Unacceptable Bodies

Trials against Natalia Goncharova in 1910 and Yulia Tsvetkova in 2019

Marina Vinnik

1. Introduction

In this text, I will compare two trials in which women artists were accused of creating pornography: one in 1910 (Goncharova) and the other in 2019 (Tsvetkova). Natalia Goncharova's case has been discussed in depth by the prominent American art historian Jane A. Sharp in a chapter in the book *Sexuality and the Body in the Russian Culture* (Sharp 1993). However, Goncharova's case has not been looked at through a critical feminist lens, taking into account feminist criticism of the male artists who influenced her work. Yulia Tsvetkova's case is fresh and so no research has yet been published about her work. Nevertheless, Russian activist circles clearly see it as a feminist activist case.

Although no one has compared these two trials before, I argue that such a comparison reveals important similarities and differences between what Russian authorities saw as a threat at the beginning of the 20th century and what they see as a threat today, more than a hundred years later.

On March 24, 1910, the Russian painter Natalia Goncharova was accused of »the public display of blatantly corrupting pictures« and her paintings were seized as evidence. Goncharova's artistic practice at the time was inspired by Picasso's and Matisse's works, which the artist herself acknowledged in a small interview to the newspaper Stolichnaya Molva in 1910. The author of this article drew attention to the fact that the »spoiled« (*isporchenniy*) audience noticed this resemblance, but »unspoiled« (*neisporchenniy*) people did not.

In 2019, the activist and artist Yulia Tsvetkova from Komsomolsk-on-Amur was accused of spreading pornographic content. This time, the accusation was not focused just on the nudity or the poses, as had been the case with Goncharova. Rather, the main problem with Tsvetkova's content is that she advocates for LGBT+[1]

1 I am aquatinted with the discussion happening in feminist theory around terms like LGBT+, queer, and others. In this text, I will use the term LGBT+ on the one hand because it was used

families and body positivity. Similarly to Goncharova, Tsvetkova takes certain approaches common in the West (in her case, feminist activism and Internet activism). Also, like Goncharova, Tsvetkova had to confront the provincial juridical system in her hometown. In their work, both Goncharova and Tsvetkova as women try to take charge of the female image. I argue in this text that it is for this reason that the Russian authorities pursued trials against these two women.

In general, the structure of artistic institutions in Russia is deeply rooted in the idea that artists are men. Natalia Goncharova was accused of showing »blatantly corrupting pictures« exactly that moment when the position of women and the definition of womanhood itself was rapidly changing. This change affected art academies in a specific way. Toward the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the presence of women became visible in the art academies. Simultaneously, the female nude was fully re-embraced.[2] In contrast to male nudity, where men were generally portrayed as muscular and heroic agents of history, female nudity was passive and eroticized.[3]

This new status quo put emerging women artists in the ambiguous position of being in the vanguard for civil rights as newly emancipated citizens, while they were often also represented as passive naked models. Following this worldwide trend, male artists in Russia in the early 20th century produced a large number of nude female paintings. However, it was precisely when a woman artist took charge of female images that she was accused of impropriety. In other words, the female gaze[4] directed at the naked female body became dangerous during a period of immense transition in Russian culture.

This point brings us back to Tsvetkova's trial. Why did the case of Yulia Tsvetkova get so much attention in 2019? I want to suggest that her case resonated with people due to the fact that the definitions of womanhood and gender are in flux once again in contemporary Russia. I will expand on this below, but it is worth looking first at the accusations against Yulia Tsvetkova and their several stages.

First, she was accused of propagandizing homosexual relations amongst children, but this case did not proceed. Several months later, she was accused of trafficking pornography on her public page on the Russian social media platform *vkon-*

by Yulia Tsvetkova herself, and on the other hand because it has a longer history and is more rooted in the post-Soviet environment.

2 Paintings and drawings produced in the Saint Petersburg Art Academy in the 19th century (with a large amount of male nudes) and visual material from the beginning of the 20th century, for instance from Repin's studio at the Saint Petersburg Art Academy (mostly female nudes), mark a clear contrast.

3 However, later, in the art of the Soviet Union, female nudes also became heroic and athletic.

4 Here, the term *female gaze* is used as a contrast to the *male gaze* (introduced in 1975 by Laura Mulvey), as a gaze that leads to the production of images of women by women. These images challenge traditional forms of objectification.

takte. Unlike the first case, these accusations stuck. The allegations against Tsvetkova revolve around the fact that she posted and reposted images of vaginas[5] on her page, the *Vagina Monologues* (*Monologi Vagini*), in an attempt to form body positive images of female physiology.[6] Similar projects exist in Europe, for example the Vagina Museum.[7]

Aside from this criminal case, two other cases are currently in progress in which she is accused of propagandizing LGBT+ values in her internet publications in several *vkontakte* groups.[8] The primary lesson from these cases is that female nudity—especially when the producers of those images are female artists—can morph into a political battleground. These two cases serve as a litmus test not only for Russian imagery, but for social dynamics regarding women in Russia as well.

