

# Tracing Dmitrij Prigov in Contemporary Russia: Preliminary Remarks on Postmodern (Dis)Continuity<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

Employing the theories of Boris Groys and Mark Lipoveckij, this paper addresses the question of Dmitrij Prigov's role in the protest art practice of Roman Osminkin and Pussy Riot. The paper proves that both Osminkin and Pussy Riot do not just repeat Prigov's strategies, but these strategies are updated by ideological and political engagement. In the paper, this engagement is interpreted as the implementation of socialist realist principles into the principles of Moscow conceptualism. The result is that the original socialist realist aim to participate in the transformation of the world by the means of art is now suspended.

## **Key words:**

Avant-garde; Osminkin; Postmodernism; Prigov; Pussy Riot; Socialist Realism

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## Introduction

The aim of the paper is to show how both Moscow conceptualism and socialist realism are part of the art practice of Roman Osminkin and Pussy Riot. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the works of Boris Groys [GROYS 1995; GROYS 1996] and Mark Lipoveckij [LIPOVETSKY 2018]. I turn to Groys's conception of socialist realism as radicalized avant-garde and proto-postmodernism. Moreover, from Groys's perspective, there exist a link between Moscow conceptualism and socialist realism that cannot be reduced into mockery. I also find fruitful Lipoveckij's remarks on the dilemma of contemporary Russian intellectuals, who continue both the legacy of nonconformism and revolutionary avant-garde. However, to make my analysis less abstract and vague, I decided to employ Dmitrij Prigov as an analytical figure. His work represents the continuity from avant-garde through socialist realism to Moscow conceptualism very well. Employing Prigov as the analytical figure then means that I will analyse Osminkin's and Pussy Riot's works through the lens of the legacy of Prigov. In this regard, this paper can be classified as a case study within the field of theory.

After a brief discussion on the current Prigov's status within the contemporary Russian culture, I move towards the discussion of the role he plays in the works of Osminkin and Pussy Riot. This is where I turn to Groys's conception of socialist realism and try to identify how certain features of socialist realism enter Osminkin's and Pussy Riot's practice. I have chosen to write about Osminkin and Pussy Riot, firstly, because they overtly and frequently refer to Prigov. And secondly, their performances and poetry are examples of contemporary politically engaged art. It allows to discuss Prigov's influence in the transmedial perspective and also to show the shift from implicitly political Moscow conceptualism to overtly political art of the 2010s. A closer look at Osminkin's and Pussy Riot's practices show us that there exists a structural relation between them and Moscow conceptualism, and that Moscow conceptualism principles are updated by another sort of structural relation. In this case it is socialist realism, which serves as a complementary model to the Moscow conceptualism one.<sup>2</sup>

## Prigov in Contemporary Russia

Dmitrij Prigov, one of the key figures of Moscow conceptualism and Russian postmodernism, has recently become known as “the non-canonical classic” (неканонический классик) [DOBRENKO, LIPOVECKIJ, KUKULIN, MAJOFIS 2010]. Calling Prigov “the

2 The paper is based on a talk given at a conference *Mladá rusistika – nové tendencie a trendy VI* held at Comenius University in Bratislava on 28th January 2020. The talk was originally in the Slovak language (see the book of conference talks abstracts [CHUDÁ, MADEJ, MIKULÁŠ 2020, 17]).

non-canonical classic” is not by any chance the evidence of Prigov’s absence in the canon of contemporary Russian culture. On contrary, it tells us much about his current status within the canon. The designation refers to Prigov’s ambiguity.<sup>3</sup> It even renders Prigov’s practice of a perpetual “shimmering” (мерцание, мерцательность)<sup>4</sup> between the different positions to avoid “being identified” [PRIGOV, JACHONTOVA 2010]. Prigov described shimmering as follows:

“[Flickering] refers to a strategy established in recent years, according to which the artist keeps away [*otstoianie*] from texts, gestures, and behaviors, which presupposes a temporary “entangling in” [*vlipanie*] language, gestures and behaviors but only for such an amount of time that it becomes impossible for the artist to be completely identified with them—and then the “flying away” [*otletanie*] from them into the meta-point of the stratageme and not “getting entangled” in them again for quite a long time, in order is called Flickering. Finding oneself in a zone between this point and the language, gesture or behavior constitutes a means of artistic manifestation called Flickering [EȘANU 2010, 64].”<sup>5</sup>

