

Nadya Tolokonnikova: Riot Rules
By Delaney Willet

In an age of media where it feels each scroll leads us to another clone of the past projection on the screen, it is rare to still see a true trailblazer, one without super-villain intentions of indomitable reign. Uninhibited by social convention, common law, gender roles, or globally-accepted aestheticism. She's something of a mystical figure, dreamed up in a feminist comic strip, and deposited on earth to do good. Or, in her own words, 'Fuck Shit Up'. Nadya Tolokonnikova, Russian-born activist, artist, futurist, optimist, and notorious denouncer of unjust regimes and social systems, may appear to be a modern-day superwoman, but she comes to us in the form of a 30-something hyper-feminine wunderkind, harboring centuries' worth of female rage under her bejeweled balaclava, bringing deliverance.

Nadya projects an innate sense of wonder and curiosity— about humanity, its potential for change, and a world beyond the limits of evil— that is starkly juxtaposed by the jaded cynicism one would expect of someone with even half her history. Though, I'd never imagined speaking with one of the most sought-after artists in the global activism movement could feel like talking to the older, wiser, funnier sister I never had. Tolokonnikova, creator of the Russian feminist protest art collective Pussy Riot, transcends physical and digital mediums of art and activism to communicate alter-globalist ideals. Alter-globalism, as Nadya defines it, is 'coordination on a global level to achieve our goals as humanity,' (The Art Newspaper), an effort bolstered by multinational groups with an ambition similar to Pussy Riot's. Nadya, armored with a list of accomplishments that are seldom done justice by her own biographies, created UnicornDAO, or decentralized autonomous organization, dedicated to "redistributing wealth and visibility in order to create equality for women-identified and LGBTQ+ people" (unicorndao.com). Pussy Riot additionally founded the independent news outlet zona.media, focused primarily on Russian investigative reporting, courtroom live-blogging, and digital censorship coverage (zona.media). Tolokonnikova recently raised \$7 million (and counting) for Ukrainian relief through NFT sales, utilizing her platform and understanding of the Blockchain to deliver urgent aid. This past spring, Sotheby's presented Tolokonnikova's 'My Body My Business', a curated auction of feminist works benefitting reproductive healthcare. The show included works by acclaimed female artists Marina Abramović, Cindy Sherman, Sarah Meyohas, and Judy Chicago, alongside Nadya's own work, titled Fragile Masculinity Genesis (sothebys.com).

Though she is, in loose terms, a polarizing figure and, in Russia's terms, a foreign agent, Nadya refuses to hire a bodyguard. She states boldly: 'I still believe that art can be more powerful than tanks and bullets sometimes because bullets can only penetrate your body, art can penetrate your mind. So my art follows the phrase: this art is a weapon,' (The Art Newspaper).

At 17, while at Moscow State University, Nadya Tolokonnikova joined Voina, a performance art collective protesting Putin's regime and complacency within the arts. Voina stirred Russian and international media through public demonstrations, kissing police officers in the subway and staging sex shows in biological history museums. At its core, Nadya's art has always been tethered in the immersive, the interactive, and the inflammatory, leading her to music,

multi-format art, and her practiced concept of total installation. At a recent exhibit in New Mexico, Tolokonnikova reproduced the prison cell in which she spent two years in solitary confinement, the final scene in an installation showcasing her repurposing of the violence she's faced due to her life's work. On display in this showcase are the papers from Nadya's sentencing, doodled over in bright scribbles, girlish scribbles, repainting her trauma into revolutionary positivity. Her use of "total installation", or taking charge of the entirety of her exhibition's (Putin's Ashes) context, allows Tolokonnikova to dictate the way in which her art is digested, a feminist concept in and of itself.