2. What Makes a Picture »Blatantly Corrupting?«

Both of these trials took place in Russia over a hundred years apart and these accusations of pornography/»corrupting« images specifically targeted women. However, neither Goncharova nor Tsvetkova produced anything resembling pornography. In fact, their work can be seen as an emancipatory, rather than a sexualized depiction of human bodies. Historically, publicly visible artists in the Russian Empire were (as in Europe and North America) men and the default human (whether dressed or naked) was represented as male as well.

In the Catalogue of Nude Studies created in the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts in the first half of the 19th century, male nudes are omnipresent. Almost every biblical or historical event is presented through a nude male protagonist: *The Crucifixion, Taking Down from the Crucifix, Dmitry Donskoy on the Kulikovo Field, Priam Asking Achilles for the Body of Hector, and Mercury Putting Argus to Sleep* (Moleva/Belutin 1963, 16, 17, 43, 44, 68). Male nudity dominated not only Russian art, but also played a significant role in the West. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes in her seminal book *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*:

> »The visual evidence of Western art history, beginning with the Greek invention of the nude as an aesthetic category, seems to justify the view that the dominance of the female body in nineteenth- and most of twentieth-century iconography was

5 Technically speaking, Tsvetkova was sharing images of *vulvas* and not *vaginas*, but Tsvetkova herself and subsequently the Russian media have referred to these images as »vaginas.« In this text, I will also use the word vagina while talking about her work in order to remain consistent.

6 See: https://zona.media/article/2020/06/29/tsvetkova-chronicle

7 See: www.vaginamuseum.at/home

8 See: https://ovdinfo.org/story/delo-yulii-cvetkovoy

> a historically specific mutation . . . Since classical antiquity it has been the male body more often than not that constituted the aesthetic category of the nude and the male rather than the female body that formed the core of classical art theory, pedagogy and practical training.« (Solomon-Godeau 1997, 22)

The specific mutation that led to the emergence of female nudes coincided with women entering the public sphere en masse at the end of the 19th century. Before the social changes at the turn of the century, almost no women had been present in Russian institutions of classical art education. In the Russian Empire, as well as in Western art academies, art was a male affair and women were excluded from it on various levels—not only as students, but also as teachers or models.

Male art students gathered and took advice from more experienced male artists on how to draw male models as male heroes. Female exclusion and the homosociality of the Imperial Academy of Arts are glaringly obvious in group portraits made at the time. The male-dominated atmosphere is especially visible in Alexey Venetsianov's sketch *The Drawing Class of the Academy of Arts* (*Risovalniy klass Academii Khudozestv*) from 1810 (Moleva/Belutin 1963, illustration 62). The eventual inclusion of women into exclusively male domains, including the (patriarchal) academy, revealed the transformations of gender in Russia more generally.

The situation started to change at the beginning of the 20th century and these changes are similarly obvious in group portraits. There is a curious illustration of how the scene at the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg shifted at the turn of the century. Boris Kustodiev, a famous Russian artist and beloved student of Ilya Repin, painted *A Statement of the Model in the Studio of Ilya Repin* in 1899. Here, in the center of the composition, a nude female model appears (the exact »mutation« that Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes about) sitting on drapery with a nude female statue in the background. However, the artists that appear in this painting are exclusively male. The six of them are depicted in thoughtful poses as if they were Pygmalions working on a new version of Galatea.

In a collective painting with a similar name just four years later, *A Statement of the Model in the Studio of Ilya Repin* (1903), the gender dynamics have changed significantly. In this painting, women artists are finally included as professionals: among the thirty-three artists working in the studio, six are women. They appear in the foreground of the canvas. Nevertheless, the model is a naked woman and the professors in charge are nicely dressed men. In her article, *In a Class by Herself: 19th Century Images of the Woman Artist as Student*, Christine Havice sees this painting as a victory for 19th century female artists who were finally accepted into prestigious academies and perceived as equals. Havice, referring to *A Statement of the Model in the Studio of Ilya Repin* (1903), says that »[t]his painting seems to represent the culmination, then, to which the previous century's developments had been tending . . . « (Havice 1981, 39). In her book chapter titled *Women and the Visual Arts*, Rosalind Polly

Blakesley also writes how progressive and important Repin's studio was, as it was a place where women were allowed to work alongside men (Blakesley 2012, 107). This sentiment is popular both in and outside of Russia.

However, if we look at the painting itself and at the diaries and letters that were published in the Soviet Union and Russia (Prorokova 1958), taking into account the visual evidence of Repin's studio, a new picture emerges. Naturally, the student group of Ilya Repin's studio in this painting is more diverse and simply larger. Repin's exception for women in his studio was first made for female models—who were less in demand than men because they were not used in multi-figural dynamic compositions. Only later was this extended to female students.

For instance, once again in a photo entitled *Ilya Repin with his Male and Female Students in his Atelier in the Imperial Academy of Arts from 1898* (Raev 2002, 98), it is obvious that the master plays the key role in the classroom. The women are talking to each other or preparing their paints, but in the center of the composition there is always a man who is the main decision-maker, teacher, and genius. Ilya Repin is seen as an important mentor for his numerous talented male students (Leniashin 2011). While it is true that, due to academic reforms, Repin also accepted women, his attitude towards them was hardly equitable or ethical.

