

Transgression, Resistance and Independent Art in Russia

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Abstract : This paper draws on research in progress focusing on independent art in the Russian Federation. I am using the concept of independent art to mean art free from state control and established restrictive narratives. The Russian state pursues its interests by supporting or forbidding certain forms of art, and art that promotes values in opposition to the official political course is often forbidden. Arguments presented below draw from fieldwork carried out in Russian cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg in June - August 2019, which included in-depth interviews with artists. This research explores socially engaged artistic works and their effect on socio-political state of affairs. It argues that artistic works entering public places have a potential to challenge autocratic system and inspire civil society to be critically engaged and to be capable to resist state propaganda. I am focusing on those artists who have a critical stance towards the current Russian political regime and analyzing their works in terms of transgression. By using the framework of transgression I aim to demonstrate how artists step across existing norms with their art influencing political and social order. To show the connection between the factors mentioned above, I will turn to two examples of transgressive aesthetics; one is individual and another is collective. The first example is Konstantin Benkovich, an artist who makes his works out of steel rebar, which is considered to be a symbol of the lack of freedom, as it is usually encountered in prison settings. The second example is a collective art practice called Monstration. It combines techniques of a demonstration and a carnival atmosphere. In 2019 Monstration was held in 30 Russian cities, despite the dissatisfaction of the authorities.

Keywords : art, culture, resistance, Russia

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