

Apocalypse at the Kremlin's Door: Subverting Monumentality through a Punk-Prayer

Alla Ivanchikova

The revolution has for its monument: empty space.
Julies Michelet

Two media events in February and March 2014 were marked by an uncanny symmetry. American exile Edward Snowden, who had been granted a year-long political asylum in Russia (subsequently extended), gave a TED talk in Vancouver.¹ His delivery was technology-assisted: he lectured via a remote-controlled prosthetic body while remaining in an undisclosed location in Russia. His digitalized talking head reminded the awestruck audience of the NSA-sponsored surveillance programs, fast-eroding freedoms, and increased powers of the Big Brother nation-state. Snowden's prosthetic body testified to the sway of these forces more than the speech itself, bringing the agility of remote-controlled technology to the foreground (partly by inviting a comparison to drones) and the intimate connection between physical space and state power. After all, the stark fact of his physical absence served as a reminder that Snowden has been excommunicated by the very system he helped create, rendered a person-without-a-body, evicted from the U.S. nation-space, and forced into exile. A few weeks prior, two members of the renowned Russian punk band, Pussy Riot, appeared as guests on the New York-based satirical news program *The Colbert Report*.² They entertained the show's audience with their irreverent attitude and snarky remarks about

Putin, their time in prison, and their distaste for state power. Released from the labor camp where they had spent almost two years, they were on a “world prison tour.” The U.S. prison complex was the last part of their itinerary.³

At first glance, these two events appear dissimilar: Snowden’s revelations were concerned with the degree of government surveillance of the digitalized world while the band’s fame was precipitated by their notorious performance of a “punk-prayer” in a church. However, both of these events heralded the end of an era of techno-optimism that marked the first decade of the new millennium, with its belief in the liberating power of new technologies (specifically, social media). The scandalous and socially divisive “Snowden affair” and “Pussy Riot affair” served as much-needed interruptions of the fantasy of freedom that many had imagined new social media would bring forth. They also signaled the renewed cultural significance of physical space in its monolithic materiality: the space of the state, monumental space, and carceral space.⁴ The members of the now-globally-known punk band were arrested, prosecuted, and sent to prison shortly after the digital remastering of their edgy yet ultimately benign punk-prayer performance proliferated on the Net via social media channels. Snowden’s revelations exposed the contours of the rigorously surveyed digital space, alarming the world to the fact that what appears to be fluid, quantum-like, and ethereal milieu is in fact a digital interrogation room where users, prompted by social media infrastructure, constantly volunteer data that, according to Žižek’s famous claim, “can and will be used against” them.⁵ The actions of both Snowden and the Pussy Riot band members thus started in the digital domain, but resulted in very real and dramatic physical displacements: the loss of freedom (Pussy Riot) and the loss of homeland (Snowden).⁶

The most recent wave of techno-optimism promoted social media environments as inherently democratic and borderless. According to such celebratory rhetoric, these spaces could spell the end of nationalism and state control and provide infinite opportunities for civic action and resistance.⁷ There was a general sense that the centrality of physical and national space was “waning” in digital technology-infused societies, as physical space dissolved and finally disintegrated into simulated environments, virtual ecologies, and networked intimacies. In his critical

account, Pasquinelli calls this phenomenon the ideology of “digitalism”: a “desire for a parallel universe without conflict, friction and gravity.”⁸ Pasquinelli argued that “digitalists” focus too much on circulation, failing to consider the labor behind networks, the physical side of technology itself, or the material processes involved in content production. Similarly, Carolyn Marvin points out that the idea of the “waning” of the relevance of nation-states, which many techno-optimists promote, is an optical illusion at the least. She observes that the claims about the “digital despatialization” and “denationalization” of the world seem surprising, since, historically, “distance- and time-annihilating technologies—telegraphy, radio, and television—have expanded rather than contracted the power of nation-states.”⁹ As Snowden’s revelations exemplify, today’s digital technologies have analogous potential to deepen state control over its citizens’ bodies by increasing the radius of state power. These media and technologies give central authorities, as Marvin states, “far-reaching power to monitor bodies at a distance.”¹⁰ The Pussy Riot affair of 2012, which I will discuss in greater detail, served as one instance in which the “freedom” of digital space was interrupted by the state. It marked a moment of the nation-state’s reassertion, transgressing any illusory boundaries between the digital and physical. Usually enfolded and invisible, state power became obvious through an act of ritualistic violence inflicted on the singers’ flesh, as they were pulled off the podium and dramatically dragged out of the church. The nation-state needed bodies: a material sacrifice to cement its grip and foster a powerful nationalist response.

