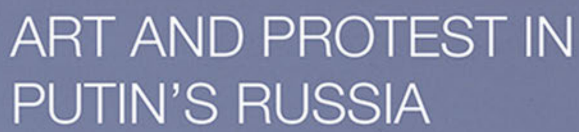

ART AND PROTEST IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Lena Jonson

Art and Protest in Putin's Russia

The Pussy Riot protest and the subsequent heavy-handed treatment of the protestors grabbed headlines, but this was not an isolated instance of art being noticeably critical of the regime. As this book, based on extensive original research, shows, there has been gradually emerging over recent decades a significant counter-culture in the art world which satirises and ridicules the regime and the values it represents, at the same time putting forward, through art, alternative values. The book traces the development of art and protest in recent decades, discusses how art of this kind engages in political and social protest, and provides many illustrations as examples of art as protest. The book concludes by discussing how important art has been in facilitating new social values and in prompting political protests.

Lena Jonson is Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Russia Research Program at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Stockholm.

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Preface

Any work of art is open to various interpretations. In this sense art has a life of its own. The way it is perceived and received lies in the eyes of the beholder. 'The Crack' (Treshchina), a painting by the Russian artist Stas Shuripa, which appears on the cover of this book, serves as a good example. In what sense is there a crack? What kind of crack? Is it a metaphor? A metaphor for what? There are several ways to interpret this painting. Shuripa is an artist interested in the philosophical–ideological connotations of form and visuality. The eye of the artist as well as the eye of the beholder exist in their specific contexts and experiences. It is this openness that creates the fascination of art. It is a language of communication but on different frequencies. The frequency on which you tune in determines what you see.

I have tuned in on the critical eye in art, *dissensus*, to use Jacques Rancière's concept. My attention has been directed towards the way in which this art was perceived and received in Russia.

This is a book about the role of art in Russian society during a period when protest was in the making and was followed by a period of conservative backlash. Focusing on cultural life and, first of all, the art scene, this book describes and explains tendencies that developed in parallel over a number of years. What resulted in the protest movement of 2011 and 2012 reflected a hope for change in society. When finishing the book in spring 2014, it was obvious that not only had this epoch of hope come to an end, but the new one, replacing it, was in full swing. What remained was to wait for the next turn in Russian history.

The book benefitted greatly from the fact that I lived and worked in Russia for over four years in the period under study. Working in Moscow during 2005–2009 as the Cultural Counsellor at the Embassy of Sweden, I had the unique opportunity to follow the art scene on the spot. Since then I have been closely following events and returned to the city several times each year to visit exhibitions and collect more material. I was a first-hand witness to developments and events as they took place and I could continuously record them.

Although writing a book is a lonely endeavour, many people contributed in various ways. Aside from the artists who kindly provided me with photographs of their works and the people whom I have interviewed, I want to thank Irina Yurna and all my friends in Moscow who created the inspirational environment for my

work and made me long to return to the city. I am also grateful to the late Russian curator Olga Lopukhova, who helped me make my first contacts with some of the younger artists portrayed in this study. My trips and visits to Moscow were made possible thanks to Tamara Torstendahl Salytjeva of the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU) and Mårten Frankby of the Swedish Embassy.

I received particularly valuable comments from Kristian Gerner, Per-Arne Bodin, Barbara Lönnqvist, Leslie Johnson and the anonymous reviewer at Routledge, and I am grateful to all of them. I am pleased to have had the help of Andrew Mash, Aleksei Semenenko and Connie Wall on the English text.

I want to thank the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation and especially the Ragnar Söderberg Foundation for their support. The generous grant by the latter made it possible for me to complete the book. I also want to thank the Swedish Institute of International Affairs for allowing me to extend the research area of the institute into the fields of art and culture.

Last but not least, I want to thank Björn Hagelin, who supported my project and maintained his confidence in me and the book throughout.

In spite of the contributions of all these people, I am solely responsible for the analysis and the conclusions.

