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Voina Not Giving Up Despite Detention

By Sergey Chernov

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Voina members Leonid Nikolayev, left, and Oleg Vorotnikov at a March 3 news conference in St. Petersburg after being released from jail last month. **Sergey Chernov**

ST. PETERSBURG — Guerrilla art collective Voina, whose drawing of a large penis on a St. Petersburg bridge was nominated and then excluded from a government arts award, will still have their work included in an exhibit devoted to the nominations at Moscow's National Center for Contemporary Arts, according to a statement on the center's web site.

The two jailed members, Oleg Vorotnikov and Leonid Nikolayev, told reporters that their time in prison had not convinced them of the error of their ways and that they were considering enacting more daring artistic stunts.

"In prison, your convictions only become stronger, you understand that you're paying a certain price for these convictions, and then you cannot simply reject them," Vorotnikov said. "On the contrary, being sent to prison means that the state has recognized your ideas as worthy of existing."

Two days after they were released, Vorotnikov says they were attacked. He said they noticed they were being followed by six or seven men near the Ploshchad Vosstania metro station in downtown St. Petersburg. The men attacked them and tried to seize fellow member Natalya Sokol's camera after she took photos of them. The attackers knocked the artists to the ground and kicked them in the head.

The attack took place at one of the city's busiest intersections, and when a crowd started to gather, the attackers announced that they were police officers apprehending thieves. "When they realized that people's sympathies were not on their side, they began to move away quickly into a side street, jumped into a Renault Logan with no plates and drove away," Vorotnikov said.

The group's most famous stunt, "A Dick in FSB Captivity" — a 65-meter penis painted on Liteiny Bridge moments before it was raised near the offices of the Federal Security Service — poked fun at the Russian secret services, while several stunts, including the one for which they were arrested, were ironic digs at the police.

"I've always felt solidarity with everybody who challenges an authoritarian regime," Nikolayev said.

"We set a goal to inspire people, to persuade them that they should not be afraid of anything. Even if they haven't broken or changed the system yet, it will happen because there is no alternative. It is simply a shame to see the current conditions under which we live, what kind of authorities we have, it's a shame to tolerate it."

An exhibit of the Innovation Award nominations will run from March 29 to May 8 at the National Center for Contemporary Arts, 13 Zoologicheskaya Ulitsa. Metro Krasnopresnenskaya. Tel. 254-8492, www.ncca.ru.

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