The designation “non-canonical classic” also refers to the possibility that Prigov earned his status thanks to “the Russian people” and that the academic or art institutions have not succeeded in taking Prigov away from them, yet. However, Prigov would have certainly said that what we are dealing here with is the issue of what he called “image” (имидж). Prigov understood image as “безличный субъект дискурсивной «практики», состоящий из набора определенных рутинных риторических жестов, поз, вещей, интонаций” [LIPOVECKIJ 2013, 17].<sup>6</sup> For that reason, as I have already said, calling Prigov “the non-canonical classic” tells us more about our current perception and attitudes to Prigov than about Prigov himself.<sup>7</sup>

The ambiguity of the current Prigov’s status in Russia was well expressed in a project related to the Moscow district of Beljajevo, where Prigov had lived for several decades.<sup>8</sup>

3 Marija Majofis discusses Prigov’s ambiguity regarding the process of his canonization [MAJOFIS 2010, 297–299].

4 The original Prigov’s terms “мерцательность” or “мерцание” have been translated into English as oscillation, flickering or shimmering.

5 For a detail analysis of this strategy within the Moscow conceptualism milieu see [LEIDERMAN 2018a].

6 “a non-personal subject of a discursive ‘practice’ that consists of a group of certain routine rhetoric gestures, positions, things and intonations” (If not otherwise stated, the English translations of the Russian quotations in the paper are mine).

7 Compare with the study by Sergej Orobij who supposes that although Prigov attempted to interpret his work from a variety of positions, he forgot about the possibility of his afterlife canonization [OROBIJ 2014].

8 Prigov called himself the creator of Beljajevo literary topos [BAVIL’SKI 2006]. In the prenotification to the cycle *The Dearest Beljajevo* (Родимое Беляево, 2007), Prigov underlines the tradition of

The project was called *Beljajevo Forever* (*Беляево навсегда*). It was initiated several years after the author's death by Kuba Snopek, a Polish-born Moscow-based architect and researcher [SNOPEK 2011]. The project was supported by a local cultural centre, *Beljajevo Gallery* (*Галерея Беляево*). Among other things, one of Prigov's visual poems (стихोगрамма) was painted on the wall at one of the Beljajevo blocks of flats in 2014. The graffiti was made by a Moscow art group Zuk Club. Especially peculiar about the graffiti is that more than eleven thousand Muscovites voted for this visual poem through a mobile app *The Active Citizen* (*Активный гражданин*).<sup>9</sup> This case demonstrates how Prigov's status oscillates between being institutionalized and non-institutionalized, and still keeps its ambiguity.

## Referring to Prigov

In 2007, members of the group *Vojna*, some of whose members would go on later to found Pussy Riot, invited Prigov to participate in their performance *Vojna is interested only in the unqualified work* (*Война занимается только неквалифицированным трудом*). The initial plan was to carry up a wardrobe with Prigov locked inside to the top floor of the Moscow State University dormitory building (one of the skyscrapers built during the Stalinist era). Unfortunately, the performance did not take place, because Prigov suffered a heart-attack a few days before the set date and passed away few days later in hospital. Furthermore, the dean of the faculty had originally forbidden the performance from taking place [2007...]. The group instead of the planned performance staged a wake in the Moscow Metro [*The Wake...*].

However, a decade later, Prigov posthumously appeared in a Pussy Riot performance called *The Policeman Enters the Game* (*Милиционер вступает в игру*, 2018). During the FIFA world cup final, several of Pussy Riot members ran into the field and interrupted the match. In a video manifesto that appeared after the performance, Pussy Riot underlined that their performance took place on the eleventh anniversary of Prigov's sudden death [*Milicioner...*]. In the manifesto, Pussy Riot referred to Prigov as to the creator of the cultural image of the Soviet (Russian) policeman. The Prigovian Policeman serves as a mediator between the laws of state and heaven and watches over the order in both social and metaphysical sense. The figure of the Policeman appeared most famously in one of Prigov's lyric cycles called *The Apotheoses of the*

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writing about geographical places, which typically inscribes the mythological elements into the representation of the actual world [PRIGOV 2016, 473–478]. Other Prigov's texts about Beljajevo are in [PRIGOV 2019, 415–430].

