

TIMES 2

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My Pussy Riot jail hell.
Now you can try it too

Nadya Tolokonnikova's latest shock tactic

arts

'My role in life is to try as many masks as I can'

Nadya Tolokonnikova of the punk protest group Pussy Riot was imprisoned for two years in a labour camp. Now she's recreating it in a Chelsea gallery, she tells **John Nathan**

Sloane Rangers, watch your step: the gulag is coming to Chelsea. Or at least a taste of it. As part of a new exhibition of Russian activist art at the Saatchi Gallery, the snow-white interiors of two of the gallery's exhibition rooms will be converted into a prison. No matter how clean your chinos and gilet are, if you venture inside you will be given a taste of the humiliation, intimidation and forced labour described by inmates of Russia's Mordovia penal colony, and by one former inmate in particular, Nadya Tolokonnikova, a co-founder of the feminist, post-punk protest group Pussy Riot.

Called *Inside Pussy Riot*, the show, devised by the theatre group Les Enfants Terribles, has its audience don a trademark Pussy Riot-style balacava, then leads them through a Tolokonnikova Pussy Riot experience, from the anti-Putin and Orthodox Church song *Punk Prayer* that the art collective performed in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012 to the subsequent arrest, trial and two-year prison sentence Tolokonnikova received for hooliganism, along with her fellow Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich (whose sentence was later suspended).

The objective of the production is partly to highlight inhuman prison conditions in Russia and beyond. The prison in Mordovia — 275 miles east of Moscow — was once part of Stalin's archipelago of labour camps. But isn't it a little tasteless to present such suffering to those who can then do a spot of shopping on Kings Road?

"You have to occupy all sorts of spaces," says Tolokonnikova with unhesitating certainty. We meet in an abandoned, dimly lit music venue in Nuremberg. Tolokonnikova is rehearsing, although not for the Saatchi Gallery show, in which she does not personally appear, but a Pussy Riot performance that will take place this evening in Berlin.

"For me it's a strategy that Ai Weiwei and Banksy belong to," she says of the methods with which political artists can engage the public. "Otherwise they [the public] will just do what they do anyway without us."

Tolokonnikova and I are sitting at opposite ends of one of the clubs



“Visitors will be humiliated and see people being beaten

threadbare sofas. Tolokonnikova — slim, dark and at 28 already the mother of a nine-year-old daughter, Gera (the father is her husband Pyotr Verzilov, a fellow artist activist) — is comfortably cross-legged, having pushed off her trainers. Her black hair is crowned by a white scarf tied in a raised knot above her forehead in 1940s style. Only occasionally does she allow a hint of insecurity to break through.

She fears that she looks “like a crazy, idealistic kid” when talking about the “holistic, think-globally-act-locally” approach needed to tackle the array of issues her activism addresses. These include police brutality; Russia and America's present “misogynist” leaders; and freedom of expression. Yet having been part of Russia's seemingly fearless performance-art scene (in 2008, with other members of the performance art group Voina, she and Verzilov had sex in public in Moscow's Museum of Biology), her fear is perhaps less to do with appearing like an “idealistic kid” than as a cliché.

If so, apart from a tendency to call Putin and Trump “assholes” a lot, that fear seems unfounded. Pussy Riot were nothing if not original. And when the conversation moves from politics to political art she fairly refers to the art world's groundbreakers as if they were her forebears — for example, Brecht, for his ability to break barriers between audience and performers, just as she wants to.

“My role in life is to try as many masks and personas as I can — a Cindy Sherman kind of thing,” she says, which places her on a line with the American conceptual artist. And when I ask if there is a danger that, among those who experience her immersive show in London, there might be some who get a fairground thrill from the suffering, her answer is rooted in artistic heritage.

“It happens,” she says with a shrug. “Like Pier Pasolini and his [film] *The 120 Days of Sodom*. But that's art. And they [the viewers] have to be free to feel and express whatever they want.”

