

“Change Life,” or the Most Difficult Thing to Imagine

By Annie Le Brun¹

Taking note of the most recent installment of “Temps qu’il fait”² and the state of things that it reveals, how can we not be gripped as much by the gravity of the situation as by the size of the bet placed on what perhaps hasn’t yet begun but which is nevertheless in the process of being imagined here, there, now, elsewhere, beyond the marked-out paths, whether it is in the solitude of the adolescence or through the informal (and yet more and more real) solidarity of those who refuse this world?

This certainty that everything is connected indeed depends on the acuity of the observer but also on one’s determination to not accept the unacceptable. And do we not see, because of the complexity of our societies, to which it alludes, that – yes – there is a connection between the [attempted] extradition of Julian Assange³ and the shootings in New York?⁴ All this isn’t unrelated to the connection that exists between the massacre of miners in South Africa⁵ and the questions asked by

¹ “‘Changer la Vie’ ou le plus difficile à imaginer, par Annie Le Brun,” published as a guest column by Paul Jorion on 18 August 2012:

<https://www.pauljorion.com/blog/2012/08/18/changer-la-vie-ou-le-plus-difficile-a-imaginer-par-annie-le-brun/>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 10 January 2019. All footnotes are by the translator, who has resisted the impulse to change the title of this essay to something better (something like “Pussy Riot and the Desire to Change Life”).

² Here there appears a link to a videotaped blog entry by Paul Jorion concerning Julian Assange taking refuge at the Ecuadorian Embassy, Emmett Grogan’s book *Ringolevio* and the Standard Chartered Bank and its regulators. This video is also available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cgcmF7WDXQ>.

³ On 16 August 2012, Ecuador granted political asylum to Julian Assange, the prime mover of www.wikileaks.org, because of fears that Sweden’s attempts to extradite him would not only violate his civil rights, but would also possibly clear the way for him to face charges (and possibly the death penalty) in the USA.

⁴ *Possibly* a reference to the 11 August 2012 event in which the NYPD shot and killed a knife-wielding man in the middle of Times Square:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/nyregion/police-fatally-shoot-man-brandishing-knife-in-times-square.html>. Note well that the author *cannot* be referring to the better-known event that took place in the vicinity of the Empire State Building, where a gunman shot and killed a co-worker and was then shot and killed by the NYPD, because this tragedy took place on 24 August 2012, almost a week *after* this column was published.

⁵ On 16 August 2012, the security forces of South Africa opened fire on striking mineworkers, killing nearly 100 people.

the regulators who are currently worrying the Standard Chartered Bank.⁶ But there is also a connection between all this and the revolt by and criminal conviction of the members of *Pussy Riot*⁷ today⁸ in Russia. Everywhere one looks, the unacceptable is beginning to be seen as such, but not by the same people and not in the same way.

And so, the fact that three young women, beautiful in their insolence, had the courage to lash out at power and the united Russian church, with full knowledge of what they were doing – this will be a bonfire in the gloominess of this year 2012. You must see the video⁹ of their intervention on 21 February [2012] in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, “center of the new orthodoxy in Russia,” where – after their prayer to the Virgin Mary to “chase Putin away” – the honor of the male in question was defended, before the arrival of the police, by the departure of the lay sisters, who were completely panic-stricken by four young unrelenting¹⁰ demons wearing masks and multi-colored tights. And it seems very significant to me that, contrary to some young people (probably speaking in the name of a serious politics that has been disconcerted by these women’s mix of humor and radicalism), we haven’t yet fully determined the stakes of this affair, namely, to quote one of the band’s friends, the artist Oleg Kulik, that the young women would end up in prison, “because power can’t admit that they’d criticized the Church, the only institution that, in the case of a revolution, would rise up to defend it.”

Similarly, it is important to me that these young feminists, of the type that I believed that we were thirty-five years ago, have been condemned to two years in prison by a *female* judge. Just as it is important that, at the very moment that they were being judged, these feminists were supported by a topless, splendid young woman, acting in solidarity, who in just a few minutes brought down a cross [in

⁶ On 14 August 2012, the British bank Standard Chartered agree to pay \$340 million in fines to bank regulators in New York City.

