

Remembrance by Richard Read

Read is an art historian, an emeritus faculty member at The University of Western Australia, in Perth, and a friend of Elena Trubina. This appreciation was published (on Facebook) on 18 August 2026. It has been reformatted for inclusion on this forum and slightly redacted to remove references to Ms. Trubina's husband.



I met Professor Elena Turbina 27 years ago at the six-week Getty Summer Seminar in Art History and Theory at Rochester and New York, 1999, where I was deeply impressed by her intelligence, discretion and personal warmth, amongst other interesting delegates mostly from the former Soviet Union and its then newly independent 'satellite' countries.

We continued an episodic correspondence until her death, encompassing the many changes of weather in our lives over that time. Sometimes it would lie fallow, not surprisingly, given her engagement with more than a thousand followers on social media, her heavy university workload at Yekaterinburg, her prolific publications in many languages and frequent international conference lectures and residences. I don't feel qualified to talk about her academic achievements, but her dear friend Megan Dixon, whom I accompanied on a visit to Yekaterinburg and Perm in 2018, persuaded me that the differences in academic disciplines between Elena and myself might be of interest for others.

I understand that over the course of her career Elena moved from pure philosophy and sociology to cultural history with a particular interest in Russia's participation with the rest of the world through cultural events, a subject that was severely reduced due to Russian actions after the World Cup was held in Russia in 2018, when we were with her there. I well remember the speed and efficiency with which she flipped open her microphone in Yekaterinburg to interview some Spanish football fans about their experiences. Her evidence-based sociological research on geographically or professionally differentiated groups of people was one respect in which she differed from me. It came from a collectivist outlook and means of writing that I greatly envied even as she maintained a sincere interest in my art historical and visually analytic studies, some of which she read closely and one she published.

In someone who deliberately left her home country, it was this collectivist outlook, based on interview techniques, that I intuited as permanently Russian about her, and I vividly remember one anecdote she told with a mixture of irony and sincerity about finding herself with teenage friends in a (to her) remote part of Russia and thinking, despite its alterity, "this too is Russia."

I was also fascinated by her upbringing in a restricted missile town in the Ural Mountains whose inhabitants were very sociable and mutually supportive, and how her father's life was divided between the love of the beautiful natural surroundings there and his highly technical work in a rocket factory, though it was her mother who imbued in her a love and command of the 'hands-on' aspects of the teaching profession. Oddly, although its movement within Russia was restricted for reasons of national security, the community enjoyed cordial relations with parallel communities in North America.

I also witnessed for myself her sense of community with the mutually supportive, convivial, down-to-earth and culturally sophisticated people of Yekaterinburg, who apart from sectors of the elite, had little enthusiasm for the domination of Moscow. She generously organised a lecture tour for me and spontaneously translated what I said with huge verve, flair, and accuracy. The concerts, cafés, films,

and theatres she took us to were of the highest quality. I remember visiting the students of a very friendly art school in the middle of a beautiful orchard where she was well-known and liked, as she was by producers, actors, and, I think, concert performers.

Her love of classical music... was profound. I understand that there will be a chapter about her in a forthcoming book, and I hope it will address the courage and conviction of her decision to stay on after her residency in Chapel Hill, organised with great intelligence and foresight for the benefit of local students by Michele Rivkin-Fish in the Department of Anthropology there. Just a few weeks before her death Elena was still holding energetic Skype classes for exhilarated students in Germany with no inkling she was ill, and her acuity was greatly appreciated in local intellectual discussion groups. In her new country she also had plans for adapting her previous expertise to what would have been a study of small, economically challenged communities in America, which I'd like to know more about.

I do not know how many of the emails exchanged over the time we corresponded still exist, for they were certainly not written for posterity, but they covered many aspects of our private and professional lives as they changed and developed, and were enhanced in recent years by regular Whatsapp exchanges on video. To go over them would spark memories of many of the kites she flew. What I most remember and miss is the wonderful nascency and idealism of our conversations with each other, overcoming one barrier after another in successive frameworks of speculation, but always reverting to the kindly, the humorous and, in her case, the sagacious. I think this would have been the case with many others too, as the spontaneous expressions of grief in various internet fora attest to.

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My last extended video conversation with ... Elena took place just a few days before she died, when all her mental faculties and beauty were intact. Despite the sadness, it was the most moving and satisfying farewell to a friend I have had, and her gentle kindness and total authenticity shone through.

I wish to end, however, with a compressed outline of her past and future career she sent in an *envoi* of an email on December 23, 2016, when after a lull in our friendship, it resumed with full force. It captures her innate humility, the dynamic, open-ended seriousness of her intellect, and her wide, proactive vigilance towards other thinkers in her research fields:

When we first met (1999), I was just thinking of leaving philosophy at which I was never particularly good. I am glad I moved toward social and urban theory where I can more clearly see how theories form, become popular and lose touch and which arguments work better. When pressed, I say I am an anthropologist because I mostly work through cases which I build by conducting quite a lot of interviews. I also usually say that I specialize in "all things post-Soviet" although the term is very tired by now and doesn't quite sell. With my research partner [at that time Martin Muller, but they couldn't get funding], who is German and works in Zurich we want to open a research center at my university titled "Global East". This is how we hope to somewhat "reformat" the studies on East Europe, Russia and parts of Asia.

Vale, Elena. You are sadly missed.