Lena Jonson
Stockholm, June 2014

1 Introduction

It was freezing cold in Moscow on 24 December 2011 – the day of the largest mass protest in Russia since 1993. A crowd of about 100 000 people had gathered to protest against electoral fraud in the Russian parliamentary elections, which had taken place nearly three weeks before. As more and more people joined the demonstration, their euphoria grew to fever pitch. Although the 24 December demonstration changed Russia, the period of euphoria was tolerated only until Vladimir Putin was once again installed as president in May 2012. Repression then targeted the leaders of the new protest movement. This period of open protest, however, had raised expectations of further dramatic change.

How could a population that had been characterized as apolitical, passive and living under authoritarian conditions suddenly take to the streets? Why did demonstrations that usually gather only a few hundred people grow to become mass protests? Far from behaving like obedient subjects, people in a number of large cities throughout Russia began to raise their voices and claim their rights. Not all social strata were represented in the demonstrations. Most were well educated and came mainly from the so-called creative class and the middle class. Compared to the mass protests taking place in other countries at that time, the number of participants might seem insignificant – but it was a remarkably large number in the Russian context and it soon became evident that their discontent was over broader issues than just the elections. Theirs was a desperate cry against the way the country was being run – a cry of, 'No more! We have had enough!' A shift in values had obviously taken place. How had this come about?

This volume explores whether – and, if so, how – cultural factors helped to bring about the shift in values that preceded the outburst of discontent in Russia in 2011–2012. It takes as its basic assumption that culture – in particular, the visual arts – played a crucial role. Focusing on the visual arts, the study asks whether there were signs that predicted or laid the groundwork for the sudden outburst of mass protest. What role did the arts community and art itself play in facilitating the formation of the new values and attitudes that led to these developments?

Working in Moscow in the period 2005–2009, and with a background of a lifelong interest in Russian society, politics and cultural affairs, I perceived that what was happening on the art scene at that time had relevance far beyond art itself. And then, after fewer than two years, social protest exploded.

Putin's return as president in May 2012 drastically hardened the political climate in the country. This study examines how the arts community reacted under conditions of renewed restrictions on freedom and what role remained for art in the new political circumstances.

The visual arts are interpreted here in a broad sense that includes painting, installations, video, performance, street art and other media. The study covers the period from Putin's rise to power in 2000, with a special focus on 2005–2013, which includes his second term as president (2004–2008), his four years as prime minister when Dimitrii Medvedev was president (2008–2012) and the almost two years after Putin's return as president following the March 2012 election. The present analysis deals almost exclusively with the Moscow art scene. There is a reason for this. Moscow is the Russian art centre, and most Russian artists tend to exhibit in Moscow even if they live elsewhere.

This book is about the role of art in society and in paving the way for protest. Thus, it is not an art historian's analysis of Russian contemporary art, but an empirical study with no pretensions to contribute to a theory of art history or political science. Nonetheless, it uses the theoretical literature to structure the analysis and to define key concepts.

Art and protest

Developments in other places and at other times have shown that value shifts usually precede great upheavals and that these shifts are often visible in the cultural sphere before they are articulated in political terms in wider society. Robin Wright writes about how the demonstrations in North Africa in early 2011 were preceded by changing values and beliefs among young people. They not only used the technology of Facebook and Twitter to promote their causes, but were 'also experimenting with culture – from comedy to theatre, poetry to song – as an idiom to communicate who they are and to end isolation caused by extremists within their ranks' (Wright, 2011: 5). A new atmosphere, a sort of counterculture, began to permeate the thinking. Roland Bleiker came to a similar conclusion in his study of the young East German poets of the 1970s and 1980s and their role in the process that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall (Bleiker, 2000).[1] He writes that the collapse of the Berlin Wall can be seen as the result of a slow and transversal transformation of values that preceded the overt acts of rebellion. Re-reading the events that led to this historic event, he emphasizes the role of the poets, the Bohemian artists and the literary scene in Prenzlauer Berg, the rundown workers' quarter of East Berlin. A counterculture emerged from these circles, as an ersatz public sphere that opened up opportunities for poetry readings, art exhibitions, film shows and the publication of various unofficial magazines (Bleiker, 2000: 245). These were inspired by the new discourses from the West, which spread through 'rock, beat and punk music, Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust novels, or, even "worse", literary traditions of an existentialist, avant-gardist or post-structuralist nature', which had political effects far beyond the infiltration of explicitly political messages. The events that deserve our analytical attention, he concludes, are not the moments

when revolutionaries hurl statues into the mud: 'Key historical events are more elusive, more inaudible in their appearance. They evolve around the slow transformation of societal values' (Bleiker, 2000: 181).