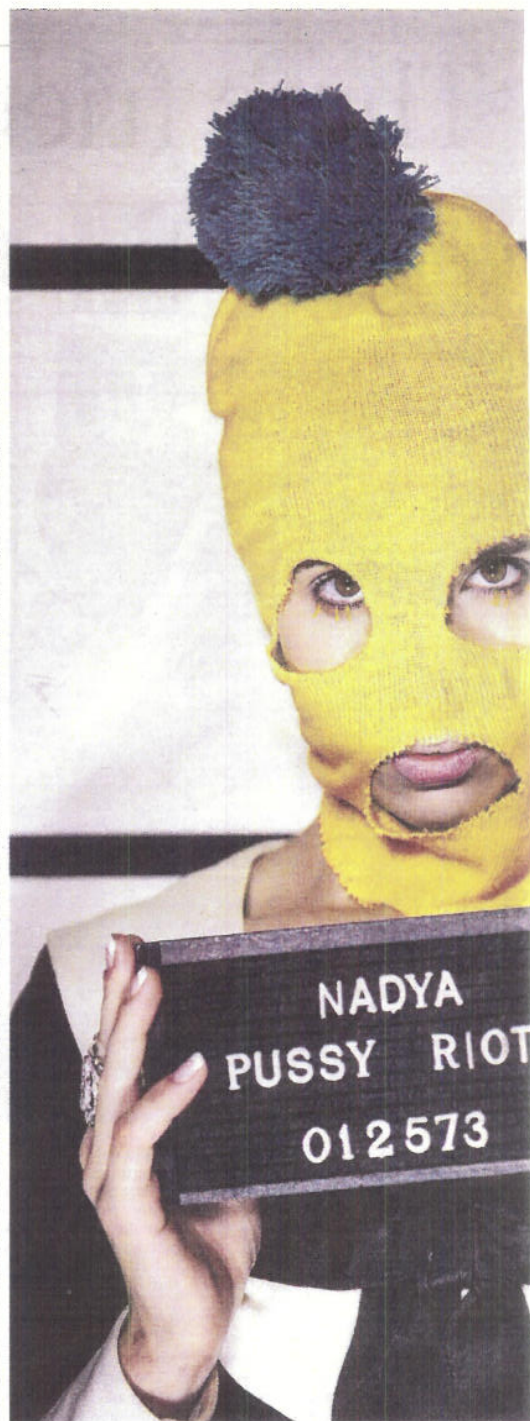
Enfants Terribles' artistic director, Oliver Lansley, sheds a little more light on the Saatchi show. “There will be audiences of 14 going through every seven minutes, so the cast of 18 are constantly shifting roles.”

He and Tolokonnikova co-wrote the play. “We talked a bunch on the phone and then she came over to London and got a sense of what it is important to her that we include.”

How uncomfortable are they going to make their audience feel? “That's an ongoing discussion,” says Lansley with a coy smile. “We don't want them to be uncomfortable, but we want people to be challenged. We're trying to push the envelope further than we have before.”

For the Russian art collector and philanthropist Igor Tsukanov, whose collection forms the backbone of the Saatchi exhibition, Pussy Riot's place, among Russian art at least, is clear. This is his fourth exhibition of Russian art at the gallery. Yet when we met a few days earlier in his minimalist house in Kensington, which is festooned with modern Russian art, he says that this latest project posed new problems.

“I was struggling to see what came out of the post-Soviet period,” he says. “In my view no art came out in the 1990s that was worth the attention from the international community. I came to the conclusion



Nadya Tolokonnikova and, above left, leaving court in Moscow in 2012

Inside Pussy Riot is at the Saatchi Gallery, London SW3 (saatchigallery.com), from November 14 to December 24. Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism is from November 16 to December 31

that the only art movement [worthy of attention] is actionism.”

He says that the problem with “actionism”, or performance art, is that it isn't the kind you can easily hang on a gallery wall. Especially that created by some of Russia's most provocative artists. So Tsukanov has found ways to exhibit the works, often with photographic and video techniques. He has even gone so far as to commission new works and give the artists in the exhibition the name of a movement: Art Riot.

“It is always better for artists to be part of a group,” he says. “Take Pussy Riot. These girls — or some of them — graduated from Moscow University.



They are educated. The most famous one, Nadya, learnt a lot from [the Ukrainian-born Russian performance artist] Oleg Kulik.

So, says Tsukanov, it is possible to draw a line from Kulik (who is best known for his naked performances as a caged dog) via Pussy Riot, to Petr Pavlensky, the artist who nailed his scrotum to Red Square and set alight the front door to the HQ of the Russian secret service in Moscow. Having gained political asylum in France, last month he reportedly set a Paris bank on fire. The French police arrested him.