9 For more detailed information about the graffiti project see [PAL'VELEVA 2014]. Lately, there has appeared an information that the graffiti may be covered during the reconstruction of the building [*V Moskve...*].

*Policeman* (*Анофеоз Милицанера*, 1978).<sup>10</sup> Pussy Riot, ironically, say that such a kind of policemen appeared in Russia during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, when all political arrests were suddenly stopped. Pussy Riot then require Russian policemen to behave like this all the time and to become actual Prigovian policemen. At the end of the manifesto, they list several political requirements; including the freedom for political prisoners, the end of the protesters' arrests, prosecution of people for "likes" and fabricated prosecutions and freedom of political competition.<sup>11</sup>

Such explicit references to Prigov can be also found in Roman Osminkin's poetry. Osminkin often in a self-reflective manner draw reader's attention to the similarities between his own and Prigov's poetry. The following fragment proves it very well:

[...]  
 и вот уже вооружившись  
 сей мыслью как кинжалом  
 иду писать ни на кого непохожие  
 не стихи а готовые трансцендетальные  
 то есть априорные сверхопытные доопытные и внеопытные озарения  
 и тут как тут слышишь:  
 как у Пригова [OSMINKIN 2015, 19]<sup>12</sup>

## Towards the Structural Relations

The previous example from Osminkin's poetry suggests that Prigov appears not only as the subject of reference. One might have noticed that in the cited fragment, Osminkin adopted devices (прием) typical of Prigov's poetic style. Apart from the typical "Prigovian line" ("приговская строка"), stylistics based on the tension between "high"

10 For a detailed analysis of the cycle see [HODEL 2006].

11 Most recently, one of the participants of the football game intervention, Piotr Verzilov, was arrested for wearing a police uniform while recording a video performance. The video was meant to be a reaction to the attempt of the Moscow administration to fully control movements of citizens amid coronavirus pandemic [*Petr...*; *Petra...*]. One may once again recall of Prigov's verses about the omnipresent Policeman: "And the center, which the Policeman holds: / A view of him unfurls from everywhere / From everywhere the Policeman can be seen [...] / Anyway, he isn't hiding" [PRIGOV 2014]. The Verzilov case is a prove that the image of the police in contemporary Russian culture will need a further investigation.

12 "and yet armed with / the thought like with a dagger / I am going to write verses / verses that don't recall of anyone else / they are not even verses but real transcendental / I mean a prior super-experiential pre-experiential and non-experiential enlightenments // when suddenly you hear: / like in Prigov".

and “low” is also typical of Prigov’s work.<sup>13</sup> Exactly in this regard Mark Lipoveckij states that for Osminkin Prigov represents an aesthetic model [LIPOVETSKY 2018, 247]. As I have already suggested, such a perspective applies to Pussy Riot as well. Since Prigov is a model, it could be suggested that there is a structural relation between the two. The relation can be located on the level of device, or, on the level of techniques and principles artists use to create their artwork. However, we cannot reduce the relation to the aesthetic level as the Russian formalistic term “device” may suggest. The aesthetics cannot be separated from the ethics. Attempts to separate art from other areas is typical of modernism, while postmodernism and postmodernity respectively, typically cross boundaries.<sup>14</sup> This is the case of Osminkin and Pussy Riot as well. They not only share aesthetic principles with Prigov, but they also share the ethos typical of Prigov. The essence of the ethos is, in my view, best expressed in Prigov’s opinion on postmodernism. Prigov overtly understands postmodernism as a reaction to the current state of society and culture. According to him, postmodernism teaches people “[...] не абсолютизировать высказанное слово, понимать, что истина бывает многоликой” [PRIGOV, ŠAPOVAL 2003, 116–117].<sup>15</sup> Understanding Prigov’s thoughts, let us now examine the appearances of the structural relation of Prigov’s works on the aesthetical and the ethical levels in Osminkin’s and Pussy Riot’s works.

