

## arts

# Russia is in the middle of a cultural crisis. We can help

Since the Salisbury poisonings the relationship between the art worlds of London and Moscow has cooled. **Malika Browne** talks to the people trying to thaw it out

On the white walls of an elegant grade II listed townhouse in Bloomsbury, London, is painted a stark black scene of women standing in the snow waving white balloons to passing cars. The mural is one of several painted by the Moscow-based Russian artist Victoria Lomasko as part of her solo show at Pushkin House. It depicts the Big White Circle flash mob that took place in Moscow in February 2012 as part of nationwide anti-government protests. “During White Circle, protesters sporting white symbols — white clothes, white balloons, white flowers, white toys, white dogs — joined hands along the entire length of the Garden Ring,” the artist explains in her book *Other Russias*, from which the image is taken. “White ribbons waved from passing cars, the snow was falling and the mood was upbeat. The only thing spoiling it were Nashi [a pro-Putin political youth movement] members holding signs that read, ‘Only 8 days left until Putin’s victory.’”

On the neighbouring wall lorry drivers shovel snow during their stand against road tolls in winter 2015, one of the most successful protests in Russia’s recent history. A sign on a lorry near by proclaims: “We want to feed the wife and kids, not oligarchs.”

Until her graphic reportage found an American publisher two years ago, the work of Lomasko, who dislikes being called an activist, had appeared only on a handful of “liberal intelligentsia” Russian websites and a Facebook page. “I was working in total isolation,” she says. “All my previous work as a freelance illustrator had dried up — not because of censorship necessarily, but because my subject matter made me gradually socially and professionally isolated. I became addicted to seeing how many likes I had on social media. I’m not communicating with Putin, though. I am talking to, and telling the stories



Victoria Lomasko’s mural depicts the 2012 Big White Circle protest in Moscow

of, ordinary people in an incredible — not a terrible — country.”

*Other Russias* is a surprisingly uplifting, moving and often very funny chronicle of grassroots protest movements, political trials (including those of the activist punk band Pussy Riot, as well as those of “invisible” people), provincial sex workers and bomb-scare-ridden LGBT festivals. It records the stories of marginalised ordinary people in today’s Russia, always accompanied by a line of text and often a shred of overheard dialogue. “Where can I get hold of a machinegun to kill Putin?” asks a wrinkled babushka in a headscarf, while two women sit drinking vodka

Moscow after the Skripal affair in March, Britain and Russia had been enjoying a period of unprecedented joint cultural creativity. In 2014 a packed UK-Russian Year of Culture went ahead despite Europe’s displeasure at Russia’s incursions into Ukraine; Russian cosmonauts sent greetings from space to the British Council by video message; and the British Museum stunned the world by making its first loan of one of the Elgin Marbles to the Russian State Hermitage Museum, for its 250th anniversary.

In 2016, as part of UK-Russia Year of Language and Literature, Shakespeare Day was celebrated in schools across Russia, a liveried Shakespeare train was launched on the Moscow metro and Ian McKellen toured Russia with the Midsummer Nights Festival. As a result of the recent diplomatic row, many long-planned events, including the UK-Russia Year of Music 2019, have been put on hold.

