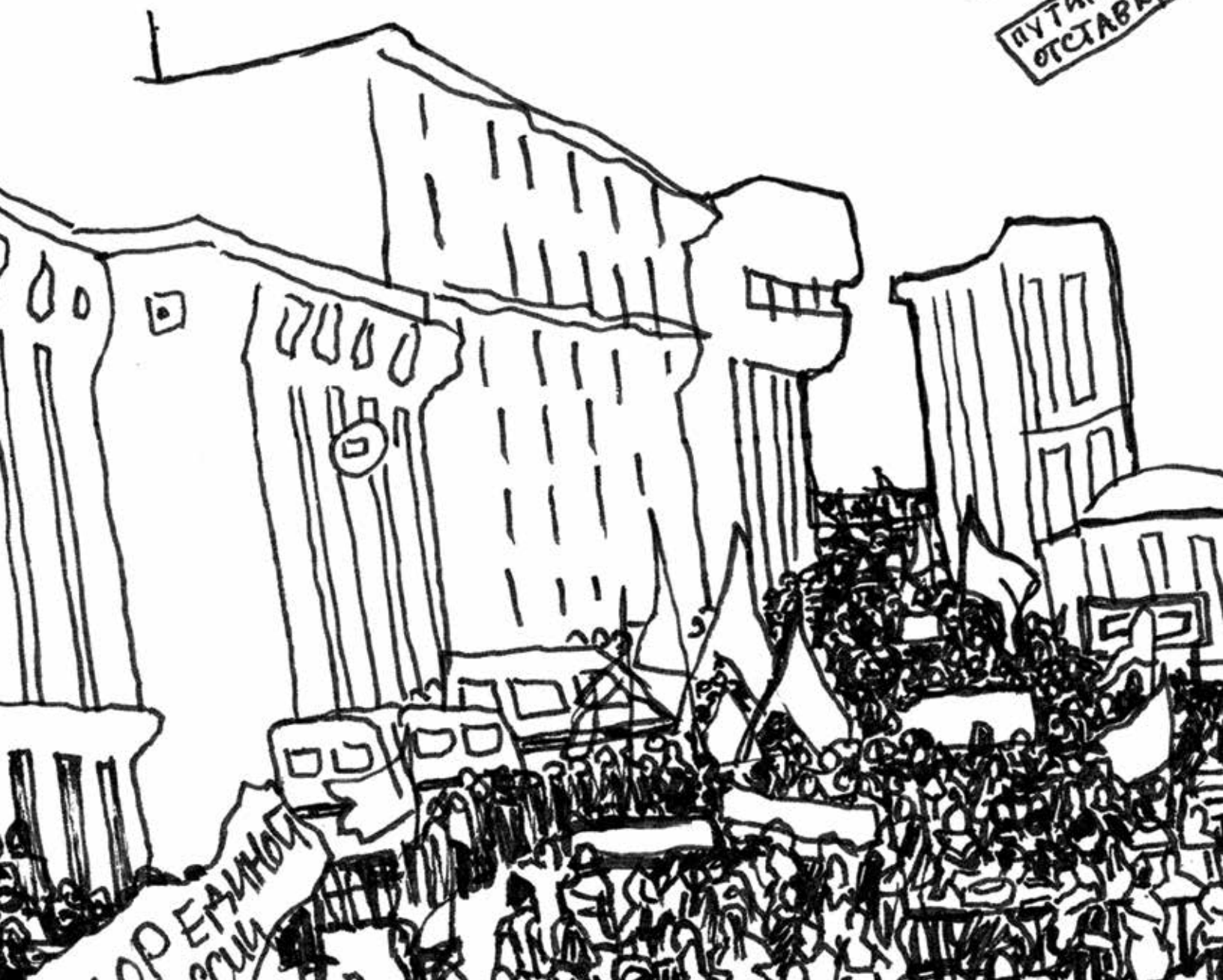


BY BELA SHAYEVICH

# VICTORIA LOMASKO

## DRAWING IN THE DARK

*Sakharov Avenue, December 24, 2011; sign on balloons:*  
RETIRE PUTIN. All images in this essay, with the exception  
of photo on page 44, © Victoria Lomasko.



