

Shout, Shout Let It All Out

by Derrick Chang

In contrast to popular media representations that reflect “moderate” or “mainstream” lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT) identity, and tend to neutralize critical social, cultural and economic differences within these communities, queer artists, performers and dissidents have sought to counter social conventions and transform public space by presenting other kinds of alterity. As part of his 2012 installation and comprehensive survey at the New Museum, titled *We Who Feel Differently*, Carlos Motta explored how the framework of marriage equality reproduces systemic disparity, representing the interests of socially and economically privileged queers who have the resources to be visible. Writing in *e-flux journal*, he noted that identity-recognition and tolerance, “have proven insufficient to confront the issues of poverty, disability, criminalization, discrimination and other forms of oppression that the majority of queer people face.”¹

Reacting to these issues, queer artists and activists present a queer citizen-subject who asserts the pressing needs of a global demographic that is excluded from normative ideas of LGBT identity. They insist on challenging, redefining and criticizing mainstream ideas of citizenship and urge their audiences to “resist a submissive viewership.”² In alignment with Motta’s sentiments, cultural theorist and anthropologist Néstor García Canclini writes that it is, “neither the rejection of difference nor its unrestricted approval [that] encourages art” to “dispel the leveling, abstract illusions of Western democracy,”³ arguing that the ability to actively negotiate these differences is vital to a functional civil society.

In his two-channel video installation *East Side Story* (2006–2008), Croatian artist Igor Grubić plays off the intercultural conflicts of the popular musical *West Side Story* (1957). The left screen shows found video footage from the first gay pride marches in Belgrade, Serbia (2001) and Zagreb, Croatia (2002) and the ensuing violence by protesters that was directed at police officers, marchers and civilian bystanders. The screen to the right shows Grubić’s own footage of dancers in choreographed action, miming the protesters by performing aesthetic interpretations of their aggressive gestures towards the marchers. Grubić’s video employs both dance and visual art as political performance and re-enactment, juxtaposing the mute choreographed movements of the dancers with the vocal assault of crowd violence in the found video footage. As art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty observes, “the viewer of *East Side Story* almost cannot help but watch the political action aesthetically and the dance politically.”⁴

This work anticipates viewers’ potential anxiety around its presentation as conforming to standardized notions of cultural backwardness and repression, referencing not just the artist’s personal investment as a Croatian citizen but also the revolutionary struggle for independence and regional conflicts with Serbia. Since the early 1990s, both Serbia and Croatia have experienced polarizing separations in their secession from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The repudiation of queer presence in Croatia is brought out in the protesters’ response to the marchers, revealing how forms of civic participation and their accompanying declarations of nationalism exist only for a minority of queer populations who are afforded public acceptance. The artist draws attention to what theorist Edward Said described as “the fundamental problem of how to reconcile one’s identity and the actualities of one’s own culture, society, and history

Igor Grubić, *East Side Story*, 2008, two-channel video, installation view at Satellite Gallery, 2014, Vancouver
 PHOTO: MICHAEL R. BARRICH, MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN ART GALLERY; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Endnotes

1 Carlos Motta, “Editorial - (Im) practical (Im) possibilities” *e-flux journal*, issue #44 April, 2013. Motta guest-edited this special issue on contemporary queer art and culture. The continuation of this thematic in his most recent survey exhibition, *For Democracy There Must Be Love* (January 24 – March 22, 2015) at the Röda Sten Konsthall in Gothenburg, represents Motta’s “ongoing preoccupation with democratic representation and the repression of individual and collective civil liberties.”

2 Ibid.

3 Néstor García Canclini, “How Civil Society Speaks Today” in *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 153.

4 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “The Draw of Dance” in *Dance/Draw* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 2011), 28.



