



## The Cherkashins: The Art of Societal Changes

Editor-in-Chief Vivian Van Dijk from EYES IN after meeting Valera & Natasha Cherkashin and seeing their photography art works:

“Life can be documented through photography. When you meet this smart and warm couple you feel that photography and art is their life. They are breathing and consuming it every day. Their art works show that. High quality works made with an eye for detail. Their photography artworks blend even on the edge of being impressionistic paintings. They follow the world with 2 sets of eyes and absorb global movements together. Their amazing cosmopolitan subway art project is one example of that. Photography at its best and at the same time witnessing momentum’s of the art of time in a global ever changing world. Leave that up to the Cherkashins and you will get masterpieces created.”

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**“When we see other talents, we realize that the world is indivisible.”**

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Valera and Natasha Cherkashin are unlike any other artist you may have encountered. This is due not just to their exclusive, global visual art that continually adapts to reflect the generational change of governments, culture and the world. It is also due to their unique perspective and background from a bygone era, one that was marked by tumultuous social change and of which these two emerged as powerful artists with a clear voice.

Born in the Ukraine in 1948, Valera Cherkashin first discovered photography in his late teens, when he took pictures of his body developing and transforming into an adult. For a short time in his 20s, Valera studied Visual Art, but walked away from it to devote himself to the study of martial arts, in both practice and philosophy, and soon became an instructor. Having

always remained interested in the arts, it was during that period of his life that Valera collaborated with Boris Mikhailov to exhibit the art of their early years. The exhibit rekindled Valera's love for visual art and inspired his move to Moscow in the 80s, where he became a part of the Russian avant-garde and contemporary art community.

While in the Moscow Metro in 1982, Valera met Natasha, a Russian who was born in Damascus to a diplomat. Natasha worked as a physics teacher and was involved in the performance arts as a mime artist before meeting Valera. The chemistry between the two inspired them to join their artistic minds to express the times they were living in: the Soviet Era.

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Using monuments, newspapers, public spaces and historical events, the Cherkashins communicated their take on current society, best showcased in their work titled “The End of the Epoch.”

In the 90s, they joined the USSR Union of Artists and were awarded a grant from the Foundation for Social Innovations, an idea of Mikhail Gorbachev as a way to return an open civil society to Russia. In 1994, the couple was invited to the United States by the Museum of Fine Arts, New Mexico. It was their first time in the United States and it left a profound impact on the duo. The trip gave them a deeper understanding of the power of change, how it affected their own country and how to use it in their expressive art creations. They returned to Moscow with the desire to incorporate their

new insight into their artwork. It was their first time in the United States and it left a profound impact on the duo. The trip gave them a deeper understanding of the power of change, how it affected their own country and how to use it in their expressive art creations. They returned to Moscow with the desire to incorporate their new insight into their artwork.

Near the turn of the century, when Europe was in the upheaval of fully converting to the use of the Euro, the Cherkashins saw it as an opportune time to communicate the deeper message of the political/financial events: the loss of identity. As each nation surrendered their currency for inclusion in the European Union, each also surrendered a piece of their past, their national identity, at a high cost.