It is well known that both the visual arts and rock music had a similar liberating function in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.[2] Ales Ervajec, the editor of a book on politicized art under so-called late socialism, highlights the contribution of the visual arts and culture in articulating and intensifying changing moods and values in the period leading up to the social-political upheavals of 1989–91 in the Eastern Bloc (Ervajec, 2003). Art and culture, he writes, 'expressed and mirrored historical processes at the same time as they were contributing to them'. Art, he says, 'was not only visibly expressing the ongoing events that led to . . . "the *first* transition" [away from communism], but also finding a unique way to articulate a historical, social, and political situation while the political sciences and social theory were still in that "unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into words cannot yet be"' (Erjavec, 2003: 7, italics in original).[3] His point is that the development of art was not only confluent with evolving demands in the political sphere, but also visualized what was going on in people's minds before it had been formulated in political terms.

Soviet underground non-conformist visual art challenged official truths and perceptions with some of these artists using mimicry in an ironic and often anarchistic way. Like the Russian rock musicians, the artists regarded themselves as apolitical rather than political. They did not actively participate in the dissident movement or consider their art to have political content. Nevertheless, as Boris Groys writes, the discourses of the Moscow Conceptualists on themes of void, emptiness and marginality as well as the Sots-Artists' mockery of official Soviet ideology changed people's perceptions of the world and how it is made visible (Groys, 2010: 2–3). In this way, art contributed to the change in values in wider society.

These examples highlight what may be called the *mind-liberating function* of art, which follows from the artistic effort to break away from established conceptions. This volume studies this function. The early Russian avant-garde of the 1910s provides an excellent example. In their creativity, the early avant-gardists confronted the accepted and established culture in a search for new modes of expression through questioning, confronting and provoking (Gurianova, 2012). The early Russian avant-gardists had no direct or immediate political ambitions. Instead, they were searching for a new ontology. Their views could be summarized as 'the politics of the unpolitical' (Gurianova, 2012: 10).

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière is in line with this ontological anarchist tradition. He sees the core of both art and politics as the questioning of established ways of understanding the world – questioning what he calls the *distribution of the sensible* (Rancière, 2004: 12), by which he means configurations of the sensory landscape, of what is seen and unseen, audible and inaudible, how certain objects and phenomena are related and also who can appear as a subject at certain times and places (Tanke, 2011: 2). The distribution of the sensible

is shared by society, defines how we understand the world around us and thus determines what is considered possible and what can be expected. He calls the established distribution of the sensible *consensus*. *Dissensus* is the questioning of the established view. Dissensus, according to Rancière, is 'a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given' (Rancière, 2010: 69). In this regard the functions of dissensus in art and politics are the same, although the forms may vary. In politics, dissensus takes place when people who do not count and are not listened to raise their voices and act beyond their place in society. He calls this process *subjectivation* – that is, the appearance of a political subject[4] – which is precisely what was seen in the streets of Moscow in December 2011. Consequently, the 'political' is for Rancière the relationships that evolve when the proper order is questioned. This is the approach taken in this book, and thus the subject of the analysis is art that questions the established structure of values and conceptions.

Subcultures and countercultures

On Open Museum Night in May 2008, Moscow vibrated with energy. Thousands of young people filled the streets on their way to view exhibitions of contemporary art. Traffic was congested in the narrow alleyways close to the former industrial area where Vinzavod had recently been converted from a wine store into a gallery complex. Cars were stuck in the middle of the street while the crowds surged past. Contemporary art had become trendy and popular among the young creative class. The art scene already attracted the rich and glamorous as well as intellectuals. Art was not regarded as political. No one seemed interested in politics anyway. Instead, contemporary art offered a new arena for creative and innovative thinking, something that was in great demand.

