Paula Chambers (2020) *Materialising Dissent: Pussy Riot's Balaclavas, Material Culture and Feminist Agency* in *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms* (2020) Amsterdam, Valiz. Katy Deepwell (ed)

On 21 February, 2012 the Russian feminist performance group Pussy Riot were arrested for staging a direct action in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The media attention this arrest and subsequent trial brought created worldwide notoriety, helped in no small part by the striking visuals of the homemade brightly coloured balaclavas worn by the group. The wearing of these "feminized" balaclavas created a visually recognizable sign for their symbolic act of political resistance, and became an activist symbol adopted by people all over the world to demonstrate their support for Pussy Riot's protest for gender equality and women's civil rights in Russia.

What were the specific material qualities of Pussy Riot's balaclavas? How did these objects come to embody both material and feminist agency? In 'What is a Feminist Object? Feminist Material Culture and the Making of the Activist Object' (2016), Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson, following Baudrillard's 'Systems of Objects' (1968), identify four major categories of feminist objects: corporeal things, world-making things, knowledge and communicative things, and protest things.[1] They propose a feminist system of objects within which the material culture of feminist activism is defined by the primacy of an object's political agency. Pussy Riot's homemade balaclavas sit within this material frame of reference as an example of feminist material culture of dissent, activism and political agency. In this, they are linked to a considerable history of textiles and symbolic objects embedded in other forms of material feminist protests undertaken by women – from the banners and flags of the suffragettes to the white headscarves worn by the mothers of the disappeared at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina or the weaving of clothing and objects into chain link fences at women's anti-war protest camps, like Greenham Common.[2]

Pussy Riot first came together in 2010 as a performance group operating as a feminist punk band of young Russian women. Their intention was to highlight, through direct action performances, the social injustices and corruption of the Russian government system, with a particular focus on Vladimir Putin as an oppressive patriarchal figurehead. The group operated with an open collaborative structure and remained open to all women who shared the Pussy Riot ethos and this characteristic of the organization produced an ever-changing line-up of women who remained anonymous behind their homemade balaclavas.

In February 2012 Maria Alyokhina (Masha), Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadya) and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Katya), three of the five women performing in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow that day, were arrested whilst giving a noisy, impromptu and disruptive (albeit very brief) rendition of their punk prayer 'Mother of God, Chase Putin Away' from the altar. Only these three members of the group were tried and convicted in the very public trial that followed. They were charged with hooliganism and

blasphemy ostensibly because the action took place on the soleas, the raised platform in front of the altar in Russian Orthodox Cathedrals reserved for the preaching of male priests. The media attention given to the trial and the injustice of the harsh sentence meant that Pussy Riot's case attained world-wide attention and the group became icons of feminism for a generation of young women across the globe. The most striking visual aspect of the women who performed as Pussy Riot – and this could be as many as twelve at some performances – was the wearing of brightly coloured balaclavas. In journalist Masha Gessen's informative account of the rise and subsequent arrest and trial of Pussy Riot, 'Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot' (2014), she explains the decision of the group members to adopt the balaclava as a strategy of anonymity to avoid arrest and because it allowed for an ever changing line-up of members where individual identification was discouraged:

> As they rehearsed, it became clear that they needed staging and visuals and costumes. "Because if we got up there and started screaming, everyone would think we were stupid" …. "Stupid chicks just standing there screaming". First they came up with wearing balaclavas, which would make them anonymous – but not like the Russian special forces, who kept their identities hidden behind black knit face masks with slits for the eyes and mouth, but like the opposite of that: their balaclavas would be neon-coloured. Then they would need dresses and multi-coloured stockings, to show that whole getup was intentional. Bright, exaggerated makeup showed surprisingly well through the slits in the balaclavas.[3]

Co-founder and one of the most public representatives of Pussy Riot, Nadya Tolokonnikova, recently published 'Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism' (2019). In this manual Tolokonnikova discusses the DIY ethos of Pussy Riot's performances, and of the liberation and sense of empowerment wearing the balaclava gave herself and the other women performing.