I want to return to the trials and to the question of female nudity, which is treated with suspicion and outrage when female artists produce images through the female gaze. It is worth mentioning that both cases were brought to the authorities by men. It is rather difficult to trace the man who was outraged by Goncharova's depictions of the female body. There is very little information about him. According to the newspapers at that time, it was a male journalist dressed as a lackey (Sharp 1993, 99). In contrast, the man who reported Tsvetkova to the police and initiated the case against her is well-known for his attacks on anyone he suspects of homosexuality. This includes cases where he has stalked schoolchildren online and reported them to their schools. Notably, he himself was recently under prosecution for inciting hatred.

Images made by women in a patriarchal society that disrupt the existing power structures seem to deeply move people in a very peculiar way. It goes without saying that visual content that objectifies women has existed and still exists in Russia. The people who produce sexualized images of women in advertisements and publications are not prosecuted. In other words, when the objectification of women happens through the male gaze, it generally meets no pushback. However, once women are in charge of their images, they find themselves under threat of prosecution.

With both Tsvetkova and Goncharova, it is clear that the real goal is not the decontamination of society from objectified images of women. Goncharova's images were powerful. She portrayed, for example, a naked model in motion without any shame and an unconventional pagan depiction of fertility. To put it another way,

Goncharova's paintings did not appeal to the gaze of a male viewer with the typical female beauty. Similarly, Tsvetkova's images, reposts, and social media groups highlight such imagery as: the female vagina, body positivism, and non-conventional families. Her work also challenges the male gaze. In both cases, the images produced by these women artists can hardly be seen as a source of male pleasure and do not resemble pornography.

3. Goncharova's Frame of Reference and Trial

Now I want to turn directly to Natalia Goncharova, her work, and the artistic environment in which she painted. Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) is probably the most famous woman of the avant-garde movement in both the West[9] and Russia.[10] Her canonization in Europe and later in Russia was a long process with ups and downs, but now she is well-known worldwide (Korowin 2018).

Goncharova started her work as an artist in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century and emigrated to France in 1919, where she lived until her death in 1962. She had a long and fruitful life, and her artistic heritage is generally divided into several main periods, including the Russian period, the Diaghilev period, and the Parisian period. For my research, I will focus on the work and transformation of the artist's style that occurred when she lived in the Russian Empire between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

Typically, Natalia Goncharova's pictures of women are seen as an emancipatory attempt to re-appropriate the depiction of women and their roles (Iovleva 2002, 184-185). It is worth noting that Yulia Tsvetkova's works aim to do the same: she draws childlike figures of women with body hair and women with non-ideal bodies, and she also collects non-sexualized images of vaginas. However, it is almost impossible to distill images of women from the male gaze, and in the case of Natalia Goncharova, this phenomenon plays a crucial role.

Goncharova's art was crucially influenced by Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Braque, Le Fauconnier, and other mostly French male painters. Those painters were not only innovative in their work with forms and colors, but also used women as objects for their studies in peculiar ways. It is possible that Goncharova was not able to trace all the sources and inspirations of the emerging cubist painters. Nevertheless, she was fascinated by the innovative, experimental, and atypical

9 In the MoMA alone her works have been included in more than thirty exhibitions. See: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history?constituent_id=2229&locale=en&sort_date=closing_date

10 Recently, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow has launched a project with a virtual reality space and Goncharova is the only female artist presented there.

way of representing female models. Perhaps the most distinctive example is the pose of a model with her hands lifted up and crossed right behind her head. This pose can be found simultaneously in typical paintings of Venus as well as on erotic postcards, which were popular at the time. I will return to the topic of this pose specifically below.

Today, feminist art critics constantly point out the modernist concept of the dual opposition in representations of women between the Madonna and the Whore. The works of Griselda Pollock, Carol Duncan, and Marilynn Lincoln Board present an opportunity for viewers to analyze modernist art through a feminist lens. When Carol Duncan writes about the canonic *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in her article *The MoMA's Hot Mamas*, she notes not only the style, but also the gender dynamics of Picasso's work:

> »Finally, the mystery that Picasso unveils about women is also an art-historical lesson. In the finished work, the women have become stylistically differentiated so that one looks not only at present-tense whores but also back down into the ancient and primitive past, with the art of ›darkest Africa‹ and works representing the beginnings of Western Culture (Egyptian and Iberian idols) placed on a single spectrum. Thus does Picasso use art history to argue his thesis: that the awesome goddess, the terrible witch, and the lewd whore are but facets of a single many-sided creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing and self-abasing, dominating and powerless-and always the psychic property of a male imagination. Picasso also implies that truly great, powerful, and revelatory art has always been and must be built upon such exclusively male property.« (Duncan 1992, 402)

In the paintings of French male artists (that were indispensable for Natalia Goncharova), a woman was always presented as some sort of prostitute, mother figure, beauty, or monster. Picasso and his other male counterparts tended to create demeaning images of women, thereby reinforcing gender power structures in Europe. Men had the means to use women's bodies for a variety of purposes, one of which was art. In Russia, where women began to produce art themselves, questions of gender and representation were lurking just below the surface.