**A**mid the swirling masses of the 2012 opposition protests in Moscow, a young woman stood still with her sketchbook, capturing their essence. Her tools were simple: pen and paper, and yet, they were sufficient for artist Victoria Lomasko to make drawings

deeper than photos, more evocative than words. “I approached each protest as a unique individual, trying to pin down its particular mood.” She always draws on location, with the energy of what’s happening pulsing through her. According to Lomasko, one of the most important advantages

that drawing during protests has over photography is the way it allows the artist to soak everything in, then unify it into the final product. While drawing huge crowds, Lomasko carefully selected the most expressive banners and individuals, forming an image of the demonstration in time—not





Above: Lomasko on the background of her series *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*; photo by Sergey Chernov. Opposite page: “I’ve been feeling slutty since December.” From the series *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*.

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simply at the moment of having its snapshot taken. Another advantage: “Unlike a photographer, I can work in the dark.”

Victoria Lomasko was born in Serpukhov, a small town outside of Moscow, in 1978. The daughter of, in her words, “a failed artist,” she was pressed to follow in her father’s footsteps, despite her desire to become a writer instead. She received her bachelor’s in

book design, and enrolled in a master’s program at the Institute of Contemporary Art, only to find that her lack of interest in conceptualism made her an outsider. Lomasko had become interested in figurative drawing, which was nearly taboo in the Moscow art world of the early twenty-first century. But the criticisms of her instructors and peers didn’t stop her. Seeking a way out of the tyranny of conceptualism, she returned to her adolescent practice of going out in public and sketching strangers. “Soon, I began writing down what the people I drew were saying,” she says. “And that’s when something clicked.”

In the West, the union of text and image is associated with comics; the combination of text, image, and current events is known as “comics journalism.” While Lomasko is most often compared with Joe Sacco

and Marjane Satrapi, she actually takes her inspiration from Russian graphic traditions, calling herself a graphic reporter, producing graphic reportage. These traditions have nothing to do with laying out a narrative into panels. Instead, Lomasko is concerned with being a witness to historical events, such as protests and political trials, or having close interactions with people, and drawing them as she experiences them. She names her influences as the nineteenth-century graphic reporters who made drawings for newspapers before photography became the common practice; artists who captured the events of the Russian Revolution; then, those who were imprisoned in the gulag and trapped in Leningrad during the siege. Their purpose was not to stylize current events or translate them into narratives, but simply to illustrate them as they happened. For Lomasko, the text within the frame is always a direct, unedited quotation from whomever she is drawing—the complement to a subject’s image, their voice. The texts that surround Lomasko’s drawings describe her experiences with her subjects, their conversations, and the conditions in which she finds them. In her nuanced personal essays, she often reflects on her own involvement with these subjects, and the political situations they’re forced to encounter together.

Like many young journalists and documentarians, Lomasko started out too shy to directly approach strangers, preferring instead to eavesdrop on them. But she knew that she needed to learn how to interview people. So for her first independent foray into reportage, she chose as her protagonist her aunt, a middle-

aged, divorced woman living in a typical Russian provincial town. She traveled there to speak to her and her friends, and the result was “Feminine,” a visual essay on Russian women of a certain age confronting loneliness and economic hardship. The essay’s sensitive portraits are paired with quotations from the women, whose acrid humor would become a trademark of Lomasko’s work. But the accompanying text is the key counterbalance: while Lomasko depicts her subjects with empathy, they ultimately embody the traditional Russian values according to which she, as a single woman and artist, is a failure because she’s not

married and has no kids. The way Lomasko contends with this is one of the deepest insights of the piece.

“Feminine” is a remarkable introduction not only to Lomasko’s striking, iconographic visual style but also to her special brand of Russian feminism. Though she is pitied and looked down upon by her subjects, she ultimately identifies with them, embodying a commitment to depicting women’s struggles and triumphs from the perspective of the working class, where she comes from, and not an academic elite, dealing in theory and ideas. This approach—showcasing the friction between Lomasko’s roots and her status as a

cosmopolitan artist—creates a unique bridge between oppositional spheres of Russian culture, illuminating deep connections between seemingly contradictory worlds.