> Early on, I discovered that when I'm wearing a mask I feel a little bit like a superhero and maybe feel more power. I feel really brave, I believe I can do anything and everything, and I believe that I can change the situation. We played at being superheroes, Batwoman or Spider-women, who arrive to save our country from the villain, but we were choking on laughter looking at ourselves: a fur hat pissed on by a cat with narrow slits for eyes, a nonworking guitar, and for the audio system a homemade battery that leaks acid. [4]

There was a joyful sense of liberation experienced by Tolokonnikova and the others, manifest in the choice of brightly coloured clothing and the balaclavas worn by the group, as Tolokonnikova explains,

> 'But why the bright colours? It was really a dumb reason: we just didn't want to be taken for terrorists in black balaclavas. We didn't want to scare people; we wanted to bring some fun, so we decided to look like clowns.'[5]

Masha Alyokhina, in her opening courtroom statement in 2012, also makes the point that the Pussy Riot balaclava as mask was not intended as a disguise, but as an intentional feminist strategy of resistance. 'Tights and dresses are a part of the Pussy Riot image, and the balaclavas, identified in the indictment as "masks", are not a disguise, but a conceptual element of our image. Pussy Riot does not want to the focus of attention on girls' appearances, but creates characters who express ideas.' [6] In this context, Pussy Riot's balaclavas as objects that were perceived as both threatening and frivolous can be seen to be examples of tactical frivolity. The 'characters who express ideas' echoes Tolokonnikova's statement that Pussy Riot's intention was to have some fun and to look like clowns. As masks Pussy Riot's balaclavas also signify collective identity and forms of political solidarity between the women who wear them. Pussy Riot's balaclavas were specifically conceived and produced with the intention to make feminist things happen.

The use of brightly coloured outfits for the purpose feminist protest is a material strategy adopted by other activisms also, the wearing of pink Pussy Hats at the Women's March on Washington in January 2017 being one example of what has become known as 'tactical frivolity'.[7] Tactical frivolity involves the wearing of pink and sparkly costumes at protests and demonstrations, a material embodiment that brings to mind carnivalesque connotations of dressing up and mask wearing, where bodily participation in acts of political subversion is both transformative and liberating. This exaggerated sense of femininity Pollyanna Ruiz argues, evokes the fragility often associated with femininity and as such places responsibility of the protestor's safety in the hands of the authorities.[8] Masking as a strategy Ruiz states, is one that has cohesive qualities, as a material strategy of political protest it '…has utilised both the threatening and the frivolous, … to create an enormously effective and imaginative organizational tool.' [9] The mask, Ruiz goes on to explain, is not a disguise but a strategy to draw attention, it downplays the role of the individual and foregrounds collective political endeavours, the wearing of masks as a form of political protest signifies collective identity. The use of masks as a politicised material strategy deliberately blurs the boundaries between us-and-them. 'the mask does not negate identity; instead it signifies the possibility of a multiplicity of identities.' [10]

Bartlett and Henderson's proposal is that a feminist system of objects is defined by the primacy of the object's political agency. They state that, 'feminist objects are intrinsically activist objects, that is, the women's movement remade and invented objects to make feminist things happen.' [11] Studying the pictures of various members of Pussy Riot in their neon-coloured balaclavas it becomes apparent that these objects have been hastily made from woolly hats, the type known as 'beanie' hats that can be rolled down, the eye and mouth holes have been cut roughly, often too large to actually obscure much of the wearer's face. Nevertheless, the affect is striking, and the DIY process of making the balaclavas allow for this strategy to be easily copied by any and all who chose to identify with the Pussy Riot ethos of women's right and social justice. The balaclava becomes not only a powerful visual symbol of group identity but always an effective tool for masking

individuality. Wearing the balaclava indicated an identification with "the cause", "the group's protest" for as long or short a time as the women involved felt necessary. Slavoj Žižek, in 'Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj' (2014), argues the adoption of the balaclava was a conceptual political strategy that undermines the notion of the individual,

> They (Pussy Riot) are conceptual artists in the noblest sense of the word: artists who embody an idea. This is why they wear balaclavas: masks of de-individualisation, of liberating autonomy. The message of their balaclavas is that it doesn't matter which of them got arrested – they're not individuals, they're an idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an idea! [12]

The fact that people all over the world (men as well as women), linked by social media and global communications, took up the Pussy Riot balaclava as a visual material display of solidarity with the ideas of the group, has a kind of uncanny multiplicity, as if the group was infinitely reproducible; one is cut down (or imprisoned) and another magically springs up in her place.