In this light, Natalia Goncharova's trial looks like a chain of coincidences, pushed by the social fears. Jane A. Sharp describes this chain in her chapter entitled *Redrawing the Margins of Russian Vanguard Art: Natalia Gocharova's Trial for Pornography in 1910*, which is the most complete investigation on Natalia Goncharova's case to the date. Sharp writes:

> » . . . Goncharova exhibited 20 to 22 paintings on the evening of March 24, 1910, in a closed session for members of the Society of Free Aesthetics (Obshchestvo Svobodnoi Estetiki) in Moscow . . . an inflammatory article denouncing Goncharova's work appeared the next day in Voice of Moscow (Golos Moskvy), a daily newspa-

> per . . . Despite the foul play that led to the ›arrest‹ of her pictures, Goncharova and members of society's committee that organized Goncharova's March exhibit were charged under article 45 ›for the public display of blatantly corrupting pictures‹ (*iavno soblaznitel'nye kartiny*). Accounts of the trial, which took place in Moscow on December 22, 1910, indicate that the case was based on the connection made by the reviewer and the court between the society's reputation for ›decadent behavior‹ and Goncharova's depictions of the nude figure . . . Owning in part to the liberal views of the judge, and principally to the fact that the meeting had been closed to the public, Goncharova and those who stood trial with her were acquitted.« (Sharp 1993, 99-100)

As I have already pointed out, that it was not abnormal for an artist to paint and exhibit paintings of nude women in the Russian Empire. However, there were clearly expectations and certain rules for exhibiting that nudity. Generally, nudity in Russian art was connected to the antique standards of beauty and the ideal body. In other words, the cubist and primitivist trends appearing in France at the time did not find fertile soil in the Russian Empire when it came to portrayals of nude women.[11] Form and style played an enormous role.

In fact, many prominent male artists were and had been openly working with the naked female body in their paintings for some time. Examples include Karl Bryullov's Bathsheba (1832), Aleksander Ivanov's Bathsheba (1843), Alexey Venetsianov's Diana Dressing (1847), and Ilya Repin's Sadko (1876) and Nude (1895-96), among others. Additionally, at the beginning of the 20th century in the Russian Empire, there were several artists who chose female nudity as their primary topic. Among them were Zinaida Serebriakova (whose naked models even included children and who did not challenge the male gaze) and Boris Kustodiev (who emphasized the beauty of full-bodied women). Nevertheless, neither high-profile academics nor artists who worked with different types of female nudity were prosecuted in the Russian Empire.[12]

What then did the public see in Goncharova's work and was the artist herself aware of the semiotics that the European painters she admired inscribed in their works? French modernist artists intentionally mixed the high genre of female nudity in art and the low genre of female nakedness in eroticism for provocative pur-

11 The closest to the French cubist and primitivist view was on the scene quite late in Russia. The male participants of the Karo Bube, who were also acquainted with the Western trends, led the charge. These men explicitly painted atypical nudes in the form of Venuses, though they did it later than Natalia Goncharova. The works most similar to Matisse's and Picasso's experiment with the ›fallen‹ Venus can be seen in Mashkov's *Nude* from 1918 or his *Russian Venus* from 1914, Larionov's *Venuses*, and Kontschalovsky's *Nude* from 1917.

12 Larionov's illustration in the futurist book *Le Futur* with a prostitute was seized in 1913, but there was no trial afterwards.

poses. As mentioned above, the poses of Picasso's models were distinctive and such poses were also present in the pornographic postcards of the time. A prime example was a woman with her arms crossed behind her head.

Among Picasso's paintings that were in Russian collections (and are now in the State Hermitage Museum), this pose can be seen in Three Women (1908) and Dance of the Veils (1907). Admittedly, this pose is not simply erotic: in several oil paintings exhibited in the Parisian salons in the 19th century, we can see a similar pose capturing the birth of Venus. This pose is especially distinctive in paintings such as Vénus Anadyomène (1848) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and The Birth of Venus (1879) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Scholars often connect this reemergence of the female nude in European art with the reinvention of male creativity, which coincided with the development of now-familiar gender roles in art: women as models, men as spectators (Nead 1992, Berger 2008). In the French art of the 19th Century, there was an attempt of male artists to create the ideal image of a more-than-human woman—a pure virgin goddess who was just born. So, in the beginning, this pose did not simply exist on erotic postcards, but also as a canonized version of Venus, which was experiencing a revival at the end of the 19th century in France (Shaw 1991).

Picasso, as well as other male artists (such as Matisse in his Blue Nude [1907] and Cézanne in his Nude Woman Standing [1899]), used this pose while staging their models as well. Outside the salons, however, there were photographs of women prostituting themselves or women from the colonial harems in the same pose, with their arms raised behind their heads (Alloula 1986). In this depiction, Venus becomes a prostitute. Picasso and other modernist artists—who inspired Goncharova—were connected to both contexts directly. They participated in the discussions in French society, when artists such as Ingres, Manet, or Braque would exhibit another Venus or a painting of a prostitute. After all, male artists had direct access to brothels and models for their paintings were always available.

The male gaze that saturated their art reflected the position of both women and men in Europe. Picasso's paintings of prostitutes (that he openly flaunted in the title) were less provocative in Europe because he was working in a modernist milieu, where many of the painters explored brothels. Picasso's early sketches for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) included a male student in the left corner of the painting and a male sailor in the center of the composition, but these two figures were not included in the final painting (Duncan 1992, 401).

