

On the brink

Torn between nostalgia and a tentative optimism, Russian art and design may not be renowned for its playfulness, but **Yolanda Zappaterra** finds some rather witty and whimsical works coming out of Russian design studios at the moment

LONDON seems to be awash with Russian creativity at the moment, from a celebration of Russian Futurism at the Estorick Collection to a more modern view of the country via Motherland, Simon Roberts' amazing photographs at Photofusion, and contemporary Central Asian art at Space in Hackney. They all share a curious factor, something that's hard to define – an almost schizophrenic sense of nostalgic backward-looking while embracing the possibilities that lie ahead.

Roberts, who spent a year travelling the country, describes Motherland as a 'layered visual statement about a country that's embracing the capitalist model, but carrying the weight of a Communist past that it's trying hard to break free from'. The dichotomy such a position creates is evident in his images, but less clearly visible in the contemporary art and design coming out of Russia. What is clear in this work is something that John Milner, Professor Emeritus in Art History at Newcastle University and curator of *A Slap in the Face! Futurists in Russia*, describes as 'the very Russian aesthetic of the home-made, peasant sensibility coming up against a current world view that's the opposite of it'.

Implicit in the sensibility described by Milner is a playfulness and whimsy that's often forgotten in Russian creativity. This is exemplified by much of the product design of Artemy Lebedev Studio, a multidisciplinary Moscow-based consultancy that designs everything from erasers to computer keyboards. Latest in the studio's output is a plug adapter for sticking your fingers into electrical sockets – the Vilcus plug dactyladapter – lovingly displayed and wittily described on the studio's website. Is it a joke? The date of the design, 1 April,

suggests our Western legs are being gently but convincingly pulled, but there's no real way of knowing, particularly as Lebedev is given to comments such as, 'Western standards may be artificially applied to Russian design, but they rarely work. Russian standards don't work abroad, which is a good indication that Russian design is crap. But this crap works here, in Russia.' It's a statement that's as offbeat as the adapter and the Tersumus eraser, shaped like the delete computer key and designed by Daniil Rassadin, but it is also disingenuous, for many of Artemy Lebedev's projects would work well anywhere in the world.

This is also true of another Russian designer's work, Vadim Kibardin, who creates tea cups that call to mind earlier Soviet space stations and draws his inspiration from the natural world. 'A close examination of nature can provide solutions to all sorts of aesthetic and engineering design problems,' says Kibardin, who strives to 'create products that ease man's interaction with his environment. I work to do away with extraneous detail in the hope that my designs will express their beauty through their simplicity, their utility and their compatibility with the natural world,' he explains.

Here Kibardin is bringing into play another dominant Russian theme identified by Milner and Roberts, that of the rural or natural. 'The sense of vast spaces, changing seasons and the sheer size of the country' were what Roberts was trying to capture in his images, and this is visible in the country's art and design too. As Kibardin puts it, 'Russian culture is very rich, and encompasses not only classical examples like Russian literature, painting, ballet, music, theatre and

cinema, but also deep folk culture, and lots of designers turn to these traditional images when developing and searching for their own style.'

Kibardin's studio is based in Prague, a location that literally and metaphorically enables him to reference and span both East and West rather than bring a purely Eastern approach to his work: 'Products issued under the mark Kibardin Design are on sale both in Europe and in Russia. I win international competitions and my projects are published in many international editions, so the maintenance of my ideas does not carry national attributes,' he says.

In this sense, Kibardin exemplifies the position of modern Russian design as one that's about looking both backward and forward, outside and inside. It's a position that's fraught with frustration, but also with exciting possibilities. As Milner says, 'There's a lot happening in Russian art and design at the moment, but it's incoherent. All the elegant work and influences are Western, all the Russian stuff isn't, so there's a real ambivalence there. But just as in the 1920s and 1930s, when designing anything was about making real the idea of a new society, there's potential for designers and artists to start making a real impact. There's a fantastic, unstoppable ambition in Russia only held back by vodka.' ●

Motherland by Simon Roberts is on at Photofusion until 26 May. The book, *Motherland*, is published by Chris Boot, priced £25

A Slap in the Face! Futurists in Russia is on at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art until 10 June