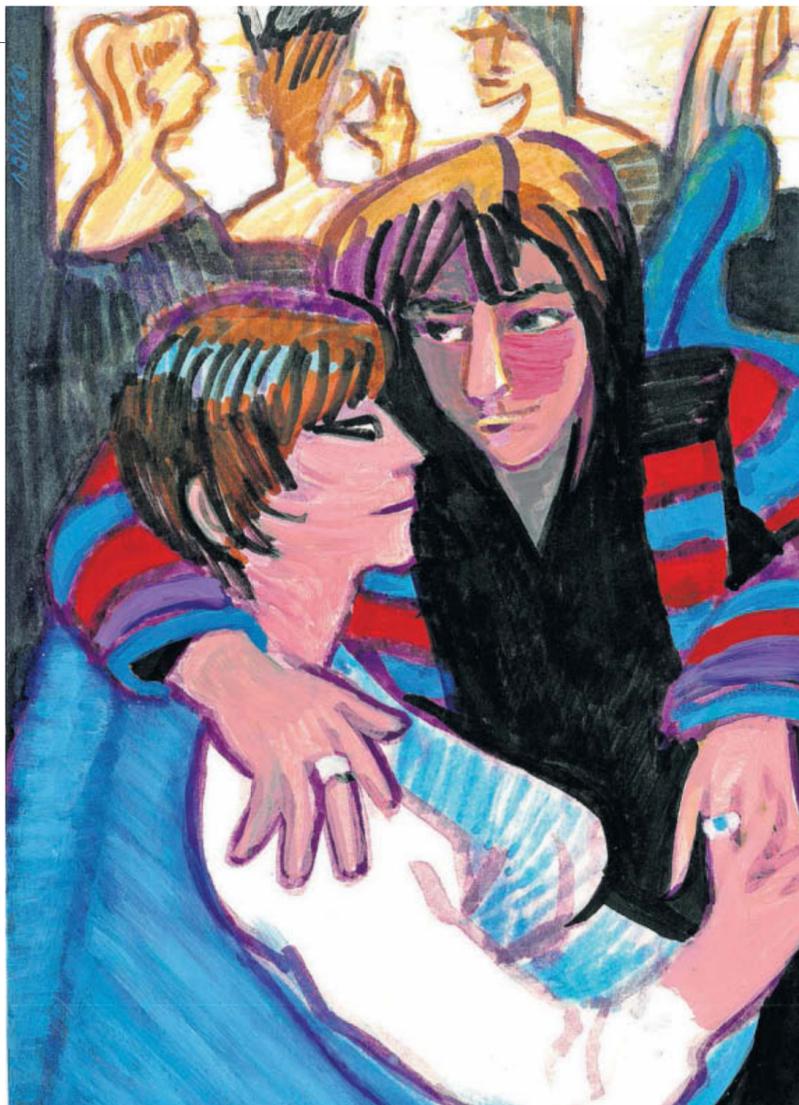
Where does this leave British-Russian cultural relations? If anything, London has become a breathing space in which Russian art can bloom. Vladimir Jurowski, an outspoken critic of Putin, has been principal conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra for more than ten years, and three of the Royal Ballet’s principal dancers are Russian nationals. Two big London exhibitions, *Revolution* at the Royal Academy and *Red Star Over Russia* at Tate Modern, enthusiastically commemorated the revolutions of 1917, relying heavily on works borrowed from Russian state museums as well as private collections, while the revolution was played down in Russia. The more recent hugely successful *Scythians* exhibition at the British Museum, made up entirely of a loan by the State Hermitage of its Scythian treasures, attracted crowds of Russians who were curious to see a collection that in St Petersburg is viewable only by appointment.

State-organised culture aside, what about the cultural exchanges

at a kitchen table, with the caption: “I’ve been feeling slutty since December.” It is shortlisted for Pushkin House’s Book Prize, the winner of which will be announced today.

Until Russia’s ministry of foreign affairs abruptly suspended the activities of the British Council in

