



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BETTINA RHEIMS

Just another day in the life of a Russian oligarch's wife...

It started with Russian editions of Playboy and FHM. Now Moscow millionaire Sergey Rodionov has paid a top art photographer to put his wife Olga between hard covers. Interview by **Viv Groskop**



For the sake of decency, we've replaced all moments of photographic rudeness with a happy, yellow smiley!

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Donatella Versace, Olga Rodionova and her husband Sergey Rodionov at Versace's Luxury party in Moscow, November 2007.

The moment Olga Rodionova enters Moscow's Vogue Café there is a change in the atmosphere. All the men shift in their seats, their heads raised appreciatively, almost inhaling her. Several make as if to stand up as this six-foot Amazonian redhead sweeps through the room.

Olga Rodionova, 34, is a TV presenter, model, actress, businesswoman and the third wife of Sergey Rodionov, a banker and publisher in his late forties who describes himself modestly as one of the poorest oligarchs. They have a 13-year-old daughter. They are best-known, however, in Moscow circles for their unusual hobby. Sergey likes to pay famous photographers to take pictures of his wife in the nude.

We meet to talk about her latest incarnation as the star of *The Book of Olga*. This is a collection of erotic portraits by the acclaimed French photographer Bettina Rheims, published here by Taschen next week. Olga is coy about the details but it is evident that the project was, as ever, funded by husband Sergey. After commissioning cover shoots for the Russian editions of *Playboy* and *FHM*, he thought it was time for his wife to appear in a book. One thousand limited-edition copies will be available, each costing £300.

Despite her pneumatic figure, Olga does not come across as an exhibitionist: she is coy, softly spoken, girlish. She wears discreet, nude make-up. Only a set of perfectly arched eyebrows betray the level of grooming that must go into her look.

Her nude career started as a one-off experiment 10 years ago. She was doing a fashion shoot for a magazine and the photographer suggested she strip. 'I thought, "Why not?" I was afraid, though, and very uncomfortable. But once you've done it, it becomes normal and you don't think anything of it.' After that, she says, the photographers started coming and how do you say no when your husband offers Helmut Newton to photograph you? Over the

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past 10 years Sergey has commissioned portraits – some of them very explicit – by Newton, David LaChapelle, Peter Lindbergh and Guido Argentini.

'By the time I did the first cover for *Russian Playboy* in 2000, I was comfortable with it,' says Olga. She reels off the photographers she has worked with most recently: Jean-Daniel Lorieux ('he's a friend of Carla Bruni – I love her, don't you?') and Gilles Bensimon (once married to Elle Macpherson). Either they come to Moscow or she travels to wherever they are. She won't be drawn on cost, but it must be hundreds of thousands of pounds.

This is not uncommon in wealthy Russian circles: Bettina Rheims says in the past three years she has photographed seven or eight rich Russians who all want the equivalent of a personal Pirelli calendar. 'They want to look sexy and over-the-top,' says Rheims, speaking from her home in Paris. 'And they want to put themselves in danger a little bit.'

At first Rheims saw this as just another private commission: 'Olga's husband sent me some pictures of her and they were horrible. I could see that she was pretty but she did look a bit vulgar and common. When I showed them to the hairdresser and stylist I work with they said, "We are going to have to spend quite a few days with her"'. But when Olga turned up at Rheims's country home in Normandy, they were all shocked: 'This huge black limo arrived and an amazing pair of long, never-ending legs stepped out. She was really pretty and not cheap at all. And she turned out to be very funny and intelligent. Suddenly an obligation turned into something much more interesting.' Over the next year they did another two more shoots in France and *The Book of Olga* was born.

