

A Pussy Riot Artist Is Back in Prison (This Time, by Design)

Nadya Tolokonnikova previews her stamina-testing performance in a mock prison cell at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

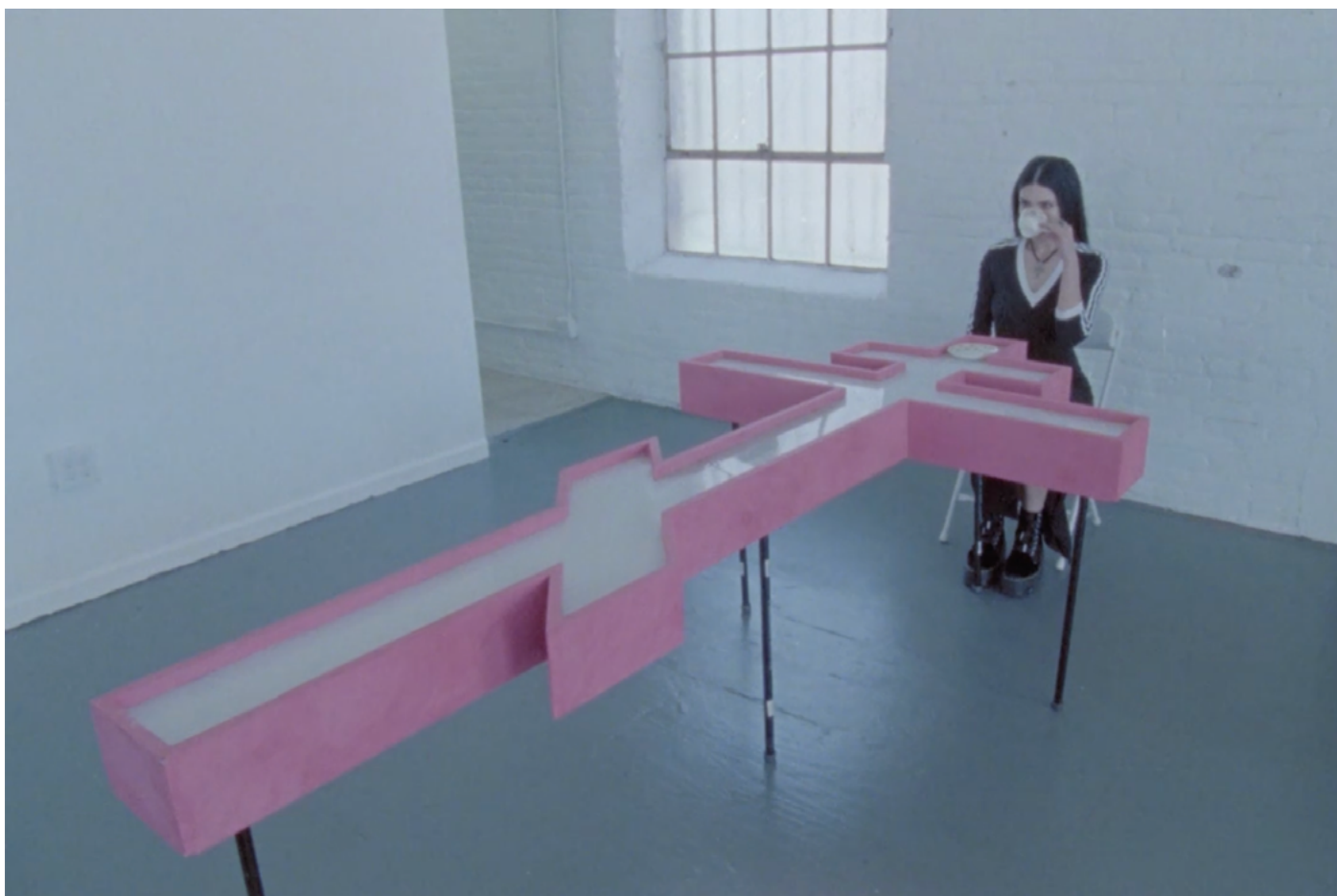
By Jori Finkel | Visuals by Ariel Fisher
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Nadya Tolokonnikova, the founder of the feminist art collective Pussy Riot, has long experienced the threat — and reality — of government surveillance. After the group's anti-Putin, balaclava-wearing, punk-inspired performance at Moscow's main Orthodox Cathedral in 2012, she spent nearly two years in Russian prison. On her release, she was tracked by the police. Since 2021, the year when she was declared a "foreign agent" by Russia's ministry of justice, she has lived in exile, bouncing from city to city in what she calls a state of "geo-anonymity."