In June 2010 the Russian art group Voina (War) painted a 64-metre phallus on the Liteinyi bascule bridge in St Petersburg. When the bridge was opened for night traffic on the river, the huge phallus rose like a mighty sign of 'Fuck you!' to the building in the neighbourhood that houses the head-quarter of the St Petersburg Federal Security Service (FSB, formerly the KGB). The performance, 'Prick: a Prisoner of the FSB' (Khui v plenu u FSB), was perceived as a political act that resonated throughout Russia. In April 2011 the Voina group was awarded the prestigious Russian prize in contemporary art, the Innovatsiya Prize, for this performance. How could a state-financed art institution reward such an action? Clearly, something extraordinary had happened.

Protest by organized movements is rare in authoritarian societies. Scholars have concluded that it therefore takes other forms of expression and finds its way into cultural practice (Alinsky, 2009: 255). Other scholars have claimed that 'under repressive regimes, artistic and intellectual production are often sites of oppositional meaning, first, because creativity and artistic freedoms are so much at odds with authoritarian control; second, because the state goes to such lengths to repress them; and, third, because the ambiguity of the message and the popularity

of the artist often make it a costly strategy compared to repressing political activism' (Johnston, 2009: 18). Under conditions of heavy repression, art constitutes a significant proportion of oppositional culture. As repression eases, the textual form becomes more important (Johnston, 2009). Thus, the visual arts, theatre, music and literature are all crucial for the creation and development of sub- and countercultures as well as for their development into social movements.[5] The visual arts in particular might be expected to play such a role, especially at an early stage when protest has not yet been verbalized in society. This would become abundantly clear in Russia.

Various spheres of culture can offer a location or an arena for free space for experimentation. While the definitions may vary, one characteristic of such a place is a space where it is possible to interact beyond the reach of the oppressors. 'Space' should be understood both in a mental sense as free from hegemonic interventions and as the physical place where these activities are carried out (Leach and Haunss, 2009: 258).[6] In such a space, networks of people may develop subcultures and countercultures.

Alberto Melucci uses the concept of 'submerged networks' for groups that are dispersed, fragmented and submerged in everyday life but 'act as cultural laboratories for the experimentation and practice of new cultural models, forms of relationships and alternative perceptions and meanings in the world' (Melucci, 1980).[7] Such networks constitute the basis for countercultures, and from them social movements emerge (Johnston, 2009: 9).

These networks become visible when they engage in overt political conflict, but conflicts in society are often neither directly political nor overt. Instead it is a daily tussle over interpretation. Melucci emphasizes the importance of countercultural movements in opposition to what he calls the dominant codes in society. On the basis of the experience of protest in Western societies, he writes that emerging social conflicts have not expressed themselves through political action in the past 30 years, but rather by posing cultural challenges to the dominant language, to codes that organize information and shape social practices. 'It is the individual and collective reappropriation of meaning of action that is at stake in the forms of collective involvement which makes the experience of change in the present a condition for creating a different future' (Melucci, 1996: 8–9). Both subcultural and countercultural movements function as the antithesis to the established and proper order. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. While subculture refers to networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interaction (Williams, 2011: 3, 39), this study defines counterculture as a socially constructed identity based on values and conceptions that challenge those of the authorities and established society (Roberts, 1978).[8]

In his study of underground Soviet rock music of the 1970s and 1980s, Thomas Cushman defines counterculture as consisting of 'a stock of knowledge which, quite literally, runs counter to the dominant stock of knowledge in a society. . . . If culture is the practical knowledge gained in the course of communicating with

others in the process of living, then counterculture is simply practical knowledge which is the result of engagement in alternative forms of communication among actors engaged in the collective pursuit of alternative ways of living'.[9] Rock music lovers shared a socially constructed identity that he describes as 'an active code of resistance and a template which was used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity in the Soviet environment' (Cushman, 1995: 91). It was built on a distinction between a 'we' in opposition to the authorities and the established society. The underground rock music scene was a countercultural movement in its own right but also part of the broader countercultural movement developing in the Soviet society of that time. In this regard the late Soviet underground culture was a parallel to the contemporaneous Western protest culture.