There is something profound about pink in power and power in pink, a binary that, sans social constructions would be nonsensical, but in our socio-political landscape, is set ablaze by Tolokonnikova's simultaneous call to action and album title: MATRIARCHY NOW! One must understand the law in order to break it, a concept of which Tolokonnikova is the superlative example. Arrested for 'hooliganism' after performing a guerilla piece entitled "Punk Prayer" at the altar of a church in protest of the comingling of church and state, Tolokonnikova spent two years in solitary confinement in a Siberian prison. Being intimately familiar with the details of Nadya's roots and career— having studied her trajectory of activism through her visual and performance art, as well as public displays and authorship, as a disciple may— I elected to engage Nadya in a conversation outside of herself, mining perspective on a world hurtling through development, made up of systems desperately seeking her intervention.

Reserved: How much of your self-presentation (the balaclavas, paired with lingerie) is self-expression and how much is an artistic and political statement? How do the two go hand in hand?

Nadya Tolokonnikova: I thought about that today, actually. I was posting video snippets and thinking about this constant urge as an artist that I have to combine cute and rough, or dangerous. It's a pretty conscious strategy that I started to practice in my Voina days, the art collective [waging] the war against Putin, [calling out] art institutions that are complacent. It was a long time ago, 2008, 2009. I started to practice it in my own style, as a part of this Voina collective, and then when me and my friend Kat created Pussy Riot, we put it as a core of the movement itself, because "Pussy" and "Riot" can represent this, too. It's like a binary. It's like an old-school binary of hot and cold, dark and light, male/female, but we're fucking it all up and mixing it all together and making them fluid so they constantly intersect, change, and mix.

These days, when I'm thinking about how I want to present myself and how others want to present themselves on stage as Pussy Riot, I want us to have this so-called traditional feminine side, because I feel like for feminists it's a very primal urge to get rid of anything feminine. I think as feminists, we all went through this period— some of us decided to stay in that period which is completely fine— but at some point I decided to overcome this because I was this tomboy who was hanging out with men and was just like I'm cool, I'm just like men; and then I was like 'Oh wait, I'm basically hating women right now, what am I doing?' I was like 'I actually do love pink colors, I actually do like to show my ass, I actually enjoy this.' Now, I want to present myself in this feminine way, but also combine it with radical politics, details like hardcore music and

movements. I'm definitely far from feminine in the way I move, or the way I talk, or the way we all scream on stage. It's just fun for me. I love combining contrasts and I believe that something new, like ideas or feelings, can be born and they are in the intersection of these different paradigms or styles of presenting yourself. I just don't like to stick to only one thing. That's one of the things I learned from conceptual art, those are people who like to play with concepts, and they're pretty ruthless when it comes to that.

Reserved: You've touched on the binary feminists often confront and manipulate within their work. What place do sexuality and dominatrix culture have in politics and in protest?

Nadya Tolokonnikova: To me, BDSM culture is a very potent tool for rethinking the way we treat gender roles. As a teenager or young adult, I had been a huge fan of Judith Butler. I'm still her fan, but she was everything to me. She was a god to me. In her performativity theory, she talks quite a lot about Ball culture and how Ball culture helps people to understand that gender is something performative, so thus it can be changed. There is no place for essentialism there. Growing up on that, I really appreciate any social behavior that shows and makes it seen that our identities are being built through repetition, through a series of performances. To me, BDSM culture really represents another literal playground where people explore new identities. It's a safe space if it's performed in the right way. You obviously can find bad people everywhere, including in the BDSM scene. You perform all these rituals or plays in a very safe or contained way.

For me, it's really dope that for the first time— or not for the first time— but women have been oppressed for thousands of years, and dominatrix culture puts women on top of the world. A very common critique to any feminist who talks about patriarchy would be you want to replace one system of oppression with another, but if you talk through the lens of BDSM culture, it's not a problem any more because you don't have to be that dead fucking serious every time you talk about something. When I talk about patriarchy, I don't mean that I want men literally to be subservient to me at all times. I invite them to play and to enjoy this, to give up on your control for fucking once in your life and enjoy being dominated. And maybe you will explore that you like it much more than you thought you would, or maybe were scared to admit, or didn't think about it just because they taught you that you had to be "strong" as a male. I also really love to provoke people, so talking about BDSM, it's like 'Yea, I totally want to dominate all the men.' I just throw that out casually. And they would come back and be really angry. I just love it. I don't really mean it, but I'm a troll.

