

# LET'S START A PUSSY RIOT

Emely Neu on Her Book: Let's Start a Pussy Riot

With Anne Sherwood Pundyk

*The arrest of Pussy Riot last February, after their guerrilla performance in a Moscow cathedral, was a galvanizing "click" moment for performance artist Emely Neu. Members of Pussy Riot were protesting the Church's support of Russian Prime Minister Putin's questionable reelection as President; they were willing to publicly challenge powerful political and religious institutions in the face of dire consequences. Inspired by Pussy Riot's bravery, Neu wanted to show support right away. She approached London-based feminist collectives "Not So Popular," "Storm in a Teacup" and "Girls Get Busy," to raise funds for Pussy Riot's defense. Together, within weeks of Pussy Riot's arrest, they organised a music festival raising money for the artists. In the process of donating the funds, Neu connected with the international support organization Free Pussy Riot, who maintain ties directly with Pussy Riot members.*

*Spurred by the success of the fundraiser -- and already well-versed in the organization of art exhibitions, poetry events and zines correlating with her interests -- Neu took on her largest collaborative effort to date. She began assembling content for an art book called Let's Start A Pussy Riot to spread the word about their work. The book was undertaken with approval and involvement from members of Pussy Riot, two of whom are serving out sentences in prison as punishment for their performance in the cathedral. The book will be launched in June at this year's Meltdown Festival in London, curated by Yoko Ono. All profits from the sale of the book will go directly to Pussy Riot members to help with legal expenses, "protection" in the labor-prisons, and support for their families. Neu spoke with Anne Sherwood Pundyk about the upcoming book.*



**Anne Sherwood Pundyk:** What does Pussy Riot's arrest mean to you?

**Emely Neu:** I think their work and specifically their arrest is a very important generational moment to raise awareness for feminism again. I was born in 1988. I am 24 years old. When I was growing up I remember listening to the riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney, but with a very innocent approach, because I wasn't old enough to be part of that movement. All of us working in support of Pussy Riot are the same age as their members. When I first saw them performing I was immediately hooked. Pussy Riot's work has a raw, DIY power that draws you in. The topics that Pussy Riot feel very strongly about -- which are feminism, LGBTQ rights, and environmental awareness -- are also very dear to me and the girls I know.

**ASP:** Where did the idea for the book Let's Start A Pussy Riot originate?

**EN:** The idea evolved organically; as soon as the Pussy Riot trial started we set up a blog called "Let's Start a Pussy Riot." The goal of the blog was to get the public involved beyond the mere consuming of news. We wanted people to share creative responses to Pussy Riot's arrest. We wanted people to really question their own surroundings whilst also celebrating these courageous girls. As the blog grew, we saw the potential for publishing a collective response in book form as a show of support for Pussy Riot. I thought about approaching Rough Trade Records as a publisher -- instead of going to traditional book publishers -- because of the history of their label.

**ASP:** So you felt a compatibility with their philosophy?

**EN:** Yes, Rough Trade Records is an independent label with a long history supporting music with substance. When I approached them I didn't have much in the way of prepared materials, although I already had a few contributors lined up. They have been brilliant, because they have given us a lot of freedom; we have made every decision. We really took good care with whom we work together, every step -- from publisher, to printer, to designer has been a deliberate choice. This project could easily be turned into something that it is not supposed to be, if put into the wrong hands.

**ASP:** How so?

**EN:** We didn't want people using Pussy Riot in a commercial sense to make money. It was really important to produce a book that represented their thinking rather than exploiting them.

**ASP:** Were you looking for contributors who had been active on the blog or people elsewhere who expressed sympathy for the cause?

**EN:** We have no contribution from the blog included, as we reached out to established artists for this collection of responses. The way in which we chose/sourced people was simply along the lines of Pussy Riot's activism, paired with traces of inspiration from last year's Meltdown Festival which was curated by Antony. As far as the overall content of the book, the first chapter gives insight into the history of Pussy Riot. Since the project is an official collaboration with them, we have pieces they generated, including courtroom statements made by the members of Pussy Riot who were arrested: Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samutsevich. These are powerful, articulate texts that give insight into the artists' intentions. They defend their actions; drawing distinction between political protest and the anti-Christian sentiment they have been accused of. The book's second chapter is a response to Pussy Riot's work: celebrating, questioning, and confronting topics that they feel strongly about.