Subcultures and countercultures often give rise to social protest movements: 'agents of resistance are created by virtue of alienation from aspects of the dominant culture and through their own self-affirmation' (Johnston, 2009: 10). What starts as apolitical resistance related to lifestyle may develop into social movements. Studies of subcultural movements in West Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1960s and early 1970s confirm this: they began by offering an alternative lifestyle as a challenge to what was then considered the stable and homogeneous 'way of life' of these societies (Brown and Lorena, 2011; Buechler, 2000; Cross et al., 2010; Dirke, 1997).

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci characterizes society and the cultural sphere as a competition for values, ideas and hegemonic leadership. Gramsci defines hegemony as the organizing principle of a ruling class that connects culture and ideology and permeates a given society (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971: 57–58, 80, 195). By securing society's consent, bourgeois hegemonic ideas and beliefs are constantly reproduced in society, but challenged by alternative, counter-hegemonic ideas and beliefs. Today, social scientists agree that all regimes do their best to uphold their hegemony of values, but semi-authoritarian and authoritarian societies in particular do so through force and the manipulation of opinion. In such societies, any questioning of the current hegemonic discourse immediately takes on political overtones.

In the late 1980s, the Soviet policy of Perestroika liberated art from the ideological directives that had controlled its form and content.[10] In the Russia of the 1990s, therefore, the cultural sphere was entirely free from any state or party intervention. The other side of the coin was that state financing of the cultural sector was cut drastically. When Russia's public political life was circumscribed after Putin came to power, cultural life and activities continued to be relatively free from state influence, particularly in the field of the visual arts. When the art market boomed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, private galleries and museums opened and former industrial areas were converted into art venues. Thus, the physical territory of art was expanding and the mental space for a subculture of contemporary art was soon in full bloom. Against this background, the major question arises of whether and how a countercultural identity developed within the Russian art community based on a sense of resistance to the evolving hegemonic consensus.

Protest and dissensus in art

The conventional concept of protest, which refers mainly to street demonstrations and actions, has been criticized for being too restrictive, so the definition has been extended to include more subtle forms of opposition (Brown and Anton, 2011). In this study the term 'protest' is used in a broad sense to include all kinds of 'materialization' of expressions of dissensus.

Rancière defines consensus as the dominant 'mode of symbolic structuralization that legitimizes the hierarchical order', according to which everything and everyone are given their places in a kind of 'normal state of things'.[11] Thus, consensus presents the community as an entity that is naturally unified by ethical values (Rancière, 2010; Rancière, 2004). In such a view of society, the specificities of the different parts of the community are ignored and dissenting views abolished (Rancière, 2010: 100, 189).

Dissensus, on the other hand, does not imply the existence of open conflict. Instead, it takes place as a hidden or indirect dispute over the framework within which something is regarded as given. Both aesthetic practices and political action seek to disrupt and alter perceptions and understanding, that is, to break away from 'the proper' and from 'our assigned places in a given state of things' (Rancière, 2010: 143). Yet, dissensus in art is expressed differently from dissensus in politics. While in politics it finds its form in *subjectivation*, in art it is *aesthetic rupture*. Rancière explains rupture as a 'process of dissociation'. The methods for this may vary. It may be the result of a strategy of ambiguity, intervention or over-identification. By splitting the assumptions of the consensus, a component of dissociation is introduced, thereby indicating a different angle, perspective or framing from the established one.[12] Such art does not prioritize the creation of an 'awareness of the state of the world' but rather openness in interpretation. Rancière is sceptical about an art that intends to raise the consciousness of the onlooker by establishing a straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means out of a didactic purpose. Instead, art is to him an intermediary object, a 'third term', to which both the artist and the viewer relate (Rancière, 2009). Claire Bishop writes that what is significant in Rancière's reworking of the term 'aesthetics' is that it concerns *aesthesis*, a mode of sensible perception proper to artistic production. 'Rather than considering the work of art to be autonomous, he draws attention to the autonomy of our experience in relation to art . . . this freedom suggests the possibility of politics (understood here as dissensus), because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organized, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world . . .' (Bishop, 2009: 27).[13]

