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Pussy Riot: The Power of Art, the Powerlessness of Artists

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, August 23rd, 2012

If you're asking whether art matters any more, just look at what's happening in Russia. The conviction and harsh sentencing of Pussy Riot, for engaging in a politically-charged performance inside a church, answers the question: art matters a great deal.

Pussy Riot is a punk-feminist band with a deliberately provocative name. Most American media have smirked at the name, and done an inadequate job of reporting what the band stands for and why. In pre-arrest interview in [Vibe](#), Pussy Riot member Garadzha stated, "A female sex organ, which is supposed to be receiving and shapeless, suddenly starts a radical rebellion against the cultural order, which tries to constantly define it and show its appropriate place."

It's similar to the perspective that transformed American culture through playwright Eve Ensler's breakthrough work, *The Vagina Monologues*, which debuted in 1996 (and continues through the work of Ensler's organization [V-Day](#)).

Here's video of the performance that led to Pussy Riot's arrest.

By American standards, this is relatively tame stuff, and would result, at most, in a misdemeanor trespassing citation. Russians see it differently; in recent polls, most Russians supported the government's stance. As a Russian reader of *Cultural Weekly* emailed me yesterday, "I feel so much repulsion against their artistic actions. Russian society is split: some say don't punish them too hard, the others say: if we forgive them today, tomorrow they'll be taking a shit where we pray."

When State takes such repressive actions against artists, it proves that artists clearly have the ability to threaten the State. To paraphrase Sir Isaac Newton, every reaction must arise from an equal and opposite action.

Pussy Riot's case is not unique; in the past year we've seen the arrests of visual artist [Ai Weiwei](#) in China and filmmaker [Jafar Panahi](#) in Iran. Each of these examples highlights a troubling paradox: While art has great power, most artists feel powerless.

Artists actually have more power than they know. But it's hard for artists to know it. Here's why: The State is highly organized, and artists are not. Artists resist organization because art-making is highly individual. Even when artists come out to support a cause, as many have done to call for Pussy Riot's release, it is not tightly organized or coordinated.

The State also has far greater resources than artists do. States have economic power unmatched by any other entity, and States muster armies and police departments. While states wield guns and money, artists control words and paint brushes.

Governments have the power of organization, economics and violence. Artists have none of these.

Yet artists clearly have a different power – the power to inspire, motivate, engage, enrage, enthuse... and to challenge the State. For this reason, governments go through periods when they fear artists and imprison them.

It's an asymmetrical relationship, both in terms of actual power and perceived power. If we'd like to balance it out a little – here are four steps we can take.

Respect artists. Demand artists' rights and insist upon artists' value. Don't ask artists to give away their work for free.

Respect creativity. Don't steal other people's creative work and respect their copyrights. And let's not disparage some artists' financial or critical success – let's cheer for them instead. Success engenders more success.

Get political. Last week, in my interview with former Governor Bill Richardson, he made the point that artists need to organize politically, at the local and national levels. He's right. You can also get political by supporting [Amnesty International](#), which seeks the release of political prisoners, including artists, and [PEN International](#), which fights for freedom of expression worldwide.

Get larger. Encourage artists paint brighter, write bigger, sing louder.

I hope we'll all try to balance the power equation a bit between artists and governments. Because no artist has ever declared a war and sent troops into battle, levied a tax, or called the police to cart us off to jail.

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