

# 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. There 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 life-long 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.

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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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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”’ (Erjavac, 2003: 7, italics in original).<sup>3</sup> 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

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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<sup>4</sup> – 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.<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup>

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

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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'.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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’.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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'.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

The first category of art, identified as an *other gaze*, is a subtle form of dissensus.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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’.<sup>22</sup>

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

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creative class and groups within the middle class during the years under study.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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

of major art exhibitions and the latest events. The art scene is a ‘moving target’ as you try to keep up with the latest news. Thus, over the years I searched the Internet, paper media, bookstores and exhibition kiosks for material. The major principle was to continuously keep an alert eye on the flow of information. Apart from exhibition catalogues, only a few monographs and anthologies have been published on contemporary Russian art, and then primarily covering art up to the 2000s.<sup>25</sup> I also conducted interviews with artists, curators and art critics who told me about their work. The interviews were important in providing the specific *Fingerspitzengefühl* for understanding developments.

During the years under study, the art scene was characterized by a dynamic expansion and institutional build-up. In the period of economic boom, the interest in a potential Russian art market also boomed. With minimum state financing, private capital covered a large part of the costs of the institutionalization of art.

However, the first institutions of contemporary art had been created much earlier. In 1992 the National Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) was created under the Russian Federal Ministry of Culture. It was the result of the work of Leonid Bazhanov, who, as soon as Gorbachev’s Perestroika allowed independent associations, created the Hermitage art association in 1986. He soon found a location on Yakimanka Street, which for some years became the hub of Moscow art life with exhibitions, seminars and concerts (Borusyak, 2009). With the Pompidou Centre in Paris as a model, he created the Centre for Contemporary Art. After he was offered a position in the Ministry of Culture, he was able to transform it into the NCCA in 1992, the first Russian federal state institution of its kind.<sup>26</sup> Later, branches were created in other Russian cities.<sup>27</sup> Private galleries were also set up after 1989: the First Gallery in 1989 (Pervaya galereya, later to become the Aidan Gallery), and the Marat Gelman Gallery and Gallery Regina in 1990. In 1999 the Moscow Museum of Modern Art opened at the initiative of Zurab Tsereteli, an artist and close friend of Moscow’s Mayor Luzhkov, with financial support from the city government.<sup>28</sup>

Although the private market for Russian contemporary art was limited, private galleries and actors now came to dominate the contemporary art scene. Two large annual art fairs (Art Moskva and Art Manezh) had started in Moscow in 1996 and were well established by the early 2000s. They incorporated both national and international art, mostly commercial.

The economy improved, but the federal government only reluctantly allocated a minimal sum to culture in the state budget. It had limited interest in contemporary art and did not understand its value. Even so, it was persuaded that an international biennale of contemporary art could improve Russia’s image abroad. The first Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art was held in the spring of 2005, with the major exhibition at the former Lenin Museum next to the Historical Museum on Red Square.<sup>29</sup> Several years later Mikhail Shvydkoi, who at the time had financed the Moscow Biennale as head of the Agency of Culture and Media, said: ‘I did not like what I saw of contemporary art but I understood that it was necessary to support it’.<sup>30</sup> Two years later the deputy head of the presidential administration, chief ideologist Vladislav Surkov, even wrote the introduction to the catalogue

of the 2007 biennale. In 2005, the Innovatsiya Prize for Contemporary Art was instituted and the NCCA organized the contest. However, apart from providing the basic financing of the NCCA and a major part of the costs of the Moscow Biennale, the federal state did little to support contemporary art. Art had to depend on the private market and private financing.

Over the period 2005–2008 several new private galleries opened in Moscow. As Marat Gelman said in June 2008, ‘People who previously thought of opening boutiques or fashion franchises now think of opening art foundations’ (Chernysheva, 2008: 13). Former industrial areas in the centre of Moscow were converted into modern gallery districts. Rough but beautiful old brick buildings of factory architecture provided an excellent environment for the new *tusovka* (trendy gatherings) of art lovers.<sup>31</sup> Art Strelka (part of the former Krasnyi Oktyabr chocolate factory) opened in 2004,<sup>32</sup> and Art Play opened in a former silk factory at about the same time. In 2006 Proekt Fabrika was created on the grounds of the still functioning Oktyabr paper factory, and in 2007 Vinzavod (a former store for cognac and wine)<sup>33</sup> became an important art centre when several of the most important galleries moved there. The same year two private galleries/museums opened to exhibit the private collections of two businessmen – Art4Russia<sup>34</sup> and Fond Ekaterina.<sup>35</sup> In 2008, the Garazh Center of Contemporary Culture, funded by the oligarch Roman Abramovich, opened in a newly renovated former bus garage built by the constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov in the late 1920s.<sup>36</sup> In 2008, Marat Gelman expanded his activities to the city of Perm in Western Siberia, when he was invited by the governor to open a museum of contemporary art in a grand Stalin-era former riverboat station.

