

From his punk Moscow teenage years to his prime as one of New York’s most groundbreaking youth documenters, *Rollacoaster* meets patriarchy-defying photographer, Slava Mogutin.

Words Laura Isabella

New York-based, Russian multi-media artist, filmmaker and writer Slava Mogutin has a knack for subverting the patriarchy. Since leaving his hometown - the industrial city of Kemerovo, Siberia - for Moscow at the age of 14, Mogutin has been going against the grain. Whilst in late-eighties London this could have been as simple a task as shaving your hair off and digesting a decent amount of punk records from bands with names prefixed with “The”, for a queer teenager in a post-USSR, vastly homophobic Russia, this meant activism through art.

By the age of 21, Mogutin had narrowly missed a seven-year prison sentence from the Russian authorities for his “inflammatory” queer poetry and journalism - on a similar charge that saw members of Pussy Riot locked up this side of the millennium - by seeking political asylum in New York. With a relentless passion for art that provokes, disturbs and disrupts the status quo, Mogutin turned his exile into an opportunity to redirect his creativity into visual art and has rapidly become known for his unique documentation of the queer scene in New York City.

For the men’s SS16 edition of *Rollacoaster*, we enlisted Mogutin, who’s now been a US resident for 20 years, to shoot cult Instagram star @lostbyfrankoccean in and around the photographer’s Manhattan neighbourhood (see the shoot on page 104). Afterwards, we sat down with him for a Skype session - him sunning himself in his Greenwich Village pad, me in a dank corridor of the *Rollacoaster* offices, around midnight, London time.

*Rollacoaster*: You moved to Moscow to immerse yourself in the art-scene there. How did you go about discovering it?

Slava Mogutin: I’m a third-generation writer, so I grew up in a very creative environment. I’ve been writing poetry and taking pictures since my teenage years. I had a primitive darkroom set up in the bathroom, where I was printing my first photographs taken at underground rock concerts and art gatherings. When I moved to Moscow at the age of 14, I got involved in the emerging art scene and made a name for myself as one of the first openly gay writers, at the time when homosexuality was still considered a criminal offence, punishable by up to five years in prison.

As a teenager, I witnessed Communism and [the] USSR crumble in front of my eyes, and there was a brief period of freedom that allowed free press and under-

ground subcultures to flourish. However, even though Boris Yeltsin’s government eventually decriminalised homosexuality, I was charged with several criminal offences, from “malicious hooliganism” to “propaganda of psychic pathology and sexual perversions” (a charge recently replaced with the infamous Russian law against “gay propaganda”).

R: You were exiled to New York: how did this move impact your art?

S: When I was kicked out of Russia at the age of 21, my exile experience helped me to reinvent myself as a visual artist. I was fortunate to meet and work with many great artists like Bruce LaBruce, Terry Richardson, Richard Kern, Attila Richard Lukacs, and Jack Pierson, and it gave me confidence in my own work. Visual art helped me to jump over the language barrier and became my main form of expression. I realised I could actually make a living of something I’m really passionate about.

R: Is queer activism through art still as important as it was 20 years ago?