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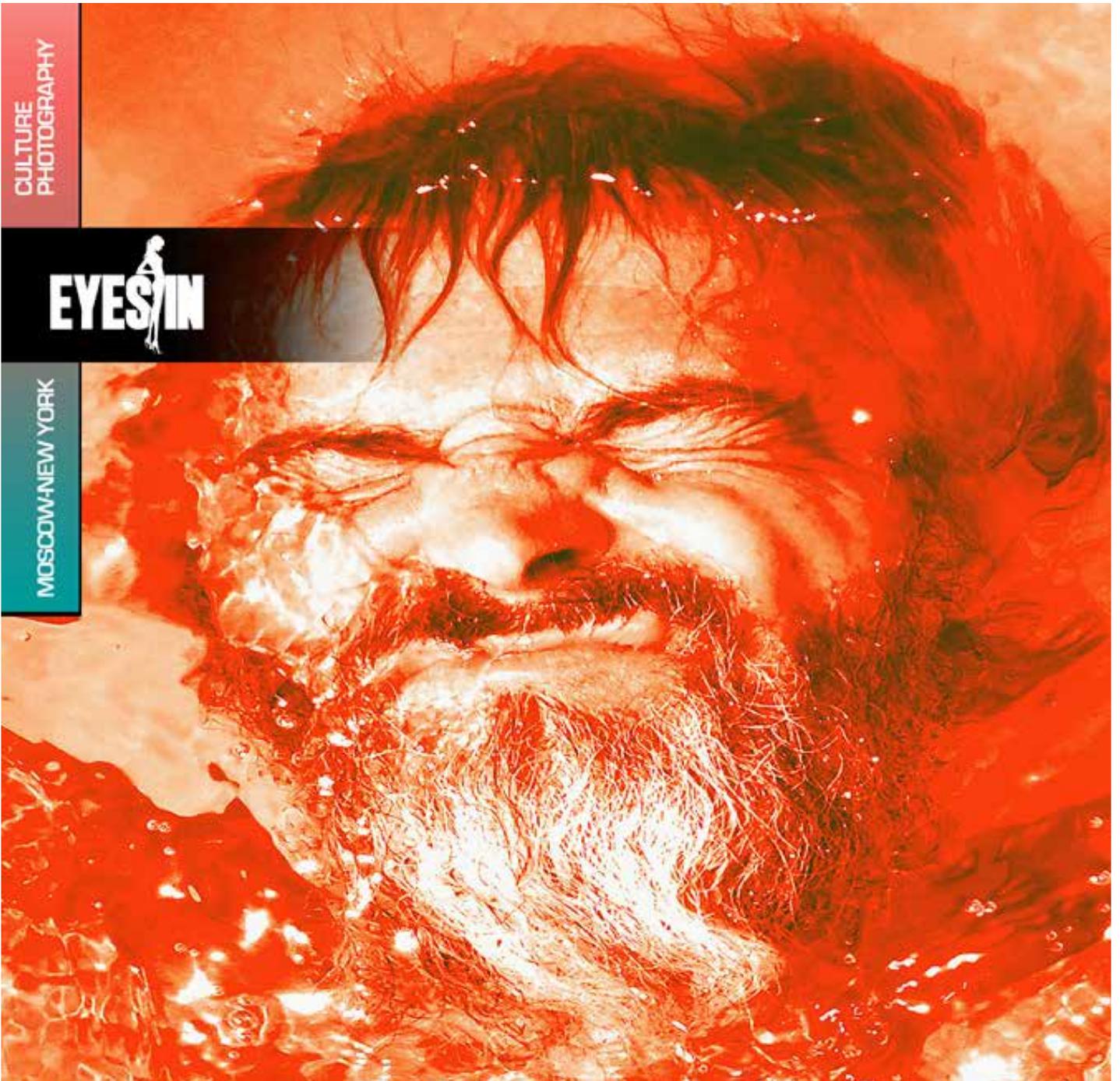


What came out of it was the Cherkashin's underwater installation piece called, "Good-bye Favorite European Portraits: Hello Euro." Placed in the reflection pool at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C., it communicated the relationship between money, government, art and national identity, as the loss of those country-specific icons were forever lost

Now residents of New York City, the Cherkashins have successfully embraced modern technology while still maintaining their artistic roots. At the New York School of Visual Arts the couple expanded their work into digital art and video installations. They have had their art collections showcased at the Art Institute of Chicago, The New York Public Library, The Museum

of Fine Art Santa Fe, and many international venues as well. They have also lectured at numerous universities, including Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Tokyo University of Polytechnics and the Russian State University for Humanities.

Their piece "Global Underground," explores the way underground metro systems around the world link us together, by more means than just transportation, and how they reveal the cultural fabric of each country. The five-year project which started in New York City, is a worldwide digital photo and video tour that recreates a virtual subway, taking the viewer to New York, London, Paris, Stockholm, Berlin, Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo.



Since their collaboration in the 80s, the Cherkashins have featured more than 100 individual exhibits and performances. More recent collections have that same persisting theme of change and incorporate environmental issues, portrayed in their work, "The Evolution of Chaos: Apocalypse." The couple also recognizes the significance

of the planetary shift into the "Age of Aquarius" and have produced collections to reflect that, namely "Radiant Outburst" and "Immersion." The creative duo have also published books of their art collections.