In 2007 the Kandinsky Prize was created with private money as the second most prestigious art award in the country, complementing the state-awarded Innovatsiya Prize.<sup>37</sup> Both contests were organized in such a way that an expert council makes the initial selection of art works and an international jury of art specialists takes the final decisions on the awards. The Innovatsiya Prize and the Kandinsky Prize became *the* events of the year in the community of contemporary art, and intensive debate soon took place around them. Moscow had become a major centre of contemporary art for a quite logical reason – most of the private capital was concentrated in the city.

Critics complained that there were no counterweights to the influence of the market as there was no state-sponsored system of professional education in contemporary art, no education for art critics and no system of state grants to artists. The small Institute of Problems of Contemporary Art, set up in 1991 by Iosif Bakshtein together with a group of artists, came to play an important role as the first and only educational centre of contemporary art. With Bakshtein, a long-term member of the circles of Moscow Conceptualism, the tradition of the Soviet underground was transferred to and integrated into the worldview of the young artists who graduated from this programme each year.<sup>38</sup> More than 10 years later, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art also started courses in contemporary art.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, in 2013 state-organized or -financed education in contemporary art still did not exist, although a system of grants for artists was in development.

A restructuring of the system of art institutions would take place in 2012–2013 (see Chapter 8).

### Structure of the study

This is a book about the role of art in society. It asks whether and, if so, how art contributed to the evolving protest movement of 2011–2012. The ‘political’ element of art is defined as participating in reconfiguring what is seen, heard and understood about the contemporary world. This takes form through aesthetic rupture. The narrative of the book follows a trajectory that comes closer and closer to the core of politics from the subtle art of an other gaze to dissent art and art of engagement, and from discussions within the art community to political action. The analysis runs from the development of a subculture to the buildup of a counterculture and discusses the direct contribution of people from the cultural sphere to the art-related activities of the protest movement.

The reader is taken closer and closer to politics in art. Chapter 2 provides the background to dissensus in Russian art during the twentieth century and sets out the political context of today’s art – that is, the major parameters of the Putin consensus as it developed during his first two terms as president (2000–2008). Chapter 3 analyses art of an other gaze as the most subtle form of dissensus in art. Chapter 4 describes the conflict between art and the church, most notably the trial of the exhibition ‘Forbidden Art 2006’. This trial is regarded as a crucial event in the development of a counterculture within the Russian community of contemporary art. Chapter 5 presents dissent art as art that disagrees with the official consensus. Chapter 6 focuses on the possible transformation of a subculture of art into a counterculture by analysing seminars, acts and statements by the arts community plus the category of art of engagement – that is, art that makes direct political statements. Chapter 7 concentrates on the political activities of the so-called new media activists during campaigns that preceded parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as the textual messages of slogans and banners at protests in December 2011 to June 2012. Chapter 8 describes the Bolotnaya Square demonstration in May 2012 as a political turning point and analyses art and politics after Bolotnaya. The concluding chapter summarizes the results of the study and relates them to the concept of subjectivation – that is, when people who normally are not listened to raise their voices in public.

### Notes

- 1 In Bleiker, see especially the chapter on ‘Political boundaries, poetic transgression’. On the example of Iran, see Kurzman (2009).
- 2 On rock music, see Troitskii (2007) and Cushman (1995).
- 3 Erjavec quoting Jean-Francois Lyotard (1988).
- 4 ‘A political subject is a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus’ (Rancière, 2004: 69).
- 5 See, for example, the case studies of Brown (2011) and Lison (2011).
- 6 See their discussion of the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘scene’. The way ‘space’ is used here is close to their concept of ‘scene’. See also Polletta (1999: 1–38).

