

Palinsesti, no. 15 (2027): Reception of Unofficial and Post-Soviet Art in Italy

Deadline: Oct 30, 2026

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«Something wrong with the idea of 'dissident' art.»

The Reception of Unofficial and Post-Soviet Art in Italy from 1960 to the Present.

Co-curated by Olga Alter and Alessandra Franetovich.

After visiting the exhibition *La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale* (1977), in the frame of the Biennale of Dissent, Susan Sontag wrote in her diary: "Something wrong with the idea of 'dissident' art."^[1] She observed that this definition derived from a label imposed by artistic and cultural authorities on a phenomenon that was in fact far broader and highly diversified, both in terms of artistic research and in the personal histories of those involved.

Such an interpretation already emerged from the exhibition itself, which focused on individual artistic practices grouped into thematic sections. The exhibition sought to trace and reconstruct artistic genealogies situated within the problematic relationship between Eastern and Western Europe, in search of a dialogue capable of overcoming the limits imposed by the Iron Curtain and, more specifically, by the repressive policies enacted by the USSR. Curator of the exhibition together with Gabriella Moncada, the art historian Enrico Crispolti advanced his own interpretation of the subject, bringing theoretical reflections back to the level of concrete realities. According to him, "dissent, in short, is not a cultural category, but a practical condition, a bureaucratic circumstance, the effect of a prohibition not always ideologically motivated, and in any case one that can only have a temporary character."^[2]

With this exhibition, Crispolti contributed to renewing and amplifying the already complex cultural - and above all political - debate on freedom of expression in the Soviet Union. This debate was already present in Italy, also in light of the international relations between the two states, and was hosted and disseminated by the Italian press, particularly outlets close to the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and was further intensified by attempts at censorship carried out by the Soviet state against the Biennale and the exhibition.^[3] Despite efforts to internationalize but also to classify the work of unofficial Soviet artists, the complex discourse surrounding dissent (addressed much more extensively in the literary field) proved effective in bringing to Western audiences' attention the oppressive conditions in which unofficial Soviet artists were forced to operate, framing them in social and political terms. However, the reception of Biennale of Dissent also fuelled politicized interpretations, in the international audience, applied to unofficial Soviet art as a whole. Some artists explicitly opposed such readings, emphasizing instead the fundamentally apolitical nature of their practice and framing their work in terms of freedom of expression.^[4]

Another issue that emerged from the very opening of the Biennale of Dissent was the following: contrary to the organizers' position - who aimed to present unofficial art from various regions of the socialist bloc - the emphasis sometimes shifted toward artists active in Russia, particularly in the central areas of Soviet power. From the second half of the 1980s onward, with the gradual opening of the international art market, the discourse surrounding dissent contributed to the circulation of artworks and artists who, partly through the politicized interpretations promoted within the Western art system, achieved significant critical recognition and market success. In the Italian context, several exhibitions offered opportunities to explore these productions and present unofficial art to a wider public, including: *Mosca: terza Roma* (Rome, Sala 1, 1988)^[5], *Artisti russi contemporanei* (Prato, Centro Pecci, 1990)^[6], *Progressive Nostalgia. Arte contemporanea in Russia* (Prato, Centro Pecci, 2007)^[7], *Arte contro. Ricerche dell'arte russa dal 1950 a oggi* (Rovereto, MART, 2007)^[8], and *The Missing Planet* (Prato, Centro Pecci, 2019-2020)^[9], alongside exhibitions organized within the framework of the Venice Biennale and the Russian Pavilion.^[10]

Over the decades, with the establishment and stabilization of the Russian art system and market, the Soviet underground became the focus of exhibitions and auctions and was gradually subsumed as a representative movement within the region's artistic development. At the institutional level, the narrative surrounding this period «made no distinction between the layers of the underground» instead interpreting artistic practices primarily as democratic expressions and forms of resistance to the regime, while ignoring the conservative and sometimes nationalist elements expressed by some artists. It also overlooked the later shifts in worldview of certain unofficial artists and their role in shaping the ideology of the current Putin regime.^[11]

With the consolidation of the Russian art system and market on both national and international scales, a degree of scepticism emerged regarding the continued relevance of the concept of dissent. The notion was increasingly reconsidered in relation to market success, as suggested by Boris Groys in the catalogue of the exhibition *Russkoe bednoe/Russian Povera* - held in Perm (River Terminal Building, Perm Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), and later in Moscow (*Krasny Oktyabr [Red October]*, 2009)^[12], and Milan (*PAC - Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea*, 2011) - he described contemporary artists as «dissidents of glamour».^[13] At the same time, new forms of artistic political activism were emerging in Russia, accompanied by renewed pressures and censorship, as in the well-known case of the exhibition *Осторожно, религия! [Caution, Religion!]* (2003), widely covered by both the international and Italian press.

Reflecting on the politicized reception in the Italian press and the relationship between media attention and political motivations, the artistic collective *Синие носы [Blue Noses]* issued ironic statements on the occasion of their participation in the 2005 Venice Biennale.^[14] Political debate thus resurfaced within the post-Soviet Russian art scene: from the arrest of members of the collective *Pussy Riot* in 2012, to the wave of protests in 2014 following the invasion of Crimea, when artists and activists organized public demonstrations and boycott campaigns against *Manifesta 10* in St. Petersburg. This long period has witnessed numerous instances of control and public opposition directed at artistic projects and at the cultural policies of institutions.^[15]

Today, the position of artists active in Russia and those who have left the country in relation to state politics has become a central issue, regardless of their national origins. Artists face new political and identity-related challenges deeply connected to the invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing

ing large-scale war, the strengthening of internal repression and censorship, and the fragmentation of the cultural scene.

In light of the current tragic political situation, this call aims to critically analyze the concept of dissent in both past and present contexts and its repercussions within the Italian cultural sphere. It also seeks to identify new ways of rethinking the mechanisms and narratives constructed through contemporary artistic and exhibition practices by authors working in politically challenging environments. In particular, contributions are invited to address questions such as: How is dissent discussed - or how can it be discussed - today within the field of art? To what extent can the practices historically associated with unofficial or underground art be understood as genuinely oppositional? And how is underground art, both past and present, connected to the protest movements and forms of political activism of different historical periods?

Suggested topics include:

The reception of artists within the Italian art scene through exhibitions, press coverage, and publications

The representation and presence of artists in Italy from the 1960s to the present

The theme of dissent within the Italian artistic and cultural scene

Critical and retrospective analyses of the Italian perspective, including forms of politicization between soft power and stereotypes

The circulation of artists in Italy in relation to exile, politicization, the art market, and collecting

The voices of artists exhibited in Italy from the 1960s to the present

National identities in the post-Soviet space and their reflection in the Italian art scene

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Deadline: October 30, 2026.

For submission instructions, please sign in at Palinsesti - Contemporary Italian Art On-line Journal; for other details contact denis.viva@unitn.it.

Scholars interested in discussing their proposal topic in advance are encouraged to contact the editors at: olga.alter@unitn.it; alessandra.franetovich@unifi.it.

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