The structural relation between Prigov and Osminkin becomes more visible when Osminkin begins to refer to himself as Roman Sergejevič [«Roman...】. At the first glance, it may seem that Osminkin only mimics Prigov, as Prigov referred to himself as to Dmitrij Alexandrovič Prigov. Prigov even stated that his oeuvre is structured into a life-long project called Dmitrij Alexandrovič Prigov.<sup>16</sup> However, there is an important difference in the practice of both authors. Kirill Korčagin underlines that Prigov (and other Moscow conceptualists as well) crumbled up the world into the fragments of different discourses, while Osminkin aims at the opposite process; he searches for his own speech in the flood of alien discourses. According to Korčagin, Osminkin primarily pays attention to the process of subjectivation of the speech and not to the deconstruction of the discursive violence as it was in the case of Prigov and other Moscow conceptualists [KORČAGIN 2015, 8–9]. Thus, Prigov stands for Osminkin as a model that stimulates his own approach. This perspective points at the common aesthetic devices of both artists and through that to the structural relation.

13 “Prigovian line” is the final verse that has a different length than the other verses of the poem. More about the line and other typical features of Prigov’s poetics see [ORLICKIJ 2014, 541–556] or [ZORIN 2010, 431–434].

14 Compare for example with Wolfgang Iser’s term “transversal reason” [ISER 1976, 135–160].

15 “[...] not to absolutize the spoken word and understand that the truth has many faces”.

16 For a more detailed discussion of Prigov’s project see [LIPOVETSKY, KUKULIN 2016].

To talk about the ethics, we must return to Mark Lipoveckij's initial remarks about Prigov being the aesthetic model for Osminkin. Lipoveckij writes that there is another functional model. This is represented by the Russian avantgarde group LEF. Lipoveckij states that Osminkin takes from Prigov the distrust toward the authorities while from LEF the effort to transform social reality through aesthetic means (the principle of "life-building", "жизнестроительство"),<sup>17</sup> and still being sceptical about the possibility of a such transformation [LIPOVETSKY 2018, 250]. Osminkin's scepticism can be understood as a result of the historical experience and of the interference of Prigov's distrust towards authorities, which is, by the way, also a result of historical experience. These aspects are well illustrated by the following verses:

мы против войны  
 прекратите воевать  
 мы требуем мира и разоружения  
 ну прекратите же воевать  
 война должна прекратиться  
 мы против войны  
 ах не прекратите  
 ну тогда мы  
 тогда мы  
 мы будем очень очень против  
 мы требуем мы настоятельно требуем  
 мира и разоружения  
 вам понятно?  
 ах непонятно?  
 [...]  
 война это плохо а мир это хорошо  
 ой  
 кажется пушки замолчали  
 муза  
 поговори со мною муза [OSMINKIN 2015, 75]<sup>18</sup>

If we understand the Muse as the agent of the creative work, we can say that, in the poem, the War plays for the lyrical subject the role of the Muse. The War drives their

17 More about the life-building principle see [KRIEGER 2006, 89–123].

18 "we are against the War / stop fighting / we need peace and disarmament / stop fighting / the war has to stop / we are against the War / oh you don't stop / well then we / then we / we're gonna be very much against it / we need we strongly need / peace and disarmament / do you get it? / oh you don't get it / [...] War is bad and peace is good / well / seems the guns got quite / muse / talk to me muse".

effort to write verses that would eventually stop the War. Nevertheless, after the War stops, the lyrical subject is forced to look for a new Muse that would stimulate their creativity. Such a perspective suggests that the anti-war poetry is fully dependent on the War. Therefore, the poem expresses certain scepticism towards the possibility of reaching the peace by writing poetry. This is, however, only one of the possible interpretations. From another perspective, the end of the War allows the lyrical subject to finally write poetry, while before they had to be fully engaged in protesting.<sup>19</sup>

Pussy Riot are probably the most famous Russian political artists. Their political engagement is much more visible than in Osminkin's case. Their performances have been overt reactions to the current social-political situation in Russia since the times when Pussy Riot's members were part of the left-anarchist group Vojna. The most prominent member of Pussy Riot, Nadežda Tolokonnikova, said that the only thing Pussy Riot did was that they took an existing music style (punk) and started to perform in the Moscow streets during the wave of anti-government protest in 2011 and 2012 [*Chudožnik...*]. The connection to Prigov in this case can be grasped through the concept "the artistic craft" (художественный промысел) that Prigov used to describe artworks with highly recognized ways of production and reception [MONASTYRSKIJ 1999, 193]. From Tolokonnikova's words, it seems that Pussy Riot approached punk similarly. They appropriated punk music as an aesthetic device. When an aesthetic device turns into "the artistic craft" it means that it becomes much easier to understand by the recipients. There is no "formal" obstacle in the process of reception. In the case of Pussy Riot punk performances, the recipients can focus on the semantics. The lyrics of Pussy Riot songs have always featured a very direct political message. It applies to the aforementioned performance *The Policeman Enters the Game*. Also significant is the performance that earned Pussy Riot their fame (and imprisonment as well) *Virgin Mary, Chase Putin Away* (Богородица Путина прогони, 2012).