Before 2012, Lomasko’s work developed along two tracks: she documented trials and worked with marginalized groups. She began volunteering with an organization that assisted children in juvenile detention centers and would travel to them to give drawing lessons. What began as a way to gain access to the institutions in aims of drawing them turned into a long-term volunteer project. In addition to teaching the children to draw, listening to them,



Barclays Center, Brooklyn,  
New York (2017). Image from  
the series *U.S. Tour* (2017),  
courtesy of Victoria Lomasko.



and telling their stories, Lomasko collected their work and showed it in art galleries. She also compiled her lessons into a program for teaching drawing in prison.

As her reputation grew, humanitarian nonprofits began reaching out to her. She worked with organizations like the St. Petersburg LGBT film festival Side by Side and Oxfam's HIV/AIDS initiative to create materials on critically marginalized groups. Part of the reason these groups wanted drawings, Lomasko says, is that they preserve the anonymity of the vulnerable while still telling their stories. The intimacy she cultivates with many of her subjects, combined with the safety of drawing, leads to texts and images whose effect is both stirring and gradual, something to sit with and take in.

Perhaps Lomasko's most powerful series is *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*, about sex workers in the small industrial city. Lomasko was able to meet these women through an activist who brought them hygienic supplies and tested them for HIV. She would not have otherwise had the opportunity to speak to so many of these women. Working with the activist, she only had five to fifteen minutes to talk to and draw each woman, often while her subject was being tested for HIV. The drawings reflect this urgency: they were completed in thick black marker, which allowed Lomasko to work as quickly as possible. As a result, they are rough and bold, like woodcuts, and the women's compressed anger flares through in their cutting and concise comments on men and money. "I have a degree; I'm not about to sweep stairwells," says one.

"A lot of them show up just to chat," says another. "We ought to raise the prices for talking—our brains are worth more."

In September 2011, Vladimir Putin announced that in the upcoming election he would run for president, brandishing the final nail for the coffin of Russian democracy. In Moscow and other cities, this announcement set off a wave of protests the likes of which had not been seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. "In the early '90s, I was a teenager living in Serpukhov, and, although it is only 200 kilometers from Moscow, no one there would have dreamed of taking the train and attending the protests. We just watched them on TV. So when Moscow was once again swept by demonstrations, I resolved not to miss a single one," says Lomasko. Over the course of 2011 and 2012, Lomasko drew *A Chronicle of Resistance*, documenting demonstrations, rallies, and political trials, including the trial of Pussy Riot. The rousing drawings from this series were published in oppositionist

Russian publications and abroad as documentation and agitprop.

Lomasko did not shy away from the contradictions of the movement, which galvanized many kinds of different groups, bringing them together. She was more interested in showing them all side by side, in dialogue, and many of her strongest pieces are diptychs of people expressing opposing viewpoints. She was not trying to produce propaganda, but using the opportunity of everyone being out in the street to show how the many marginalized voices she had been drawing for years come together to shout in discordant unison.

"The verdict is overturned, and the case will be sent back to the district court for retrial. Osipova will remain in police custody until March 15."

Приговор  
отменён.  
Дело возвращается  
в районный суд  
на новое  
рассмотрение.  
Осипова  
остаётся  
под арестом  
до  
15  
марта.



Lomasko began finding it increasingly difficult to publish and show her work in Russia. What was worse, many of the nonprofit organizations she had worked for were also feeling the squeeze, both politically and financially.

She grew in renown, and her drawings began to be shown in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and throughout Europe. Alongside gallery exhibitions, Lomasko participated in DIY shows. For instance, at Occupy Abai, Moscow's 2012 version of Occupy Wall Street, Lomasko's drawings from the protest camp were displayed in the camp, to the delight of the protesters. Her drawings for *Volya* (Will), a samizdat anarchist

newspaper, were wheeled through the city on a cart.

At the same time, Lomasko joined forces with artist and critic Nadia Plungian to curate "The Feminist Pencil," a show of women's socially engaged graphic art, mostly from Russia. The work in the show had notably low commercial viability for its political content and media and was created by mostly unknown women artists. It was radical and

Woman holding flowers: "Are the police with the people?"



