Organizing “cultural resistance”: Tactical social networking among Russian Artivist collectives rodina and Rebra Evi

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Revue Hybrid
When development in the early 1990s of the World Wide Web and Mosaic browser brought the Internet out from university laboratories and research centers, many voices spoke out, praising the advent of a new society. Freely circulating information, data sharing, communication transversality, and decentralized authorities on content production comprised the main characteristics of this “post-media era,” turning Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into vehicles of “subjectivization,” finally freed from the clichés of mass media. Based on the principle of an individual's free participation, the “networked society” would finally be able to lay the foundations of “cyberdemocracy,” connecting centers and peripheries in order to jointly agree on which direction to take our now globalized existence. Twenty years have passed, and this discourse has lost none of its importance. It continues to provide a progressive political horizon to the tendency to migrate whole parts of our existence onto the Web—even if it is merely a tendency, and not a conscious, deliberate practice. And yet, in this same time frame, the Internet has fulfilled all of its initial promises of surveillance and control. “Cognitive capitalism,” which transforms any data into a source of profit, is the economic model based on networks. As for the political models that have come to support it, they have in fact adapted themselves so well to the imperatives of neoliberalism that even the differences between opposing political regimes have become murky. Therefore, to believe that the Internet is in itself an agent of “democratization,” or that participation on digital platforms naturally leads to a more collaborative society, would be to show a certain naivety.
Yet on the other hand, one only has to observe the uses of ICTs in non-democratic countries to question this observation. Even though surveillance services have a stranglehold on Internet users’ personal data and there is a high risk of identification and repression, the enthusiasm aroused by digital sharing spaces and by the transformation of networks into bubbles of free expression and political organization—sometimes against the current regime—raise questions and encourage us to better understand these tools’ capacity to “create democracy.” Does this mean that users have to subscribe to the mystifying discourse on cyberdemocracy? By putting forward the opposite hypothesis, that of non-tactical Internet use known to be under lock and key, we maintain, on the contrary, that a democratic process of awareness, discussion, and collaboration on the Web between Internet users can only begin to occur under the influence of already politicized individuals, and thus ones often gathered in a collective, who use the Web to consolidate and expand it. By using Michel de Certeau’s meaning of the term “tactic” (1990), subsequently adopted and further defined by media theorists Geert Lovink and David Garcia to denote a set of cultural practices at the confluence of technology, art, and activism (1997), we wish to explore the specificity of tactics employed by artist-activist collectives, in order to create the conditions of an existence that resists the current regime and its models, the modus operandi of their “digital insurrectionism,” and the effects produced by such actions online. To do so, I will refer to the study of two concrete cases of Russian artist-activist collectives based in St. Petersburg that I meet between 2017 and 2019: {rodina} (“Motherland”), founded in 2013 by a philosopher, a philologist, and a psychotherapist, and which numbered around twenty members at the time of its dissolution in the fall of 2018; and Rebra Evi (“Eve’s Ribs”), a feminist collective founded in 2016 that quickly found a favorable response from a young generation of men and women, with about thirty members to its name and a hundred participants. Using methodological tools of political philosophy, media sociology, and digital ethnography, I will first draw a portrait of Russia in the digital age to show what possibilities ICTs provide as resistance against Putin’s regime. Next, I will show how the Web can be used as a vehicle of diffusing artistic performances with strong visual impact. Lastly, I will try to measure the political impact of this kind of explosion on the web, leading to the construction of a community ready to invest in more traditional political spaces.

Russia in the digital age: a chance for democracy?

