Repressions and censorship in Russia are having an effect: people need to find new ways to protest. Artists who express criticism are making use of a variety of imaginative aesthetic tactics from the Cold War era. At the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Hana Gründler and her team are researching how art in Eastern Europe circumvents authoritarian structures and opens up spaces of freedom – then and now.
It is spring in Saint Petersburg, the end of March 2022, and artist Aleksandra Skochilenko is entering a supermarket. The “military special operation” in Ukraine, as it is referred to by the Kremlin, is in full swing, but nobody can mention war. Skochilenko takes a look around, pulls some price labels from their holders, and replaces them. Instead of a special offer for instant coffee, there is now an entire sentence: “The Russian army bombarded an art school in Mariupol where approximately 400 people had been hiding from the attacks.” And: “Military action causes record inflation.” Or: “Stop the war!” A few days later, the draftsman and musician is arrested. She is charged with disseminating deliberately false information about the Russian military forces – a statutory offense in the Russian criminal code designed to silence critical voices.

Russia’s repression of its own population has intensified since the attack on Ukraine. According to Russian non-government organizations, since the new parliament was introduced, over 250 people have been criminally prosecuted – and over 800 have been prosecuted due to anti-war activities. Organized political opposition was defeated long ago, and Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny met his death in a polar penal camp.

The situation is similar in other successor states to the Soviet Union. For example, according to the UN, approximately 1,500 political prisoners are currently imprisoned in neighboring Belarus. But how are resistance and critical art possible when artistic direction action can be sanctioned with drastic punishments? Hana Gründler, Research Group Leader at Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institute, and her team are researching how art and philosophy as resistant practices under repressive regimes in Eastern Europe since 1945 together with her team in Florence.

Artists are once again using the subtle forms of protest from the past and re-interpreting them.

In the repressive climate of the 1970s, the Czech artist Jiří Kovanda and others began using the rigorously monitored public space for direct action through the medium of art. Much as Aleksandra Skochilenko sought to use the supermarket as a site for her direct actions, Kovanda used the pedestrian zone of the city in his day. With his arms spread out, he positioned himself in Wenceslaus Square in Prague. Passersby were forced to walk around him and turned around to look at him.

In this action and others, he became a disturbing element in the city’s hustle and bustle, an inexplicable obstacle, an irritation. In doing so, Kovanda did not explicitly evoke the invasion of the Soviet troops or the tanks in Prague’s city center. Nor did he reference the suicide of the 20-year-old student Jan Palach, who poured gasoline over himself and set himself on fire in January 1969 to protest the invasion and repressions of the Soviet occupants. Jiří Kovanda’s performance was subtle. And visible only to those who stopped and watched the artist. An act of resistance with his own body.

“In the phase of so-called normalization in the CSSR, these performances took place under extremely difficult and risky conditions. However, the artists always defended themselves against overly catchy, one-dimensional political interpretations,” Gründler explains. They resorted to small gestures when big ones were not possible. Afterwards they disseminated them with photos or critical writings via Samizdat (an underground system of copying and distributing self-published, non-conformist texts) – and also in the West. “Many artists emigrated; there were channels that were used to make documentation of these kinds of direct actions and performances known. For instance, exile magazines and art magazines like Flash Art or exhibitions in Germany and France. The Iron Curtain was more permeable than people thought.”

Nowadays the Internet serves as a multiplier for direct action. For example, in April 2022 photos were published of a person lying bound and gagged at different locations in Moscow in order to remind people of the cruel acts Russian soldiers committed against civilians in Bucha. But there are more subtle forms of artistic and civil resistance that, consciously or unwittingly, draw on the aesthetic practices of the 1970s. The critical community is increasingly using art and graffiti in public spaces to illustrate the unspeakable and then share it in networks. The website “No wobble!” (https://nowobble.net), for example, documents anonymous anti-war street art in Russia. Among other...
Criticism through fabric: with her land art action of 1970, Zorka Ságlová evoked a legend from Czech history from the year 1420, according to which Hussite women laid clothing down on the muddy bottom of a pond so that the enemy’s horses would become entangled in the fabrics. Ságlová represents quiet protest by women.

Provocation through nostalgia: the symbols of Stalinism – progress, work, and order – are absent from Richard Uutmaa’s painting from around 1955. Leisure reigns in their place. An idyll instead of bustle and activity.

Things, it shows Lego figures holding white papers in the air and thus evoking the White Paper Protests. There are also clay figures bearing a sign with the words “Нет Войне” (“No to war”), or simply a carp that has been crossed out: here the word “vobla” (carp) replaces the nearly homonymous word “voina” (war).

It seems playful – and powerless. “They look like harmless gestures. But in an oppressive system, they are extremely potent signs,” says Gründler. “There are aesthetic practices of the unofficial culture of the underground that question everyday processes. Many artistic approaches motivate spectators to question their own view of reality. Similar to grassroots movements, they transform the beholder’s perception, and this, in the end, could lead to changes in political reality as well.” Hana Gründler does not speak of a lack of freedom of art. Instead, she believes that “art opens up spaces of freedom.”

One example from the past that Hana Gründler mentions is a collage by the Czech artist and poet Jiří Kolář. It shows a cutout of an iconic press photo: a burning streetcar that was photographed near the Czechoslovakian radio station on August 21, 1968 during the invasion of the
Soviet Troops. On top of it, Kolář attached a hand presenting a portrait of Dante Alighieri – a poet who refused to be silenced by authorities and was forced into exile for political reasons – much like Kolář hundreds of years later, who took French citizenship. “This isn’t agitprop or political art,” says Gründler. “During the era of socialist realism, art was expected to represent reality ‘correctly’ and without political ambiguity. In contrast to this, artists like Kolář insisted upon the complexity and ambiguity of their living environment. They turned fantasy, which was tabooed by the state, into a highly effective instrument for raising awareness.” It is important to be able to “read between the lines.”