To learn more about Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, please visit [metro33.org](http://metro33.org)

## A Conversation with the Cherkashins

### As a child, what did you want to become?

Valera: I was born shortly after World War II in Ukraine, at the territory where military operations were conducted. It was easy to find abandoned weapons or ammunition. Once I found a jar of gunpowder. I was curious to see how it burns, so I set it on fire. The skin on my face burned completely, but my eyes somehow survived. That was a miracle. This way, I received the baptism of war. But still up to 18-years-old, I desired to become a major military commander.

Natasha: My father was an architect and then became a diplomat. My parents moved from one country to another. So instead of Moscow, I was born in Damascus, one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. As a child, I was very active and couldn't stay in one place longer than a minute. I was jumping, spinning and dancing all the time. I imagined myself a famous dancer.

### In which town did you grow up?

Valera: I grew up between a traditional Ukrainian-Russian village and the big city of Kharkov, the former capital of Ukraine. Thanks to that, I feel and well-understand both the nature and the city civilization.

Natasha: I grew up mostly in Moscow, with some periods in Bamako and Casablanca. I was very lucky to be able to see other countries as a child, because most of the people in the Soviet Union were not allowed to go out of the country at that time.

### Do you think your background has influenced your current photography and artist style? If so, what specific element in your background is most pervasive in influencing your current photography and artist style?

Valera: In early childhood, my two uncles were involved in family and everyday photography, but it did not interest me. When I was 12, I bought a simple cheap camera, and quickly learned to shoot and print my own photographs. But household surveys were not interesting to me. I mostly photographed myself and the development of my body, as well as some of my actions. I was interested in bodybuilding at that time. The fact that I have often lived in the countryside, in nature, helps me to maintain optimism and positivism, as it clears me from extreme and destructive ideas. We still spend a month every summer in Crimea, in the nature, near the Black Sea. We dedicate this time to yoga, meditations, work with energy, as well as taking pictures for new projects. Many new ideas come to us there.

Natasha: I grew up in a big city and I loved it. We didn't have a country house. Instead, almost every weekend we traveled somewhere by car. I learned a lot about the history of Russia this way. I got used to moving and quickly adjusting to new circumstances. I still like to learn from different cultures, and at the same time try not to forget my roots. Also, we had a lot of art books at home. I spent hours looking at art and absorbing it. But before I met Valera, I didn't think about becoming an artist. He changed my life. Before, I was a teacher of physics in English and an actor at mime theatre.

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### What inspires you in the job of being a photographer & artist?

Valera: I love movement, love traveling and thinking about the meaning of life and art, about social and political changes. I like a sense of belonging, and therefore I feel a great responsibility to the art.

Natasha: I like to share my impressions, and photography gives me this wonderful opportunity. It’s a great material, which fixes the state of the world at a certain moment.

### In which way do you consider yourself an innovative creator?

Valera: In synthesis.

Natasha: When we only started to collaborate, one art critic said: “In your artworks you combine the incompatible” and it seems we still do it.

### In which way do you use innovative technologies into your photography and artistic works?

Valera: New events and new times require new forms of expression. Technology is only a tool. And it’s important to find the right tool to express the ideas of the artist in the best way.

Natasha: At the end of 20th century, we created works based on silver gelatin prints, the series “Mirages of Empires.” We worked on the surface of prints, using bleach, watercolors and newspaper transfers. In 1999, we started to work with digital production with the assistance of MFA Photography and Related Media Department of the School of Visual Arts, located in New York City. We never came back to hand work. We think new materials fit the new epoch in the best way.



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### Which basic elements of creativity did your family teach you?

Valera: My family was not at all from the art world. My parents were always surprised by my behavior and hoped that one day I would become “normal, like everybody else.”

Natasha: I loved to make craftsmanship and even took a special course at school. My mother taught me many crafts, like knitting, sewing, crochet and working with paper. All of those skills help me a lot when we do our installations.

### How did you get the idea for creating your photography and artistic works?

Valera: I live permanently in the creative process. I’m working all the time, thinking about it and waiting for when the miracle happens. There may be a lot of work, a lot of thoughts, a lot of intellect applied, but still there may be no art. There is no art without a miracle.