The Russian Federation, which at the end of the Soviet experiment adopted a constitution ensuring equality among citizens before the law and judicial independence (1993) before adopting the principle of a presidential election by universal suffrage (2012), is a young democracy, if a very dubious one. Since 1999, only one figure stands out from this swampy background, that of Vladimir Putin. Such a monopoly does nothing to encourage public debate or opposition, which are sine qua non conditions of any democracy. Thus, the electoral fraud of which the “United Russia” party was accused in 2011 (notably by Alexey Navalny), the physical elimination of the regime’s political opponents (notably that of Boris Nemtsov in February 2015), their sentencing to exile or prison (Oleg Sentsov), as well as the outright ban on demonstrations unless during official parades on Labor Day (May 1) and Liberation Day (May 8), have gradually outlined the contours of a State that is only legal in name. Instead of pursuing a suicidal approach of a head-on opposition to the regime on the basis of shared codes, it is rather...
in oblique art forms where critics have found refuge from this oppressive state policy and an increasingly chauvinistic and conservative society. Artivism, a category which regroups works on the edge of political action and artistic performance, upending daily life with events often extreme in character and whose origins go back to the Soviet Agitprop, has thus become a necessity in contemporary Russia. On the one hand, it can consist of dodging accusations and rushed appearances in court, with make-up or colored hoods that camouflage identities and blur any leads on facial recognition. But on the other hand (and above all), it is about developing a richer and more complex hermeneutic grid of the world, imagining methods of political action able to get us out of the militant-martyr position, and bringing about easier adherence thanks to creative, even festive forms of expression. The group Voïna (“war”), founded in 2007 in Moscow, was the first after the fall of the USSR to revive provocative performance forms, which were taken up and expanded on by the feminist punk group Pussy Riot (2011), as public sexual acts (Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear!) and even the punk concert at the Church of the Holy Savior in Moscow, where the song “Virgin Mary, deliver us from Putin” was sung to much astonishment (fig. 1). Videos are immediately associated with these creative-militant processes, but their distribution remains limited, thus compromising visibility, by a very centralized media system. If some take it upon themselves to convey these actions abroad from within the confines of Russia itself, either by referring to the European Commission of Human Rights, by making the film Pussy Riot. A Punk Prayer, or even by gaining public and financial support from certain Western diplomatic and artistic figures (Merkel and Banksy), they remain, if not unknown, then largely misunderstood regarding the intellectual and political approach that drives them. The official television media, controlled directly or indirectly by the government (Pervi Kanal, VGTRK, Gazprom-Media), provides a biased reading of these actions, in line with the values of Orthodox conservatism and national unity.

Figure 1

At left, a photograph from the punk concert organized without permission by the band Pussy Riot inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour of Moscow (Pussy Riot archive collection). At right, activists Nadejda Tolokonnikova, Ekaterina Samoutsevitch, and Maria Alekhina, behind the glassed-in cell during their trial on August 17, 2012 (AFP).