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- 7 Quoted by Leach and Haunss (2009: 260).
- 8 Keith A. Roberts (1978) refers to the fundamental difference between a counterculture and a subculture. Counterculture rejects the norms and values that unite the dominant culture while the latter finds ways of affirming the national culture and the fundamental value orientation of the dominant society.
- 9 Cushman (1995: 7–8) makes a distinction between ‘counterculture’ and ‘alternative culture’, where the latter, although different from the dominant culture or norm, presents no challenge. This distinction can, however, sometimes be difficult to make. What may seem nonpolitical and fairly harmless can still have a political effect in the longer run. It may also be perceived by the authorities as a genuine challenge.
- 10 For studies of ideological directives in the cultural field in Soviet times, see, for example, Sokolov (2007), Groys (1992) and Clark and Dobrenko (2007).
- 11 Chantal Mouffe (2008: 9) explains it in the following way: ‘What is at a given moment considered to be the “natural order” – together with the “common sense” that accompanies it – is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objective outside the practices that bring it into being. Every order is therefore political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated’.
- 12 According to Rancière (2004: 63), ‘Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning’.
- 13 Compare with Susan C. Haedicke’s (2013: 45) notion that Rancière emphasizes the meeting between the artist and the spectator, claiming that a spectator achieves emancipation or critical awareness by translating what he sees into his own experience, linking it to what he already knows and, through that association, creating new awareness.
- 14 ‘Artefacts are not only materially constructed but also socially constructed. Even though they may be individually produced, their creation too is, in a sense, a social performance, because the audience is always in the artist’s mind. Because of their performance, cultural artefacts can serve as the focus of numerous other performances after their creation. Both social performances and artefact-based performances, however, are closely linked to the ideations’ (Johnston, 2009: 7).
- 15 Graeme Gill (2013) writes about the efforts by the Russian post-Soviet presidents to create a meta-narrative to fill the ideological vacuum that replaced the Soviet narrative. See also Billington (2004).
- 16 Compare the introduction of the official concept of ‘sovereign democracy’. See Hayoz (2012).
- 17 Alexei Yurchak (2006: 10–14) writes about the Soviet Communist Party as the source of the official updated interpretation of the ‘truth’, thereby solving the ‘Lefort’s Paradox’ between ideological enunciation and ideological rule in the Soviet Union.
- 18 For the gap between the intelligentsia and the authorities, see Shalin (1996). On peasants and the authorities, see Hosking (1997).
- 19 Brown and Anton (2011: 2) use the term ‘subversive art’, which could be a joint term for the last two categories above. They explain it thus: ‘The concept of the subversive . . . functions in two senses: first, it refers to the activities of individuals and groups . . . operating with the explicit aim of disrupting politics and challenging dominant narratives; second, it refers to the effects of social actors and trends that, although not explicitly political, have been interpreted by dominant elites in political terms’.
- 20 Compare the term the ‘other gaze’ used by Groys in the sense of Russian unofficial art in the Soviet Union. Groys (2003: 55) had in mind Moscow Conceptualists and Sots-Art, first and foremost.

- 21 Compare Tökes (1975: 16).
- 22 On *styob*, see Beumers (2005: 245, 261).
- 23 The term ‘creative class’ as used by Richard Florida (2002) includes people in the knowledge-based and creative sectors such as scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and architects, plus people in design, education, the arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content.
- 24 These demonstrations were described by Yurii Grigorii (2012), a sociologist from the Higher School of Economics, as a protest ‘against the very idea that loyalty can always be bought’ and as a ‘moral protest, a protest against corruption and greed, against the lack of moral order’.
- 25 An overview of Western and Russian art is provided by Andreeva (2007). A collection of articles about Russian artists previously published in the Russian media can be found in Kovalev (2005). Interviews with people from contemporary culture, among them artists, can be found in Bazhanov and Iro (2012). There are exhibition catalogues covering individuals or groups of artists, and of the collections of private collectors.
- 26 Author’s interview with Leonid Bazhanov, Moscow, September 2007.
- 27 Nizhnii Novgorod, [www.museum.ru/m3065](http://www.museum.ru/m3065); St Petersburg, [ncca-spб.ru](http://ncca-spб.ru); [www.nccakaliningrad.ru](http://www.nccakaliningrad.ru); Ekaterinburg, [www.uralncca.ru](http://www.uralncca.ru).
- 28 [www.mmoma.ru](http://www.mmoma.ru). For the development of the Moscow art scene in the 1990s, see Rekonstruktsiya/Reconstruction, 1990–2000 (2013).
- 29 [www.moscowbiennale.ru](http://www.moscowbiennale.ru).
- 30 Mikhail Shvydkoi at a meeting of the Cultural Counsellors of the EU member states, Moscow, October 2009.
- 31 Beumers explains that *tusovat* describes the activity of just being friends with a group not necessarily of the same composition (2005: 245, 261). Viktor Miziano uses the term to describe the socio-cultural phenomenon of the informal gathering around the art scene in the 1990s. He calls it a kind of personalized self-organization of the artistic environment in a world without institutions and state protection for the arts (Miziano, 2004: 15–42).
- 32 [www.artstrelka.ru](http://www.artstrelka.ru).
- 33 [www.winzavod.ru](http://www.winzavod.ru).
- 34 [www.art4.ru](http://www.art4.ru).
- 35 [www.ekaterina-fondation.ru](http://www.ekaterina-fondation.ru).
- 36 <http://garageccc.com/ru/page/about>.
- 37 [www.kandinsky-prize.ru](http://www.kandinsky-prize.ru).
- 38 They have remained part of a loose network of former students, and Bakshtein, as an influential operator on the Moscow art scene, was also able to place his students in the art scene and connect them abroad.
- 39 [www.mmoma.ru/about](http://www.mmoma.ru/about).

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