Natasha: Many ideas come when we are moving: in a plane, a train, a car. Also we like to do site-specific installations. Very often, architecture of the exhibition space becomes a key for the new series of works.

### What do you like to communicate with your photography and artworks?

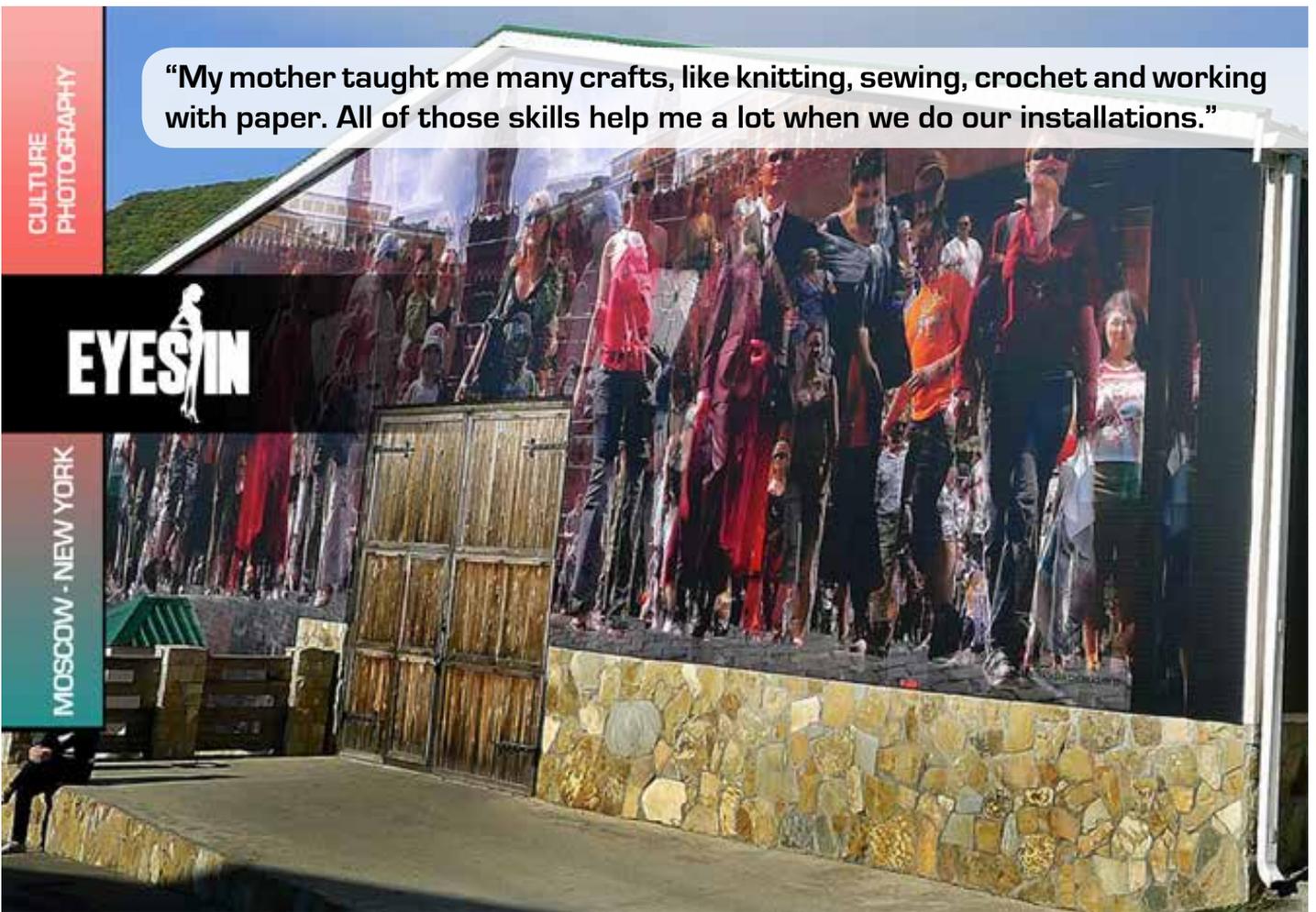
Valera: Usually we work with the theme or idea that is important to us at that moment. I began from studying myself, my body, and then I became interested in the bodies of other people, human emotions and then expanded the horizon. I became interested in the life of society and its transformation, cultures of the USSR, the USA, Europe, the East, global problems of mankind, space problems, etc.