In her article *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity* (Pollock 1992, 278), Griselda Pollock describes how not only classed, but also gendered spaces shaped the concept of modernism. While artists such as Manet, Degas, Renoir, and Guys were painting in brothels, depicting mistresses or prostitutes—noble Russian women like Natalia Goncharova had no opportunity to be in the same spaces as these ›fallen women‹. Yet by copying the poses from the male painters who inspired her, it is

possible that she unintentionally made an even more provocative statement than most of the male artists in the Russian Empire.

Generally, an image carries the male gaze when the female model is shown as a passive object that the viewer can look at. Goncharova's gaze, however, is constructed differently. As she stressed in her interviews, her aim was to present models in a sculptural way (*Stolichnaya Molva* 1910). It is hard to tell which paintings were seized exactly because Goncharova was a very fruitful artist, and also because we only know about the trial through ancillary texts. However, Jane A. Sharp has made some suggestions that are now commonly accepted in other sources:

> »Only five paintings from the period 1905 through 1910 are listed as ›nudes‹ or ›live models‹ . . . I have been able to identify only two of Goncharova's female nude life-studies (*Female Nude* [*Life Study*] 1908-1909, oil on canvas, 111x83 cm; *Female Nude* [*Life Study*] 1908-1909, oil on canvas, 118x96 cm) at the present time. These images seem to correspond with the paintings described . . . The identity of God (*Bog*), one of the confiscated paintings, is more difficult to establish. Whereas written accounts refer to it as a male figure, the only known painting by Goncharova of pre-Christian divinities appear to have female attributes (breasts). These paintings include the image that both Ilya Zdanevich and Mary Chamot identified as the confiscated picture in question, *God of Fertility* (*Cubist treatment*) (*Bog plodorodiia* [*kubisticheskii priem*]), of 1909. It is positle that Zdanevich and Chamot confused this painting with another painting, a depiction of masculine divinity, not identified by Zdanevich and presumably now lost. Otherwise, we have to assume that Goncharova repainted *God of Fertility*, since no representation of the genitalia (male or female) can be discerned at the present time.« (Sharp 1993, 107-112)

The model in Goncharova's painting *Female Nude* (*Life Study*) (1908-1909) carries herself powerfully.[13] She is not a passive model. Her nudity does not weaken her, but it does not transform her into a monster either. Unlike sheela na gigs or other sculptures of women displaying their vulvas, Goncharova's piece is not terrifying. The model is standing straight, and her arms are crossed behind her head, her gaze is off to the side, but her pose is not seductive. There is no harem, and she is not a mistress: the female model is in the woman artist's studio.

In the cases of Picasso and Modigliani, we see women as clear sources either for visual pleasure or for a supposed visual shock. Goncharova's model looks more like an athlete than a prostitute because her posture is sturdy, her back is straight, and her muscles are visible. Although the pose of her model was inspired by actual courtesans posing for famous artists in Paris, the painting carries more of a

13 See also Luise Thieme's chapter about the idea of female nudity as self-empowerment in the work of Gabriele Stölzer.

resemblance to the later Soviet images and statues of the Girl with an Oar than to the pornographic pictures of the era.

The case against her reveals two distinct, but overlapping postulates, both of which draw a parallel between her trial to Yulia Tsvetkova's. First, Goncharova's case shows how representations can transform, causing unpredictable effects, for example, when created not by a man in France, but by a woman in the Russian Empire. The shift of the (gendered) agent together with the shift of the (gendered) environment carries a precarious unknown element. Second, Goncharova's trial was set against the backdrop of a cultural upheaval in the Russian Empire, particularly regarding the position of women. Much like the early 20th century, a renegotiation of the position of women in Russia is currently taking place, which leaves female artists again exposed to the whims of the authorities.

4. Tsvetkova's Frame of Reference and Trial

In order to get a sense of Tsvetkova's trial, it is imperative to not only talk about her work, but also feminist art (especially from the West). Yulia Tsvetkova's art has clear similarities to global trends in feminist art, which functions as visible reference points. Additionally, I will compare and contrast the reactions from others regarding the trials themselves. But first, I need to lay out the facts of the case.

Yulia Tsvetkova is a contemporary Russian feminist artist and activist who currently lives in Komsomolsk-on-Amur. She lived and studied Modern Dance in Moscow and attended the London Film School. In 2019, Yulia Tsvetkova was accused of producing and trafficking pornographic content on the internet. Tsvetkova, born in 1993, is a twenty-eight-year-old activist and artist who was working as an educator in a children's theater at the time of her trial.[14]

In 2019, Yulia Tsvetkova was prosecuted specifically for her social media pages and publications of vagina illustrations, which are by now a common place in feminist art. The trial quickly captured attention in and outside of Russia. One reason Tsvetkova's case immediately stood out is probably because of the familiarity of the accusations in other times and places.