Ironically, despite the seeming concretion and thickening of state power in these new regimes of control, these events also signal this power’s radical instability, and offer important lessons concerning individual agency. It seems appropriate, therefore, to place the Pussy Riot affair beside the Snowden affair because they both constitute examples of premeditated, highly strategic individual agency rather than exemplifying collective action (such as the Occupy movement). Considered together, these two affairs also foreground, in a complementary, jigsaw-puzzle-like manner, the problem of the commons in the age when the distinctions between private and public become untenable in their traditional forms. While Snowden instructs us to keep up with developments in the digital milieu and urges us to protect the digital commons, the members of Pussy Riot bring the importance of the physical commons into relief. They force us to revisit the way in which we

think of the spaces of resistance and spaces of protest and teach us to pay close attention to the physical and symbolic valence and specificity of these places. In what follows, I will analyze the site where the Russian band staged its political performance, suggesting that the very nature of that site provoked the heavy-handed response that led to the band members' imprisonment. I argue that recognizing the band's tactics of what I call "counter-monumentality"¹¹ provides insight into the way in which national monuments simultaneously express and subvert state power. This complex duality ultimately makes them effective sites for acts of protest.

The arrest of the band members in March 2012, following their performance of the "punk-prayer" at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, marked the end of the band as a meta-media event and repositioned it as an old-media event. Lev Manovich defines "meta-media" as a combination of old and new media that features "the remixing of interfaces of various cultural forms and of new software techniques—in short, the remix of culture and computers."¹² Prior to its arrest, the group was known for its tactical music performances in key locations (e.g., national monuments, the public transit system) that were recorded and disseminated via social media networks. The hybrid nature of these meta-media objects (fragments of a real-life performance that were edited and remixed for online circulation) resulted in the neutralization of the actual place of protest and brought the virtual character of dissemination and circulation of the recordings to the foreground. In Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms, the digital representation of the physical space of protest "remediated" that physical space.¹³ During that time, Pussy Riot members gained visibility primarily as heroes of what Geert Lovink calls "tactical media"—as nomadic media warriors that users detected, "liked," and "followed" in the digital milieu.¹⁴ The colorful balaclavas that the band members wore exemplified the nomadism of these tactical warriors; the horizontal, non-hierarchical organization of the collective; and the possibilities of endless horizontal proliferation through copying and imitation. In short, they epitomized W.J.T. Mitchell's claim that the recent global revolutions are "not those of face but of space."¹⁵ The anonymity of the balaclavas (reminiscent of the tactic employed by the Guerilla Girls feminist art collective) served an invitation to mimicry and imitation: it suggested that anyone could become a member of the collective by staging his or her own acts of protest while wearing a colorful mask, and that it would be impossible to tell a real Pussy Riot performance

from a fake one.¹⁶

The identities of the band members were ascertained only after the arrest when their masks were removed. The band's media archive became part of their criminal file once they were put on trial, their digital record scrutinized by the legal agents to determine the appropriate level of punishment. The primacy of physical space in the act of protest over the virtual (remediated) space of its subsequent circulation was asserted during the trial by the judges and emphasized by the head of the state, Vladimir Putin. The problem, the accusers stated, was not the topic of the punk-prayer (the meaning of the protest lyrics), but the topography (the site where the protest took place). The soundtrack of the punk-prayer that appeared on YouTube was found by the court to be different from the actual performance in the cathedral, as witnesses present in the actual space during that time ascertained. High-tech media (digital recordings) were scrupulously compared with low-tech mediation (eye-witnessing). The band members were convicted based on the actual performance and not based on their digital archive. Political issues such as an anti-Putin motif were present in the online version but absent in the live performance, because the band members were dragged out of the cathedral before they could finish their song. Thus, the three women were tried as "hooligans" rather than political activists.¹⁷

The site of the actual protest is of particular interest in the Pussy Riot affair. Reclaiming the commons was the signature art form the collective developed, as members of the group, in the spirit of the Occupy movement, would temporarily take over places of national significance and reclaim them as spaces of popular democracy and protest. One of their first Occupy-style performances occurred at Red Square, where the band members, wearing colorful balaclavas, occupied the Monument to Minin and Pozharsky (see Image 1 below). While Red Square is the main ceremonial space of the state, the monument is much more complex and ambiguous in terms of its symbolism. It can be simultaneously viewed as a space where state power and legitimacy are reaffirmed and restored, or as a space that signifies the crisis of such legitimacy (the monument marks the end of "the Time of Troubles" brought forth by the crisis of state power). The paradoxical nature of state-sponsored memory-work is also visible in the physical space of their protest-prayer: the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Despite its aura of unyielding monumentality, the gargantuan complex known as the Cathedral

conceals beneath its marble and granite many unresolved contradictions. The history of this location makes the symbolism of the Cathedral highly unstable and vulnerable to critique as the history of its erection, demolition, and recent rebuilding exemplifies the turbulent recent history of the Russian state with its three distinct stages: the imperial, Soviet, and neo-imperial periods.