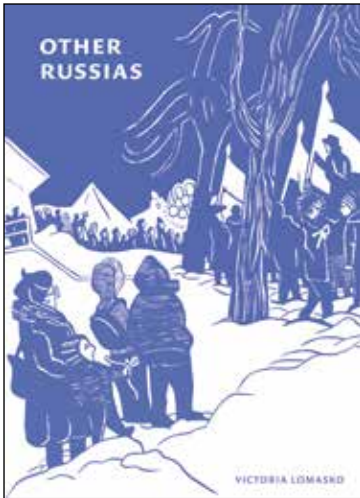
inspired radical opposition: there were cases of visitors to the gallery defacing it. Nonetheless, Lomasko and Plungian cocurated a second iteration, “Feminist Pencil 2,” and it traveled to St. Petersburg, Oslo, and Berlin, where they held workshops and lectures open to the public.

With Putin’s reelection, the budding opposition movement found itself squashed. Harsh prison sentences were doled out to activists, such as Pussy Riot and Taisiya Osipova, as well as everyday people who’d come to the protests, such as the defendants in the 2012 Bolotnoe Delo trials. Lomasko began finding it increasingly difficult to publish and show her work in Russia. What was worse, many of the nonprofit organizations she had worked for were also feeling the squeeze, both politically and financially. Everywhere she looked, there was less and less opportunity and a growing sense of doom.

However, new opportunities had meanwhile blossomed outside of Russia. A grassroots feminist group in Kyrgyzstan invited her to Bishkek to teach a workshop. With this trip, Lomasko began her exploration of the post-Soviet landscape, focusing on gender and the vestiges of Russian and Soviet imperialism. In subsequent years, she traveled to Dagestan, Georgia, and Armenia, producing colorful series that explore these territories with fresh eyes. She recounts how the head of St. Petersburg’s Center for Independent Sociological Research was shocked by her report on Tbilisi. “That’s not the Georgia I visited,” he told her. And how *could* it be? While people rolled out the red carpet for the high-ranking sociologist, Lomasko embedded herself in grassroots



Top to bottom: Pittsburgh; Brooklyn Subway; Trans Black Women. All from Lomasko’s series *U.S. Tour* (2017).



*Other Russias*

Victoria Lomasko

Translated from the Russian

by Thomas Campbell

n+1 Foundation (2017)

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[www.nplusonemag.com](http://www.nplusonemag.com)

activist groups that she worked with, learning about the activists and their battles organically, alongside the work she did with them. Plus, as a woman and artist in a society that takes neither identity very seriously, she was able to have the kind of interactions that gave her a ground-level perspective—something an official researcher would have to struggle to find. Eventually, Lomasko hopes to travel to all the former Soviet republics and create a compendium of her essays. “In the post-Soviet landscape,” she says, “one sees many of the same issues that affect people in the middle of Russia, but through a new lens.”

In March 2017, a collection of Lomasko’s reportage was published by the Brooklyn publishing house

n+1 as *Other Russias*. It is not only Lomasko’s first book in English but also the first time her work has been collected. It was republished by Penguin UK in June and is to be translated into a number of languages. The book is divided into two sections: “Invisible” and “Angry.” The first includes many of her stories about marginalized groups from before the 2012 protests, and the latter focuses on opposition in Russia from 2012 to 2016, ending with the grassroots social movements led by Moscow park defenders and long-haul truckers. To support the release of her book, Lomasko embarked on a U.S. book tour, including a stop at the Harriman Institute. After her talk, Lomasko was confronted by a group



НАБЛЮДАТЕЛИ  
НАБЛЮДАЮТ  
ЗА ПОДСЧЁТОМ  
ГОЛОСОВ



of individuals from the audience seemingly there to express the views of the Russian government, barraging her with questions about why she supported Pussy Riot. The tension in the otherwise supportive room was an important reminder that the warm reception she meets from Western audiences is but a reprieve from Russia's wintry political climate. "I just want the Russian government to follow its own laws," she told one of the men confronting her. "Since when are you a lawyer?" he retorted. "I'm not," she calmly replied, and moved on to the next question. ■

*Bela Shayevich is an artist and translator living in Brooklyn. She received her M.A. in Russian translation from Columbia in 2007.*

*Right: Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh. From the series U.S. Tour (2017).  
Left: Election observers observing the vote count (March 4, 2012).*