Next month, the outspoken Russian activist and artist will be subject to another kind of surveillance — in a jail of her own making. From June 5 to 14, Tolokonnikova, 35, will be spending her days in a corrugated-steel replica of a decrepit Russian prison cell, installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Los Angeles. She will eat, drink and use the toilet in her "cell," and will perform some of her aggressive noise-music rage-screeds there. Visitors can watch her through peep holes and a security camera feed.

"It's my first durational performance," she said, using a term for the stamina-testing genre popularized by the artist Marina Abramovic, who is a close friend. Tolokonnikova was sipping tea at a long, pink-rimmed table in the shape of a Russian Orthodox cross — her own design — in a temporary studio in Los Angeles. "I'm used to the intensity of short outbursts of energy."



Nadya Tolokonnikova sipping from a teacup at the head of the pink table she designed in the shape of a Russian Orthodox cross.

The MOCA show, "Police State," is in one sense a reckoning with her incarceration, during which she went on three hunger strikes and published an open letter describing "slavery-like conditions." She recalls how women in her penal colony were forced to work 17-hour shifts in a sewing factory at risk of injuries and even death. She has since tried TMS (Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation), anti-depressants and psychotherapy to process the experience, with mixed results.

"For me personally talk therapy didn't work — I don't love to talk about my feelings. But I'm interested in renegotiating trauma, rewriting your own personal history to bring your creativity into the mix," she said. "This is art therapy, basically."

At another level, the museum show is a condemnation of carceral conditions and human rights violations in her homeland and beyond. The idea came, she said, after she saw a concrete-box replica of the brutal solitary cell used to confine her friend and mentor, the Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny, who died in prison in 2024. Tolokonnikova called this installation, created by his younger brother, Oleg, "one of the best works of public art and political art I've seen."

"The police state isn't a distant experience for me and those I care about," she added in her soft-spoken cadences — the message more pointed than the delivery. "Russia has more than a thousand political prisoners, whose only fault was to say that the emperor is naked. The best people of Russia are behind bars."



Tolokonnikova on a hunger strike during her incarceration in Penal Colony 14, Mordovia, Russia, in 2013. Ilya Shablinsky/Pussy Riot

Since "Police State" is debuting during a time of high-profile detentions and deportations by the Trump administration, it is bound to be read as a critique of this government's actions as well. "I think she's really speaking to the current political moment," said Alex Sloane, the associate curator of MOCA, who is developing the project. "We can't see these things — the human rights abuses, government overreach and the targeting of specific communities — as being isolated to Russia any more."

Or as Tolokonnikova quipped at the studio: "Authoritarianism is like a sexually transmitted disease — you have it before you know it." She went on to describe the rise of a "tech-bro oligarchy" in the United States and rapidly shifting international alliances, which she said could impact her safety. "Travel has become increasingly dangerous for me, mostly because I was put on this international wanted list by Russia at the start of the year, but also because of Trump becoming more friendly with Putin."

She pulled out a bag of red foam clown noses, offered me one and popped one on herself. She broke out laughing and suddenly looked like a goofy teenager, her black plaid skirt giving strong schoolgirl vibes. "Imagine being so serious and worrying about your safety all the time. Put the clown nose on and everything is just fine," she said, noting that she originally used the noses to "troll" her clown-fearing husband, John Caldwell.

This tension between gravity and levity, and a razor-sharp sense of humor, infuses many of her artworks. While she continues to organize some collective street actions under the Pussy Riot rubric, she has recently been showing painting and sculpture, or more accurately objects akin to them, in gallery and museum settings under her own name.

Her first solo museum show, "RAGE," opened at OK Linz in Austria last summer. This month, she has one exhibition at Nagel Draxler gallery in Berlin, "Wanted," and another at Honor Fraser in Los Angeles, "Punk's Not Dead." And surrounding the mock prison cell at MOCA, she is installing her artworks and sculptural elements, including a gumball machine she's filling with colorful balls marked with the names of poisons, like Polonium and Novichok, which have been used on Russian dissidents.



On display at Honor Fraser gallery, "Riot Shields," the aluminum riot shields that Tolokonnikova scraped and carved during a January performance with Pussy Riot Siberia.



Tolokonnikova beside her new sculpture, a stainless steel slide with a cheese-grater surface, at Honor Fraser gallery. She calls it "Life."

The centerpiece of "Punk's Not Dead" is a stainless steel slide that you might imagine on a playground if its surface did not resemble a supersized cheese grater. The show also contains several of her new "Icons" paintings, embellished with medieval Cyrillic calligraphy, enigmatic crosses and other invented symbols of devotion.