The book is extraordinarily explicit and shockingly pornographic, some of it borderline offensive. Some photos seem intentionally kitsch. Here is Olga stepping out of an open-topped sports car wearing a leopardskin thong and fetish sandals. There she is lying flat on her back naked in a field of long grass, being ravaged by a lobster. Others are strangely ambiguous. There are black and white poses of her in leather hotpants, zip open at the front, with ▶

collar and whip, but looking like a mother smiling at her newborn baby. As Marie Antoinette, complete with beauty spot, Olga looks demure, almost virginal, until you see that she is holding a black dildo. She is naked in most of the photographs, apart from the odd wisp of lace or bondage tie, and an elaborate labial piercing is clearly on show throughout. Olga describes the pictures as representing 'broken glamour – they are fractured images. A friend of mine said, "I didn't think anyone could improve on Madonna's *Sex* book but you have".'

There is something a little disturbing about the project. Olga says: 'Sometimes I had to say to Bettina, "Is this really necessary?" She would say yes. And so with only one or two exceptions we did it. We decided to do something that will go down in history. I love the Marie Antoinette series. It was a completely new image for me, an idea you can play around with. We used the costumes from the Sofia Coppola film and it was all historically correct.'

'If someone says to me, "Take your clothes off", I can't do it. I need my motivation. Bettina used to say to me, "Olga, I have a surprise waiting for you". Then if there was a pose I didn't like, we would discuss it. I had to feel comfortable taking my clothes off in front of 20 people. One of the male models had an energy I didn't like so he was removed.'

What does her husband think of *The Book of Olga*? 'He loves it. Although he is a businessman, he is a creative person. I always tell him that he should have gone into the arts. He is a very open person – *The Book of Olga* is proof of our trust in each other.' She thinks her creative projects have helped their relationship, which she admits is unorthodox. She and Sergey moved in together in 1994 and had a daughter two years later, but didn't marry until 2002. 'People get divorced here a lot, but we've been together 15 years. We are not ordinary people, though. We are separate a lot of the time too, which keeps us interested in each other.' Her daughter knows about her nude pictures but has not seen them. 'She's too young. I will explain it to her in the appropriate language when the time comes.'

Like many wealthy Russian men, Olga's husband Sergey shuns the spotlight. He is not keen to be interviewed: we communicate by email. He apologises for his English (which is excellent, if slightly eccentric). He sees these images as liberating for women: 'This is the first book by a great artist [Bettina Rheims] dedicated to an ordinary woman [Olga]. To my mind, it's Bettina's best work because nobody tried to influence her imagination. It provides an assurance for all ladies that beauty does not necessarily coincide with youth only. It is an eternal category.' He is eager to point out, however, that he is not a billionaire 'and I hate throwing money around and showing off'.

Olga, however, loves to show off, and wanted to be an actress as a child. Her family was privileged during the Soviet era. Her father was in the Moscow military police and mother was a doctor. Olga studied at the Institute of Management and Law and briefly went into banking, where she met Sergey. Soon after, a friend of hers who owned a clothes shop left for America and she borrowed the money to buy it from him. She later bought the Vivienne Westwood boutique on Moscow's most exclusive shopping street, but closed it in July because it was getting too stressful in the economic climate.

She travels constantly, especially in the Middle East, where she buys all her perfumes. She and Sergey have a large apartment in Moscow but she spends a lot of time at their house near Zagreb, Croatia. She prefers Milan and Paris for shopping. When we meet she is dressed demurely in Chanel jeans and a scooped-neck Etro jumper, carrying a Celine bag. Her necklace reads 'Olga': her husband had it specially commissioned. She owes her figure, she says, to the gym and bellydancing. She is careful with her diet: she does not mix food groups, never eating protein and carbohydrates at the same meal. She says she maintains a very small circle of friends. 'I don't like parties. They're just for drinking and talking about nothing.'

Her disdain for socialising is understandable: in certain Moscow circles, the Rodionovs are ridiculed as pornographers. 'I do not really care about what people say,' says Sergey. 'In many cases of disapproval, people mostly have their own unresolved problems in their relationships.'