According to Henri Lefebvre, the social function of monuments is to signify national unity: “a monument transmutes the fear of the passage of time, and anxiety about death, into splendor.”¹⁸ A monument is also a spatial actor that “overcomes conflicts, at least momentarily, even though it does not resolve them; it opens a way from everyday concerns to collective joy.”¹⁹ The universalizing function of monuments makes them useful to the state as they create an illusion of temporarily overcoming or suspending social contradictions by opening up a horizon of universal meaning. Serving as a collective mirror (similar to the mirror-effect in psychoanalysis), monuments are orthopedic, creating the image of unity out of disunity and antagonisms. While signifying the apparent permanence, atemporality, and imperishability of power, monuments are only able to accomplish this to a degree as they inevitably bare the “stamp of the will to power, the will to mastery.”²⁰ The cool façade of the monument masks the latent aggression, readiness to banish the obscene, excommunicate the heretical, and silence the unbeliever. “Monumental durability is unable,” writes Lefebvre, “to achieve a complete illusion. Their credibility is never total.”²¹

The monumental Cathedral site hijacked by the band’s performance has a particularly turbulent history, attempting to embody a vision of social unity while at the same time testifying to the lineage of multiple antagonisms that challenged that vision. The Cathedral was initially conceived as a monument to Russia’s victory over Napoleon in the war of 1812. The idea of a Cathedral complex that would also serve as a national monument was innovative: on the official site of the Cathedral, the building is referred to as a cathedral-monument (*hram-pamyatnyk*).²² The site selected proved to be challenging: the soil was unstable and all work was stopped by 1826. The new site, which was marginally more hospitable, required the relocation of the existing Alexeevsky Convent and the demolition of its standing structures, including the Church of All Saints. The Cathedral was finally completed by 1881 and became the main ceremonial space of the Russian Orthodox Church. The

colossal Cathedral complex served as a testimony to the unity of church and state, containing images of saints alongside images of political and military leaders and featuring the statue of Tsar Alexander III in its courtyard.

Half a century later, in 1931, the Cathedral was demolished by the Soviet government in a symbolic gesture of ritualistic violence of one regime against another. Seeking to assert the legitimacy of their own rule, the Soviets considered building their own monumental ensemble tentatively called The Palace of the Soviets to reoccupy and recode the empty space opened up by the revolution. However, the plan to build an awe-inspiring monument to the revolution was abandoned with the advent of World War II. From 1958 onward, the foundation of the building was used as a public swimming pool, literalizing Mitchelet's claim that the "revolution has for her monument: empty space."²³ In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, dreams of rebuilding the imperial cathedral resurfaced. While the idea was controversial, Moscow's influential mayor Luzhkov put the plan into action. The new cathedral, replicating the old imperial structure, was built in 1999 and became the new ceremonial space of the Orthodox Church.

Despite its seeming weightiness, the building that the band members selected for their "punk-prayer" is thus perched rather precariously above unstable ground. While attempting to represent the desired permanence of power, the cathedral architectural complex also connotes the real threat of social change (i.e., the impermanence of all power structures and the inherent instability of any regime).²⁴ The rhetoric of disjunction deployed in "the punk prayer" made this precariousness tangible, exposing the antagonisms concealed in that space. The monument to state power was redefined as the portal to a contested past and as a testimony to irreducible social antagonisms. It became, temporarily, a space where historical time was seen as being out of joint, as a place of possibility for an aperture onto the political (Walter Benjamin's "dialectical image").

I refer to the band's tactics as the art of "counter-monumentality," as they involve the practice of hijacking and redefining monuments to fit new political demands. By adding live singing bodies to the bodies of marble and granite, the Pussy Riot collective attempted to temporarily revise the scripts of national unity and social cohesion offered by national monuments. Because they lack permanence, these hybrid counter-monuments are