“My subject matter made me professionally, socially isolated



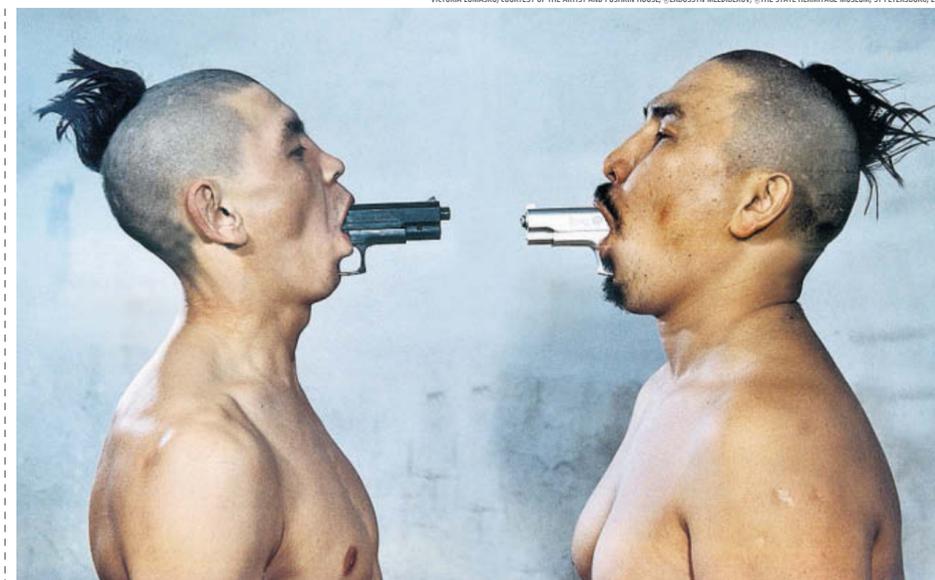
A work from Victoria Lomasko’s recent solo exhibition, 18+, at Pushkin House

one level down? “It’s been a very tough seven years,” says Elena Sudakova, the director and principal curator of the non-profit Gallery of Russian Art and Design (Grad) in London. “But the London community has been incredibly supportive and receptive. Russia is very much in our DNA [as an arts body], but the Russian artists we represent see themselves as international artists, speaking to everyone.”

How have political events this year affected Grad’s work? “Our next project is *Shadow Memory*, a digital art project with claims to be the first interactive location-based mobile app created by contemporary artists,” Sudakova says. “It will launch as part of Art Night [July 7] and will showcase urban London in a subversive light, with a diverse collection of digital cross-cultural narratives. We had to bring over many Russians in the spring when the Skripal affair was at its height and everyone told us they wouldn’t get visas, but of course they all did.”

“We work a lot with Russian artists to bring them on to the international arts scene by bringing them to London. This city is a great platform for urgent contemporary art and for moving things forward.”

In December 2016 Grad held a solo show by the Moscow-based installation artist Irina Korina.



My Brother, My Enemy, 2001, by Erbossyn Meldibekov featured in a lecture about Central Asian art at Pushkin House

*Destined to be Happy* was a site-specific installation created for Grad’s former premises near Oxford Circus. Steel beams chaotically criss-crossed the gallery, a comment on the doomed state of Moscow and modern Russia, while cheerful, emoji-like cushion shapes appeared to crush human beings, who were visible only as legs. “People came in and saw it, and asked us if it was about Brexit,” Sudakova says. “Others thought it was about climate change, which shows that art can mean different things to different people. For the first time ever we gave feedback to the artist.”

An estimated 800,000 people from Russia and the former Soviet republics — not all of them Russian-speaking, but certainly people with a habit and appetite for consuming classical culture — call London home. According to one London resident, Katya Ivanova, a high-profile event such as the recent visits of the Russian soprano Anna Netrebko or the Sovremennik theatre company (sponsored by Roman Abramovich) prompts a mass expedition among the Russian diaspora, but they are just as likely to attend events without a Russian flavour.

While there are many new cultural organisations and journals catering to Russophones and Russophiles in London, Pushkin House is often singled out by the Russian arts community as the trailblazer despite its age. It was founded as the Pushkin Club in one room of a house in Notting Hill in 1953 — the year of

Stalin’s death — by the Russian émigrée Maria Kullmann, who recognised the need for a neutral space for Russian culture to flourish. The club became a literary and musical refuge of sorts, sustained financially by the upstairs rooms it rented to students.