4 The appearance of “new media” (websites, blogs, and social media networks) seems to offer a second chance to build a social and political alternative. We are witnessing the emergence of a “parallel public space.” This concept, created ad hoc for the Russian context, refers to the situation where mediation between the State and civil society for the formation of a free and diverse public opinion is no longer ensured by the press, clubs, and meet-up groups that guarantee its publicity, but where there is nevertheless the possibility of opening breaches. “For the USSR, preventing citizens
who were living under its rule from receiving signals from the outside world was a major issue in ensuring the longevity of its power system, based on the retention of information,” explains Mattelard. If in the 1970s and 1980s it was the transnational media that provided different portrayals of the world from those of the regime, introducing diverse opinions lacking in the media landscape, it is now the Internet that provides the existence of a parallel space.13 To better understand the importance of this shift to ICTs, it is helpful to review the array of existing infrastructures in the Russian Federation. The vast telephone networks inherited from the USSR were handed over to a flourishing private telecommunications industry, characterized by the proliferation of a large number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) during the transition to a free market economy. The widespread practice of connecting to the Web, increasing the number of Internet users from 1.98% among the population in 2000 to 82.6% in 2019,14 has mainly been driven by the exponentially growing smartphone market, whose devices were often sold with mobile contracts at an extremely affordable price (less than 10e/month for MTS and MegaFon), thus leading to an exceptional coverage of 60 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (fig. 2 and 3). This individualized access to the Web could be the origin of a radical change in Russia’s media landscape. If, contrary to the hopes expressed by the champions of the digital revolution quoted in this introduction, the traditional division of the mediascape is far from being fully abolished, the diversification of Internet use encourages original and varied participation forms. A quantitative survey conducted by Kondratov thus shows a massive influx of political and social actors in the blogosphere who have been excluded from the official sphere and traditionally affiliated with opposition media, as well as the creation of Web platforms for editorial political blogs, among which we can cite MediaZone (2014) for having been founded by Pyotr Verzilov (Voina), Maria Alyokhina, and Nadejda Tolokonnikova (Pussy Riot). The establishment of both Russian (VKontakte 2006, Telegram 2014) and foreign (Facebook 2004 and Instagram 2010) social media networks completes the picture. This is the last element accounted for, in order to grasp the extent of online participation. The massive presence of Internet users (90% of the 65.9 million Russian users were registered in 201415), the multimedia dimension that tends to enhance visual content thanks to optimal viewing capacities (high speed of 7.64 Mbps), and finally the multilateral communication structure specific to networks, are the main characteristics of what could be an immense “digital agora.” Of course, this is just a possibility, as social networks can become showcases for all kinds of content, from chat videos to Instagram selfies. In any case, it is this possibility that activist collectives have seized upon. Those who take hold of a tool do it neither naïvely nor independently of all which defines them as social individuals,16 and so they try to take advantage of this new technological environment to attempt new organization and visibility techniques. Taking over after the first generation of activists, they have launched a “militant use of the Internet” (Blondeau and Allard, 2007) on Russian cyber-territory, meant to create a discussion space around problems raised by government policy and by a very normative society, and to extend these debates to a maximum number of Internet users. As for the collectives that interest us here, there are 2,693 members on VKontakte (rodina)17 and more than 11k on Rebra Evi. It would seem that all the conditions are in place for the advent of a “network society,” in Russia, one that would be more democratic, seeing as it is more participative, showing pluralism and even tolerating dissent. But we must not forget that digital-age Russia is concurrent with Putin’s Russia. In order to see if the promise of openness and exchange can be
translated into reality, we must take a closer look at the legal consequences for anyone freely expressing their opinions on networks, the effectiveness of controlling digital space, and the real impact that these militant uses of new media and new technologies have on political life and Russian society.

Figure 2

![Graph showing the number of internet users in Russia from 1992 to 2010.](image)


Figure 3

![Graph showing the number of landline and mobile telephone subscribers from 1990 to 2011.](image)

The visual shock of political performance and the emergence of a “parallel public space”

In other words, the relationship between public space and a parallel public space is at stake whenever we try to measure the extent of social change since the establishment of the Internet in Russia, and the effectiveness of activists’ tactical use of the Internet. We will attempt to understand this by analyzing three actions carried out and/or shared on the networks by the {rodina} and Rebra Evi collectives between May 2018 and March 2019.

1) *Nine Steps in the Decomposition of the Supreme Leader* is the visual transcription of a work made by members of the collective in 2015. A poster of Putin’s presidential campaign, which had been peeled off the street and placed on a planter, degrades to the point of decomposition. Snapshots document the various stages of decomposition, and nine selected photos depict the leader’s disfigured face until its ultimate disappearance (fig. 4). Playing on both the “faciality of power” and the materiality of its representations, in a country where statuary towers imposingly in every square, the members of {rodina} show through this work the substantial instability of power: when all is said and done, the “supreme leader” is only a man, enlarged by his image and by the fascination it arouses. After an auction in 2017, the funds from which financed a collective project, the work was resold for the same reasons in 2019 to the feminist lawyer Varia Mikhailova. Printed in large format and framed, the activist displayed the work during the May 1st demonstration, at the end of the 2018 presidential campaign which saw Putin win a fourth term. As a poster, the work became part of a performance which about fifty members of {rodina} performed that day during the official parade of unions and parties, dressed up as skeletons and zombies to participate as representatives of “The Party of the Dead” (fig. 5). Varia Mikhailova was immediately arrested by the police and taken by force to the police station. She remained in prison for only one night, exonerated with a sum of 160,000 rubles (2500€) that the members of {rodina} managed to collect, thanks to a t-shirt, postcard and poster sale, where the work in question was printed—multiplied infinitely, thanks to its digital nature—and distributed on a large scale due to a global network of solidary members (Moscow, Paris, Berlin and Helsinki) (fig. 6), thus deriding the court decision ordering the destruction of the physical work. In the case of this first performance, the impact of the post shared by {rodina} on vkontakt is not measurable in numbered shares and “likes,” but rather in the number of times the information was relayed by St. Petersburg and Moscow collectives and alternative media: Feministki Poyasnyayut (200 likes, 44 shares, 14k views), Romb (341 likes, 38 shares, 23k views), Nastoyashchyi Lentach (3246 likes, 343 shares, 171k views), and Radio Svoboda on YouTube (652 likes and 11k views). The performance and arrest caused such a stir that they also received international coverage.

