Nadya Tolokonnikova on political art

August 14, 2017 - Nadya Tolokonnikova is a Russian conceptual artist and political activist best known for her work with Pussy Riot, an anti-Putinist activist collective and feminist punk band based in Moscow. On August 17, 2012, she was convicted of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" after a performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and was subsequently sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Since her release in 2013, she has worked to raise awareness of conditions within the Russian prison system as well as help establish alternative media outlets in Russia. She is currently working on the creation of "Inside Pussy Riot," an immersive political theatre experience created in conjunction with London-based theatre company Les Enfants Terribles.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2130 words.

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As of right now you're in the home stretch of funding a Kickstarter project (Inside Pussy Riot) for an immersive political theatre experience. Funding your project this way feels very appropriate: everyone who contributes feels like they have some ownership in it.

It's a great platform. I used to have troubles with asking our supporters for money, because I was like, "Oh, I'm a leftist, I shouldn't even talk or think about money." The reality is that in order to make a great, impactful thing, you sometimes need to spend money. I got over it.

So many people have already tried, in a variety of ways, to tell the story of Pussy Riot. What made it seem like an immersive theatrical experience like this would be the best way to tell it?

My goal is not necessarily to tell our story. It's based on our story, just because it looks like people want to hear the story. We spoke with my friends who are co-producing this play and the theatre group, Les Enfants Terribles, and it was more their initiative to tell our story. Our story is the framework to talk about other things. My goal was just to tell about Russian prisons, about the prosecutions of political activists, about the abuses of power, and about any individual who is trying to resist that power. In my mind, it's not particularly about us, because it's pretty boring to talk about yourself. I want it to really be about these other bigger things.

There is this idea that most people don't always really understand things unless they experience it for themselves, so the idea of telling your story via interactive theater makes sense. Physically experiencing something can be profound. It's much different than simply watching or listening.

It is. I was interested in this form of immersive culture for a while. I didn't really know that much about this kind of theater until after I got out of prison. After learning more about it, I found that it was really in line with what we're trying to achieve. When we started Pussy Riot we wanted our audience to understand what was happening. We opted not to play on normal stages or venues, but in public spaces. We always had this impulse to make the audience a part of whatever was going on.

I grew up reading Guy Debord's *The Society of Spectacle*. Every time I make some kind of art, every time I give some kind of performance, I am thinking about the audience and this expectation that it will be just another show. You always struggle with things like, "How can you involve people's feelings? How can you make them more sympathetic to things that you're trying to tell them about?" I know that we're not the only artists who have struggled with this. I'm not saying that our answer is the right one. We're trying to use immersive theater as our attempt to make people sympathetic to the causes we're talking about.

The notion of "political art" is something that comes up a lot lately, for obvious reasons. What does it mean to make political art? What does it look like? What makes it successful? Also, do artists have a responsibility to be addressing the current political landscape in their work?

I don't think they do, actually. I know that this is something a lot of artists are feeling and struggling with though. I think that being an artist just means that you have a responsibility to be your own free person and to develop your own path, which doesn't have to be political. I think you're already making a political statement just by experiencing your own freedom through art.

Of course, in addition to making your own art, you obviously can still be an involved citizen. You don't have to express your politics through your art. Your art can be apolitical and you can make a difference in other ways. Go and protest. Go and tell people about what's going on in prisons. You don't have to use your art to do that. Being an engaged and politically involved citizen is way more important than being a political artist. I'm not a political artist. Of course some of my friends, who are political artists, would be super strict about that. They would say, "If art is not political, then it's not valuable." I don't agree with that.

Of course, this is not just about artists. As human beings on this planet, we should *all* be politically involved. The fact is that we have to be, because of things like our climate, because of nuclear weapons. In many ways since the '60s, it looks like nothing has really changed. We're still going back to the paradigm of the Cold War. It's like we're walking in place, over and over again, for a century.

Right. Also, making political art doesn't absolve you of also doing those other things in your real life, too. It goes both ways.

I agree. All art is, in a way, political simply because it exists. I wouldn't primarily define myself as a political artist. Sometimes I might want to make a work of art about leaves, about the sky, about the sun. This is how I experience my freedom. I don't want to feel that I have to do political art all the time, you know what I mean?

When I feel like I'm inspired, it's not my job. It's my art. My art is about freedom, it is about intuition, impulse, and inspiration. If I feel inspired by cloud, I'll make a song about clouds. We should have freedom to make whatever we want. You engage with politics in your daily life to ensure that kind of freedom in your artistic life.

When you decided to create a theatrical production based on your real life experiences, how did you start? Where did that process begin?

