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Art, Madness or Terrorism? Pyotr Pavlensky and the Art of Weakness

By Eva Hartog

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Artist Pyotr Pavlensky holds a petrol can during a protest action titled "Threat" in front of the Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters in central Moscow, Nov. 9, 2015.

The main entrance to the yellow building on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad in central Moscow rarely gets used — but even when the huge doors remain closed, they send a chill down your spine.

The building, which now houses Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), is a symbol of the reign of terror carried out by its former occupants, the Soviet-era KGB security service.

In a performance titled "Threat. The Burning Doors of Lubyanka," Pyotr Pavlensky in the early hours of Monday morning doused the heavy wooden doors with gasoline and set them on fire. He made no attempt to deny his authorship, posing for photos in front of the flaming doors in a hooded sweater, with the gasoline tank still in his hands, until he was taken away by police.

With the stunt, the 31-year-old St. Petersburg native targeted the heart of Russia's security apparatus and a building that was given the status of cultural landmark in commemoration of the scores of well-known writers and artists who were imprisoned there during the waves of repression from the 1930s through the 1950s. Paradoxically, the building's landmark status could now see Pavlensky serve up to three years in prison on charges of vandalism.

A court on Tuesday ordered him to remain in pre-trial detention until early December, ruling he was a flight risk.

A Political Message

In a note alongside a video of the stunt uploaded to his Vimeo page, Pavlensky wrote about the authorities' use of fear as a tool of control.

"The threat of inevitable punishment hangs over everyone who can be tracked with devices, have their conversations overheard, or at border passport checks," the note said. "Fear turns free people into a sticky mass of disconnected bodies."

The video was no longer accessible as of Tuesday morning. A request for comment sent to Pavlensky via Facebook was answered only with "Pyotr is under arrest."

The stunt was also a reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent,"who is a Chekist, who is a product of this building," prominent art critic and gallery owner Marat Guelman told The Moscow Times.

The heavy symbolism in the performance is what made it a work of art, rather than pure political activism, as some commenters cited by Russian media argued.

"The imagery of the doors of Lubyanka as the Gates to Hell, the source of evil, is very strong," Guelman — who was recently evicted from a Moscow exhibition space after hosting a charity auction for political prisoners — told The Moscow Times.

Pavlensky initially grabbed headlines around the world when he nailed his scrotum to Moscow's iconic Red Square in November 2013. He has also previously wrapped his naked body in barbed wire, cut off his earlobe and sewn shut his lips.

According to Guelman, the focus on Pavlensky's physique in previous performances has distracted from his message.

"[They] had more visual effect but too much attention went out to his body. His balls. Because he didn't undress this time, the attention is focused [on the performance]," Guelman said.

Not Pussy Riot

Pavlensky fits within a tradition of Russian artists who blur the boundaries between art and their anti-Kremlin views.

He is often mentioned in the same breath as Pussy Riot — the band that gained fame after staging a "punk prayer" in central Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral with an anti-Putin song in 2012, a stunt that saw two of its members put behind bars.

One of the former captives, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, told The Moscow Times she felt inspired by Pavlensky's work.

"I'm in awe of the ['Threat'] stunt and glad that there are those like Pavlensky who can teach me courage, artistic precision and the art of hitting the target. Pavlensky is our eyes, hands and conscience," she said in written comments.

According to Guelman, however, Pavlensky has set himself apart from Pussy Riot and other groups like the "Voina" collective — which drew a giant penis onto a drawbridge in St. Petersburg opposite that city's FSB building — by making weakness central to his work.

"The image of the weak person who is stronger than the authorities ... this apparatus that is scaring us all with prison, the courts, with force, is completely powerless in relation to Pavlensky," he said.

Split Society

Pavlensky's performances are at least as polarizing as Pussy Riot's — he often elicits fervent support, but a segment of Russian critics and commenters and a large portion of ordinary Russians consider him mad, distasteful or dangerous.

In the wake of the stunt, social media was awash with comments denouncing Pavlensky's action as aggression disguised as art.

"If they don't lock him away, he will launch a burning bottle at the court. An elderly disagreeable woman will die on the third day after the artistic performance with multiple skin burns, the forever drunk forty-something intellectuals will give the artist a standing ovation at [restaurant] Jean-Jacques, until they, as usual, fall under the table," journalist Anton Krasovsky mused on his blog on the Ekho Moskvy website.

And radical ultraconservative activist Dmitry "Enteo" Tsorionov — who earlier this year was sentenced to 10 days in jail for vandalizing a modern art exhibition — tweeted: "If you justify blasphemy in [Moscow exhibition center] Manege, then also justify setting fire to doors and caricatures of the victims of the airplane crash [over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula]. It's art after all."

Criminal or Lunatic?

The ambiguity in Pavlensky's performances has made the Russian authorities seem at a loss on how to deal with him.

Pavlensky's lawyer, Olga Chavdar, told Radio Svoboda investigators had repeatedly asked Pavlensky during overnight interrogations on Monday whom he had been trying to "kill" with his stunt.

Most of those questioned by The Moscow Times said it was likely the authorities would make Pavlensky's latest stunt into a loud political case to set an example.

"It looks like the authorities have taken the decision that Pavlensky needs to be punished because he will continue with his stunts if they don't," Pavel Chikov, head of the AGORA

human rights association defending Pavlensky in court, said.

But previous attempts to crack down on Pavlensky — who is already facing vandalism charges for setting alight a stack of tires in St. Petersburg in solidarity of the Ukrainian Maidan protest movement — have backfired.

When he was forced to undergo tests at a Moscow psychiatric institution, he turned the punishment into a performance by cutting off his earlobe while sitting naked on the facility's roof.

In another strike to investigators, Pavel Yasman, a Russian Investigative Committee investigator tasked with questioning Pavlensky, switched sides and asked to be allowed to defend the artist in court instead — a request that was denied because he was not considered a disinterested party.

Even the authorities' attempt to cover the scorched doors of the FSB's entrance on Monday morning led to commenters pointing out the irony of the headquarters being barred with an "Iron Curtain."

Whatever the authorities' reaction, Pavlensky is sure to have considered it in advance, Guelman said.

"The authorities' reaction is part of [Pavlensky's] performance. He is always showing the authorities that if it is going to act like an aggressive apparatus then it will act according to his scenario," Guelman said.

True to form, Pavlensky asked prosecutors during a Tuesday court hearing to charge him with terrorism, arguing his act had been similar to those of others judged under that charge. He was presumably referring to Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and activist Alexander Kolchenko who were convicted to 20 and 10 years jail time respectively in August for their roles in setting on fire two offices — one belonging to the ruling United Russia party — to protest the annexation of Crimea last year.

Threatening to remain mute until the charge was changed, Pavlensky literally had the last word.

"You can't use incarceration as a threat to a person who has nailed his own balls [onto Red Square]," Guelman said.

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Correction: An earlier version of this article referred to a statement made by Dmitry Kiselyov on his Twitter account. The statement has been removed due to questions about the account's authenticity.

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