paradoxical. In his analysis of the Occupy movement, W.J.T. Mitchell calls such interventions “corpographs”: their entrance into the public space is as at odds with (orthogonal to) a traditional monument.²⁵ Where a monument seeks to foreclose the multiplicity of meaning through a fantasy of national unity, reflecting imaginary consensus onto viewers, these temporary installations are non-orthopedic: they refuse such foreclosure of meaning and expose the tensions hidden and enfolded in physical sites. Irreverent gestures that the monumental proscribes are liberated in such corpographs, allowing the “excommunicated” antagonisms to find their way back into articulation. By staging instances of visual and physical presence in space, corpographs facilitate the seizing of “the commons” and reclaim public spaces for public use. In the act of such occupation, the artists transform the space and divulge that “the commons” is always already pre-occupied by the state and that their open democratic character cannot be sustained. An act of occupation thus becomes an act of revelation: it reveals the proprietary sociopolitical matrix that inundates spaces seemingly void of ownership. In the light of this defiant act, the space stands open and the defining sociopolitical matrix stands naked, exposed in its obscene glory.



[Image 1: Pussy Riot occupying the Monument to Minin and Pozharsky on the Red Square in 2012, Photo by Denis Bochkarev]

The digitalist culture of the last two decades seems to have lost its faith in the usefulness of monuments. Mario Carpo professes that “[m]onuments in stone may be destined to play a lesser role in the future than they have in the past. They will most likely be replaced by music, voices, words, and all that can be digitally recorded, transmitted, and reenacted. In fact, to some extent this is already happening.”²⁶ However, the Pussy Riot saga suggests that physical monuments remain potent sites for political protest and tactical intervention in conjunction with audiovisual media. Such forms of protest can expose the profound instability of state power that these monuments seemingly consolidate. By hijacking this symbolic potential, individual agents can produce real change. The instability of state power in the case of Pussy Riot’s impious revolt became obvious in the state officials’ hysterical, heavy-handed response that inadvertently turned the band members into martyrs.

Itself influenced by the Arab Spring and the American Autumn of 2011, the Pussy Riot affair of 2012 served as a precursor to the Snowden affair of 2013. This lineage of activism highlights the need to rethink both material and digital commons as a common good that needs to be reclaimed. The chronology of events is significant as well. Perhaps the Pussy Riot protest seemed theatrical and a bit silly, and the state’s response appeared overly hysterical, but following the Snowden revelations, their protest reiterated the necessity and relevance of protest more generally. Furthermore, it reasserted that the reach of state power must be questioned, checked, and challenged.

Considered against the backdrop of these prior events, Snowden’s revelations force us to ponder not simply the private realm’s vulnerability to scrutiny and surveillance, but the near-total convergence between technologies of privacy—the intimate, confessional, expressive space of social media that came to define the new millennium—with technologies of surveillance and control. Reflecting on the Pussy Riot affair in the aftermath of Snowden’s revelations frames the consideration of the following questions: What kind of political and social action can and must emerge in the post-Snowden/post-Pussy Riot world? When digital ephemera accrete and converge with the apparatus of state power, when flexible networks of communicative capitalism harden into carceral spaces, to what extent do we have to excommunicate ourselves from the digital realm to become political

subjects? What are the commons, now that they include digital spaces, and how can those spaces be reclaimed (and is this possible or desirable)? What kind of tactics do we need to employ if we are to engage in the art of protest? What inspiration can we find in the confessional militancy of the Pussy Riot performance? Their act, an intimate form of a prayer framed by the loud, riotous noise of electric distortion, may be a place to turn for answers.

Notes

- 1 Edward Snowden, "Here's How We Can Take Back the Internet" TED talk, *TED*, (March 2012).
- 2 Stephen Colbert interviewed two members of the band, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina, on *The Colbert Report* on February 5, 2014. Watch the video on <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/49r39y/pussy-riot-pt--1>.
- 3 Pussy Riot, "Mother of God, Drive Putin Away" (*Bogoroditze, Putina Progoni*), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALS92big4TY>. Putin's "civilizational nationalism" (see Igor Torbakov, "Russia: Looking at Putin's Nationalist Dilemma" in *Eurasia.net*, February 8, 2012) is a paradoxical ideology that involves upholding the value of the Soviet past, along with Russia's imperial past, combining the use of often contradictory images (that belong to an atheist and to a religious culture respectively). This highly contradictory project incorporates anti-American rhetoric as one of its key ingredients, which enables persecution of the local opposing voices (Pussy Riot) while providing political refuge to Snowden.
- 4 The renewed interest in the physical and the material is exemplified by Chris Anderson's recent book *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution* (New York: Crown Business, 2012), in which he describes the importance of 3-D printing tools as technologies that will redefine material production for the twenty-first century.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, quoted in Geert Lovink, "Hermes on the Hudson: Notes on Media Theory after Snowden," *e-flux journal* 54 (April 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/hermes-on-the-hudson-notes-on-media-theory-after-snowden/>
- 6 In making a provisional distinction between digital space and physical space, I do not wish to construct a simplistic, rigid boundary. It seems

obvious enough that the world of data is inseparable from the material labor that sustains it, while physical spaces are increasingly becoming technologically “augmented spaces.” (For instance, see Jason Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2012). In fact, as Bolter and Grusin pointed out more than a decade ago, physical spaces, especially symbolically rich sites, are always themselves media spaces (*Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 173.

