

Tuning Speculation II: Auralneirics and imaginary networked future

“‘IDEAS MATTER’: Žižek Sings Pussy Riot”

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This paper intervenes into recent debates concerning the relationships between language, poststructuralism, and new materialist philosophies by proposing two points of departure for an alternative conception of conceptual art informed by sound/music practices. The first, “IDEAS MATTER,” refers to Slavoj Žižek’s description of contemporary Russian art collective Pussy Riot, while the second, “Žižek Sings Pussy Riot,” plays on the title of John Baldessari’s 1972 video *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, a work in which the artist sings Sol LeWitt’s well-known “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969). In a recent statement, Žižek pithily hailed Pussy Riot as “[c]onceptual artists in the noblest sense of the word,” calling the group “artists who embody an Idea.” Žižek’s characterization follows from Pussy Riot’s 2012 performance *Punk Prayer - Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away*, the group’s infamously thwarted demonstration staged in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which resulted in a two-year prison sentence for three of the group’s members, a consequence which for some, according to Anya Bernstein, paradoxically revealed both “the brutality and impotence of the Russian state.” With direct references to anti-LGBT violence, feminism, and state oppression linked to Russian Orthodoxy, *Punk Prayer* notably parodies the form of a religious musical text setting and thus invokes the era of pre-absolute liturgical music. In relation to *Punk Prayer*, I cite Carl Dalhaus’s discussion of the historical specificity of absolute music in which a premodern concept of music as *harmonia*, *rhythmos*, and *logos* gave way in the 19th century to pure instrumental music as the dominant paradigm. I suggest that in the wake of absolute music *logos* finds a new valence in contemporary critical music practices as dispersed, networked, and virtualized—though no less real—materiality.

While Pussy Riot’s work is frequently situated within the contexts of performance art and activism, Žižek’s comment suggests further consequences for the group’s work as a kind of propositional or conceptual music. “Anybody can take on this image,” one Pussy Riot member explained in a Youtube video, referring to the group’s balaclavas, instruments, and dresses. Here Žižek’s Hegelian-cum-Kosuthian notion of conceptual art, *Art-as-Idea*, is met by a conceptual art defined as proposition, which also recalls the work of LeWitt or Lawrence Weiner. This propositional character of conceptual art, which notably mirrors the very structure of the musical score, is expressed in LeWitt’s original “Sentences” (“Ideas can be works of art,” to quote sentence ten, “All ideas need not be made physical”). As both a kind of musical “realization” and a text setting of LeWitt’s “Sentences,” in *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, ideas *become* physical matter. Finally, conceptual art as both Idea and proposition returns in a consideration of authority, wherein again ideas become material presence, this time through violent force. In his recent rejoinder to Althusser’s materialist philosophy, Žižek claims that authority works strictly as threat, that it is propositional; were it enacted, like the impotent father or the Russian state as Bernstein suggests, it would cease to be genuine authority. In conclusion, the threat, like conceptual proposition, is seen as matter virtualized.