**ASP:** Tell me about some of the contributors.

**EN:** We have visuals and written pieces from over 50 artists from around the world. I could mention several artists, including Judy Chicago, Bobby Conn, Mary Beth Edelson, Nomi Ruiz, Jeffrey Lewis, Vaginal Davis, No Bra, Robyn and even artwork from Pussy Riot's daughter, Gera. I did an interview performance with Peaches. Then we have the Mayor of Reykjavik Jon Gnarr, who has submitted a written piece and Tamsyn Challenger has built a ducking stool sculpture especially for the project. She is donating twenty percent of the proceeds from this piece to Pussy Riot. There is another piece that is a good example of

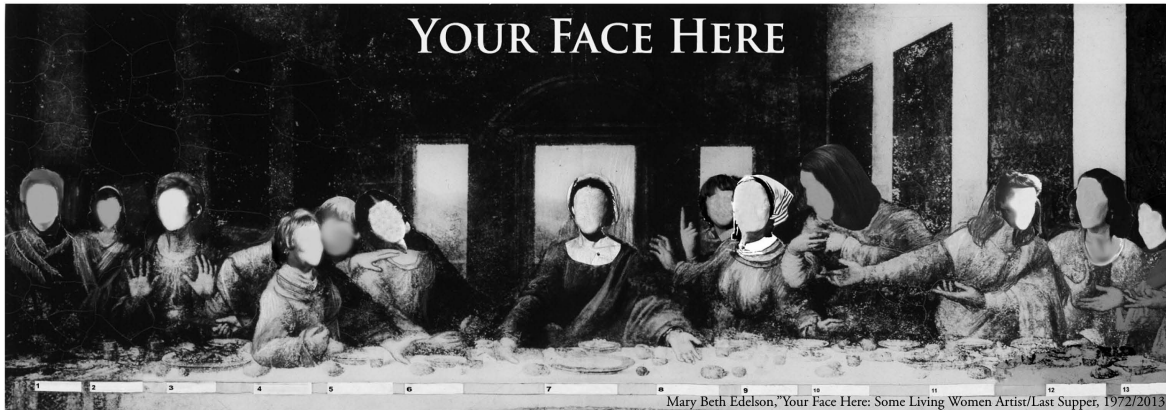
an individual artist taking action called "Plastic Women" by Rozhgar Mahmood Mustafa. She placed five manikins amidst a crowd of Kurdish people who were protesting against the Kurdish government in the hope of changing the construction of the political environment. The crowd was all male, except for the five "plastic women."

There is a Finnish director, Elias Koskimies, who I just found by chance on the Internet on Boy George's Twitter. He has made a musical short film -- it's eight or nine minutes long -- in reaction to the ban of gay propaganda in Russia. And he took the initiative and made this on his own, and it's so beautiful, touching and poetic. I feel like the personal is so important to this book. Another good example of this is Raphael Fox. He is a transgender man who was part of the reality TV series in England called "My Transsexual Summer."

**ASP:** Had you seen the show?

**EN:** I have seen the show, but only just recently. I initially heard him giving a talk at a Performance Matters event in London. Afterwards I just went straight up to him and invited him to contribute to the book. He is also a screen printer and I had seen some of his work before we met. Fox has also set up an amazing ongoing documentary project called "My Generation." He really puts out his personal story in order to evoke a change. I think that is very brave. This is another quality I was looking for in the contributors. Personal stories that operate on a smaller scale where someone really puts themselves on the line for things they feel strongly about and believe in.

**ASP:** Do you feel this mirrors what Pussy Riot is doing?



**EN:** Yes, exactly. We want the ideas behind their work to echo within the pages of the book. But we are taking it a step further, showing how every artist engages in their own personal Pussy Riot. However they define that is up to them. I often feel we are all in our own little bubbles and our own little worlds and sometimes we think everything is fine and we take everything for granted. When you see a story like Pussy Riot's arrest, however, you know you can't take things for granted anymore. These girls have been so strong throughout the whole trial. Their court statements are incredibly forceful. They are saying, "We are freer than all of you together, our bodies are trapped but our minds are free. We can still say whatever we want." I think it's incredible.

**ASP:** It shows that in an everyday environment or on a much smaller scale we could have the courage to state our opinion. Pussy Riot can inspire small acts of personal bravery.

**EN:** I hope our book can convey that idea. Another source of inspiration for us was Future Feminism. Last summer, I went to Antony's Meltdown Festival in London. I went to about seven shows because I was reviewing it for a German music magazine. There are a few people involved in the book that are dear to the foundational part of the Future Feminists. So Kembra Pfahler has written an introduction to the second chapter. We have an interview with Antony and we have Bianca Casady's work, as well. Another important aspect of the book is the dialogue between generations and the dialogue between different strands of feminism. It is very important to put all these different voices together and start a meaningful dialogue. That is something we and the Future Feminists have in common.

