' ('Vtoroi nelegal'nyi tur', 2011). They stated: 'We decided to play where there were the most rich Putinists. De-politicisation and the demand for brain-numbing chic have created [...] the phenomenon of 'Putinist Glamour', which has become a major factor in contemporary politics, founded on passivity, conformism and non-interference. The victims of our concerts are those same people who are so valued in the Russian conciliatory culture of the "tusovka", such as the artist Nikas Safronov and the designer Denis Simachev' ('Vtoroinelegal'nyitur', 2011).

Image 7: Pussy Riot perform *Kropotkin Vodka* in the Podium Store on Kuznetskii Most, Moscow, November 2011.

Прямо во время концерта Гараджа решила перекусить, найдя на полу какой-то бутерброд.



К концу песни, во время финального слэма, когда наши мозги наконец хорошо протряслись, до нас дошло, что использование меха песцов и других зверей не соответствует нашим зооащитным взглядам. Мы разраженно кинули шубы работникам магазина, и быстро покинули заведение. В «Подииуме» все настолько были рады тому, что мы закончили петь и оставили в покое песец, что совершенно не заметили того, что мы ушли в их платьях.

Source: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/5164.html> (accessed 12 April 2013).

Image 8: Pussy Riot interrupt a fashion show to perform *Kropotkin Vodka*, November 2011.

Огонь обжыл Тюрю и Гараджу. Зрители в оцепенении наблюдали за выступлением. Тут Тюря поняла, что наступила ее очередь исполнять куплет, и потянулась из огня к микрофону.



Огонь обжигал руки Похлебки, но она продолжала исполнять феминистские аккорды.

Source: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/5164.html> (accessed 12 April 2013).

Image 9: Pussy Riot performing *Kropotkin Vodka* on Stoleshnikov Pereulok, Moscow, November 2011.



Source: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/5164.html> (accessed 12 April 2013).

The video for *Kropotkin Vodka* showed the power of the internet to transform a countercultural fashion 'event' into a coherent and politicised act of protest. For Pussy Riot, therefore, fashion and politics are very much intertwined. Beyond the intersection of fashion and 'glamour politics', the world of high fashion would also seem to be a natural target for a group that seek to promote feminism and the overthrow of patriarchal social relations. As Bartlett has argued, post-Soviet Russia saw the development of 'new overexposed rituals of femininity and sexuality [which] could be interpreted as a liberating and healthy reaction to the previously imposed deritualization of sexual behaviour [in the Soviet Union]' (Bartlett 2006: 186). Freed from the ideological constraints of Soviet constructions of gender, the new Russian consumers were able to indulge in fashion trends that reclaimed the female body and presented it as highly sexualised. As such, Pussy Riot's rejection of 'fashionable' dress has much in common with second wave feminists, who saw stilettos and girdles as a form of exploitation (Hollows 2000: 139). Certainly, statements by the group seem to confirm this view: according to Bullet, 'Pussy Riot use different codes of beauty, opposite to the traditional feminine image, in Russia or anywhere. Our look is not meant to be about long legs and high heels. The point is to be more surreal and Dada [...] This project is not about being good-looking; it's about being simple and strong' (Goldman, 2013: 140).

Pussy Riot's style can therefore be seen as both a 'fashion attack' and an attack on fashion. By referencing the counterculture of the Russian underground, they tap into a strong tradition of clothes and artistic 'happenings' as a means to challenge the political status quo. At the same time, using the power of new media, their protests target the fashion industry, both as a perpetuation of outmoded ideas of femininity, and as an extension of Putin's own

political hegemony, which is intimately bound up with ideas of glamour and chic. Yet whilst this engagement with fashion and the fashion system is clearly central to the group's message, and represented an important target of their anti-Putin 'actions' until 2012, their attack on fashion politics has not ignited the passions of either the state or the public in the same way as their attack on the Orthodox Church. There were no arrests following Pussy Riot's impromptu performances in Moscow's 'glamour locations', and responses to *Kropotkin Vodka* on the internet were certainly muted: the most passionate thread on their *LiveJournal* message board concerned whether they had in fact stolen dresses from the Podium store, and if 'leftist feminists' were beyond the law (dark_seven 1.12.11). The complex, cross-media intersection of fashion, feminism and politics, although central to Pussy Riot's challenge to the current Russian cultural and political scene, did not explode in the mainstream media or gain headlines around the world.

In fact, this lack of resonance can also be read in fashion terms, in light of the varied expectations that surround women's dress in contemporary Russia. Pussy Riot's experimental attire drew little attention in the context of Moscow's 'glamour locations', where countercultural or extreme fashion is one part of a multifaceted and experimental approach to dress. The attention of Russia's mainstream media was only captured when Pussy Riot turned their sights on the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, a location where the norms of female dress are much more clearly drawn. Orthodox tradition dictates that women should cover their arms, legs and heads when entering a church; as such, the outfits worn by Pussy Riot during their 'Punk Prayer' became an integral part of their perceived challenge to Russian religious mores. As Liubov Sokologorskaia, witness for the prosecution at the Pussy Riot trial, commented, 'They had dresses that bared their shoulders and were very contrasting! And they had hats of different colours too. And their tights were different colours!... This was blasphemy, sacrilege, and an insult to my feelings, and my faith' (Sokologorskaia 2013). The prosecutor similarly commented that 'they were dressed in clothing inappropriate for such a place [...] Bright colours may not be worn' ('Prosecutor's Statement' 2013: 53). In this particular location, therefore, Pussy Riot's use of fashion as protest subverted expectations in a way that was truly new and shocking. Their engagement with social media disseminated this shock to a globalised and receptive audience. Yet as their 'fashion attack' found its mark, it finally and decisively shattered their carefully-staged, anonymous fashion façade, revealing three ordinary, casually-dressed and vulnerable young women in the dock of the Khamovnicheskii district court.

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