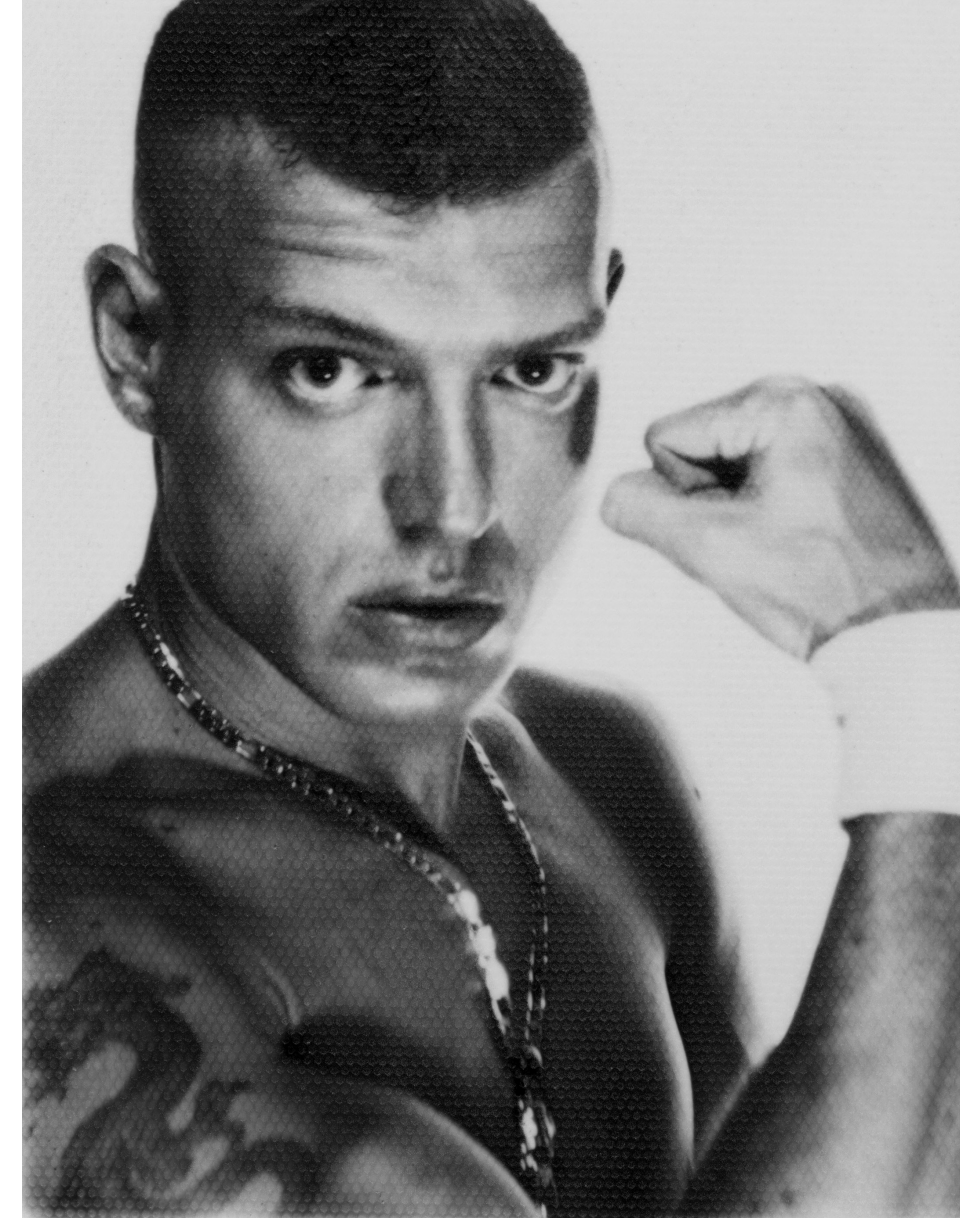
S: For me, being queer means being socially-conscious and politically involved, and it’s just as important now as it was 50 years ago, at the onset of the sexual revolution and gay liberation movement. We live in the increasingly hostile and divided world and we have a long way to go in terms of acceptance and equal rights in 80-some oppressive countries, including my native Russia, where gay people aren’t as lucky as we are in the US or EU.

R: Your work seeks to explore shame through “shamelessness” - as in acts of hedonism and self-indulgence. What is it about these concepts that captivates you?

S: The concept of “shame” is shaped by religious and ideological dogmas – a tool used to control people’s minds and perceptions. Some of my favourite books, films and works of art that were considered shameful, obscene or pornographic some decades ago, are now being considered classics and masterpieces, from Rimbaud, Genet, Henry Miller and William Burroughs to Pasolini, Fassbinder, Warhol and Paul Morrissey. Let’s leave “shame” to censors and puritans!

R: Tell us a bit about other themes you explore in your work, and why they are important to you.

S: Growing up in [an] oppressive totalitarian culture, I was initiated in the elaborately grotesque and pompous Soviet mythology, with its bizarre rituals that became my first introduction to performance art. At school I was obliged to wear a uniform – a military style dark navy-blue suit and a red tie around my neck – and learned how to operate an AK-47 machine gun as a part of our “civil defence preparedness” class at the age 10. So I guess it comes as no surprise that I wanted to rebel



against political oppression, ideological propaganda and brainwashing of any sort. After being arrested on several occasions and beaten up by the Russian cops as a punk teenager in Moscow, I decided to use my magic powers and channel my rebellion through my writings and art, which got me in big trouble with the authorities, but saved my life in the end.

R: Art that truly pushes boundaries...

S: Quoting Barbra Streisand, “Art does not exist only to entertain – but also to challenge one to think, to provoke, even to disturb, in a constant search for the truth.” This is not to say that I’m a big Streisand fan, but she said it all.

R: You shot Instagram sensation @LostByFrankOcean for this issue of *Rollacoaster*. How did you find the shoot?

S: In my work, I embrace all new media and I usually find more inspiration from amateur Internet artists or social media than any conventional galleries or institutions. Besides, “Lost” is a great song, and my first photography monograph was titled *Lost Boys*, so there was an obvious connection. So, we had a brief text exchange, he liked my

work and ideas for the shoot, and a few days later we were shooting!

R: I’m always interested to find out how photographers develop connections with their subjects - a necessity that helps to drum up chemistry on-set.

S: Every portrait is a collaboration and every collaboration is about trust and respect. I’ve photographed many beautiful people and great artists and I would never ask them to do something that I myself wasn’t comfortable doing. Every photo session is different, just like every person and face. It’s not something you can rationalise or explain, it has to do with personal chemistry.

R: Finally, Slava, what’s your mission statement? What, ultimately, are you aiming to say with your work?

S: I’ve always followed my heart, spoken my mind and tried to express myself in the most radical and honest way. After all I’ve been through in Russia, I consider myself lucky to be able to tell my story, and I’m always happy to find out that my work resonates with so many people around the world. This is my mission in life and art—to create beauty, share the joy, spread the love!