In order to detect 'protest' in its broad definition, this study uses the three basic categories of cultural factors defined by Hank Johnston: artefacts, ideations and performances. Artefacts are 'cultural objects produced either individually or collectively, such as music, art, and literature'; ideations are 'values, beliefs, mentalities, social representations, habitus, ideologies, or more specific norms of behaviour . . .'; and performances are described as 'actions that are symbolic

because they are interpreted by those also present at the action, the audience' (Johnston, 2009: 7). All three categories are social constructions.[14]

The present analysis is inspired by Rancière's concept of dissensus and Johnston's categories of protest, but an additional concept is central to this study – identity. The issue of identity consensus (the search for a collective 'we') is very high on the Russian agenda. It has caused problems over the centuries – and it continues to do so today – because it is loaded with political and ideological connotations. The creation of a collective consensus under Putin is therefore the starting point for the analysis of dissensus in this study.

Who are 'we'?

The Putin regime has felt the need, more than the Eltsin regime did, to create a sense of common national belonging, a 'new Russian idea'.[15] The Putin regime's search for a concept of identity and a feeling of belonging in accordance with its own political priorities and values became more urgent towards the middle of the first decade of the new century, against the background of the colour revolutions on former Soviet territory – most notably Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004.[16]

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the loss of previous official definitions of what constituted the Soviet 'we' created a vacuum, and various definitions began to circulate. Soviet ideology had replaced a nation-state identity with a state identity that had a stance on ideological issues, religion, nation, ethnicity, and so on. The Communist Party regularly provided the authorized and updated interpretation of this identity.[17] In post-Soviet Russia, various identities developed that together provided a scattered picture of Russian identity. As old Russian and Soviet identities resurged, the populations of large cities developed new and fluid subjective identities typical of a post-modern society.

The break-up of the Soviet Union swept away all previous ideological and political directives on how the economy, society and art were to perform. A window of opportunity was opened for carrying out reforms. Soon, however, post-Soviet structures were restored from the 'wreckage and pieces of what was left' (Gudkov, 2012). The 1990s became a decade of lost opportunities with regard to transforming society and the system. When the decade came to an end, most reform ambitions were stuck or lost in new power constellations, a crashed economy, a weak state apparatus and growing corruption.

Vladimir Putin, appointed heir to Boris Eltsin in the autumn of 1999 and elected president in March 2000, immediately took measures to centralize and strengthen state power. Boosted by international energy prices, he managed to give the impression of a strong and efficient leader who would bring stability and a better standard of living to Russia's citizens. As soon as he came to power he initiated a policy reversal in an authoritarian direction, restricted the freedom of the media, started to manipulate the political scene and changed the rules of the election process in order to establish 'stability'. When the colour revolutions took place, he shared the fear of other leaders of post-Soviet states that something similar might happen in their countries. In March 2004 Putin was elected for a second term. This

was the beginning of a period of relative wealth. An economic boom followed from the inflow of petrodollars, and there were expectations that this situation would last forever. Russia seemed politically stable on the surface, albeit at the price of development in an authoritarian direction (Shevtsova, 2010).

The creation of a new Russian identity became a central task for the regime's ideologists. Putin chose a strategy of traditional, basic collective values. The aim was to promote state cohesion and to legitimize the demand for the unconditional subordination of Russian citizens. According to Zygmunt Bauman, identity is a construction, a 'fiction', and to transform this fiction into reality requires much coercion and convincing to harden and coagulate it 'into the sole reality thinkable' (Bauman, 2004: 20). Putin was trying to formulate such a fiction – a collective 'we'.

One major aspect of this collective identity defines the relationship between rulers and ruled. On the part of the regime, this entails finding a unifying concept. The definition of a 'we' by the regime and by groups close to the regime here constitutes the official, 'proper' way – consensus – of how things should be viewed, interpreted and evaluated. These efforts stumbled, however, because not everyone accepted them. Modern societies naturally include a growing number of individuals with multiple identities, and many of them do not recognize the predetermined identities defined by a dominant discourse of consensus. Moreover, Russians have often regarded those in power as 'them'– different from 'we'– but their alienation could not usually be expressed openly or directly.[18] The relationship between rulers and ruled has been and is reflected in different understandings of aspects of identity in national, political and religious matters, such as, for example, a national–ethnic Russian entity vis-à-vis a national–civic community, an Orthodox Christian unity vis-à-vis a non-confessional one, and a regime–loyal political community vis-à-vis a community of independent, free-thinking citizens.