The use of self-portraits in your work is very strong. Where does that strength, those splashes of the photo canvas, come from?

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Valera: I started with the shooting of myself as a person. Now, almost 35 years later, I returned to it. I realized that within me is the whole world, with its experience, its problems and the space. The longer I live, the more I feel the pain of people, nature, the Earth and the universe.

#### **Do you have a favorite photographer yourself?**

I love all art and all artists! Every artist is a particle of great art, which is more or less important. In my art, I'm inspired by several "big particles." I love Michelangelo for his space, Rembrandt for his light, El Greco and Goya for their emotions, Malevich for a new era he started, Duchamp for a new attitude to the art, Filonov for his space, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst for their synthesis with business.

#### **Are you ever afraid you will run out of inspiration and creativity in your job?**

It's a constant feeling. Lifting, exhaustion ... alternation.

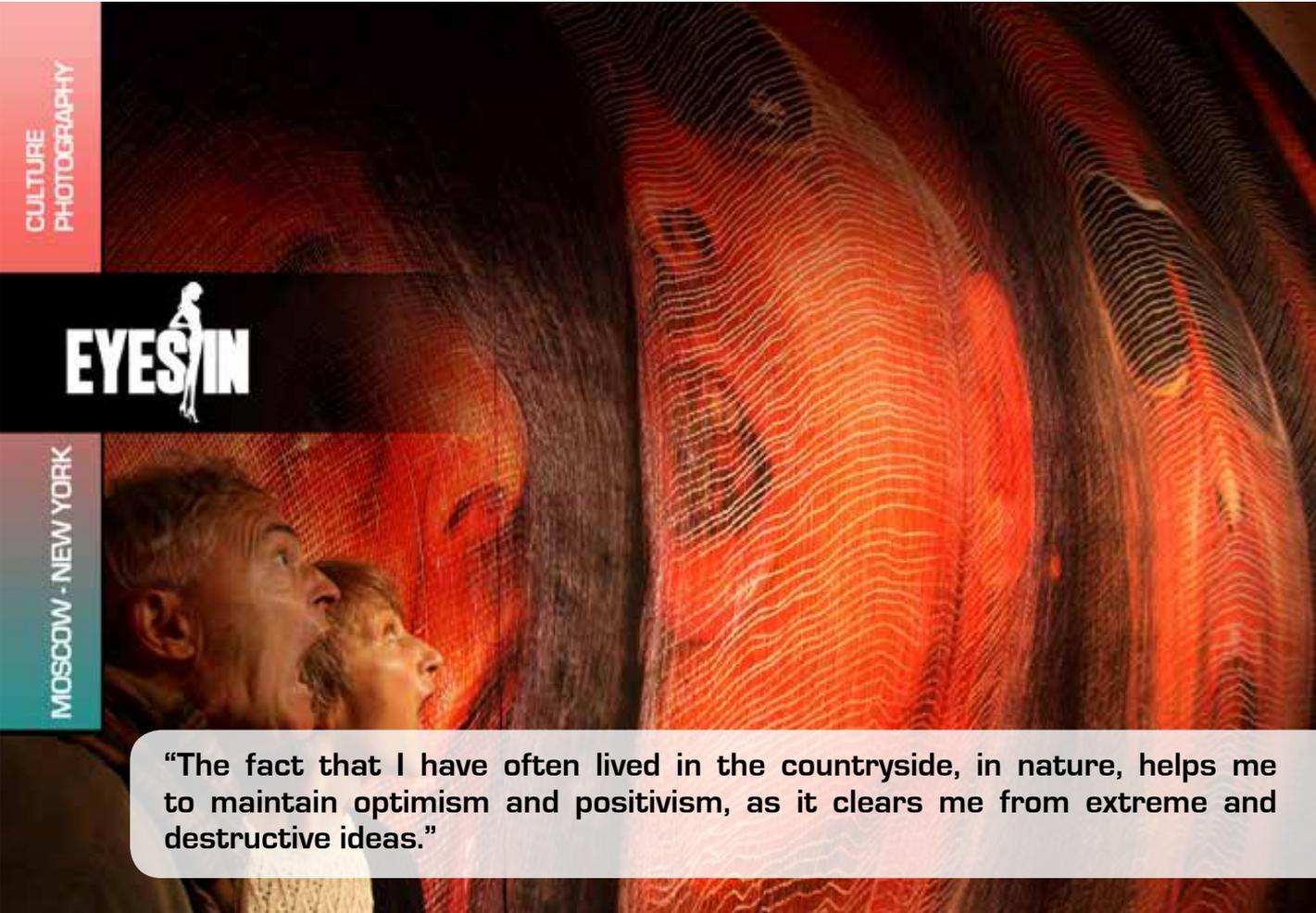
#### **What is the most difficult thing in your job?**

