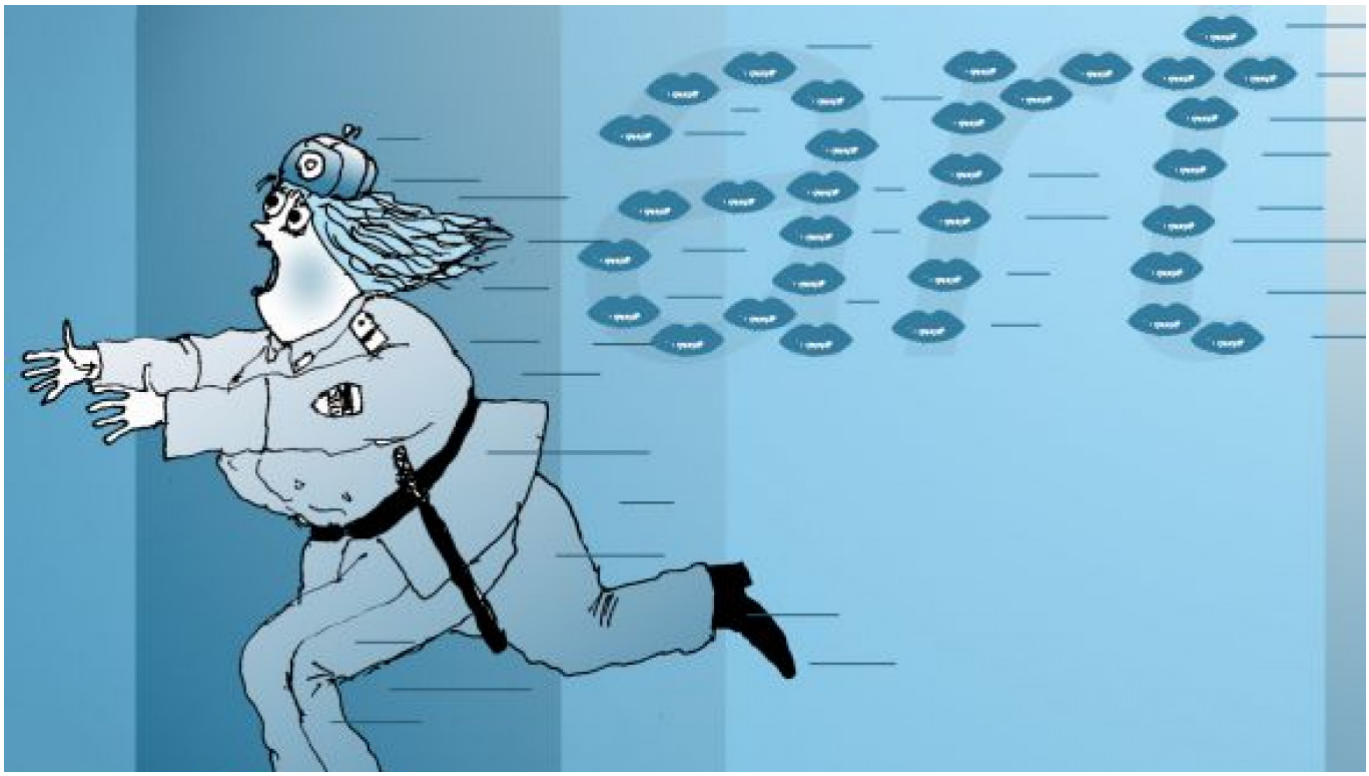
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In the Spotlight: Art

By Anna Malpas

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This week, a group of female anarchists grabbed policewomen in the Moscow metro and forcibly kissed them on the lips, in an artistic happening apparently claimed by Voina, or War, the group that painted a giant penis on a bridge in St. Petersburg.

Then, confusingly, the "ideologue" of Voina, Alexei Plutser-Sarno, complained that the anarchists who did the kissing — and posted a video on LiveJournal calling themselves Voina — were not real members of the protest group.

The performance was organized by a "provocateur" who was booted out of Voina because he turned police informer, Plutser-Sarno said in his blog. He called it a second-rate and "glamorous" flash mob, although he conceded that the kissing idea was "not lacking in irony."

If I were a female anarchist, I would feel quite annoyed to find out that I had been puckering up with unwilling, tired women in drab uniforms, all for the wrong side. Although it's true, the protest had a certain obviousness to it that was not typical of Voina's surreal and witty style.

I suppose I should feel sorry for the metro policewomen, too, but I once saw one administer "first aid" to an unconscious young man — searching through his pockets, taking out his passport and writing down his details very slowly.

Voina had previously overturned police cars in St. Petersburg's Palace Square in a September protest called "Palace Coup." It was a basically funny concept — a bit like tipping cows — although the policemen who were sleeping inside the cars understandably felt differently. Two activists are currently awaiting trial for hooliganism prompted by political hatred, an offence that could lead to jail sentences. They were detained in November and eventually freed from detention after the British street artist Banksy reportedly paid their bail.

The artists first came to many people's attention back in 2008 when they staged a real orgy in Moscow's dusty State Biological Museum. They stripped and had sex next to a stuffed bear that symbolized President Dmitry Medvedev, in a performance called "F*** for the Heir Puppy Bear." The session was recorded in dozens of photographs that certainly made the heart beat faster than the museum's usual displays of African violets.

Voina's defining moment came last summer when they hastily painted an enormous phallus on a bridge across the Neva, just before it was due to lift up for the night. The painting was a bit lopsided, but they made it, and police watched helplessly as the penis rose up into the sky, floodlit, right opposite the headquarters of the FSB.

The giant penis instantly beamed its way round the world in blogs, and people took it, if you excuse the expression, into their hearts. Sadly the original was soon scrubbed off by the St. Petersburg authorities, who had earlier been only too happy to approve erecting the far more phallic Gazprom tower nearby.

The performance was titled "A Dick Captured by the FSB." As political street art, it was nominated for a prestigious state prize for contemporary art, called Innovation. Then the work was mysteriously removed from the shortlist, prompting several jury members to walk out.

On Wednesday, the jury issued a statement, rather amusingly asking the anarchists to make up their mind between two versions of the work's title, the only difference being the use of "dick" or "member." It also said they had to give their consent to the nomination and had to submit the names of all the participants, most of whom act anonymously. On Thursday, as the deadline was due to run out, one of the artists, Oleg Vorotnikov, said they would not be signing anything.

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