

'Zero Tolerance' at MoMA P.S. 1

By HOLLAND COTTER FEB. 5, 2015



The Pussy Riot collective at the altar of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, in the 2012 video "Punk Prayer — Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!"

Courtesy of the artists; Matthew Septimus, Courtesy the artists and MoMA PSI

'ZERO TOLERANCE'

MoMA P.S. 1

22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue,

Long Island City, Queens

Through April 13

Zero tolerance is a phrase used for the crackdown — no questions asked, no exceptions made — on behavior seen as threatening by the law enforcement authorities. Almost universally, the policy is a form of selective social repression, from the military quashing of pro-democracy demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo to recent police killings of unarmed black men in the

United States. To address the issue forcefully in art would require a tougher and more focused exhibition than [“Zero Tolerance”](#) at P.S. 1, where a side-by-side lining up of hard and soft forms of “protest art” from varying times and cultures ends up emphasizing aesthetics over politics. Yet some of those pieces are great, as sharp as a slap, and well worth a visit.

Unsurprisingly, some of the best stuff is documentary. One of the earliest pieces, [“Videograms of a Revolution”](#) (1992), by Harun Farocki and Adrei Ujica, records the spontaneous popular overthrow of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989. Made before the days of digital social media, the entire feature-length piece is edited from hundreds of videos shot with hand-held cameras by citizens on the street in Bucharest. It’s a classic of politically persuasive filmmaking, and completely gripping.

Igor Grubic’s [video](#) of gay pride marchers under attack by neo-Nazis in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2001 and Zagreb, Croatia, in 2002 is a reminder that gay-bashing, by fist or by law, is still the rule in much of the world. This, of course, includes Russia, the source of [“Punk Prayer — Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!”](#) (2012), by the female collective Pussy Riot. An exhibition standout, this short and shaky video records their guerrilla performance at the altar of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Brightly costumed, throwing air punches and chanting anti-Putin songs, the women have a fabulously strange neo-Byzantine presence, which is artful and something more. (After the video went online, three Pussy Riot members — Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova — were arrested and charged with inciting religious hatred.)

Organized by Klaus Biesenbach, Mia Locks and Margaret Aldredge, the show has other potent entries. In Amal Kenawy’s [“The Silence of Sheep”](#) (2009), a herd of artists and workers crawl, pre-Arab Spring, through downtown Cairo; films of the 2011 protests in Tahrir Square by Ahmed Basyony were made just days before he was shot and killed there at age 32. Halil Altindere’s [“Wonderland”](#) brings angry hip-hop theatrics to a gentrifying Romany neighborhood in Istanbul. And I love the video of kissing attacks on policewomen by the female members of a second Russian collective, [Voina](#). The police resist, but the kissers mean business and no targeted subject escapes a smooch: a zero tolerance in the right direction.

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