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Figure 4


Figure 5

Varya Mikhailova with a reproduction of the work during the May 1st 2018 demonstration (rodina VKontakte page).
Several images from the fundraising campaign to bail out the activist using the sales from t-shirts, bags, and postcards (rodina VKontakte page).

2) *Meat Producers* was a performance carried out on February 23, 2019, on the occasion of “Fatherland Defenders Day.” Extolling virility and warlike proclivities, in a country where women suffer from domestic violence that generally goes unpunished and where forcible annexations are widely accepted by the population, this celebration is a purely ostentatious display of the official political stance. A group of women, dressed as soldiers, wearing gas masks and the traditional kokochnik, met at a set time in front of the War Commissariat (Leningrad Oblast) to make a “meat display.” Cradling newborns who would be sent to the butcher by a sexist and militarist ideology, they attacked the masculine pillars of Russian society.

3) Two weeks later, in response to the successful circulation of these photographs, Rebra Evi’s office was visited by a group of (male) Putin right-wing activists, at a time when co-working spaces were not mixed, while the next day’s March 8 march was being prepared. By way of forced entrance, these young men came to unload several dozen bouquets of flowers. The activists, begging them to leave, finally managed to get rid of them by using spray paint. The violence of such a violation of private space makes an obvious contrast with the symbolism of flower bouquets. On the contrary, by establishing a constitutive link between these two gestures, Rebra Evi improvised a performance: Our Flowers on the Tomb of Patriarchy featured a naked man, lying lifeless with his limbs torn off and covered with the same flowers from the day before. The aesthetically striking images of these two performances, attentive to both the composition and contrast of colors, have circulated widely on networks, arousing admiration, amusement, the thrill of revolt, and an avalanche of comments from members of different Russian cities (Moscow, Ufa, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Novgorod,
Vladivostock...). This time, the visibility of these actions was ensured through the visibility of the collective itself, which can be explained on one hand by the fact that a year had passed, which provided enough time for more Internet users to take a more open critical position against governmental policy and its values, while on the other hand, the problems related to the condition of women in Russia are so serious that Internet users have become increasingly interested in the online pages of feminist collectives. On Rebra Evi’s page, Meat Producers has 2,987 likes, 230 shares and 83k views, while Our Flowers on the Tomb of Patriarchy has 459 likes, 25 shares and 18k views (fig. 7 and 8). Of these performances, two issues deserve comment. First, there is the fact that the two collectives do not intend to abandon the street to profit more fully from the Web. Faithful to the modus operandi of artivism which intervenes in public spaces to cause a ripple in everyday life alongside social movements, the street remains for these two collectives the space par excellence of political confrontation. The street appears in all performance shots, in visual elements such as sidewalks, asphalt, and buildings that are recognizable to any Saint-Petersburg inhabitant. Thus, the same performance produced in an apartment would have absolutely no impact on Internet users, weakening its political scope. Secondly, keeping in mind that the performances will probably last only several minutes, and that the arrival of law enforcement agencies is to be anticipated, certain methods are implemented to keep a visual record that will testify to the performance. Instead of being used as an archive for the collective, this visual and audiovisual material is used to give a “second life” to the events via social media networks, which are thus doubly exploited: in the lead-up to the events, there is minimal use of communication tools in light of their internal organization, in which physical encounters are preferred due to a rather classic distrust of technology in the activist landscape; downstream, there is, on the contrary, maximum exploitation of digital distribution tools, so that the events are as widely shared, visualized, and commented upon as possible.
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Figure 7

