

Other Russias: Interview with Victoria Lomasko

By Andrew Miller. Published in *The Nation*, 2018

The subjects of VICTORIA LOMASKO's graphic reportage are what she has called her heroes, regardless of what side of an issue they stand. In approaching work this way, she finds a way of representing the voices that connect ordinary people to one another, as well as highlighting those moments where an individual's actions and actual life may be in discord. During a lecture at the Chautauqua Institution, Lomasko stated that:

'the majority of citizens in Russia continue to be invisible because we don't have a voice in public space, and we know nothing about our rights ... for me it's interesting to collect in one series people with opposite political opinions. I draw ordinary participants, not leaders or famous politicians. I think a lot about modern alternative forms of journalism ... I follow my heroes for a long time and share fragments of their stories ... the idea is to make heroes closer to readers, so that readers start to care and help.'

For Lomasko, the foundation of her graphic reportage is not found in her Western contemporaries, such as Joe Sacco, but in the art of 19th- and early 20th-century "artist-correspondents." She has specifically pointed to early Soviet artists who captured moments from the revolution and important battles, such as the siege of Leningrad.

'Graphic sketches are a genre that require minimal budget. For example, many graphics were made during the blockade of Leningrad ... the artists were witnesses to the extreme hardships ... [I] need to feel the rhythm of an event and express it immediately in a drawing ... In comics, the compositions of all frames on a page are interdependent, so you can't insert reportorial sketches.'

Born in 1978, near the end of the Soviet era, Lomasko followed her father's wishes for her to become an artist. She was raised in the small historic city of Serpukhov, Russia, where her father designed propaganda posters and her mother worked in a print shop. Growing up just 100km south of Moscow, Lomasko said she rarely made it out of Serpukhov in her youth. As an adult, however, she has experienced far more of the world than most people, creating graphic accounts of important social events throughout many ex-Soviet countries, European countries, and the United States. It was during one of these trips that I had the good fortune of meeting her at the Chautauqua Institution, in western New York. Lomasko was invited there in support of her latest collection of graphic reportage, the book *Other Russias* (n+1, 2017), which won the 2017 Pushkin House Prize for Best Book in Translation. *Other Russias* was also named as a 2018 Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) Reading List Selection.

Andrew Miller: During your lecture, you said you began this work counter to the liberal intelligentsia of the time. As you put it, "social problems weren't interesting to them and weren't being shown in contemporary art." In your graphic reporting you specifically choose to show people struggling for their rights, does this make you an activist, or do you remain just an observer?

Victoria Lomasko: I do not like being called an activist. I am sure that the term and the concept of activism were created to sell the results of various social activities. Across history, there have been people interested not only in their private life but also in something outside of it; trying to influence what they were passionate or concerned about.

Nobody calls artists such as Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, or Käthe Kollwitz "activists." In their art, there were political and social topics. Like them, I am an artist, not an activist; I do not belong to any special interest groups.

There has been some reporting about your brief time taking courses at the Institute of Problems of Contemporary Art in Russia, now called the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art. According to several articles, you didn't feel as though you fit in, because the institute was obsessed with conceptual art and eschewed social realism. With that in mind, other than the three you just mentioned, which artists are you most influenced by?

I'm not impressed with the conceptual, modern, plastic paintings which have no plot to them. I'm attracted to when the artist is at the junction of a historical situation, and they were able to depict these changes, find new images for new heroes, create a new iconography. David Siqueiros works are so out of this world that it's unclear how to learn from him, I just admire him. Some of my graphic decisions were learned from the German artist George Grosz. Of course, Russian artists are extremely important to me, who, despite their high professional level, are almost unknown in foreign countries. It is unlikely that you will know anything by the names of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Alexander Deineka, Pavel Kuznetsov. Petrov-Vodkin and Deineka drew primarily on the theme of the Great October Socialist Revolution, creating the first images of Soviet people. And Kuznetsov, the "Russian Gauguin," worked in the Russian colonies in Turkestan. I may be critical of his subject matter, but the work itself is very beautiful.

I believe your father was also an artist, you have said that he spent his work days drawing hundreds of Lenins, but also that he painted on his own time; is that why you became interested in art?