Since the regime's new efforts were an attempt to create a common identity of rulers and the ruled based on political support for the regime, expressions of disagreement were often seen as signs of disloyalty. The sense of a growing gap in definitions of 'we' and 'them' constitutes the driving force behind the development of a 'counterculture'.

Protest on the art scene

In order to identify dissensus/protest in the art sphere, three specific questions are addressed. First, were there works of art that represented aesthetic rupture? Second, were there discussions and public stances by the arts community that reflected a counterculture? Third, did people from the visual arts in any way actively participate in the new protest movement?

Three categories of art are defined that differ according to how close to or far away they are from the prevailing consensus. Although the distinctions between the categories – an 'other gaze', 'dissent art' and 'art of engagement'– may not always seem razor sharp, they are nonetheless helpful and sufficient for this analysis.[19]

The first category of art, identified as an *other gaze*, is a subtle form of dissensus.[20] This art is ambiguous but implies a questioning, sometimes hardly visible, of established conceptions. It may function 'subversively' through its mere 'otherness'. It is important to point out that these artists most often deny any political motifs or motives. Nonetheless, their works may be interpreted as dissensus. The viewer's reaction determines whether that is the case.

The second category, *dissent art*, is defined by open disagreement with the official consensus. The term 'dissent' implies the existence of a contrary belief or opinion, or at least a different position.[21] The disagreement is, however, often indirect rather than direct. It may include an art activist element. The third category, *art of engagement*, is art intended to openly and directly intervene in the public sphere with a political message. However, it should not be confused with what in the West is called 'engaged' art or 'participatory' art.

The second and partly the third categories are in the tradition of provocation and rupture, dating back in part to the early Russian avant-garde of the 1910s. The techniques used by these artists – irony, parody, satire, laughter, mockery and burlesque exaggeration – follow the traditions of the carnival culture of the Middle Ages. Although the medieval carnival was a circumscribed and regulated activity, it contributed to liberate the mind from dogmatism and pedantry, and from fear and intimidation (Bakhtin, 2007; Platter, 2001: 54–57). The Soviet underground artists of Sots-Art in the 1970s and 1980s followed this tradition. The term *styob* was coined for exaggerated support for the target of criticism by mimicking its style and form. It was the 'exposure to mockery that leads to an irreversible and permanent profanation'.[22]

As the field of art in Russia expanded dramatically in the 2000s, explored new territories and extended into everyday life, Russian artists started to experiment, pushing the frontier between art and politics beyond its traditional border, in a similar way to processes that took off much earlier in the West. The Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s provided art with tools and techniques for political communication (Lievrouw, 2011). As the Internet and new social media spread in the West, new techniques were spawned for using art for political purposes (Lievrouw, 2011). The spread of Internet users in Russia at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century opened the door for such media activism there. This study classifies such media activism as 'political action' and discusses it in a separate chapter.

While protest through art raises the general question of the relationship between art and power, dissent art and art of engagement also raise specific questions with regard to the artist's role in politics. The late Russian avant-garde of the 1920s wanted to use art to create political awareness in the service of the utopian goals of the Bolshevik regime. Within a few years, these artists, who initially worked enthusiastically in the service of the new regime, were compelled to subordinate their grand plans to party directives. This experience led the Soviet non-conformist artists of the 1960s to reject any politicization of art and paved the way for a tradition of the non-involvement of art in politics among independent artists (Groys, 1992). This may partly explain why art in the service of a political agenda has encountered difficulties ever since in finding a foothold in Russia. The question

of whether there has been a change in this regard is examined elsewhere in this volume.