Reserved: Freedom, what does it mean to you? Given your prison reform efforts in the US and elsewhere, and the way that these "free" countries have distorted the meaning of the word, do you find similarities in the injustices you began fighting in Russia, and the state of certain global systems?

Nadya Tolokonnikova: I think the political systems are really different, because you, as Americans, seem to have imperfect attempts [at] democratic institutions, uninterrupted, for a few hundred years. In Russia, those events would always get interrupted by authoritarian regimes. It

really kills the democratic political system, because it has to be uninterrupted in order for tradition and people's habits to set in. People in Russia just don't think that they can actually change anything. They can't vote, they don't really think about politics as much because they cannot influence. The American political system is fairly corrupted by money, influential people, part of the 1%, so there is that, but still it is much more complex. I'm mesmerized by its complexity, because in Russia it's quite literally one person who decides who's going to live and who's going to die. If Trump said he wants me dead tomorrow, it's not as easy for him as for Putin to kill me.

When it comes to the system of mass incarceration, it's always been perplexing for me to see how in the land of the free there can be so many incarcerated people. The United States has the biggest prison population per capita, which is pretty insane. I believe it's Russia, China, and the United States at the top, which is lovely company. I visited Rikers Island in 2014, 2015. Since then, I've attempted to visit a couple of other facilities. They refused my entrance, even though I had all the right documents. They didn't really want to have human rights activists inside of the facilities. I snuck into the downtown jail in Los Angeles a few years ago with a friend and supporter of mine. She was like, 'Tag along with me.' It's horrifying. There is a mental health crisis that is not being addressed. There is a homelessness crisis. In the prison system, they are all intertwined.

I might be naive, but I feel like it's my job as an activist to be naive. I don't really understand how in such a rich country, it could be such a big problem, with the homelessness and mental health situation. I've seen people who have mental health issues being handcuffed to tables in their jail cells and my reaction to that was if you put me through this treatment for months, most likely I will lose my mind. That's not the way you treat people who already have some pre-existing conditions. You probably want to go to a specific mental health facility. The food, access to education, books, it all can be improved drastically for the amount of resources the United States have. Last time I checked California also has really big taxes, so that's also really interesting. It was really sad to see how the private prison stock market reacted to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. I remember I watched it. One day he got elected, then the prices of those stocks jumped, went way up after he got elected. The buffoon that he is, he enables the worst in society, so having a person like that in charge also doesn't help. I'm not a politician to tell you how to solve it, but as an activist and artist, I think it's incredibly important to keep talking about it. Another big issue in the United States that I've noticed is incredible racial discrimination when it comes to the prison industrial complex and incarceration politics. From top to bottom. I was fortunate enough to witness a speech by Bryan Stevenson. We both received an honorary university degree the same year and it's his life's work to talk about these issues. I'll just finish my speech to say go read Bryan's book to learn more about it.

Reserved: You were recently added to Russia's Most Wanted list for an NFT you created [*depicting the Virgin Mary in the form of the vulva. This is illegal under Article 148 of Russia's criminal code—an offense added following Pussy Riot's 2012 conviction. (Tolokonnikova calls it the "Pussy Riot Article.") (Artnet News)*]. What are your thoughts on art in the digital space and

its influence on commerce, censorship, and accessibility, as well as NFTs and Cryptocurrency utilized as an aid to subvert government intervention?

Nadya Tolokonnikova: We can talk a little bit broader about the Metaverse and accessibility for people. I think information should be accessible for everyone. It doesn't matter where they are. The internet should be a human right. Governments of the world have to spend money making sure every family has access to internet. It's just the basics. You cannot keep up with this world if you don't. NFTs are just one part of it, one use case of blockchain. This is an interesting one. If you ask me if they're here to stay, I don't know. The market is way down right now and I don't know if it's going to come up. I think they're going to be used in some sort of way, but I don't really know how. If I had to guess, they're probably going to become much cheaper, because they've been almost like a luxury item, like expensive watches. I think they're going to move toward being used in applications without people knowing it's an NFT. They buy, maybe, a game, and it's registered on Blockchain just because it's more transparent for the company.