**ASP:** In talking with you about this I realize there is quite a bit of commonality with the way Girls Against God and Let's Start a Pussy Riot have unfolded. I've been working with Bianca, Molly O'Brien, Jean Marc Ruellan, and other contributors along with input from Antony since last fall to make the publication. GAG is dedicated to illuminating the oppressive nature of organized religion and other patriarchal institutions. One thing that we've learned and tried to follow decisively along the way is to really move beyond the factionalism and strife that prior feminist iterations have encountered. So, as you were saying, multiplicity of voices is very important for us as well. We are not looking at the enterprise as a rigid, dogmatic movement, but are really working hard to keep it open.

**EN:** Just the other week I heard a young girl saying, "I don't believe in feminism; it's a term from history." I thought, "Wow!" Given my own experiences, I feel just the opposite: we need to revitalize the meaning of feminism.



Emely Neu, "Zwischenraum (An Interview Performance With Peaches)"

**ASP:** Recently, Lady Gaga, who positions herself as a role model, was quoted as saying she wasn't a feminist. This reminds me of last summer when I was talking with Bianca about this issue she said, "I'm putting my foot down. I don't feel like softening the term." We need to keep using "feminism," rather than try and invent a new word.

**EN:** There are so many definitions of it. But there are also stereotypes that are attached to the word. Some people don't want to be part of it because...! Or they don't think it's important because...! But, I feel strongly about using the word "feminism." It's super important. I think we need to look at how we can include all these strands. I really hate it in particular when people say, for me, feminists have to be aware of all the academic work. Or that it's a term from

academia. I do believe that the personal is political as well.

**ASP:** I agree. There is a kind of limiting, unproductive look to some of the academic definitions of "feminism."

**EN:** I grew up surrounded by strong, independent women as well as watching a lot of Pippi Longstocking! I learned so much listening to their stories. As a result, I don't think learning about feminism only happens in academia. Also, the radical image for young girls may be too scary. And the word "feminism" goes in and out of fashion. However you define it is fine, I believe, because using it generates an awareness of the issues. It's so easy to point your finger at something and say, "This is wrong," and "This is right." Instead of just being open to listening to another person's ideas.

**ASP:** It will be interesting to see how it plays out. We have one essay in Girls Against God, by the photographer Alice O'Malley about the women's peace encampment protests in the early '80s; there was one outside of London and one in upstate New York, in Seneca. There was a very conscious consensus-building process used by the organizers of both those large-scale protests. They were massive demonstrations against Nuclear Weapons whose participants were all ages, orientations and socio-economic levels. In contrast to this example, there are other historic moments such as the attempt to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment here in the US. Factionalism within the National Organization for Women was detrimental and destructive to the bigger mission. Just this week in the New York Times, Edith Windsor, whose case against the unfair tax implications of the Defense of Marriage Act was argued in the Supreme Court, recalls being discriminated against by other feminists. She said that NOW "...tried to get rid of lesbians in the organization. They said it was ruining how they looked." Working against factionalism is a key part of moving forward.

**EN:** I think it's just about sitting down and engaging with your surroundings in a more conscious way and starting a dialogue.

**ASP:** On the subject of dialogue, let me ask you about your own art practice. You described your work as taking the form of performative interviews.

**EN:** Interviewing came naturally to me; I remember when I was little I would always go out into the nearby park and ask passersby questions. At 15 or 16 I started to write for local papers and started to work in television even earlier than that. To approach spoken exchanges as an art form is a given for me. I've worked as a journalist, but I don't see myself as one and I don't aspire to be a journalist. In my current work, I am inserting elements from the theatrical realm. I'm working on a choir piece where I add a mythical genderless choir – similar to a Greek chorus – into the interview situation. They question and interrupt the two-party interview exchange; so it then takes on an unexpected triangular dynamic.

**ASP:** It sounds like the natural impulse you've always had to engage in a dialogue has become a focus for your artwork with respect to these exchanges; only you are broadening the elements and possibilities. I appreciate this about your work because as an artist and someone who also writes I don't make a distinction in my own thinking for either type of work that I do. Let's Start A Pussy Riot feels like a natural outgrowth of your own art practice. How can our readers get a copy of the book?

**EN:** The book will be available at The Meltdown Festival this coming June. The best place to look online is on our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/LETS-START-A-PUSSY-RIOT/212071305586673>). We are still building our website. We are all working on this project voluntarily whilst still doing our full time commitments and studies. It's been quite full-on for all of us. The Rough Trade Records website would be good, too, and they will be distributing the book to record stores in the UK. We have a lot of American artists in the book and we hope to distribute it there, as well.

**ASP:** What is your best hope for the book?

**EN:** We want to raise donations through sales of the book since all profits are going directly to support Pussy Riot. Over the long run, our best hope for the book is to also raise awareness for feminism, gender rights and environmental activism; we want to get people thinking, to enter into discussions and where possible, take steps to initiate positive change.