

Title: Deconstructive Conversations
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Abstract:

Novosibirsk has been featured in Putin-era “Culture War” headlines only a few times— most recently in regard to the Tannhauser incident. Yet the political events surrounding the censorship of this production form part of a longer public “conversation” between conservative and liberal activists in the city. The local struggle “for morality” (za npravstvennost’) has been unfolding in the press and on the streets of Novosibirsk since at least 2012. Its ostensible pretexts have included, in chronological order: Pussy Riot, Marat Gelman’s Rodina art exhibit, a show of Picasso’s drawings; appearances by Sasha Grey, the black-metal group Behemoth, and Marilyn Manson; and, in 2015, the decade-long tradition of the Monstration.

Public stance-taking around these cultural events has not just served to polarize pro-Western and anti-liberal forces. It has also brought citizens together from both sides of the barricades in discussions organized by groups with a wide range of institutional affiliations. In this paper, I closely read one such open socio-political discussion, to shed light on how activists themselves debated what should and should not motivate the state to become involved in cultural affairs on behalf of its citizens. I argue that in reflecting on what makes art political, participants foregrounded and contested the interactional meanings of both civil consensus-building procedures, and indecorous, disruptive dissension.

My paper, based on extended fieldwork in Novosibirsk in 2012-2013, suggests that urbanites engaged in public life are keenly aware that the aesthetic of dissensus (or, to use an emic term, *kholivari*) is a “weapon of the weak” useful in resisting political hegemony. However, they also question its essentially anti-hegemonic value. That is, they recognize it as a technology that can also be used by the “strong” in representations of a fractious and unruly Russian civil society, whose seemingly unrepresentable differences state and media elites can claim to encompass.