The general arbitrariness of Lanthimos's subject matter and the slapdashery of the treatment suggest a kind of incoherent randomness. A handful of color swatches sat next to a plaster Jesus; the effect of one on the other, utterly unexplored within the frame, was left to fester at a thematic level—which it doesn't. Swatches of tree were bombarded with klieg lights in what looked like a footnote to a Gregory Crewdson deep dive in a Deep South multiverse; the same nighttime-light blitz appeared in another photo, with even less revelatory power. What did Lanthimos intend by hanging these images on these walls? Did he imagine that anyone who's not a superfan of his motion pictures would be intrigued by these works? Was this array of snapshots even slightly less of a vanity project than Russell Crowe's bar band 30 Odd Foot of Grunts?

The curiosity of "Yorgos Lanthimos: Photographs" was that the great man uses choked-off, extremely unexpected, knot-in-a-garden-hose compositions in his films—sometimes playing out whole scenes from the freakiest of vantage points. Here, Lanthimos seemed afraid of those arty compositions; dull framing and a blithe carelessness about the texture of objects within the frame were de rigueur. Was he so spooked about being pegged as a foreigner training a condescending eye on humble Americana that he essentially dismantled his own talent? Fortunately, Webber Gallery offered the viewer, at a cozy adjacent table, a copy of Sofia Coppola's *Archive*—that great filmmaker's recent coffee-table book. I can say that Sofia, so often damned as a nepo baby, has such an eye that even her regurgitated costume-test Polaroids land as solid gold.

—Matthew Wilder

Nadya Tolokonnikova (Pussy Riot)
Geffen Contemporary at MoCA

Nadya Tolokonnikova's "POLICE STATE" both wittingly and unwittingly traded in an atmosphere of terror: Red and purple gels bathed the cavernous black hole of the exhibition space in a flushed, eerie light; high-velocity floor fans disrupted the steadiness of the air, forcing ceiling-height banners that read PUNK'S NOT DEAD to billow, tangling visitors inside them; and deep, hammering bass delivered from towering speakers thundered into you like a prickly, distorted wave. Both an installation and a durational performance on view at WAREHOUSE at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, "POLICE STATE" was organized like a church. Rows of wooden pews faced a giant neon cross that hovered in front of the central work of the show: a corrugated metal cell, inside of which Nadya Tolokonnikova, one of the founders of Pussy Riot, busied herself each day for the run of the exhibition. This decidedly theatrical approach to the representation of state violence privileged the sensory experience of ritual, casting it all as a ruse within a ruse—a Russian doll of performativity where one didn't know in which direction to look or whom exactly to observe, and where one didn't know if one was about to be saved, or condemned, or both.

Tolokonnikova's cell was outfitted with peepholes at various levels, granting visitors visual access to its interior. In addition to housing the artist, it was crowded with a surprising amount of things, including a kettle, a rusty bunk bed, a wooden desk with a computer and a synthesizer, another wooden desk with an old-fashioned sewing machine, a mini pink piano, and drawings pinned up everywhere. These objects were contributed, we learned from the show's accompanying pamphlet, by both current and former political prisoners. While inside, Tolokonnikova wore a green Adidas tracksuit and a white kerchief covering her dark hair, which was set in braided pigtails. Visitors were instructed not to interact with the artist, but she flashed a glance at those who peered into the space. Adding to the ghoulish element of the experience were glimpses of the wide eyes of strangers observing the artist through the peepholes across the cell. Viewers peered at Tolokonnikova, but also at one another, while others sat in pews, watching us watching her.

View of "Nadya Tolokonnikova: POLICE STATE," 2025. Photo: Zak Kelley.

While Tolokonnikova's two-year incarceration in Russia, on which this performance was based, should have weighed heavily enough for this art to hurt, its shockingly dystopian timing made it almost unbearably painful. Beginning on June 9, the National Guard was deployed steps from the museum, in view of Barbara Kruger's building-size mural *Untitled (Questions)*, 1990/2018. Kruger's work poses a question that we now have a definitive answer to: Who is above the law? In other words, over the course of a few hours on a random summer day, "POLICE STATE" went from an aesthetic experience to a lived one as the museum was closed and the performance postponed in response to the display of state power summoned nearby: machine guns, masks, rubber bullets, tear gas, flash grenades, raids, arrests, deportations. Art is meant to evoke, to symbolize—for it to "become" was abject and harrowing.

Returning to the relative safety of the museum, other artworks orbited the installation in a seemingly random arrangement. A scaled-down watchtower hovered at the edge of the would-be church, to which were affixed the lyrics from the Pussy Riot song "Police State," released in 2017. Small monitors on the floor beamed a four-channel live feed of Tolokonnikova inside her cell, while another displayed archival footage from Russian prisons. On the opposite side of the gallery were three gumball machines, labeled with names of poisons (RICIN, SARIN), and a pair of large, two-dimensional objects made from sheets stretched on canvas that could have been mistaken, in the dark, for paintings. This peculiar array of artworks came together as a constellation of distinct but intertwined tribulations—landmarks in the unruly, inhospitable landscape of Tolokonnikova's ordeal.

One could say that the artist offered nothing radical by way of experience, given the history of durational performances of this ilk (think Marina Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002). However, Tolokonnikova, whether artist, activist, or layperson, continues to place herself, as a public figure, in danger and at the mercy of crowds and cruel governments. The performance was not a spectacle, and it's not a concept—it's a truth made crudely and painfully legible by our own government in real time. "POLICE STATE" was an exhibition intended to problematize the act of looking: Today's miserable polemics made it impossible to look away.

—Georgia Lassner