Above, from top: Yekaterina Samutsevich, Nadya Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and in court in Moscow in 2012; the Pussy Riot performance of Punk Prayer in 2012; Carcass, Pyotr Pavlensky, 2013

Back on the sofa, Tolokonnikova explains an early influence on her life as an artist activist. "When I was a kid, 18 years old, I watched a movie," she says. "It wasn't the best, but it was about suffragettes, and that was the way I learnt about suffragettes. It fetishised their suffering a little bit, their hunger strike, the way they were force-fed. But work doesn't have to be perfect to inspire somebody."

She has written a book called *Rules for Rulebreakers: A Pussy Riot Guide to Revolution*. "I think it's f***ing terrible. But I'm going to publish it because maybe it can inspire someone else who can write a better book." Like the suffragette film. "Exactly," she says, before adding about the Saatchi show: "The play may be terrible."

For an international revolutionary life is busy. Tolokonnikova lives in Moscow, but her schedule of talks, interviews and performances is scary. Two days after we meet she pops up in New York on MSNBC to talk about the similarities between Putin and Trump — they are both "eroding our [democratic] institutions".

The parallels between Putin and Trump are many, she tells me. They "find people to accuse for all the things that are happening. For Trump it's Muslims, women, Mexicans. For Putin it's other people, people like Pussy Riot. Trump is far away from Russia, but he's normalising the way he talks about women, female sexuality and female bodies. And it's being translated into Russian. So for Putin it's much easier now to be a misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic asshole."

Comparisons between the Soviet era and Putin's Russia are less obvious, she says. "I don't like easy comparisons. We might have got killed in the USSR, or would have ended up in prison for ten years. So things are different. We do have more access to information."

After New York she travelled to Philadelphia to speak about "the importance of standing up" for beliefs: two days ago she arrived in Berlin for tonight's show. She arrives in London tomorrow. The high profile does not, she maintains, come naturally.

"We invented the mask for a reason. We wanted to be under it. Just now [while rehearsing] I was on the verge of a panic attack. I don't want everyone staring at me. But it was impossible to keep your mask on in the court. So now we have to deal with what we have. But there are many in Pussy Riot who remain anonymous, and Pussy Riot are not one or two or three people." She doesn't know how many there are. It's an "ad hoc" organisation, as befits its anarchic spirit.

Still, she's using her now famous face in service of her activism. And although she's not actually in the

Saatchi Gallery play, she does have a presence. According to Lansley, there is one moment in *Inside Pussy Riot* when she is specifically represented. "It's when you are taken to solitary confinement and you almost have a direct one-on-one experience with her." "My goal with *Inside Pussy Riot* is to create a kind of activist school," says Tolokonnikova. "Immediate gratification is one of the problems of our time. So lots of activists think they will do one thing and things immediately get better. That's not true. You need to understand that you go through lots of stages and will face obstacles you may see as impossible."

"That's why we're creating this prison experience, so that people will have to choose what they believe in and then, in another room, be humiliated or scared and see people being beaten around them. I can't predict what will happen in their heads, but what I want them to think is that you have to go through a lot to stand up for your beliefs."

For Tolokonnikova, "standing up" has involved going on hunger strike

“I’m encouraging my daughter to find ways to rebel against me

while in prison to improve conditions, and smuggling out an open letter that graphically and eloquently set out the daily abuses she says she and her fellow inmates experienced. She has always acknowledged that they had none of the protections that she had from her fame, lawyers and an international campaign to free her.

Her 21 months in prison must have been especially hard on her daughter. "She didn't like it," Tolokonnikova says, with pointed understatement. "She sent me a letter with suggestions about how I should escape. She told her father to steal a bus and smash the prison walls with it and then people can get on. She wrote this plan on paper and then Pyotr brought this plan to me in prison and showed it to me."

Would she want her daughter to follow in her footsteps? "No. I'm encouraging her to do the opposite, because I've told her that the kids who follow the steps of their parents are stupid, passive squares, and kids have to be rebellious. So I'm encouraging her to find interesting ways to rebel against me."

And then, with a smile she adds: "She'll probably vote for Putin."

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