Johnston's categories of artefacts, ideations and performances are used here to highlight various forms of expression within protest in art (Johnston, 2009). The 'artefacts' analysed in this study are objects that have been nominated for the two prestigious annual Russian art awards, the Kandinsky Prize and the Innovatsiya Prize, shown at major exhibitions in Moscow, discussed in Russian art debates, or caused a strong reaction in society. 'Performances' are analysed as words and deeds by the arts community articulating protest by organizing exhibitions, seminars, discussions or publishing statements. The 'arts community' is not a homogeneous entity. The term is used here to indicate words and actions made public by people from the arts community. Discussions and statements are traced with regard to public stances in defence of common professional interests. This includes reactions in cases where its members are put on trial or threatened with legal action. Material about such activities can be found on websites, in art journals and other journals, in daily newspapers and on personal blogs. Ideational content is identified from exhibition catalogues, art reviews, articles and interviews with artists and art critics. The criteria for selection follow from what can be considered relevant to the identity discourses and art dissensus. Major art exhibitions held in Moscow during the years under study are included. Information on art outside the galleries – such as street art, performances and actions – was collected from the Internet, where these activities were usually well documented at that time. The selection of works of art in this study is determined by its research questions and is therefore not representative of Russian contemporary art as a whole.

The present study also discusses whether there was more direct participation by the arts community in building a protest movement. The direct contribution of people from the cultural sphere to political mobilization in the autumn of 2011 and the winter of 2012, before the December parliamentary elections and March presidential elections, respectively, is analysed as political activity. The sources of material on political actions and demonstrations are newspaper articles, websites and documents directly from or about these groups and activities.

Art and the protest movement

How does protest communicated through art relate to political protest? We assume that a counterculture in art appears in parallel with a broader social counterculture. These are phenomena of confluence, but art – being strongly receptive to what is happening in the social environment – may articulate/visualize sentiments, beliefs and values before they are articulated in political terms. However, art needs to reach out to a wider audience if it is to have any effect on the spread of new values (Bleiker, 2000: 211).

Contemporary art has long been considered a small, isolated, marginal world in Russian society. Small circles of artists and intellectuals lived in Moscow in splendid isolation for years without any ambition to reach out to wider groups. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that art of dissensus reached members of the

creative class and groups within the middle class during the years under study.[23] These groups would turn out to be the key groups in the protest movement. The question is therefore *how* ideas of contemporary art spread among these groups. The emergence of an art market and the opening of new galleries in the first decade of the twenty-first century certainly helped. More and new categories of people showed an interest in the visual arts, and contemporary art attracted young urban students and professionals. It became trendy and fashionable to visit exhibitions in the galleries in central Moscow, such as Vinzavod, Art Strelka, Krasnyi Oktyabr and Garazh. This new interest in the visual arts may be assumed to have helped to make contemporary art a means for communicating new ideas and values to the Moscow middle class. These were also spread through the Internet to other cities, some of which were creating their own local art scenes. Thus, the ideas and values expressed through art were disseminated to the young, educated strata of wider Russian society.

As several commentators have pointed out, the protest movement that arose in December 2011 was values based, not based on material interests.[24] It was primarily a movement of the creative class and parts of the middle class mobilized through communication over the Internet and social media. Social science theory, based on the experience of various protest movements in the West since the 1960s, emphasizes the specific character of such movements. They relate to identities, and their concerns are directed towards cultural rather than productive and distributive relations (Buechler, 2000; Diani and Eyerman, 1992; Whittier and Robnett, 2002). They are not organizations in the traditional sense but loosely affiliated, informal, anti-hierarchical networks. As the availability of the Internet spread in Russia as well as across the world as a whole at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it became a tool of such networks (Firat and Kuryel, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011). An interesting question for this study is whether and how people from the cultural sector – with their knowledge of communications and new media methods and techniques – contributed directly to the mobilization of protest from 2011.

When in March 2012 Vladimir Putin was elected president for a new term, the political climate hardened. The protest movement had not yet been able to develop sustainable organizations. Whether and how such will appear is a question for the future. Whether art and the arts community will play any substantial part in this process in the future is also an open question. In the meantime, a more urgent question is whether art can continue as a space for counterculture in a situation where the political 'spring' has rapidly transformed back to 'winter', or if it will fall in line with new official injunctions of the day. Was the end of the spring of 2012 a sign that there never will be a summer, or was it a first sign that something – that still needs time – is in the making? These questions are returned to in Chapters 8 and 9.

An expanding art scene

During my more than four years in Moscow in 2005–2009, I closely observed the art scene by visiting exhibitions and by meeting and talking to people from the cultural sphere. Since then, I have regularly travelled to Moscow to keep abreast