Valera: the most difficult for me is to get that consent from the inside; when you feel that this is it, the artwork is finished, and you should not do a one more single touch.

Natasha: Sometimes it is impossible to express yourself completely because of the lack of materials, equipment or tools. But then it becomes a new task, which enables us to find some innovative solutions.

#### **What is the most fun part of your job?**

It's the sense of the successful completion of the work and the response of people.



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**Do you expect your way of creating photography or artistic expressions to change in the future?**

Valera: We always look forward to it because we have a strong feeling of time and its changes. Also we feel our own development. We feel the quantum jumps, which give us the right and the opportunity to explore new creative territory and new challenges, using new features, while keeping inner integrity. This is one of the most important tasks. We are not afraid to move away from the found, and do not like to replicate the ideas. But consistency is important—the new is a consequence of the past and present.

**Do you embrace the changes in the photography and artist industry regarding social media and technology influences?**

This is mutual influence, reflecting the changing stream of life.

**What do you consider to be your greatest masterpiece?**

Our masterpiece is the synthesis of all that we have done, the process which went through all the time, where one work went out of the other. It combines a sense of what is happening now and our feeling of the future. It includes interrelatedness and interdependence of everything, the feeling of the whole world.

**Do you have any preferences for an artist? And/or for creators of artistic or innovative works?**

This is a conversation about talent. Talent may be expressed in all ways and directions, in the manufacture of household items, food, composing music, visual art, or fashion.

**If so, why is that? What special quality do you like in their work or personalities?**

When we see other talents, we realize that the world is indivisible and that all kinds of creativity are drawn from the universe.

**Could we feature your favorite photographer, author, artist, designer, architect, filmmaker, etc. in our magazine and/or online?**

One of our favorite photographers is Eikoh Hosoe. He did a lot of innovative steps for his time and his country.

**In which way do you think photography, culture and art are different and/or similar?**

Photography is a part of art; art is a part of culture. It's the same as comparing apples, fruits and food.

**Do you aspire to collaborate in your creations with an artist or innovative creator from another discipline?**

Yes. We had a very interesting experience of performing at a fashion show. We collaborated with a group of models, dancers and a very talented artist of body art, Elena Demi. We designed the wedding dresses and staged the performance. The title was "Why polygamy began?" It was a great collaboration. It gave us a number of new ideas, new forms and approaches.

**Do you have a favorite company with whom you would like to work?**

Our projects usually include many aspects. For example, to continue our project Global Underground, dedicated to subways around the world, we need a sponsor for the flights, the international hotel chain, and a good camera with photo and video options. Then we need a powerful computer and, of course, professional software. Finally, we need to print out the completed artwork for a show. We have already successfully collaborated with several companies which supported our projects timely: Swiss International Airlines, Air France, Moscow office of Adobe System, Inc. We'd much rather like to cooperate with International air companies, CANON, Adobe System, Inc., IBM or MAC, Epson or Hewlett Packard companies. What is the most important part in this thread? All are important! The company which can participate in a creative project becomes a favorite one.

**Do you follow any philosophical or psychological approach in your photography?**

Modern contemporary art is not only the process of creating a beauty, but also involves to be engaged in cognition of the world and that raises some philosophical problems.

**What is your favorite building in the world?**

We are excited by Egyptian pyramids, ruins of Luxor and the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Between them is everything!