"Meat Producers." Post from February 2, 2019 (Rebra Evi VKontakte page).

Figure 8

"Our Flowers on the Tomb of Patriarchy." Post from March 8, 2019 (Rebra Evi VKontakte page).
Needless to say, efforts to undermine possibilities for this parallel public space have been strengthened as a result. This is demonstrated by the ousting of Pavel Durov, founder of VKontakte and Telegram, who refused to hand over the personal data of political opponents after they organized demonstrations over VKontakte against the 2011 legislative election results, and who was subsequently replaced by men close to the Kremlin (Setchine and Ousmanov). Likewise, it can be seen in the ban on certain foreign networks, such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Or in the creation of Runet in 2019, a kind of “digital wall” aimed at separating the Russian Internet from the international Internet, greatly simplifying the work of monitoring Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Information and Communication (2008). Or even in the impossibility for Apple to carve out a share of the telephone market, due to the Russian authorities’ requirement to pre-install national applications in cell phones that can facilitate data collection. Behind all of these operations, there is certainly a discourse with a cumulative performative value, aiming to dissuade activists from establishing a collective force, while the shadow of repression hangs over them. Such control loses its obviousness as soon as one looks at the digital ecosystem of Russian ISPs: while in France there are only four large ISPs, “in Russia there are a little over 13,000, with sometimes very small ISPs providing service for a city or a small region.” Yet, the ISPs are required to provide the government with anonymous data collections, such as targeted individuals’ browsing history—an impossible task, given the economic and logistical burden such an arrangement would impose on small businesses. The RESISTIC program (“Resisters on the Net. Criticism and evasion in the face of digital coercion in Russia”), conducted within the CNRS, also explores the existing gap between this discourse and its effectiveness. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that political isolation and repression are really exercised against activists. We are witnessing a kind of “digital adaptation” of more traditional repression techniques, such as directly controlling individuals already in the Roskomnadzor’s line of fire on platforms whose server is hosted in Russia (VKontakte and Telegram), fake profiles asking to participate in discussion and organization groups, and informing by pro-Putin Internet users already present on networks. As Kiriya and Kondratov show, in doubling the presence of State force in these online public spaces, there is a practice of identifying and isolating activists which seriously compromises any project of a parallel digital public space.

“Virtual communities” and cultural resistance: slowly constructing another perspective

Having to deal often with the police, confronted as they were many times with police violence, imprisonment, and fines, worried the day after performances even in their homes, the activists of the two respective collectives do not have the naivety to believe that the Internet and social networks constitute the beginning of a real democratic emergence in Russia. It is at most a means to an end, to be used with due caution so that their presence on the Web does not act as bait. Without specific training in encrypted communication, and without the constant know-how to slip through the net, yet convinced that wide visibility on the Internet protects them more than secret schemes, {rodina} and Rebra Evi’s undertakings are much more about occupying the web than about taking part in a project that they would find ambivalent from the start.
According to a questionnaire concerning the expected results of their virtual presence, and on the fears that it can provoke in terms of control and repression, their collected answers vary, while displaying certain constants. Firstly, desired visibility is never that of the collective but that of the messages conveyed through performances, in such a way that one can come back to them “stripped of any signature” through the reactions they elicit. It is an approach suitable to activism and opposed to art, which is characterized precisely by the apposition of a signature, but in which the aesthetic and creative dimension is never simply ornamental. Secondly, interventions in urban spaces and their distribution via images function as catalysts for an in-depth debate on more varied and wider societal problems, such as domestic violence, ecology, and the orthodox religion’s hold on the private sphere and on sexual orientation through official policies. The importance of these debates makes quantitative criteria (number of likes, shares, and members) quite secondary to the creation of a “virtual community,” which goes so far as to specify its claims and to constitute itself as a concrete political force, capable of migrating from the Web back to the street in the long run. Finally, no practice of anonymity, false profiles, or camouflaged identity on the Web is adopted by members of the two collectives, although the risk of exemplary punishment is always present, and it is not rare to see police officers appear at demonstrations announced over social media. Nevertheless, it is never a question of “playing the martyr.” It is rather, on one hand, an intention to not close themselves off in a political circle, and on the other, an impossibility to determine how the monitoring services will perceive “degree of danger” in what the collectives post, which leads them to take risks, a bit like in a Russian roulette; otherwise, they would be forced to simply accept the political status quo.