However, what I wish to foreground is a moment where the nation-state’s jurisdiction over physical space (represented in national monuments or in its borders) comes to the foreground. In her “Invisible Media” (Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, eds. *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, New York: Routledge, 2003), Laura U. Marks points out that the media of the nation-state and the military have been becoming increasingly invisible (“enfolded”), characterized by stealth and liquidity. Moments of high visibility of nation-state power thus strike one as somewhat anachronistic, but may also signify a new development, which I tentatively call “the return of the state.”

7 Ibid.

8 This paradigm has had many adherents since the moment of the Internet’s inception and has mimicked earlier visions of the social world transformed by technology. In her *When Old Technologies Were New* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Carolyn Marvin observes that the advent of electric technology and later the telegraph and the telephone inspired fantasies of networked humanity that resemble our own fantasies of the digital era. For instance, she cites predictions that “strife would cease in the world of plenty created by electrical technology” (206), that political geography will be “practically obliterated” (202), and that an adoption of a telegraph-inspired universal language will bring “global harmony” (193). A similar account is offered by Jeffrey Sconce in “Mediums and Media,” in *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears that Shape New Technologies*, edited by Marita Sturken, Douglas Thomas, and Sandra J. Ball Rokeach (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004). See also Asa Briggs, “Man-made Futures, Man-made Past” and Wendy M. Grossman, “Penguins, Predictions, and Technological Optimism: A Skeptic’s View” in the same volume.

9 Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008), 101. “Digitalism” is in itself a revised version of the

cyber-optimism of the 90s. In 2000, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin warned against seeing cyberspace as a quasi-theological milieu where physical and national space is “transcended.” See *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 180.

- 10 Carolyn Marvin, “Peaceable Kingdoms and New Information Technologies: Prospects for the Nation-State,” in *Technological Visions*, 248.
- 11 The term “counter-monument” was introduced by James E. Young in his “The Counter-Monument: Memory Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Winter 1992): 267-99. Specifically, his analysis centers on Holocaust memorials in post-war Germany, which are called upon to commemorate absence and loss. According to Young, a counter-monument defies “a number of cherished memorial conventions: its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration” (277). While Young focused on physical counter-monuments (concrete structures) that set to defy the logic of traditional, state-sponsored monumentality, my main interest here is counter-monumentality as a *practice*: specifically, the practice of contesting, disrupting, and redefining the meaning of established monumental sites.
- 12 Lev Manovich, “Understanding Meta-Media,” *C-theory* (October 2005).
- 13 See *Remediation*.
- 14 David Garcia and Geert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media,” www.nettime.org (May 16, 1997).
- 15 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry*, 39, no. 1 (2012): 9.
- 16 At the peak of the band’s popularity, masked performances proliferated worldwide, arguably culminating in Madonna’s adoption of the balaclava during her concert in Moscow in August 2012. See Miriam Elder, “Pussy Riot: Madonna Supports Punk Trio at Concert in Russia,” *The Guardian* (August 7, 2012).
- 17 See Bernstein for the analysis of the trial in Anya Bernstein, “An

Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2013).

18 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 221.

19 Ibid

20 Ibid, 222.

21 Ibid, 221.

22 See the official site of the Cathedral for the history of the building, <http://www.xxs.ru>.

23 Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*. (LaVergne, TN: Lightning Source Inc., 2008), 4.

24 In their seminal text on post-Soviet monuments, Benjamin Forest and Julia Johnson claim that during transitional times ("significant critical junctions") existing monuments become co-opted/glorified, disavowed, or contested. Contested monuments are the most interesting because, as Forest and Johnson point out, they "remain the objects of political conflict." While the authors classify the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a glorified/coopted monument, the "Pussy Riot affair" makes obvious that it remains a contested site. See "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow," *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 3 (2002): 524-547.

25 Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution," 27.

26 Mario Carpo, "The Postmodern Cult of the Monuments," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation History Theory* 4, no. 2 (2007): 55.

Alla Ivanchikova is an assistant professor of global literature at the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Her work focuses on cultural and feminist theory, new media studies, and global literary studies. Her work appeared recently in *Warscapes*, *Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, and *Academic Quarter*.