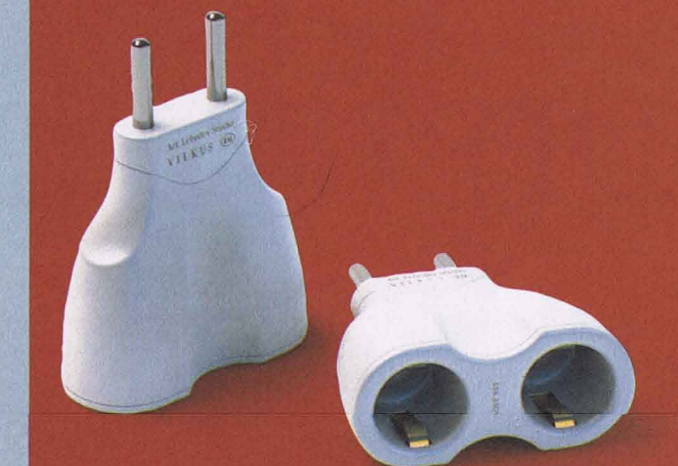
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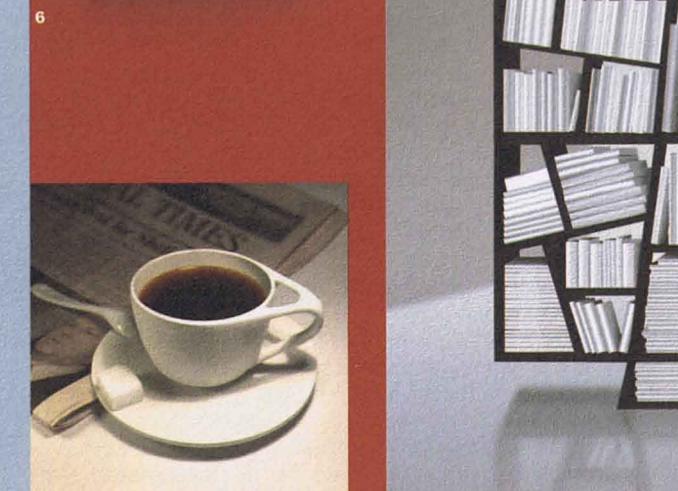
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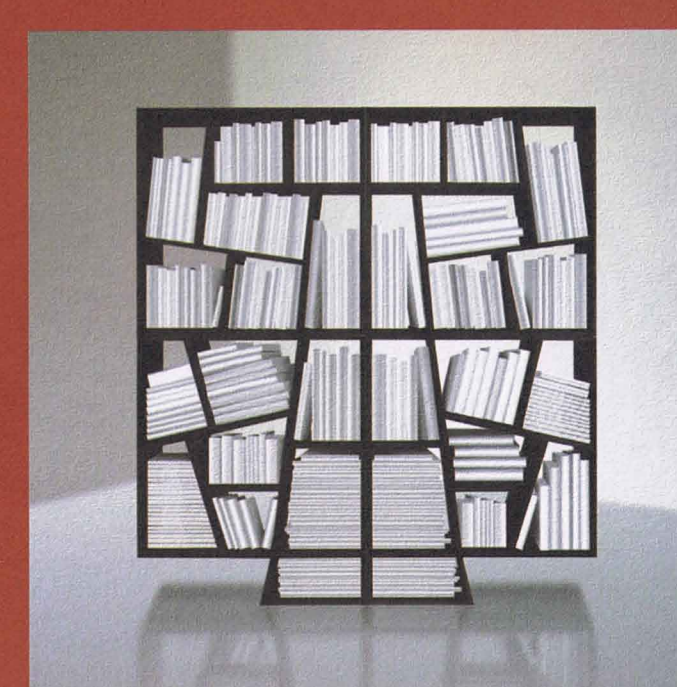
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1 Superbitus money box, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studio

2 and 3 Images from Simon Roberts' Motherland series

4 Optimus Maximus computer keyboard, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studio

5 Vilcus plug dactyladapter, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studio

6 Tersumus eraser, designed by Daniil Rassadin for Artemy Lebedev Studio

7 Good morning cup, designed by Vadim Kibardin

8 Tree bookcase, designed by Vadim Kibardin