Pascal Lièvre and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, *Patriotic*, 2005, video, installation view at Satellite Gallery, 2014, Vancouver
 PHOTO: MICHAEL R. BARRICK, MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN ART GALLERY; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

to the reality of other identities, cultures, [and] peoples...”⁵ The work attempts to acknowledge cultural differences within citizenship as a combination of social memory, politics, history, nationalism and identity. The aestheticizing of violence in the piece, however, is unavoidable, but in presenting *East Side Story* so that sound predominates, Grubić fills the exhibition space with controlled ambient “noise,” which draws our attention to acoustic threats rather than emphasizing the physical violence that the images portray. The cacophony of aggressive actions towards marchers in Belgrade and Zagreb, and the responses of the performers documented in *East Side Story*, allows us to also reflect on Pussy Riot’s more recent opposition to authoritarian politics in Russia. Pussy Riot performed their “punk prayer” “Mother of God, Drive Putin Away” inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February 2012, vocalizing the non-alignment of citizenship and identity in Russia. Donning balaclavas paired with acid-bright tights and dresses, their demonstrations seized public space for unauthorized anarchist performances. The subsequent arrest of three of their members earned them “prisoners of conscience” status with Amnesty International and their theatrically punk action further generated publicity for their goals, creating a rhetoric and civic practice of “noise” and establishing a minor constituency among their fans and supporters.

Pussy Riot’s sonic practice takes inspiration from American noise rock, screamo, queercore and riot grrrl music movements. Arguably, the band’s political influences also reflect an allegiance with activists of the late 1960s, whose media- and performance-based actions similarly addressed the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and education. However, by presenting themselves on the Internet, Pussy Riot are able to transcend the incarceration of civic noise, imagining their public as relative and fluid, not absolute. Their particular brand of “dissident” performance sees citizenship as an elastic, flexible and interactive form that allows for the reformation of social and political realities. Following Pussy Riot’s arrest, the approval of what became known as the Russian LGBT propaganda law on June 30, 2013 resulted in frightening restrictions on queer public life in Russia. However, a reading of the “state of exception”⁶ during the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, installs LGBT athletes and spectators as apolitical actors, suspending the code of ethics ruling the Games in favour of Russia’s legal rejection of queer citizenship.

In contrast to the noise politics and the vocal negation of scream rock, Pascal Lièvre and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay’s music video *Patriotic* (2005) reinforces what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant describes as doing politics “...to be in the political with others, in a becoming-democratic that involves sentience, focus, and a comic sense of the pleasure of coming together once again.”⁷ *Patriotic* re-enacts the language of anti-terrorism from excerpts of George W. Bush’s Patriot Act of 2001 to the melodic tune of Céline Dion’s pop cultural ballad “My Heart Will Go On” from the 1997 movie *Titanic*. To the strains of romantic love, this seductive propaganda video deconstructs the transition between *language* and *speech* as tactics and strategies deployed by both government policy-makers and artists. Legislative language is structured in the way in

5 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994).

6 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

which it communicates claims for the protection of civil liberties through the Patriot Act; its aim is to convey rational and logical thought. Speech, however, conversely acquires meaning and significance through use, through experience and pathos. The spirited, comic singing of *Patriotic* animates the submissive viewership by changing the syntax of how the Patriot Act is presented: the lyrics fade in and out of a soft bubblegum pink background, drawing our attention to the provisions and legislation concerning citizenship, immigration and globalization that have occurred since its adoption in 2001. Ten years after Lièvre and Nemerofsky Ramsay made their video, *Patriotic* continues to foreground state considerations that are reinforced through securitization, counterterrorism and nationalism.

Both *East Side Story* and *Patriotic* articulate the complex societal and civic protections that govern the binary between gay-friendly and homophobic realities, upstaging these binaries through performances that are enacted on a sonic register. Grubić's *East Side Story* communicates Berlant's assertion of "ambient citizenship" as a mode for questioning the circumstances of whose noise matters. According to Berlant, "ambient citizenship registers the normative distinctions in terms of who has the formal and informal right to take up soundspace."⁸ With its soothing lyricism, *Patriotic* is an incongruous performance of the Patriot Act (which has Canadian counterparts in Bill-24, The Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act and Bill C-51, the Anti-terrorism Act) that critiques its powers of social coercion and policing. It is, however, the desire to make queer noise in videos that forms a common dissonance. Ultimately, the contradictions inherent to both works align in the desire for the harmonization – but not assimilation – of political difference, queer identity and citizenship. From vocal aggression to primal scream rock to acoustic melody, examples of queer anxiety perform the politics of noise as a form of communication that points out the need for a global re-evaluation of citizenship.

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⁷ Lauren Berlant, "On the Desire for the Political" in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

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