My father worked as an artist at the secret Serpukhov metallist plant[1] where he did the design and artwork for Soviet posters. And for himself in his spare time, his father painted landscapes with views of the ruining Serpukhov churches. It's funny that he was sure that the churches would completely collapse and remain only in his paintings, but now in our city, most of the Soviet plants have turned into ruins, while the churches are perfectly restored—a good example of how the political system and ideology changed.

My father, even before my birth, firmly decided that his child would be an artist. If I had brothers and sisters, he would have made them artists, too. Perhaps if not for his pressure, I would have become a poet or writer.

Our apartment was always littered with paintings by my father and other artists, and I was irritated by all these canvases. Paintings are an object that must be displayed, or else stored away, and I was more interested in developing a clear message from a story, or idea, that could be easily shared.

In other interviews, you've mentioned being tired of Moscow and considered living someplace else. Are you still living and working in Moscow? Have you gone back to Serpukhov?

A few years ago, I felt tired of Moscow, and I tried harder to work primarily in the post-Soviet countries: Georgia, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. It is interesting to me that my love for Moscow returned after trips to America. My first award for my work included a trip to New York, I won for my courtroom drawings.[2]

After spending time in New York, I no longer perceive Moscow as a tough metropolis. Rather, I think of it as a pretty Asian city, comfortable, like well-worn house slippers. I think that Moscow is the only city in Russia I would choose to live in now. Unfortunately, in 2017, a huge project called "the renovation" launched in Moscow. The plan was to demolish more than 5,000 five-story houses and move the residents to new high-rise buildings. My house, fortunately, did not end up being part of this program. I say this because I thought it might be, apparently, the new houses are of terrible quality and in bad areas. After the rallies of 2017 against "the renovation" project in Moscow, there are no notable social movements I'm currently following. I return to Serpukhov every few months.

Given the fact you followed in your father's footsteps, have you and your father worked together on any projects? Also, you've said that your mother worked at a print house in Serpukhov, how has that impacted your work?

My father and I have different views on life and art, we work in different genres and techniques, so I can't imagine how we could do joint projects. But I used an image of him, posed as the Soviet artist creating some of his works as part of the fresco, "The Daughter of an Artist Decorator," which I made for an exhibition in Manchester.

My mother studied at the Moscow State University of Printing Arts as a typographer and worked all her life in the Serpukhov Print House. The print house, which has been completely preserved in its appearance since the Soviet era, was closed only last year. I managed to sketch the final days of this enterprise in operation.

I also studied at the Moscow State University of Printing Arts, where I learned to make art books, so I can say I got a synthesis of parental creative strategies. Since childhood, I was drawn not to painting, but books. I was interested in the synthesis of images and text.

Did you learn to be a journalist while at university?

I have no formal literary or journalistic education. I wrote quite a lot in childhood and adolescence, but, determined that I would enter the art department, I abandoned writing. It was very difficult for me to start writing again. My first book, Forbidden Art, I co-authored with artist-journalist Anton Nikolayev, who wrote most of the texts.

The book Other Russias begins each series of graphics with text meant to serve only as short commentary to the images. To understand how to develop my reportage into a book, I read journalist Masha Gessen's book, From Life: A Manual on Social Journalism. It's funny, I got to know Gessen not in Moscow, but only now in Chattanooga.[3] This gave me a chance to compliment her on her book. Over time, I became more confident with my work, then winning the opportunity to study post-Soviet countries for the "Trans-border Journalism" project, participating in it along with professional journalists.

During this American tour with Other Russias, I have on many occasions recalled Soviet caricatures about the "cruel grin of capitalism," such as when I was drawing a graphic reportage in Pittsburgh, in an area where primarily African-Americans live. I was also struck by the huge number of beggars and homeless in New York City, and how many of these people talk to themselves—they have gone mad, unable to fit into society. People in America, in my opinion, either become very adult and independent or quickly degrade.

Soviet people, by and large, remained at a level of adolescence—the state controlled all spheres of their life and provided basic needs: free housing, medicine, and education.