The crystal-clear messages of Pussy Riot's performances have always been crucial in the relationship to their audiences because their aim was to make political changes and those are impossible without the public support. For this reason, Pussy Riot from

19 Similar scepticism is typical not only for Osminkin's poetry, but for his performances as well. In the 2018 video performance, the author states that he decided to vote in the Russian presidential election. However, he arrived at the wrong electoral precinct. Instead of giving the vote in the elections, he decided to give his voice to the street in the form of oral performance [*Kak...*]. The Russian expression "отдавать голос" can mean both "to give a vote" and "to give a voice". While the expression remains the same, the activities it describes are very different. It can describe the act of engagement in the political process and an artistic gesture as well. However, in the context of contemporary Russian regime, both activities become equal in a way that they do not give the subject the real power to change anything. Such scepticism can be identified in the performances of other authors as well. Compare, for example, with Daniil Leiderman's notes on the "monstrations" [LEIDERMAN 2018b, 177–179].



the very first, tried to rely on the mass media. After they were arrested in 2012, the importance of mass media even increased. And the arrested members, Tolokonnikova, Ałochina and Samucevič, were aware of it. That is why they tried to appear credible in the eyes of the public and earn its support [*Tolokonnikova...*]. There is another connection to Prigov. In this case, his concept of “image” that I have already mentioned. Prigov frequently underlined the position of the author in contemporary culture and society. He related the issue of image with the mass media, as the mass media are the main “creators” of the politicians’ images. In this regard, Prigov often mentioned the Russian nationalist and populist Vladimir Žirinovskij, whose activity was, according to Prigov, aimed primarily at the manifestation of his own image [BALABANOVA 2001, 136]. The importance of mass media image can be recognized in the transformation of Pussy Riot’s strategies in 2014. As Tolokonnikova puts it, the group realized that the punk and carnivalized strategies are not effective in a state, which institutions do not work properly. For that reason, they started to focus systematically on the human-rights. They set up an independent media outlet *Media Zone (Медиазона)* that monitors the violation of human rights on the territory of Russian Federation [EROFEEV, KOCHERGINA 2018, 151]. However, Pussy Riot did not forget their “punk” period, as their performance *Policeman Enters the Game* proves very well. Moreover, there was an important shift in their music production.<sup>20</sup> The principle of appropriating music style for the needs of communication of explicitly political content applies to Pussy Riot’s practice to these days. Pussy Riot now relies on the electronic music or hip-hop and the visuality of pop-music video. Songs like *CHAIKA, Make America Great Again, Straight Outta Vagina, Track About a Good Cop, Police State* and many others are the best evidence.<sup>21</sup>

## Tracing Traditions

Following Lipoveckij’s analysis of Osminkin, we may identify traces of historical Russian avantgarde in the activities of Pussy Riot, too. And again, thanks to the principle of life-building (жизнестроительство). Many Russian avant-garde artists were driven by the effort to work for the needs of the revolutionary regime and to work for newly founded cultural institutions. It was exactly this reason, for which Boris Groys considered socialist realism, or the culture of Stalinism to be radicalized avant-garde [GROYS 1996].<sup>22</sup> According to Alexander Ždanov, the ideologist of socialist realism, the works of socialist realism should have been ideologically strong and

20 The carnevalized punk performances may have been too much for the conservative Russian society.

21 The videos are available on the official Pussy Riot channel at [youtube.com/users/PussyRiotOfficial](https://youtube.com/users/PussyRiotOfficial).