Deciphering a painting by the Estonian painter Richard Uutmaa also requires a good deal of imagination. Oliver Aas, doctoral fellow in Gründler’s research group in Florence, mentions it as an example of subtly subverting the dominant narrative. At first glance, the painting of Puise Bay (1955) appears to be nothing more than a “banal” landscape. However, in the cultural context of that period’s Stalinism, it becomes an egregious provocation: a non-political, purely aesthetic depiction of a landscape that could not be more political.

The importance of beginning on a small scale

The artist Zorka Ságlová also questioned common patterns of narration when she laid out 700 white napkins in a field in Bohemian Sudoměř in 1970. Her land art performance evoked one of the most famous battles in Czech history from the year 1420. Legend has it that the leader of the Hussites, Jan Žižka, and Hussite women decided to lay out clothing on the muddy bottom of a pond so the horses of the Catholic nobility would become entangled in the fabrics. “The Communists appropriated this story about the Hussites and perpetuated it as an extremely heroic, masculine narrative. Ságlová instead, reinterpreted it. She showed how women brought down an entire army of knights and thus hints at feminine, supposedly unheroic forms of resistance,” says Gründler.

But how effective are these kinds of artistic practices? How do such actions resonate with the public? “At the time, Ságlová’s performance probably went largely unnoticed outside of a small circle of unofficial culture,” Gründler explains. “However, as Václav Havel has shown, it is significant even if only a couple of people change their opinions in such a repressive system. It’s important to start on a small scale: like the vegetable merchant from Havel’s essay “Power of the Powerless,” who does not hang a banner in his shop window on May 1 and thus refuses to give space to the official rhetoric. It is bottom-up strategies that help overcome civil society’s passiveness and that can lead to an ethico-political transformation.”

In former Czechoslovakia, history has proven the artists and dissidents right. In 1989, as in other countries of the “Eastern Bloc,” the predominately non-violent Velvet Revolution took place. The dramatist Václav Havel played an important role in it. “This sharp critic of the regime spent several years incarcerated as a political prisoner, where he wrote letters to his wife, Olga, every week. The Letters to Olga are expressions of hope and humanity in dark times and have special relevance again now, at a time in which many artists and oppositionists are imprisoned,” says Hana Gründler. “From our safe vantage point, we need to understand the kinds of dangers artists are currently exposing themselves to in Russia and Belarus.” Artists like Ales Pushkin, who emptied a wheelbarrow full of manure in front of Alexander Lukasenko’s presidential administration in Minsk in 1999 and was briefly imprisoned. He repeated the performance in Kiev in an exhibition in 2021. And, even though he was facing criminal proceedings, he returned to Belarus. Shortly after, he was sent to prison on the grounds of “denigrating state symbols.” He died there in the summer of 2023 under mysterious circumstances, much like Navalny.

Or Aleksandra Skochilenko, who was sentenced to seven years in prison for her supermarket-based direct action in November of last year. “In March of 2022, the war was a ‘special operation’. But Skochilenko called it by its real name,” says Gründler. According to information from Amnesty International, the 33-year-old is still in a detention center in Saint Petersburg awaiting her appeal hearing, despite suffering from several chronic illnesses. The human rights organization says it is unlikely that she will receive a fair trial. She can only hope for humane treatment during her sentence.
According to media reports, during her pretrial detention Skochilenko has meanwhile written in a letter that she embodies everything “that is insupportable for Putin’s regime: creativity, pacifism, LGBT, psychological enlightenment, feminism, humanism, and love for everything that is bright, ambiguous, and unusual.”

In prison for the truth

At this time, it cannot be foreseen whether and how the repressions in Russia will be further intensified after the election in March. Last year, the administrations in art museums across the country were staffed with people close to the state, observes art historian Sandra Frimmel from the University of Zurich. There is currently no reliable artistic state doctrine, “no cannon of what is allowed, but rather a canon of what is forbidden.” All institutions and forms of art, whether circuses, theaters, or museums, should represent “state values.” Disparagement of military forces, religious symbols, and “homosexual propaganda” are generally forbidden. Even the rainbow, which could be read as an LGBTQ+ symbol, is on the list. Until recently, the national conservative party Law and Justice in Poland pursued a similar policy during its eight-year term of office from 2015 to 2023. In her research, Magdalena Niesłony, who was a visiting scholar in Hana Gründler’s team, shows how “cultural politics became a central battleground of indoctrination” under the right-wing government. That is now changing under the new government of Premier Donald Tusk. At the Biennale in Venice in 2024, the Ukrainian collective “Open Group” will display a performance video in the Polish pavilion. The contribution by a right-wing artist was withdrawn in January.

In Russia, in contrast, it is now important to “create solidarity networks, smaller and trust-forming measures that build up hope and bridge gaps,” says Alexander Borodikhin, journalist and publisher of “Mediazona,” one of the largest Russian oppositional media. “The general demobilization and desensitization of recent decades has induced a certain learned helplessness,” according to Borodikhin. In his view, artistic protest should not be viewed as a practicable means that can be used to question the existing order. “Art can be a way of reinvigorating connectedness – not a battering ram, as some dissidents hope.” It is a tactic involving small steps, one which artists have used for decades. After all, as Hana Gründler puts it: “Art does not have to be unequivocally political. But as micro-ethical practice, it opens up possibilities to think differently.” And, in the end, changes in perspective have inspired revolutions in the past.

Penal camp for messages against the war: even though she was facing ten years of imprisonment on the grounds of “disseminating false information about the Russian military,” Aleksandra Skochilenko replaced price tags with anti-war messages in a supermarket in March of 2022. In November of 2023 she was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment in a camp.