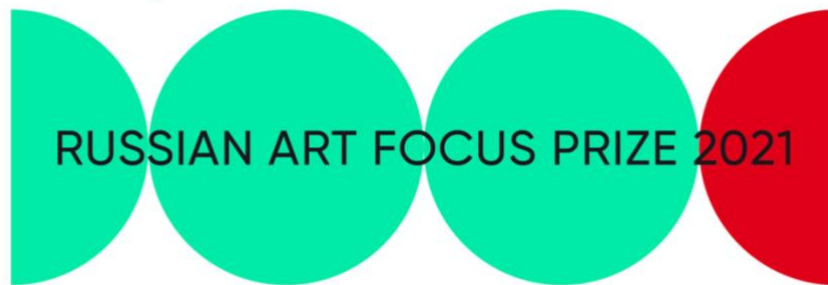




RUSSIAN
ART
FOCUS **prize**



RUSSIAN ART FOCUS PRIZE 2021

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



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Editor-in-chief

2021 has been the summer of anticipation. International travel seemed to be on then off, with many covid related restrictions still in place. At Russian Art Focus, our editorial team spent the holidays choosing the shortlist for the inaugural prize and now we wait for the jury's verdict on September 3 at the Viennacontemporary.

What does the shortlist say about the cultural landscape in Russia today? It is impossible not to start with what is noticeably absent: no-one is writing about the art of painting. It's off trend and, curiously, this is at odds with the international art world, where, over the past decade, there has been unprecedented interest given to figurative painting in the art market, at fairs and in museum shows.

Today, it seems the most incisive writing, the tightest grip on what is of most value when scrutinizing Russian contemporary culture under the microscope, is writing about social issues, whether through performance art and art activism or exhibition projects. Art that confronts the socio-political terrain of contemporary Russia. Narratives about predicaments, social and ecological realities, cultural and sexual identities, as well as the artists themselves negotiating the terms of life in Putin's Russia.

When not addressing these big social issues, writers and academics more focused on aesthetic values typically turn to Russian conceptual art. It seems to be on a collective pedestal. Moscow conceptualism, it is clear, has deep and enduring roots today, a reflection of the natural order of things you might say. The greatest national contribution to post-war international art since the 1970s surely is the Moscow conceptual movement. That it is quantifiably being examined and studied by top scholars in international publications should be greatly encouraging to all of us concerned about its legacy in international art history.

A quick glance at the names on the RAF research prize shortlist and you would also be forgiven for thinking that women rule the Russian art world: with the exception of artist Pavel Mitenko from the 'Agitatsia' group (four out of five of its members are female) all the winners on the research shortlist were women. Hardly a surprise, though, when taking into account that it is mainly women who study art in higher education, a gender unbalance universally known. How to attract more males into the subject today to balance it out remains a challenge for both universities and colleges in Russia and abroad.

Art activism is such a deep furrow in Russian "visual" culture, a rich field. American artist and academic Suzanne Lacy's 1991 contemporary classic textbook first defined this kind of public activist art as new genre public art. Art made for the public, outside of galleries and museums, but a new genre as distinct from traditional public art of monumental urban sculpture and installations. Pussy Riot, the Party of the Dead and, to some extent, even Pokras Lampas' suprematist mural in Ekaterinburg stem from this kind of art and its striving for social good. Writ large on a cover of this anthology: "To search for the good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas or revelations into matter, but to make those revelations actually matter." It addressed mainly the situation in America, but could be about anywhere. What it shows is how, over the past few decades, we all have arrived at a time in our cultural lives when artists and activists can be one and the same.

But, in Russia, new genre public art has deep and wide roots. We can even, if we like, circle back to Moscow conceptual art and a field in Belyaev, art activism off piste. Perhaps, one day, there will be a new class of landscape artists there interrogating the elements in paint on canvas, or painting portraits of ghosts of the past. In the meantime, for now, the battle cry is: "Art! Concept! Action!"