Historically, the most prominent analogous work worldwide is probably Dinner Party by Judy Chicago (first exhibited in San Francisco in 1979), where the artist—in the form of a triangle dinner table decorated with vulva-shaped porcelain ceramics and embroidery—attempted to present a women-centered history. Interestingly, in 1990 Judy Chicago was accused of producing pornography as well. As Josephine Withers describes:

14 See: https://holod.media/2020/06/12/yulia-tsvetkova/

> »In the summer of 1990, it was the focus of a vicious debate on the occasion of its acceptance as a permanent gift to the black, urban land-grant University of the District of Columbia . . . After the gift was accepted in June 1990, a disinformation campaign mounted in the neo-conservative Washington Times soon spread to the floor of the House of Representatives. As part of a larger discussion of the District's budget request, *The Dinner Party* became the focus of an hour-long impassioned debate that centered on its allegedly obscene imagery. The claims of Representatives Rohrabacher and Dornan that *The Dinner Party* is ›weird sexual art,‹ and ›three-D ceramic pornography‹ are themselves obscenities, but in their perverse way, a cogent demonstration of the powerful emotions which *The Dinner Party* can bring forth.« (Withers 1992, 527)

In the post-Soviet space, female artists have also worked with vaginas. For instance, Irina Nakhova (b. 1955) created a installation piece *Stay with me* (2002), which represented a womb-shaped space with labia on the outside, as a logical continuation of her installation project Rooms that she started in the 1980's. Visitors of the exhibition had the opportunity to go inside a »uterus house«. In her statement about this work, Nakhova wrote that she recreated a feminine bodily space that is friendly and welcoming in contrast to the unwelcoming parts of male bodies that can never nurture things inside of them (Kameneckaja 2010, 85, 235-240).

The Russian artist (with Azeri-Uzbek heritage) Aidan Salakhova (b. 1964) goes as far as to combine the image of a black burqa with vulval shapes of the female body in sculptural form in her series *Destiny* (*Prednaznachenie*, 2009-2011). Aidan Salakhova has exhibited, sold, and published photos of her sculptures in Russian art magazines. Though, when her works were shown at the Venice Biennale in 2011 and represented the art pavilion for Azerbaijan, government officials from Azerbaijan insisted on their removal.[15] According to the open sources, they were not accusing the artist of producing pornography. Instead, they accused her of producing art that was non-representative of Azerbaijan and reckless with Islamic imagery.[16]

In Naomi Wolf's popular book *Vagina: A New Biography* (2012), she argues that (across a very broad number of territories) attitudes toward vaginas historically started with sacralization but were later replaced with medicalization and subjugation. As openly vagina-positive images, she refers to Venus figurines with protruding vulvas, Sumerian worship of the goddess Inanna and her vulva (where even vases were symbols of Inanna's uterus), the Egyptian cult of Astarta (who was often portrayed with lotus-flowers as a vulval symbol), and pre-Christian and early Christian Irish sculptures of sheela na gigs. Liv Strömquist continues this topic

15 See: https://observer.com/2011/06/aidan-salakhova-sculptures-to-be-removed-from-azerbaijan-biennale-pavilion/.

16 See: https://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2011/06/110609_azerbaijan_biennale_censorship.

in her more recent book *Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy* (2018). After publishing her other book *What is Love?* (2018) (available in its Russian translation in 2020), Strömquist even mentioned Tsvetkova in one of her interviews.[17]

Returning to Tsvetkova's case, it is significant that another important visual trope of her images are the alternative representations of female bodies. Like Goncharova, who was painting Scythian idols as symbols of fertility, Tsvetkova—in a simple, even childish manner—draws women with unideal bodies in her activist images. Childlike and homely depictions of vaginas as well as unidealized naked bodies cannot be called pornographic. Looking at the visual material that Yulia Tsvetkova makes in her art, it is obvious that she appeals to young women and men. She appeals particularly to those who are connected to Russian feminist activism, while she does not at all appeal to those interested in pornographic content.

Despite the similarities between Tsvetkova and Goncharova regarding the female gaze, there are important divergences between the two artists and their respective trials. Not only is Tsvetkova's work located in a different time frame, but it is also located in the current globalized conditions, which are markedly different from the beginning of the 20th century. Since the 1980's, cities in Russia have been able to build various cultural connections with Western Europe and United States. This process, for instance, has enabled several LGBT+ initiatives to function in the public sphere, even despite the notoriously homophobic Russian laws.[18] At the same time, there are no visible LGBT+ or feminist organizations in Komsomolsk-on-Amur (with a population of around 300,000 people).

Unlike Goncharova, Tsvetkova clearly aligns herself with both feminism and activism. For her, art and activism are patently connected. There is no question that she uses images of women's bodies for aesthetic or sculptural purposes, but her use of women's bodies carries a political dimension as well. After all, she openly identifies herself as an artist and as a feminist activist.

Accordingly, and unlike Goncharova, Tsvetkova receives support not only from other artists,[19] but also from feminist activists in Russia and abroad. When Natalia Goncharova was accused, a Moscow newspaper published angry statements from a journalist in addition to subsequent discussions about those statements

17 See: https://daily.afisha.ru/brain/16947-feminizm-segodnya-stal-produktom-liv-stremkvist-o-dele-cvetkovoy-menstruacii-i-lyubvi/

18 In Saint Petersburg, festivals like Queer-fest or Bok-o-bok take place. There is a functioning Russian NGO in support for gay people called Exit (*Vikhod*).