"Punk's Not Dead" began with a January residency at Honor Fraser, where Tolokonnikova gave an earsplitting performance as part of the group Pussy Riot Siberia. Her musical instruments were aluminum riot shields that she "played" by scratching them with brass knuckles and other tools and carving them with hearts and anarchy signs. The riot shields now hang in the gallery like a vandalized series by Donald Judd.

The gallery owner Jeffrey Deitch, who gave her a pop-up show in 2023, said he is not surprised that Tolokonnikova is increasingly using galleries and museums as a media platform.



Tolokonnikova and other balaclava-clad members of Pussy Riot Siberia performing in January at Honor Fraser. Koury Angelo

"From the very beginning she's been an artist," he said. "When Pussy Riot did their famous performance at the Moscow cathedral, they were not a group of trained musicians but really performance artists." Now, he added, "you have this integration of performance, art, activism and this charismatic persona — she wraps it all together."

Still, it hasn't been easy for Tolokonnikova to find venues for her art. "Someone told me the art world is harder to navigate than Russian jail," she said, smiling at the thought. But so far, she said, "having people tell me no or ghosting me is annoying" but nothing like having "a squad of riot police invade your exhibit."

A more substantial challenge: bringing something of the live-wire intensity of street performance into the museum world. "It's much more explosive and abrasive to perform something for 40 seconds, when you have to deliver a message before you're dragged by the feet by the police," she acknowledged. "But after I got out of jail it became almost impossible for me to make work in the same way because I was under police surveillance 24-7 and my phone was tapped."

"I didn't want to get killed," she added, "so I was pushed into the studio work." She said she's learning from artists like Abramovic, Valie Export and Yoko Ono, who have made provocative work within safe spaces. She also speaks admiringly of the "total installations" of the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov, who would go so far as to recreate grimy Soviet-era apartments in the name of art.

Her first solo gallery show, at Deitch's gallery in 2023, featured the multipart project, "Putin's Ashes." Outraged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, she invited women who shared her anger — Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian — to join her in the desert for a ritualistic burning of a portrait of the Russian president. At the end of the performance, documented in a short film, she deposited the ashes into glass vials. Deitch showed both the film and vials, which she had shrouded, using her prison-era sewing skills, in fake fur.



After burning a portrait of Vladimir Putin, Nadya Tolokonnikova used the remains to make the art object "Putin's Ashes," displayed in 2023 at Jeffrey Deitch Los Angeles. Nadya Tolokonnikova



Detail of "Putin's Ashes," shown at Jeffrey Deitch Los Angeles in 2023. Nadya Tolokonnikova



A still from the short film "Putin's Ashes." Tolokonnikova invited women — Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian — to join her in a ritual burning of the Russian president's portrait to protest his invasion of Ukraine. Nadya Tolokonnikova/Pussy Riot

The exhibition prompted the Russian government to file a new criminal charge against her for insulting religious believers; placement on a "most wanted criminals" list and a warrant for her "arrest in absentia" followed. "My job for quite a while, the last 15 years of my activism, is to hurt Vladimir Putin as much as I humanly can," she told MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell, "and the instrument of my war is my art. We know that he's incredibly superstitious, so he might actually be afraid."

When "Putin's Ashes" traveled to a gallery in Santa Fe, she experimented with recreating some elements of a Russian prison cell and hung out there for a while on opening night, using a homemade shiv to carve some graffiti into a wooden table. As an introvert, albeit one with exhibitionist tendencies, she said she found it a convenient way to avoid small talk with the crowd.

In her MOCA cell she will be installing some drawings made by Russian political prisoners, including Valeria Zotova, who is serving a six-year prison sentence after being accused of planning a terrorist attack. Tolokonnikova will also play a keyboard and other instruments, layered with audio tracks from actual prisons.

"The music is going to be at times very gentle and beautiful and reminiscent of my childhood," she said, explaining that she will sing lullabies that remind her of her mother, who died last summer in Russia. At other times, "there are going to be screams of pain, or screams of rage, screams of power."

She is rehearsing the music, but not training physically, for the project. "It's not as strict as Marina's performance," she said, referring to Abramovic's physically punishing 2010 durational work, "The Artist Is Present," at the Museum of Modern Art.

"It's not about putting physical constraints on my body — I've done that enough in an actual prison environment. Yes, I can go without food for 10 days," she said. "To repeat it in a museum environment to me would almost look like a gimmick. What's interesting to me is to be this living and breathing heart of the installation."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/15/arts/design/nadya-tolokonnikova-pussy-riot-moca.html?searchResultPosition=1>