I really love the idea of Blockchain because it removes, well not literally removes— it's very idealistic. The way it works in the real world, even sometimes government agencies don't know how to wrap their heads around it. I love how idealistic they are. The founder of Ethereum, Vitalik Buterin— he's from Russia but he moved to Canada when he was 6— he thinks about stuff like 'What is the future after nation-states are not going to play such a big role in the world as they play today? What other form of organization could take its place?' These idealist nerds are building these models and games about how to redistribute funding. 'How do we incentivize good behavior? How do we punish people for bad behavior?' I wouldn't say I'm a proponent of that, because you have to be— especially if you invest money in it— a very risky individual, which I am. But I wouldn't advise it to anyone else unless you're really willing to lose. Also, you don't necessarily have to spend money. There's tons of stuff you can play with and familiarize yourself without necessarily investing your money in it.

The Metaverse play, which isn't necessarily connected with Blockchain but could be, is something that really talks to me because of accessibility. I'm from a super small city originally and I love the idea that I potentially wouldn't have to move out of my home city if I didn't want to, to be heard or to get the information and the education I wanted to get. The idea that people can choose to gather on these virtual occasions if they wanted, I think we always have to talk about these things as options if we move totally to the Metaverse.

As you probably notice, I really love to explore what the world has to offer. I think it's just a part of my general strategy of trying different things and seeing what sticks. Also, I'm obsessed with the future. I try to see long term and imagine how the world is going to look in one hundred years. Looking into all of this technology sometimes helps, sometimes it's the more I know nothing. It's just like, 'Well I guess I have no fucking clue how this is going to play out.' There will be flying things and AI (*she says with a laugh*) hopefully. It's necessary [for activism]. Otherwise you're left resisting. It's what the systems of oppression and dominant systems want from you. They want you focused on resisting, without having your own vision of the future. I know it's damn hard, because we are not the elite class. We have to fight for our survival and we also

have to think about the future. Sometimes to people you just appear out of your fucking mind. You sound like Elon Musk. But otherwise it's going to be left to people like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos and they're going to build a future and we're going to be sucking the balls of persons whose balls we don't want to suck. *(laughs)*

Reserved: Lastly, there's been discussion in the news of members of Russia's elite class denouncing the war on Ukraine, but doing little else. How can individuals of privilege use their platform to aid in reform, in Russia and globally? Where and how would you like to see the public stepping up?

Nadya Tolokonnikova: Put money where your mouth is. It's general advice. There's a scale of contribution. We can't demand things of people because we don't want to be disciplinarian. If I'm allowed to dream, first of all, I love when they say openly and loudly, they pronounce these words, 'I do not support terrorist war crimes, the terrorist regime of Putin. I do not support the war. I support Ukraine.' A lot of them don't even do that. They say we are for peace. Aren't we all for peace? You should say those words. You're going to get in a lot of trouble back in Russia, but....

A recent example of this: a Spanish journalist found out that a Russian sportswoman living in Spain was an active supporter of Putin's regime. She helps him to stay in power forever. She asked people to vote to change the constitution to allow Putin to stay in power pretty much forever. She has blood on her hands. She never denounced the regime. She said 'I'm for peace' and Spain is fine with that. I think we should probably put more pressure on people like that if they want to build different lives in a different country. That's fine. I think we should allow people to change, unless they actually committed crimes they should be investigated for. Also, if you happen to have a lot of money you probably have a lot of influence. You can build media organizations, start nonprofits, and help war refugees. There are a lot of options and I hope to see more efforts of people going that direction.

Get Involved: *The feminist collective's 'Church of Feminism' collection, including balaclavas to be donned in Pussy Riot fashion, can be found at pussyriot.love, along with further information on Pussy Riot's upcoming shows and events.*