19 The case of Natalia Goncharova happened a long time ago, however, it has not been documented extensively. Nevertheless, almost exclusively male artists appear to have actively defended her: the sculptor F.K. Kraft, the writer Ilya Zdanevich, members of the Jack of Diamonds (which had female members, but none of them are mentioned in Sharp's article), and Goncharova's partner, Mikhail Larionov. The only woman mentioned in this debate aside from Goncharova herself is Mary Chamot.

(*Stolichnaya Molva*, 1910). During Tsvetkova's case, many of the Moscow- and Saint Petersburg-based publishing houses showed their support and published articles in her defense. In a CNN interview, Yulia Tsvetkova acknowledged that support and gave a deeper analysis of the Russian environment (not just a homogeneous all-oppressed territory) stressing the differences between big and small cities, saying that she appreciates the activism in her support that happened outside big cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg.[20]

Being an open activist and feminist helped Yulia Tsvetkova to receive support from various feminist groups around the world. Goncharova was never perceived as a feminist, though now she is often included in the newly written feminist narratives of the Russian avant-garde. At the time, there were no women-only marches or protests in support of Goncharova.[21] However, Tsvetkova has received support as a political feminist. Now it seems that in the new era of globalization, internet activism and feminism has spread to Russia, especially to the larger cities.

Many artists have taken part in online solidarity marathons with the hashtags *#заЮлю, #СвободуЮлииЦветковой, #За_Юлю, and #ЯМыЮлияЦветкова*, under which artists have posted images of vaginas so as to make a point that the female body should not be censored. The escalation of Tsvetkova's case took place during the coronavirus restrictions, which also meant that there was naturally more online activity. These protests have taken place mostly online on platforms such as Facebook, vkontakte, Instagram (which all have their own censorship policies),[22] and Telegram (the channel @wearejulia argues that Tsvetkova is a political prisoner).[23] Although these protests took place online, they received strong responses. Online platforms have helped to form actions of feminist solidarity in Russia and abroad.

However, some offline events also took place. In Russia, feminist activists have taken part in protests (so-called single-person protests that Russian citizens are officially allowed to participate in without prior permission) to support the case of Tsvetkova. In Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and other Russian cities, feminist activists protested on July 27, 2020, and many were taken into custody by the police. The number of people arrested in Moscow was forty and in Saint Petersburg, three peo-

20 See: https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/yulia-tsvetkova-pornography-gay-propaganda-law-lgbtq-activism-russia/index.html

21 One can argue that political issues, such as the right to vote and the right for political equality, were more important during the first wave of feminism. For this reason, it is possible that Goncharova was unable to rally feminists to her cause. However, only after the third wave feminist movement, are cases like Goncharova's and Tsvetkova's seen in a political light, as the fight against patriarchy has changed over time.

22 The female body is notoriously censored on Facebook and Instagram through the prohibition on female nipples, which is a topic often discussed by feminist artists today.

23 See: https://t.me/s/wearejulia

ple were arrested. Among those arrested were prominent Russian activists, such as Daria Serenko, Sovia Sno, Anastasia Reziuk, and Daria Shipacheva.[24]

The artist Daria Apachonshitch[25] from Saint Petersburg was arrested earlier (on July 17, 2020) for her action in support of Yulia Tsvetkova, which was called Vulva Ballet, near Mariinsky Theatre (an iconic Russian theatre for ballet and opera).[26] In front of a wall with emblematical paintings of Saint Petersburg views and the image of a ballerina, five women dressed in red and pink, held banners with vulva-like images and slogans »Free Yulia Svetkova« (*Svobodu Yulii Tsvetkovoy*) and »I exist. Do you?« (*Ya est. A vy?*). The women then performed a dance and were subsequently arrested. The activists criticized the cultural assumptions that a woman can only present herself as a non-threatening ballerina. After all, ballerinas also have vulvas.

Most of the artists and activists who participated in these actions had to pay a fine of ten thousand rubles.[27] But there was one exception: Anastasia Rezniuk spent 22 days in jail.[28] In her Instagram post from 29 July 2020, Anastasia wrote: »It is better that I spend 20 days in a detention center for a single protest than Yulia spend six years in a colony for drawings . . . Fight for political prisoners and the repressed!«[29] With these words, Rezniuk clearly placed her fight in support for Yulia Tsvetkova and in line with the struggle for the rights of political prisoners in Russia.

Several actions in support of Yulia were simply disrupted and never happened. On September 15, 2020, a stringer from *New York Times*, filming in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, faced intimidation and was forced to give up all the filmed material.[30] Additionally, in Moscow on September 15, 2020, the screening of a German movie called *Vulva 3.0* (2014), directed by Claudia Richarz and Ulrike Zimmermann, that was organized by the Moscow-based curator Andrey Parshikov, was cancelled by the National Guard of the Russian Federation (the so-called *Rosgvardia*).[31] It started with an anonymous phone call to a Moscow police station. The caller stated that

24 See: https://ovdinfo.org/news/2020/06/27/spisok-zaderzhannyh-na-akciyah-v-podderzhku-yulii-cvetkovoy-27-iyunya-2020-goda

25 While this article was being prepared, Daria Apachonshitch received the status of ›Foreign Agent.‹ This determination by the Russian authorities, declared in December 2020, serves as a warning sign from the Russian police. She is clearly being targeted for her actions in support of feminist causes.

