

## Art at the End of Empire

*Rome proves the perfect setting for an exhibition of contemporary New York Art.*

**An exhibition hosted in Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni celebrates the continued influence of New York in the arts. The contributing artists, twenty-five in total, including Keith Edmier, Jeff Koons, Renée Green, and Bjarne Melgaard, interpret the City through different venues and expressions but it is the venue and the host city that really exalts the significance of the exhibition.**

I went to see 'Empire State' in there fairly unacquainted with many of the artists. But I'd recently read a survey published by The Art Newspaper that revealed how the bias of the global art world is shifting towards south and east, and I thought it a strange coincidence. I wondered if 'Empire State' could be seen as an artistic exhale of an empire that is seeing the beginning of the end of its reign? And if it is, what will happen to the art it produced?

It was Renée Greene that put me on the idea. You could be forgiven, surrounded by grandiose and intrusive artefacts like Rob Pruitt's dinosaurs or Bjarne Melgaard's disturbing Allen Jones remakes, for ignoring Greene's more timid Space Poems. Yet because they are so explicit in their historic reference, or perhaps just because I am a historian, the Space Poems really exalt the significance of the exhibition.

The Space Poems are multi-coloured banners hanging from the ceiling, with names of different historical and cultural personalities written on them. The reference to fascism is clear, the style of the banners, the names and the historical period those people had belonged to. Greene's intention, I read in the brochure, is to recall how Mussolini's totalitarian state subdued artists and forged symmetry between art and society. They are a direct reference to a very different exhibition hosted in the same palace in 1932.

The *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* – 'The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution' was seen by more than 3.8 million people. As an exhibition, it was considered radical in the way it mixed items from the fascist regimes' wars, bloodstained shirts, flags and newspaper articles, with artwork designed for the exhibit. It was not art put on display, the fascist showcase was in itself creation of art: "This Exhibition does not have the arid, neutral, alienating quality that museums usually do. Instead, it appeals to fantasy, excites the imagination, restores the spirit"<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound was one of many impressed visitors.

The 1932 exhibition exemplified the original futurist idea of what art should be and do. The futurists had despised how museums froze the expression and deprived it of political significance. And while futurists came to be disavowed in favour of other artistic styles, the interdependence between art and politics that they created continued throughout the totalitarian era. In the totalitarian era, abiding artists thrived because the politicians hinged on them. Without art, the political project would fail and the politicians knew so they invested in art everywhere. Even posters and flyers were splendid pieces of artistry. As such, totalitarian art an active subject, not a revered object. The 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* was perhaps the most salient example of this fusion of arts and politics.

While totalitarian regimes embraced art, art also assisted their demise. Mino Maccari's sarcastic series 'Dux' portrays the Duce as a fat and laughable figure, his mistress with an unmistakable silhouette of a turn-of-the-century prostitute. Maccari's colourful, folkloristic humour deconstructed the machinery

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<sup>1</sup> From the 1932 exhibition catalogue

that gave totalitarian art its force, and reallocated the artistic work in a series of events called history. Rid of political protection and exposed to history's judgement, the political message was discredited but the art was absolved, sentenced to a life as inmate in museums.

Even as museum artefacts, however, totalitarian art remains decisively attractive. Supersized paintings of wars and battles and courage, retain life even when immersed in silence and high ceilings. In *The Great Helmsman*, Thayat's Mussolini is more scary than Anthony Hopkins in Hannibal Lecter. In Deineka's magnificent mosaic, a young woman on her way to milk the cows seems capable of crushing anything that might obstruct her sturdy calves while the promise of a communist future unfolds in the reflection of her eyes.

My question is this: If Empire State is a roam of a dying beast, not only in arts, but as a political and social empire, will the art that empire produced retain influence when deprived of its political context?

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In his contribution to 'Empire State', Adrian Piper acts like a modern Macari when he writes 'Everything will be taken away' twenty-five times on four blackboards hanging on the wall. Piper words gain particular significance when you leave the Palazzo and go out into the Italian capital. If you head right on Via Nazionale, the imposing Altar of the Patria appears first, then, the Roman Forum slowly takes shape. It was there, in the Forum, that a slave followed victorious Roman emperors as they entered the city amongst jubilant crowds, screaming 'memento mori, memento mori!' Once the world's most potent political stage, the Forum is now a series of impressive but politically void ruins, poignant reminders that everything will after all, go away. What will remain of New York art when the empire is gone, remains to be seen. In any case, there is no place more fit to provoke reflection on that, than Rome.