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Yevgeniy Fiks. Still from the video 'Thematic Language', 2018
@Yevgeniy Fiks

MOTHER TONGUE РОДНАЯ РЕЧЬ

9 March—11 May 2019

Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, London, WC1A 2TA

Private view 8th March 7–8:30pm

Panel Discussion 8th March 6–7pm with the artist Yevgeniy Fiks, writer Juliet Jacques, art historian Professor Sarah Wilson, and historian

Professor Dan Healey [Book here](#)

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GRAD and Pushkin House are proud to present *Mother Tongue / Родная Речь*, the first London solo exhibition by New York-based Russian artist Yevgeniy Fiks, exploring historical gay Russian argot or slang. This coded language dates back to Soviet times and can be compared to Britain's polari, the jargon used in the past by gay and other subcultures.

Through this exhibition Fiks elevates this 'themed' language into a poetic code, celebrating its wit and nuance. *Mother Tongue / Родная Речь* reclaims and celebrates Soviet-era Russian gay argot as a unique cultural phenomenon and gives a historical context to today's post-Soviet LGBTQ community whose language partially evolved from it.

The exhibition takes the form of an installation, recreating the environment of a classroom, equipped with a blackboard, alphabet charts, texts books, and a language instructional video, designed as formal introduction to the vocabulary and usage of the argot.

Soviet era *pleshki*, or cruising sites, are presented in a series of photographs of Moscow many of them famous tourist destinations – devoid of people and subverting standard perceptions of the city.

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Fiks envisions the 'language of the *pleshka*' as a complete and distinct language, separate from standard Russian. A semi-humorous instructional video gives a lesson in how to use and construct phrases from this 'themed' language. Like *polari*, Soviet gay slang contributed to the sense of the separate identity of queer communities of the time, and allowed users to communicate openly about things that could have seen them excluded from mainstream society, or even imprisoned. Thus it was a defence mechanism that provided safety.

The exhibition is accompanied by the recently published *Mother Tongue / Родная Речь*, a book by Fiks, both about, and written in, Soviet-era Russian gay argot. In the book, this is conceptualised as a literary language fit for the production of high culture, including written literature. The book includes a linguistic introduction to Soviet-era Russian gay argot and a collection of conceptual poetry written by Fiks in that language.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the globalisation era in the 1990s, a cosmopolitan (mostly Anglo-American) gay slang has fused with Soviet-era gay speech, and many original Russian queer terms that were used before the 1990s have been replaced with Anglo-American borrowings, diluting the unique Soviet culture of sexual and gender dissent. After decades of persecution and attempts to eradicate sexual and gender non-conformity, male homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia in 1993. The period between 1993 and around 2013 was characterised by slow and difficult improvements to the conditions of gay life in Russian. This modest progress was interrupted, and is in the process of being reversed, with the introduction in 2013 of the 'Gay Propaganda Law', which ushered in a new wave of state and social homophobia. At the same time it led to LGBTQ issues in Russia becoming central to public debate in an unprecedented way.



Yevgeniy Fiks. Photograph from the series 'Moscow' showing *pleshki* or cruising sites of Soviet era, 2008
@Yvgeniy Fiks

Artist's statement from Yevgeniy Fiks

I define my position, as a 'Post-Soviet artist', as having the responsibility to raise a proper understanding and critical reflection of Soviet history in order for Post-Soviet societies to move forward. My works are based on historical research, usually of forgotten and unresolved 20th century micro-historical narratives. Some of these topics include the shared histories of the Red and Lavender scares during the McCarthy era in the USA; Communism in modern art; Soviet LGBT history, and African, African-American, and Jewish diasporas in the Soviet Union.

About Pushkin House

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About the artist

Yevgeniy Fiks was born in Moscow in 1972 and has been living and working in New York since 1994. Fiks has produced many projects on the subject of the Post-Soviet dialog in the West, among them: 'Lenin for Your Library?' in which he mailed V.I. Lenin's text 'Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism' to one hundred global corporations as a donation for their corporate libraries; 'Communist Party USA', a series of portraits of current members of Communist Party USA, painted from life in the Party's national headquarters in New York City; and 'Communist Guide to New York City', a series of photographs of buildings and public places in New York City that are connected to the history of the American Communist movement. Fiks' work has been shown internationally. This includes exhibitions in the United States at Winkleman and Postmasters galleries (both in New York) Mass MoCA, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Moscow Museum of Modern Art and Marat Guelman Gallery in Moscow; Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros in Mexico City, and the Museu Coleção Berardo in Lisbon. His work has been included in the Biennale of Sydney (2008), Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2011), and Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art (2015).

About Pushkin House

Pushkin House is an independent arts charity specialising in Russian culture. Our programme encourages open-minded, explorative discussion. It was founded in 1954 by two generations of émigré Russians, to create a welcoming meeting place for the enjoyment, understanding and promotion of Russian culture in all its forms, and for the exchange of views in a lively, informal atmosphere, with freedom of speech a core principle.

www.pushkinhouse.org

About GRAD

Since opening its first base in 2013 at London's Fitzrovia Grad has operated as a Kunsthalle, a platform and a forum for debate while researching, curating, commissioning and producing over a hundred critically-acclaimed projects. Equally known for its historical shows and contemporary exhibitions exploring urgent social realities GRAD instigates intellectual enquiry and builds connections between artists, individuals and communities from different continents and cultures. GRAD challenges cultural bias and preconceptions and champions an experimental interdisciplinary approach with a focus on new media and technologies.

Press contacts

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Exhibition opening hours

Thursday, Friday 11am–5pm

Saturday 1pm–6pm

Free Entry