It happened sometime in 2014. When I was in prison, I decided for myself, just for the sake of my sanity, to treat everything as my research. I wanted to collect these experiences in order to change something, the system. Partly, we're doing this through our prisoners' right organization, which is called Zone of Justice. We founded it in 2014. Then, we created an independent media outlet which covers law enforcement issues in Russia. We cover all main court cases. Not just political cases, but the most important cases that reflect what it actually means to live in Russia today. Everything has been about trying to change the system and bring awareness to what was happening. We've always used art as a way to do these things, but the idea for an immersive theater piece started around three years ago, but it's a really big project to put together. It took until now for everything to come together.

Do you imagine that this will be the kind of production that can travel other places? The play itself being like a political action that can be staged in other cities?

I want it to do that. It all depends on our success in telling this story. If we can make this an interesting experience for someone, I don't think it would be hard to take it to other places. It all comes down to how well we do our jobs as artists.

My ultimate goal is to make this kind of play in the big ex-KGB building, which is near the Kremlin. It's a giant building, which was built during the time of Stalin. Hundreds of thousands of people came through that building and they were tortured and killed. It is probably still happening there. There shouldn't be such a terrible and ugly and cruel place in the middle of Moscow. I thought it would be nice at some point to present an immersive theatre in this building dedicated to all victims of the Russian state.

That's my ultimate dream. I don't know when it can happen. At this point if I tried to rent an office—I'm not even talking about a theater space—if I tried to rent an office or a simple studio space in Moscow under my name, in 95% of cases the owner of the place will get a phone call from the prosecutors office. They would try to intimidate the owner and I'll never get the place. So, it's really hard to think about doing that kind of institutional work in Russia without getting rid of Putin.

You are in Moscow now. How difficult is it for you to live and work there these days? I assume you could travel and work elsewhere if you wanted, so why stay there? Isn't it difficult?

Yes and no. I get tremendous energy from just being here and speaking in my own language and seeing the culture develop here. I love the history here and the all of the great thinkers who have come from Russia and the art and the amazing churches. It all gives me power and gives me strength. This is my home. If I want to change things here then I should be here.

I am more likely to be beaten or arrested or intimidated in other ways being here, I know. Lately, they have started to use shit, like literal shit, as a way to attack you. Someone will approach you with an actual pot full of shit and throw it in your face. It happened to me. It also happened to my friends, local journalists. Or they will take this this liquid medicine, which contains a lot of alcohol, and they throw it directly in your eyes. So, your eyes get burned and you need to go to the hospital. It is all really disappointing. There is always the possibility something like that could happen. The cops can just come to your flat and tell you, "Oh, you violated a law." They constantly try to invent something else, in order to put pressure on political activists.

I don't want to give in to Putin and his demands. Just because they claim that they own Russia, doesn't mean that they do. I believe in showing different shades of Mother Russia. Also, we want to provide people here with real, accurate information about what is actually happening. We created a media outlet that people can trust, but it's not just for the people here, it's for an outside audience too. We want people all over the world to understand that Russia doesn't equal Putin. When you look around, especially in American media, you see all of these things about Trump's collusion with Russia… but Putin is not Russia. When I see journalists doing that, it hurts me.

They make Russia, and all Russians, out to be simple, and we're not simple. It makes it seem as if all of Russia is blind to what Putin is, as if we don't have eyes or ears. They make it seem as if no one here criticizes him. We do, even though we don't have the same kind of media and the same instruments to do that. People here are trying. Western eyes don't always notice the small and extremely courageous acts of protest that are happening here. We are trying to highlight them.

Do you see Pussy Riot as an artistic device that can go on forever, as a kind of creative activism tool?

We started Pussy Riot, from the very beginning, with a super broad definition. It was an anonymous political movement. A lot of people in Pussy Riot are still anonymous. They've never been caught. Some of them joined after we ended up in jail. There are a lot of people in Moscow who can identify themselves as Pussy Riot, but nobody has ever heard of them. They're making their own actions and their own art and supporting other members of Pussy Riot in different ways. It's become more like a network. I think as long as somebody wants to use this name, and as long as it can help us achieve our activist goals, we will use it. As long as Pussy Riot helps people to say what they want or make what they need to make, someone will use it.

ESSENTIAL PUSSY RIOT

Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer (2013) - Official Trailer
Pussy Riot gig at Christ the Savior Cathedral
Pussy Riot - "Make America Great Again"
Pussy Riot - "CHAIKA"
Pussy Riot - "I Can't Breathe"
Pussy Riot - "Putin Lights Up The Fires"

Name
Nadya Tolokonnikova

Vocation
Artist, Activist

Fact

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