No one doubts that the stable foundations for democracy in Russia can be laid only when a macro-political oppositional force has organized itself, with its own operations (party, party program, and victory in free elections), in order to diversify the political options of the country. However, it is equally well known that nothing of this kind can be envisaged as long as the world’s coordinates of perception have not been modified, as long as the ground of consciousness has not been ploughed, in a people for whom resignation and submission to authority are linked together. “War of position” is the strategy Gramsci says consists of seizing cultural tools when the balance of power is clearly favorable to the adversary and “the war of movement” lost in advance. However, it is on this “micro-political front” of Russian artivism—the only one currently possible—that the dominant vision is gradually being eroded. This is seen in the significant increase in number of Internet users who follow the two collectives online, but above all, in the growing number of participants at the cultural events they propose: traveling exhibitions in the Kommunalka apartments of {rodina}, cultural activities (video-projections, yoga, debates, co-working, concerts, masterclasses) that Rebra Evi hosts at Rosi Dom, a physical space inaugurated in 2018 with a very full calendar, and the theater festival organized in the fall of 2019 by the same collective, and spread out over a weekend in several alternative St. Petersburg spaces (fig. 9, 10 and 11). We must understand that if these two collectives’ tactical occupation of the Web demonstrates a certain efficiency, it is thanks to a surreptitious shift in the meaning of the very concept of “participation.” This term no longer designates enthusiastic adherence to the digital project, but rather the pooling of ideas and how to create cultural projects, whose online presence continues to be an important element for those who do not yet know the collectives, yet whose existence has become
less and less central for those who participate. Rosi Dom’s program is updated on the website www.rebraevy.ru and relayed daily over social networks, but once one starts to visit the space and be in contact with the people, participation turns into collaboration with an already existing project, or into the proposal of a new project specifying political desires and needs. In this first case, we can refer to the response to a call for contributions for a feminist postcard exhibition that took place in Rebra Evi’s premises in March 2019. In the second, we can refer to the Femitales project, a website of tales for little girls depicting them as envisioned from their dreams instead of through their physical appearance, written and illustrated by women who did not know each other and in general were not professionals (fig. 12). This participation in a “community in the making” reaches a greater level of maturity, in our opinion, in summer camps that have been held for the past four years in the Lake District north of St. Petersburg. At the same time that artistic and cultural projects are emerging and branching out, bringing about real encounters and leading to a new understanding of the world and its problems, participation in more traditional political events is becoming less hesitant. Thus, the March 8 march saw its numbers triple from 2018 to 2019 and maintained this size in 2020, even though the authorities refused to allow it. During the May Day parade, a feminist batucada and “The Party of the Dead” with a carnival-like flair paraded in costumes alongside old gentlemen from the Communist Party (fig. 13). Upon Navalny’s return to Russia and the news of his imprisonment in January 2021, a very large number of demonstrators, after a “gymnastic” warm-up on TikTok (the latest trend in Russia, which has allowed for the arrival of younger Internet users in the blogosphere), showed both their solidarity and their rage, without disregarding fearful consequences of a repression that could be excessive and not very forgiving.30
Figure 9

A weekly poster for the week of November 30 – December 6, published on the Rebra Evi website, detailing activities hosted by the collective at Rosi Dom.