26 See: https://zona.media/news/2020/08/04/apakhochich.

27 Which was a little more than one hundred euro in 2019-2020.

28 See: https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/news/251045-activist-arrested

29 See: https://www.instagram.com/p/CCBhH3Xq1TW/

30 See: https://vot-tak.tv/novosti/na-stringera-snimayushhego-film-o-yulii-tsvetkovoj-dlya-inostrannogo-smi-napali/from23 Aug. 2020; see: https://jfj.fund/jfj/the-new-york-times/

31 See: https://ovdinfo.org/stories/2020/09/16/eta-chast-tela-kontroliruetsya-gosudarstvom-kak-sorvali-pokaz-filma-vulva-30

at the screening for around seven hundred attendees, the movie will contain homosexual propaganda, thus breaking Russian law.[32] On the day of the film screening, twenty militarized employees of the Rosgvardia showed up at the outdoor cinema Flakon and prohibited the event.

Actions in support of Yulia that happened outside of Russia were far less dramatic and dangerous. For instance, a big exhibition in Tsvetkova's support took place in Berlin on 28 August 2020 as one of the events of the Red Square Festival.[33] On 16 September 2020, an exhibition called *My Body, My Show* was run in Prague[34], where drawings of Yulia Tsvetkova were shown along with works of Pussy Riot, Daria Apachonshitch, the Chto Delat group, and others. Members of Amnesty International in the Netherlands in October 2020 also protested in support of Yulia, where they printed her works and stood in front of the Russian embassy in the Hague.[35] And the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam acquired some of Yulia Tsvetkova's as a sample of Russian activist art.[36]

Aidan Salakhova, whom I mentioned above, also supported Tsvetkova and publicly criticized the trial against her:

> »Yes, it scares me. Because if there is the precedent that a stylized drawn vagina will be called ›pornography‹ by the court, then they could try more than half of the artists in our country. You know, I caught myself thinking recently that in the 90's or even in Brezhnev's time, we were freer than we are today.«

The accusations against Yulia Tsvetkova spurred new configurations of solidarity and collectivity in a way that would not have been possible for Natalia Goncharova. It seems that now we have a community of people who identify as feminists and are ready to support Tsvetkova's cause, which is now seen as political. Natalia Goncharova never called herself a feminist and never gathered a collective of women to be her key allies. Her identity was strictly artistic and never consciously political. However, she was also never under threat of spending several years in prison for her images.

At the time of writing, Yulia Tsvetkova is still facing prosecution. On 9 June 2020, she was formally charged with spreading pornography. The hearings are ongoing, and the case is being further investigated for the third time already.[37]

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32 The Russian Federal Law, passed on 30 Jun. 2013, claims to »protect children from information advocating for a denial of traditional family values.«

33 See: https://red-square.berlin/de/2020/28-08

34 See: https://www.svoboda.org/a/30876226.htmlfrom 06/10/2020; https://artalk.cz/2020/09/15/tz-my-body-my-show/

35 See: https://t.me/amnestyrussia/1022

36 See: https://www.parool.nl/kunst-media/stedelijk-museum-verwerft-kunst-van-russische-activisten~b1616f2c/?referrer=https %253A %252F %252Ft.me %252F

37 See: https://ovdinfo.org/story/delo-yulii-cvetkovoy

5. Conclusion

We can speculate as to whether or not a kind of artistic purity where we can separate art from politics and gendered predispositions is possible today, but in my observation as a practicing artist and curator, more and more artists are dismantling the possibility of so-called ›pure art‹ by openly taking political agendas. And many Russian women artists who are working today call themselves feminists and stand for their own causes as well as for the causes of others. Thus, activist networks of women and men both in and outside of Russia constitute a support base for Tsvetkova. Furthermore, by calling herself a feminist, Tsvetkova has attracted a broader array of people than Goncharova did.

These networks exist against a background (or, perhaps, express part of it) of shifting gender norms in Russian society. The Russian authorities respond to these shifting gender norms in heterogeneous ways, but it is precisely this heterogeneity that puts female artists at risk. After all, it is not merely the question of female nudity, but rather a question of female perception itself. It is also a question of how artistic trends travel across space and apparent cultural boundaries. Just as Natalia Goncharova adapted the styles and forms of French male artists, Yulia Tsvetkova has adapted Western feminist styles and forms regarding bodies and vaginas.

Of course, Russian citizens often borrow foreign concepts and terms and apply them to the Russian context. Recent discussions, for example, have evolved around Black Lives Matter and the movement's application to the Russian context. But Russia itself also produces its own concepts, such as the questions regarding so-called ›New Ethics‹ (*Novaya Etika*), and their place in the post-Soviet space. Overall, what makes the trials of Goncharova and Tsvetkova notable is how they not only reflect Russia's relationship to the outside, but also Russia's relationship to itself. In other words, Goncharova's trial reflected a crisis in gender norms and relations at the beginning of the 20th century and Tsvetkova's trial reflects the current crisis in gender norms and relations in Russia. The two cases ultimately show important similarities and differences between Russia of 1910 and Russia of 2019.

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