⁷ English in original.

⁸ On 17 August 2012, three members of Pussy Riot – Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich – were convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” for their performance of an anti-Putin song at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior earlier in the year.

⁹ On YouTube, with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPDkJbTQRCY>

¹⁰ The French word used here, *déchaîné*, can also mean unchained, as if they’d just escaped from Hell.

Kiev] with a chainsaw.¹¹ It is even more important that they purely and simply laughed during the reading aloud of the grounds for their conviction.¹²

In fact, these young women are feminists, ecological and homosexual-rights activists, members of collectives of dissident artists. . . . If Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alyokhina are guilty, they are guilty of REVOLT and less so of being artists who apparently want to truly “Change life.”¹³ And perhaps it is this that is difficult to imagine here, when the majority of our artists, champions of subsidized subversion, indulge themselves in all the forms of cultural hijacking [*détournements*]¹⁴ and recycling that are possible, and end up finding their places in the on-going campaign of neutralization. Conversely, we can only be impressed by the manner in which *Pussy Riot*¹⁵ reappropriated the *Punk*¹⁶ insurrection, giving back to it the burden of revolt [*la charge de révolte*] that the music business of the 1970s had immediately stripped it of.

And this is no doubt why, after having accused these young women of “hooliganism,” the Russian criminal justice system then convicted them of “vandalism” and “incitation to religious hatred” as a way of depoliticizing an intention that can’t be reduced to this or that ideology. In such cases, the distortions of the prosecutors are always proportional to the anxieties that have been aroused: it is a short step from “hooliganism” to “cosmopolitanism”¹⁷ and the vagueness of such formulations always (and still) hides a part of the “vile beast.”¹⁸ In any case, the international resonance of the trial is a sign. Something about this revolt demands to be heard and understood.

It hardly matters which media star wishes to support these young women. For my part, at this moment when the processes of generalized domestication are accelerating, I can only rejoice when I see the vast resources that are being called upon – for example, on occasion of the Olympic Games – to re-inject a master-slave morality (the Family, the Fatherland and Religion), of course now presented in brand-new packaging.

¹¹ Her name was Inna Shevchenko, 22 years old, a member of FEMEN. Cf.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/17/pussy-riot-trial-femen_n_1798009.html.

¹² For a translation of Maria Alyokhina’s remarkable statement to the court, dated 8 August 2012, cf. <http://www.notbored.org/pussy-riot.html>

¹³ A revolutionary slogan coined by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud.

¹⁴ Cf. Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “*Mode d’emploi du détournement*” (1956), translated into English here: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm>

¹⁵ English in original.

¹⁶ English in original.

¹⁷ A term used by the Nazis to denigrate Jews, internationalists and other “undesirables.”

¹⁸ A term that is used to designate Nazism, fascism, and other embodiments of the extreme Right.

These are all contradictory signs that not only are the structures of this world in the process of collapsing, but also that, little by little, things are beginning to appear in a scandalous slight, which are facts that – here and there, like dotted lines – inspire the refusal to continue to play the game.

Elsewhere I have said that *if servitude is contagious, so is freedom*. We are at the point of an unstable equilibrium, where everything can tip over to one side or the other. From this comes the importance of paying attention to *all* the signs, and we can never be too vigilant in trying to discern what is actually happening. This is why it displeases me that people pay no heed to the elusive youthfulness of this revolt that comes from the East. Think of the Provos,¹⁹ of the *hippies*,²⁰ of the “adventurists”²¹ of 1968. . . . There will always be the insolent beauty of what begins. Even if, “in matters of revolt, none of us need ancestors,”²² it could be the case that everything begins with the “return of the repressed,”²³ but elsewhere and otherwise. It is as if each insurrection is enriched with all the previous dreams still to come, that is to say, as if, each time, it is a matter of playing the Great Game.

Perhaps we must know this to begin to *see*.

¹⁹ A Dutch revolutionary group that was active in the 1960s.

²⁰ English in original.

²¹ A term used by various Communist parties to disparage those who would act before the conditions among the working classes were ripe.

²² André Breton, “The Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (1930).

²³ A concept developed by Sigmund Freud.