Today, there is almost nothing left of the Soviet way of life, people have learned to survive on their own. In Russian society, this has caused a huge social stratification. And instead of communist ideology, patriotism, Orthodoxy, and nationalism have taken its place.

During your CLSC lecture, you spoke about the relationship between your drawings and the text. You said, "sometimes I see the ideal image, both visually and in social context; I need only pick them up and place them on my paper. At once I understand these are strong images." Whereas in other cases the image is subordinate to the text. So, when you include quotations, do you try to capture direct quotes, or do you summarize, or is it something else?

The idea of including dialogues in the reporting came from my reading of New Journalism by Tom Wolfe; along with some other books on journalism. Unfortunately, I can only capture a couple of the characters' phrases, but I would like to be able to record and include interesting whole dialogues.

Although you prefer not to be called an activist, in your lecture you mentioned working with activists and other human rights organizations. It is also factual that you've had difficulties in the past overcoming censorship of your work, including Other Russias, which itself has not been printed for the Russian market. As an outside observer, it feels natural that this would be an issue for you given how much of your work shows how ordinary citizens struggle to express themselves freely. When focusing on both marginalized groups and closed groups, you not only capture more liberal or leftist characters, such as Russian LGBTQ+ communities; but you've also captured Orthodox activists and youth serving time in detention facilities. How do you see yourself in this narrative? Do you have to confront your own ideals to do this work? Are you ever surprised by the viewpoints of your heroes?

In recent years, I rarely show up and receive orders for my work at home in Russia, but I have many offers from abroad—Germany, England, the United States—so there is no need to complain.

In Russia, it is difficult to be surprised at any combination of political views. You can meet ardent communists, such as Kapitalina Ivanovna from my drawing, who prays to God that the rain does not spoil her icon of Lenin, Engels, and Marx. Likewise, many who hate Putin at the same time say they adore Stalin. Some of the liberals and leftists unexpectedly supported the annexation of Crimea to Russia. Sometimes it is positive though. I remember how, during the occupation of the camp of Abai Abai, the left organized a library, lectures, theatrical performances, while the hardened nationalists guarded the camp in solidarity.

When I first started doing graphic reports, I considered myself left. But gradually came to the realization that people are too complex to look at them only from a political standpoint. For example, many of the heroes of the reportage "Truckers, Torfanka and Dubki" had nationalistic views, or despised LGBT people, but within their confrontation with the authorities they were fearless and uncompromising, they were honest and generous with each other. And many times, I encountered how friends from the political left turned out to be sex tourists or were prejudice against other nationalities. I like to avoid conviction and just show why people choose their ways. I don't want to criticize, but instead, show how that if we can change ourselves we can also change society.

Your philosophy is very encouraging. What pieces have you worked on that you feel have had a noticeable impact on public perception?

Perhaps the breakthrough was a project in children's colonies, where I not only created graphic reportage myself but also conducted drawing classes for pupils and after published the results on various social networks. At that time through the official media, there were almost no articles about the children's colonies, and many considered me a hero for venturing into what they believed were very dangerous places.

However, after a series of publications, the readership changed their attitude towards the pupils, and a few of my acquaintances even became volunteers themselves in the children's colonies.

Besides graphic reportage, you have contributed directly to some activist actions. For example, you created a map of the trucker strikes to be used as propaganda in support of the truckers. How do you choose when to use strict reportage, or to use something more directly associated with one side of an issue?

Usually I confine myself to only creating my graphic reports, but of all the characters in the book Other Russias, the truckers turned out to be the most attractive to me, so when they asked me to make them a poster for the strike, I was happy to help them. Beside that instance, I have on my own initiative created posters in support of Pussy Riot, and for rallies against the war in Ukraine.

You mentioned some homophobic men threatening to beat you up at an LGBTQ+ rally until they realized you were drawing them, and then they became flattered. Have there been any times you felt your safety, wellbeing, or freedom was being threatened because of your work?

