

News

Russia Arrests Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova in Absentia

The artist faces an immediate two-month detention if she returns to her home country.



Elaine Velie November 22, 2023



Artist Nadya Tolokonnikova in her video work *Putin's Ashes* (2022) (all images courtesy the artist)

Russian artist Nadya Tolokonnikova, co-founder of the feminist art collective Pussy Riot, was **arrested** in absentia in Moscow yesterday, November 21, on the charge of “insulting the religious feelings of believers.” Tolokonnikova, who currently lives outside of Russia, **faces an immediate two-month detention** if she returns to her home country.

“Today the clown Russian courts arrested me even though I was not there — for my art once again,” Tolokonnikova said in a statement shared with *Hyperallergic*.

In March, the artist was placed on Russia’s **Wanted List** in the wake of growing attention to her artwork *Putin’s Ashes* (2022). The multimedia series consists of a video in which Tolokonnikova and 11 other women wearing

balaclavas set a 10-foot depiction of Putin in flames and a group of artworks that incorporate bottled ashes from the fire. Tolokonnikova's arrest comes less than a week since Russia **sentenced another artist**, Alexandra Skochilenko, to seven years in jail for an artwork in which she replaced supermarket price tags with calls for an end to the war in Ukraine.

The Russian criminal case into Tolokonnikova that opened earlier that month **revealed** that the artist was under investigation for violating the "religious feelings" law, known informally as **the "Pussy Riot" law**. The charge **mandates** a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (~\$3,390), forced labor, and up to one year in prison.



Women in balaclavas burn a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Nayda Tolokonnikova's video work *Putin's Ashes* (2022)

Tolokonnikova is no stranger to Russia's persecution of dissident artists or to the nation's unforgiving judicial system. After her participation in the famous **2012 Pussy Riot performance** at Moscow's Christ the Savior Church, Tolokonnikova and fellow Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich were charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" and **sentenced** to two years in prison. The artist has continually created and displayed her work, and years later in 2021, she was **named** a "foreign agent."

Putin's Ashes was exhibited at **Jeffrey Deitch Gallery** in Los Angeles in late January and at Santa Fe's **Container Gallery** this summer. Now, the display is headed to the Dallas Contemporary museum and will be on view starting December 8.

"I want to show Russia they cannot silence or intimidate me," Tolokonnikova said of her recent arrest. "Every time they try to do so, I will only reply with more volume and rage."



Tolokonnikova in *Putin's Ashes*



Tolokonnikova incorporated the ashes from the fire into her artworks.