I imagine the women sitting at home of an evening with a pile of beanie hats, bought, stolen, borrowed or found. And sorting through for a suitably coloured hat that might clash pleasingly with their bright tights and dresses, while happily cutting away until the required eye holes and mouth holes were achieved. This may have taken more than one attempt as this type of woolly hat is stretchy and it would be easy to cut the holes too low or too high, something that would only be discovered once the 'balaclava' was tried on in front of a mirror. I imagine laughter and joy at the simplistic brilliancy discovered in this strategy of material subversion, perhaps several women together laughing convivially at each other, perhaps wearing their new balaclavas all evening to drink wine, beer or vodka together. Perhaps I will make one myself. I agree with Tolokonnikova, why should there not be joy and laughter in revolution and resistance.

Bartlett and Henderson usefully define four categories of feminist objects: i) 'corporeal things' for the body or of the body; ii) 'world-making things', that bring into being a feminist world in creative and cultural terms; iii) 'knowledge and communicative things' that can be described as communicating a feminist message or way of being in the world; and iv) 'protest things' that are crucial for the production and dissemination of feminist political discourse via material culture. This is an egalitarian model where no category is more valuable than another and most feminist objects sit in more than one or sometimes all of these categories.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas are 'corporeal things' in that they are worn as headgear, and are made from items of pre-existing clothing, woolly hats. They are things for the body. That the materiality of this particular form of political protest became its defining feature is interesting here for a couple of reasons; firstly, the hasty process of 'hacking' the hats to perform a function other than that intended by its manufacturer has resonances with

Bartlett and Henderson's identification of the activist object as frequently having been produced through collaboration but an object that cannot be attributed to a single creator. Also, in relation to the domestic and feminized nature of the materiality itself (brightly coloured woolly hats are most often worn by women and girls), of the imagined process undertaken to transform these objects of femininity into objects of political resistance. Bartlett and Henderson give another example of the feminist identified clothing as the dungaree, a unisex item of clothing that refuses and rejects sexual objectification. The power suit is another example because it mimics the costume of men in the work place and has become a form of dress that Bartlett and Henderson term 'feminist camouflage'. Pussy Riot's balaclavas too were originally worn as a sort of feminist camouflage, they ensured a certain level of anonymity and allowed for a changing line up within the group. They also disguised the identity of group members and enabled them to avoid detection and arrest, at least until February 2012.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas are 'world-making things' in that they bring into being a feminist world in creative and cultural terms. As a performance group with a specifically feminist agenda, Pussy Riot set out to subvert the traditional distinctions between art and politics through the imaginative transformation of feminine material culture as a symbolic gesture of activist political resistance. The adoption of the brightly coloured handmade balaclavas by fans and supporters across the world made Pussy Riot into a global phenomena and brought to light the inequalities and injustices experienced by women in Putin's Russia.

> feminist culture is generative: we observe the creation of a material culture that accompanies production of feminist ideology and knowledge. And feminist culture is performative: it makes possible a feminist way of being in the world, and a feminist way of imagining the world – a specifically feminist counterculture.[13]

Some examples given by Bartlett and Henderson of 'world-making things' are Patti Smith's seminal album *Horses* (1975), and craft based feminist art making that utilises the skills and materials of traditional women's craft processes such as knitting, crochet and embroidery.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas are 'knowledge and communicative things' in that they communicate a feminist message or way of being in the world. As objects that are intrinsic to the performative spectacle of the group, the brightly coloured balaclavas can be seen as materiality that critiques existing patriarchal and phallocentric knowledge systems, and constructs an alternative feminist viewpoint. Pussy Riot were, and still are, very active online. They upload videos of performances and respond to comments and questions via various social media platforms, Pussy Riot's political intention was always to be world facing. In addition to their original intent as objects of symbolic defiance to Russia's oppressive political system, the balaclavas have, through online dissemination, come to embrace a wider frame of reference, an activist feminist politics of and for the

twenty first century. Bartlett and Henderson cite feminist publications such as *Spare Rib* (1972-93) as examples of knowledge and communicative things.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas are 'protest things' in that they are the material culture crucial to the production and dissemination of feminist political discourse. It would be fair to say I think, that Pussy Riot may not have captured the public imagination in quite the way they have if it were not for the material strategy of wearing the brightly coloured balaclavas. These objects, in part at least, made political protest occur. As objects that are primarily used for political protest, Pussy Riot's balaclavas can be seen as crucial for the production and dissemination of feminist political discourse via material culture. The handmade protest banners of women's marches such as 'Reclaim the Night' against violence against women are examples given by Bartlett and Henderson of protest things.