The most unpleasant thing was drawing at the trial against the organizers of the conceptual art exhibition. The criminal case was initiated by Orthodox activists, they came to all meetings and each time threatened me either with a lawsuit or with physical reprisal for graphic reports I made using their image. We were all detained and taken to the police station, where we were forced to sign a paper that we would no longer hold exhibitions in public spaces without official permission. At the same time, the police said that they liked the drawings and asked me to leave a few prints for them to keep for themselves.

I think in 2018 such a situation would have been impossible. We would definitely have been fined, and it's unlikely that the policemen would have been nice.

In my copy of *Other Russias*, instead of just a signature you gave me (and many others) the gift of an original drawing. Again, thank you so much for that, I will treasure it. Is this something you always do at your book signing events? When you are working in the street, drawing reportage pieces, do you have requests from your subjects for the drawing or a copy of it?

My first professional trip was to France, to the great comic book festival in Angoulême. There, I became acquainted with this French tradition. French authors of graphic books do not just put their signature, they make a drawing without fail. Many French artists create very complex compositions using only colored ink. I liked the idea. For me, it's more important to make a funny personal message to every reader, not an exquisite drawing. In *Other Russias*, I always draw my self-portrait and a Russian bear, and then for each reader, these characters have a personalized message.

When drawing on the street, the characters of my reportage often want to see how they look in the drawings. The originals are rarely asked for as a gift, they understand that I need the drawings for my work, and usually they are satisfied with a photo on their phone.

Regarding the materials you utilize, specifically A4 size paper and limited color palettes; are these practical choices or aesthetic choices?

When I'm drawing on scene, I'm using an A4 format album. I would be glad to make larger drawings, but they are too difficult to draw due to the weight. This format is a convenient size for me and best matches my drawing speed.

I rarely use color in my graphic reportage if events are developing because the emphasis is not on actions but on the words of the characters. For example, I did not need color in the report "Slaves from Moscow," which is mostly portraits of the twelve freed slaves from the Produkty grocery store. It was more important to have their stories, about what they experienced in slavery and what they now hope for. It's the same with the black and white graphic report of the "Girls of Nizhny Novgorod"—an interview with sex workers in their offices—just unmemorable, plain-looking apartments. But, for example, in my forthcoming book about the post-Soviet countries, there is a lot of color because the trips took place in the summer and I drew a lot of southern landscapes and scenes taking place in the open air.

Thank you so much for spending time in conversation with me. One last question, what advice do you have for young artists? What comes next for you?

My advice to young artists is to pay less attention to what is in demand and sells well at the moment. Just persevere in what you are attracted to. Probably, you will have to live a few tough years, but when the recognition comes, you and your message will be out front of the competition.

I could always make money just doing illustration, but I decided to do graphic reports. When I began in this genre no one in Russia was doing it, and my earnings came infrequently. Notoriety came gradually. Today, I earn enough from my various publications, exhibitions, and one-off murals, lectures and teaching master classes.

However, first off, I need to finish my book of reportage on post-Soviet countries. The next idea is to make an autobiographical book, *My Serpukhov*, in which I get away from journalism in the direction of stories and essays, not only about current events but about my personal experience. Finally, perhaps, there will be some kind of graphic memoir based on my trips to America. Oh, and I'm also very interested in working with frescoes, which I perceive as frozen poems.

[1] The metallist plant in Serpukhov had been under the management of the Soviet army and was used in the development of the Soviet space program and rocketry components.

[2] Photography is not allowed in Russian courts, so Lomasko used her graphic reportage to cover the trial of two art curators, Andrei Yerofeyev and Yuri Samodurov. They had hosted an exhibition of banned art. Orthodox activists destroyed the exhibition, yet it was the curators on trial for inciting religious and ethnic hatred. No charges were brought against the vandals. Ultimately, the curators were found guilty. Lomasko published the courtroom drawings in collaboration with journalist Anton Nikolayev as the book *Forbidden Art*.

[3] Masha Gessen was also at the Chautauqua Institution as an invited guest lecturer for a weeklong series devoted to Russian-American relations in this time of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Gessen's book, *From Life: A Manual on Social Journalism*, was published by UNESCO solely for Russian audiences. Gessen, like Lomasko, devotes much of her time to reporting on ordinary Russians struggling to maintain basic rights and dignity.