For him, these photographs represent Olga's power as a woman and their strength as a married couple. 'This is about the freedom of a woman who dares to appear the way the artist sees her and who is aware of her beauty and strength. She is confident in herself, in her relationship and she is not afraid of what other people will think of her. It is also about the freedom of a man who is so sure in his feelings, in his family and in his relationship

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with his woman that he fully approves of her self-expression. I would be proud if this book occupies a place in the history of art.'

This may sound absurd, but *The Book of Olga* has already been hailed in the French press as a great work of art. *Le Monde* placed it in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade and Titian. The French art critic Catherine Millet, best-known for her bestselling memoir *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*, agreed to write a foreword for the book. Millet compared one of the images to Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* and describes Olga and Sergey as champions of 'the rights of individual freedom'.

Millet describes Olga as being 'almost absent' in the pictures. Rheims agrees that this is what makes the images powerful: 'It was as if she is outside the frame. She is looking at herself being this character – but she is not there. It's her detachment which makes it art.' This is what prevents the book from being 'just another dirty book', says Rheims: 'The strange thing is that Olga never seems to really care about anything: she neither agrees nor disagrees with it and she does not seem to take pleasure from it. That was the strangest thing that I had to deal with: her absence.'

'She was doing what I told her to do and she was not reluctant at all – but somehow she was not involved. If she hadn't wanted to do it, she would have said no. She is a strong woman. It's not that

the husband is saying, "Do this or I'm going to beat you up". I would ask her, "Olga, do you want to do these pictures, because if you don't, I'm not going to take them. Do you want to take your clothes off and open your legs?" And she said, "Yes, of course, otherwise I wouldn't be here". But she takes it as a job. She is like somebody who goes to the factory and they don't dislike it, but they don't have fun either.'

This is, of course, what makes this enterprise fascinating: the balance of power between a man who has purchased this role for a wife who is not exactly unwilling but not entirely compliant either. Olga says she is a muse, a model – a vessel for the artist's fantasy. 'I am not in that book. It's not me.'

Does it affect her sex life with her husband? 'No. It doesn't affect my personal life,' she answers coldly. 'It's work. You are a muse and you are playing a role.'

Not everyone understands this, though, she adds, and that is why the book will not go on sale in Russia. 'These pictures will never be seen here. Our society is not ready for such things. Some people here don't even see photography as an art form. People don't understand here, they can be primitive: they confuse the image with the person. The thing about Russia is that as soon as you pop your head above the parapet, people will slap you down. Someone has already written that a husband should not allow his wife to do this.'

'Russia is a patriarchy and men prefer their wives to stay at home under lock and key. No one wants feminism here. My husband knows I could not sit at home doing nothing. Besides, I would not be interesting to him if I did that.'

Olga is enigmatic (which is perhaps how her husband likes it). While we talk about her life, she does appear curiously detached, as if she is talking about someone else. Bettina Rheims adds that she never quite got to understand her: 'Olga is very different from the other Russians I have photographed and we have become great friends – but they were all pretty crazy. It's a crazy moment for Russia and they are all going bankrupt now so it's probably even more bizarre. Russians are always so over the top and extravagant. They are fun, generous and exuberant. I can't complain about any of the private jobs I've done there – because they're into anything. In Russia you can go much further in your fantasies and I found a kind of generosity in that.'

Sergey and Olga both hope she can continue doing these kinds of shoots for years to come. 'I did this because it was Bettina Rheims,' says Olga. 'I have no shame or embarrassment about it. Lots of beautiful women have been photographed naked: Madonna, Monica Bellucci, Claudia Schiffer. That naked photo of Carla Bruni has been round the world and no one thinks any less of her for it. But I do understand that it's not for everybody and that a lot of people have complexes about their body.'

I am still not convinced she is doing this entirely for herself. She admits that her favourite set is by the fashion photographer Sante D'Orazio: 'I'm fully dressed in all of them. I look at my most glamorous when I'm wearing clothes.'

However, her husband Sergey adds: 'I would love Olga to continue doing nude photography because it perfectly confirms my privileges. She would always be trying to look her best and take care of her body – to my benefit.' ■

The Book of Olga is published by Taschen at £300