The ambivalence and ambiguity of craft as art practice has proved an ideal medium for subversive political activities due not least to its ability to expose 'patriarchal domesticity as contradictory, fragile and frayed at the edges.'[14] A study of feminine material culture in this context, offers an invaluable perspective on the women's movement when it is understood as a materialisation of social forms and relations. If, as I believe, we live out social relations through materiality, then feminist reconfigurations and reinvention of craft objects are also part of the transformation of the structures of knowledge

Pussy Riot's adoption of brightly coloured balaclavas as a performative material strategy with feminist political intention and a craft centered material engagement can be analysed alongside other potentially subversive activities such as craftivism and yarn bombing, activities often presented in the media in a derogatory manner. The making and wearing by many of the Pussy Riot balaclava, as a materialisation of feminist activism is an exercise in community action organized for and by women. The fact that it draws on many craft-based community projects centered around women's traditional craft skills; sewing and quilting bees, knitting groups, and yarn bombing, was their means of creating an action in which a large number of people could organize. This is an indication of a collaborative process identified by Bartlett and Henderson as one that marks the feminist activist object. [15] However, as Ele Carpenter warns, the dismissal of craftivism as 'woolly activism', is symptomatic of an underlying sexism due to the connotations of white middle class, middle aged women who are perceived to undertake these activities.[16] Pussy Riot's craftivism in contrast, was presented in the media as inflammatory and dangerous, the women themselves as victims of an unjust system or conversely as hysterical political anarchists. However, Carpenter makes the case for DIY craft processes as effective and legitimate political agency. Radical crafting she proposes is 'a social process of collective empowerment, action, expression and negotiation.'[17] Art activist craft practice is performative and interventionist, integrating gesture and agency, 'Here the simplest action is carefully planned to take or reveal responsibility for a socio-political convention, explored through collective creativity and individual volition. It is active resistance and transformation.' [18] The practice of craftivism defined in these terms enables art-activist objects produced to be placed within Bartlett and

Henderson's system of feminist objects. The materials chosen all have the aesthetic and technology of craft, the 'hacking' of the woolly hats, objects that when cut in to are in serious danger of unraveling, are materially disruptive. The reinvention of brightly coloured woolly hats as balaclavas, objects more usually associated with undercover crime and violence, disrupts the symbolism of these objects and repurposes them for feminist use. As 'corporeal things', craftivism produces things for the body or of the body. As 'world-making things', it brings into being a feminist world in creative and cultural terms. As 'knowledge and communicative things' it communicates a feminist message or way of being in the world. And as 'protest things' it is crucial for the production and dissemination of feminist political discourse via material culture and in open access digital platforms as the manifestation of feminist social relations.

Despite media representation, (or maybe because of it) Pussy Riot have become feminist icons, and their hastily made woolly balaclavas symbols of feminist protest. Pussy Riot's balaclavas remake and reinvent the material culture of feminism, as evidenced through their global success as feminist activist material objects. The feminine materiality of Pussy Riot's balaclavas, manifests itself as a feminist object with value as a symbol of political agency, an object of feminist material culture whereby the mechanics by which these activist objects are brought into being (physical making and online dissemination) becomes one in which, 'The scale of production and the distribution and circulation of feminist objects exemplify the activist object's repurposing of artefacts, and signify the political ideology of the women's movement'.[19] The balaclavas were objects that bring into being the possibility of a feminist material culture, and as such contribute to the visibility of feminist political protest. As corporeal things the balaclavas identify the body a key signifier of feminist identity and allegiance. As world-making things they are part of feminist cultural activities. As knowledge and communicative things they produce, record, and distribute feminist thought and knowledge, hence legitimising this work. And as protest things they are the material culture that makes political protest occur. Pussy Riot's brightly coloured balaclavas are objects with feminist material agency, they are activist objects that materialise radical strategies of feminist dissent.

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