22 Also compare with Peter Bürger’s theory of avantgarde according to which the avantgarde tried to overcome the aesthetic autonomy of modernism. Even from this perspective, socialist realism seems

understandable to a mass recipient [ŽDANOV 1950, 7–17]. I have shown before that these are position where Pussy Riot are heading as well. I do not intend to suggest by any chance that Pussy Riot continue or resurrect the poetics or the ideology of socialist realism.<sup>23</sup> I approach here the socialist realism in Boris Groys's sense. The theorist interprets socialist realism as a variation of modernity in art. Furthermore, Groys claims that the socialist-realist eclecticism turns it into a proto-postmodernism. In this regard, he compares it with the French surrealism [GROJS 1995].

Understanding socialist realism in such a manner, we may say that both Osminkin and Pussy Riot update two different functional models. These models are Moscow conceptualism and socialist realism. Prigov is in this regard the concrete realization of the functional model of Moscow conceptualism. Prigov works in the updated modus of socialist realism as the agent suspending the utopic project of transformation the world under the rule of a single principle by the means of art. Pluralism and openness are inscribed into the structure of socialist realism model during the process of update by the Moscow conceptualism model. On the other hand, socialist realism inscribes into the structure of Moscow conceptualism model the overtly political perspective that opens the way for overcoming the postmodern ethical indifference<sup>24</sup> and define political requirements.

My position may seem less oxymoronic if we consider the transformations of socialist realism after the death of Stalin in 1953. It turned into a more open system (device) for the search for the “sincerity”.<sup>25</sup> It means that socialist realism turned into a more pluralistic form, while it still preserved one of its key features—the responsibility of the writer (artist) towards the society. It is exactly in this regard that Naum Lejderman and Mark Lipoveckij define the so-called “intellectual prose” of such authors like Ales Adamovič, Vasil Bykau, Jurij Trifonov, Alexandr Vampilov or the Strugackij brothers as a parable (притча) understood as “a didactic-allegoric genre”

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to be a radicalized avantgarde. See Roman Kanda's review of the Czech translation of Bürger's book, in which Kanda discusses the theory in a similar manner [KANDA 2017].

23 In this regard, it seems to be important mentioning the group of Russian and Czech authors (artists and theorists) who published *The Manifesto of Radical Realism (Manifest radikálního realismu, 2016)*, where they claim the importance of “the rehabilitation of the Soviet art project” or “the continuity of the communist moments in the art history” [ARTOMOV, FORMAN, HAUSER, KLYUKOV, TER-OGANJAN 2016]. Apart from the leftist critic of capitalism, the authors call for the return of a medium to the art practice, because art, according to them, has become too dependent on texts, contexts and the artist's self. From such a perspective, it is possible to criticize both Osminkin and Pussy Riot. On the other hand, the relation of the “radical realists” to the socialist realism poetics and ideology would need a further scrutiny as well.

24 Indifference is frequently considered to be the crucial characteristic of postmodernity and postmodernism [ZIMA 2010].

25 I refer to Vladimir Pomerancev's 1953 essay *On Sincerity in Literature (Об искренности в литературе)* published in the journal *Новый мир*.

[LEJDERMAN, LIPOVECKIJ 2003, 193]. Generally, the main function of such literary texts is to convey a moral.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to Lipoveckij's observations. As I have mentioned in the introduction, he writes about the dilemma of contemporary Russian intelligentsia:

“This dilemma consists of either continuing to struggle, this time against Putin's conservative cultural hegemony, using the subversive methods that proved effective in the 1970–1980s, or, in the adopting Soviet methods for the establishment of one's own cultural hegemony, formally and discursively modelled after the Soviet one. Yet the effects of Soviet cultural hegemony are also well known and not forgotten by the poet.” [LIPOVETSKY 2018, 250]

The paper proves that we can agree with Lipoveckij's statement. However, an additional comment seems necessary. We should not perceive this dilemma as an irreconcilable dichotomy. The analysis shows that both poles of the dilemma are complementary.<sup>26</sup> It is this complementarity that makes the peculiarity of Osminkin's and Pussy Riot's art practice. Writing about Osminkin, Lipoveckij calls this complementarity “cohabitation of incompatible modalities” [LIPOVETSKY 2018, 259]. This complementarity of “incompatible modalities” is how the conceptualist “shimmering” looks like in the practice of Osminkin and Pussy Riot.

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26 Similar complementarity is identified by other researchers as well [LEIDERMAN 2018b; OUSHAKINE 2001; SMOLA 2019].

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