Figure 10

The premises of Rosi Dom (Rebra Evi Vkontakte page).
Figure 11

The main page under the "Festival" section of the Rebra Evi website.

Figure 12

The home page of the Femitales website.
In conclusion, taking all of these factors into account, it appears that in the case of Russia we cannot speak of an alternative media landscape, nor of a kind of participation across digital platforms and social networks in a collaborative project where content, ideas, and initiatives moves freely. Digital control reinforces political surveillance, in such a marked way that any attempts of a “parallel public space” are constantly undermined. While mass surveillance poses serious problems for Western democracies, insofar as we cannot exclude the hypothesis that a liberticidal regime may one day seize this data, the treatment of political opponents is certainly not to be envied in countries where it is already in place. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the “cyber-actionism” of the two studied collectives, piercing the Web like a spear, has nonetheless begun to lay the foundations for a new type of citizen, one attentive to the fate of Siberian forests, unrecycled city waste, border populations of Ukraine and Crimea, Azerbaijani and Georgian migrants, and queer communities, discussing and debating on social networks in an increasingly fearless manner. Constructing a community that is not only virtual is a real challenge, but on one hand it seems to us already half-met, given that the community exists wherever people learn to express their dissent, claim their rights, and draw on others’ courage beyond any particular ideology of online participation; one might even say it is fully met, given that existence on the networks is seen as a springboard, a showcase, and an instrument of dissemination, but never as an endpoint.
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NOTES

4. On one hand, “cyberdemocracy” has been used as a conceptual tool to develop participatory democracy within a few progressive parties, and has become a widespread online practice through access to public policy data and the creation of discussion forums on numerous town hall and regional websites (Jocelyn Ziegler, “Cyberdémocratie et démocratie participative,” in
L’Internet et la démocratie numérique, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2016). On the other hand, intellectuals and academics continue to fuel this optimistic discourse on digital uses. This can be witnesses in the hypothesis of an expressive shift on the Web (Médiamorphoses, no. 21, 2007), in several issues of the journal Multitudes (see issues “Envoûtements médiatiques,” no. 51.4, 2012, and “Subiectivités numériques,” no. 62.1, 2016), and in the ArtEc Colloquium, “La fabrique de la participation culturelle,” in November 2020, which gave rise to this issue of Hybrid.

5. Here I am referring to the military program ARPANET, developed by DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) in 1966, and only authorized for civilian use in 1980 through the creation of NSFnet.


7. Whistleblowers Julien Assange (Wikileaks, 2010) and Edward Snowden (2013) demonstrated this by exposing the existence of mass surveillance within our Western democracies.

8. On the matter of artivism, we are referring in particular to Stéphanie Lemoine and Samira Ouardi’s book, Artivisme, art, action, politique et résistance culturelle, Paris, Alternatives, 2010 and to Paul Ardenne’s book, Extrême. Esthétiques de la limite dépassée, Paris, Flammarion, 2006. Artivism’s origins are debatable since it is not an artistic movement that we can clearly date. Art historians generally agree on recognizing the first manifestations of artivism in Dadaism, since it is also one of the first manifestations of anti-art (Unart). To omit the Russian origin of artivism would however be a historical flaw. Firstly, because European Dadaism was directly influenced by the Soviet Agit-Prop, through Dada Berlin and Dada Cologne (Paris-Berlin, Rapports et contrastes [1900-1933], Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1979). Secondly, because the pro-Soviet revolutionary climate of the immediate post-war period in Germany, including the Spartacus League of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibknecht, promoted forms of direct and playful intervention that had not been assimilated into art, and for this reason did not appear in art history books (Erwin Piscator, Le Théâtre politique, Paris, L’Arche, 1962). Curator Elizabeth A. Sackler remedied this shortcoming by organizing a 2015 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum on 20th century artivism, titling it Agitprop! Beyond this connection, it is important to emphasize the differences between Soviet Agit-prop and current forms of political performance, the main one being that Agit-prop depended on Comintern voices and had clearly defined goals within the “Department for Agitation and Propaganda,” whereas artivism is by definition in opposition to a social and political order.