Throughout the years of the Soviet Union official cultural dialogue was limited to heavily supervised, state-organised exchanges by left-wing writers, such as Michael Frayn and Claire Tomalin, and between specialist, often spurious societies (philately was a notorious theme) for the promotion of “peace and friendship”. Pushkin House continued to be a place where White Russians and Soviet writers were glad to come to speak freely, without the pressure of censorship or political repercussions. Self-funded

“We are an interface between Russians and their culture

through donations, the rental of the top floor to a Russian language school and ticket sales to its events, the centre is run as a charitable trust and is consequently in nobody’s pocket.

“The role of Pushkin House in promoting Russian culture and community in England cannot be exaggerated,” says Lyuba Galkina, the founder of the Zima Group, which includes a Russian language magazine and Zima, a restaurant in Soho. “A variety of events in Russian and especially in English plays a great part in keeping a positive connection between the two countries.”

Pushkin House’s programming tries to maintain the fine balance between traditional — a Russian village choir holds regular events there based on the Russian Orthodox calendar — while looking forward. On the afternoon of my visit, Sasha Ilyukovich and the Highly Skilled Migrants, a Russian post-punk and folk band “all about the immigrant experience”, are setting up for a concert that evening.

“During the Skripal period it was very intense,” says Clementine Cecil, Pushkin House’s British director. “There was a feeling that people desperately needed answers. People wanted to hang around and talk after events to discuss and debate and try to understand. I felt then the importance of having a neutral space where things can be discussed freely, and both Russians and non-Russians feel equally welcome.”

To mark the anniversary of 1917, Pushkin House collaborated with the Russian journalist and writer Mikhail Zygar on *Project 1917*, a groundbreaking Russian history social-media project with key events and diary entries from the lead-up and duration of the revolutions announced as if they were Facebook updates or tweets. Pushkin House also commissioned a pavilion from the Moscow-based architect Alexander Brodsky in the shape of a wooden train carriage entitled *101st km: Further and Everywhere*.

The title referred to the distance that poets and other exiles had to maintain from big cities after returning from labour camps during the darkest days of the Soviet Union. “Further everywhere” was a familiar announcement on trains leaving Moscow in Soviet times, indicating many other stops; it was the guard’s enigmatic way of saying “et cetera”. Installed in Bloomsbury Square for a month, the inside of the pavilion was lined with Russian poems and their translation, while at each end a video installation showed a snowy landscape as though filmed from the front and back of the train.

At a recent poetry reading by the Russian poet Sergey Gandlevsky at Pushkin House, Cecil noted that at least one of the attendees, a Moscow restaurateur, had flown to London especially to hear the poet because it would have been harder to have done so in Moscow. “Russia is in the middle of a cultural crisis,” Cecil says. “It’s really important for Russians to see their culture represented here. We’ve become an interface between Russians and their culture. I feel we offer a freer platform than in Russia. We are helping Russians to both develop and meet their culture.”



Scythians at the British Museum, loaned by the Hermitage

## Entertainments

### Theatres

#### THE TIMES

Please be advised that calls to **084** numbers can cost up to **7p per minute** plus your network provider’s costs.

HER MAJESTY’S 020 7087 7762  
THE BRILLIANT ORIGINAL  
**THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA**  
Mon-Sat 7.30, Thu & Sat 2.30  
www.ThePhantomOfTheOpera.com

QUEENS 0844 482 5160  
The Musical Phenomenon  
**LES MISÉRABLES**  
Eves 7.30, Mats Wed & Sat 2.30  
www.LesMis.com

St Martin’s 020 7836 1443  
66th year of Agatha Christie’s  
**THE MOUSETRAP**  
Mon-Sat 7.30, Tues & Thu 3, Sat 4  
www.the-mousetrap.co.uk

Vaudeville Theatre 0330 333 4814  
Oscar Wilde’s  
**An Ideal Husband**  
Tue-Sat 19.30 | Tue, Thu & Sat 14.30  
Extra Matinees added  
Classicspring.co.uk

#### THE TIMES

Book your advertisement or announcement now at:  
**thetimes.co.uk/advertise**