17. This number is steadily decreasing due to the termination of the collective, which consequently stopped publishing in September 2018. As we will see in this article, the bifurcation of members of {rodina} to Partiya Mortvykh (“The Party of the Dead”), which was one of the most recurrent performances in its last phase, accounts for the migration of Internet subscribers to the page of the new collective, VKontakte, which tallies 3,286.


22. Alongside older groups, such as Soc-Fem (2012, 59k subscribers), Skola feminizma (2014, 20k subscribers), new collectives are emerging, such as Sostry Khachaturyan (2018, 6,760 subscribers), including more radical ones (Separatistskiy feminizm, 2019), and sometimes in medium-sized cities (Chelyabinskaya Feministskaya Agitgruppa, 2019).


25. [Online] https://anr.fr/fr/projets-finances-et-impact/projets-finances/projet/funded/project/anr-17-ce26-0020/?tx_anrprojects_funded%5Bcontroller%5D=Funded&cHash=5c05cc44684976bf20efe40f7cb9f78 [accessed 27 April 2021].

26. These are some of the topics addressed by the collectives, both on their VKontakte page but also during debates that sometimes followed their performances—during my two stays in Russia, such was the case for {rodina} (at the Museum of Street Art in October 2018, and at the Museum of Anti-conformism in February 2019). Rebra Evi regularly organizes debates on her premises, even festivals on the road, focused more particularly on the status of women (sexism in art, female masturbation, the clitoris, lesbianism, and the anti-gay propaganda law). The latest one took place in March 2021, in Moscow: [Online] https://vk.com/rebra_evi?z=album-112850327_277162214 [accessed 27 April 2021].


28. In an article published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, Marlène Laruelle, a historian associated with CERCEC, attacked European stereotypes about Russia’s supposedly structural inability to emerge
from authoritarianism, explaining the historical reasons that led to the political disengagement in the early 1990s and the desire to see the country presided over by an “effective leader.” By denouncing the ethnocentric assumptions underlying these criticisms, she defended the existence of a “Russian-style democracy.” While her clarifications are important, the characteristics of such a democracy (freedom of thought, freedom of travel, the right to private property and entrepreneurship, and the right to limited legitimate use of physical force) seem to us to be insufficient in describing a democracy: diversity of opinion is seen as a weakness, healthy opposition to the regime is associated with terrorism, bans on demonstrations are commonplace, and there is no de facto separation of powers. [Online] https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/mav/100/A/17977 [accessed 27 April 2021]. Yet the 4th and 5th chapters of her book, La Russie, entre peurs et défis (Paris, Armand Colin, 2016) are dedicated to painting a picture of a Russia that is both neoliberal and authoritarian.

29. The growth of subscriber numbers on VKontakte was not recorded by the collective, but there were only a few hundred members in 2013, and more than 6,000 when I met the collective in 2018. That number has therefore almost doubled in two years. Regarding participation in daily events, 30 people tend to respond, and this number doubles or triples during conferences and festivals.


ABSTRACTS

This article explores various uses of social networks in a non-democratic context, in order to investigate the Internet’s capacity to work as an agent of democracy beyond mere ideology of online participation. As a diving off point, it takes the examples of two activist-artist collectives based in St. Petersburg which belong to a performative art movement, and which have remained very active in online social networks since their founding. Considering the specificity of these two cases, this paper’s aim is to draw a portrait of Russia in the digital age, to determine certain uses of the Internet in order to understand their “tactical” reach, and lastly, to measure on a micropolitical level the impact of their artistic practices as they circulate online.

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Keywords: Russia, social networks, artivism, visual performance, parallel public space

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