

to love and devour
07.05 - 23.11.2025
Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation

Tolia Astakhishvili

With Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, Zurab Astakhishvili, Thea Djordjadze,
Heike Gallmeier, Rafik Greiss, Dylan Peirce, James Richards, Maka Sanadze.

Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist

Venice, 22nd of November, 2025

Thank you, Kristian.

I'll pick up the thread you opened—the one about *Stimmung*, about mood as a form of thought—and bring it into a city that seems to live entirely on states of mind: Venice. I would like to do it slowly, as if we were walking together on a late-autumn morning, when the light slips over the water and time, instead of flowing, seems to settle.

When I began writing *Rhizomes of Water and Dust*, my first impulse was to return to Joseph Brodsky. Not so much to the writer, but to the man who, for twenty years, arrived in Venice in January, as one returns to a secret ritual. In *Watermark* he writes: “Venice is a postcard sent from nowhere to nowhere.” A sentence that appears to be a paradox and is instead a revelation: a postcard without sender or recipient that nevertheless always arrives. It arrives where it must: in the interiority of the one who walks through it.

Brodsky sees a Venice that does not offer itself to the gaze but deposits itself. A city made of pauses, of subtractions, of what is missing. As he walks, he perceives “the time that stagnates,” the light sliding across the walls, the lagoon as a liquid memory. His Venice does not belong to the present but to a suspension. And that was my point of departure: the city as an experience of suspension.

Usually, when writing a text for an exhibition or for an artist's practice, I like to let myself be accompanied by fiction, by verses, by external and estranged images, by readings and by music as well. And so it was for this exhibition by Tolia, which I wrote while listening especially to Luigi Nono — ...*sofferte onde serene*... (1976) for piano and magnetic tape. Composed in his house on the Giudecca, ...*sofferte onde serene*... is perhaps the most profoundly Venetian piece of the twentieth century. Nono develops an intimate dialogue between a live piano and a pre-recorded track, like an echo returning from another time. The music is born from mourning, from loss, from listening to a city that breathes slowly. It is a piece made of minimal fractures, of silences that resemble the lagoon, of sudden openings that do not burst but surface.

Water is everywhere: in the broken returns, in the unfinished phrases, in the sounds that dissolve like a receding tide. The title itself—“serene waves”—carries the fragile doubleness that accompanies all of Tolia’s work:

serenity is not peace, but exposure; waves are not force, but memory.

It is a music that does not “accompany” the exhibition but inhabits it, just like the spaces she opens, the unfinished passages, the breathing surfaces.

And then Arvo Pärt — *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978), for violin and piano.

A piece reduced to the essential: an arpeggio, a melodic line, a movement that returns, shifts slightly, reopens. Pärt writes in what he calls the “tintinnabuli” style, a musical form seeking purity through simplicity. The result is music in which time does not flow but settles—exactly like in the Brodsky passage that opened my reflection. *Spiegel im Spiegel* is a meditation on water, on reflection, on the figure that loses itself in its own double.

It is a piece that, like the exhibition, does not want to be understood but crossed slowly. It moves like breath, like a step resonating in an empty room, like the changing light over the scraped walls of the palazzo. It is music that asks for nothing: it simply exists. And precisely for this reason, it enables encounter—like a house that receives without ever closing.

As I walked through Dorsoduro, I found that same rarefied quality: walls that exude water, surfaces that give way, floors remembering every life that has passed across them. Venice is not a landscape but a mental condition, and perhaps Brodsky sensed it before everyone else: it is a city that seems to age inside us, before it ages in its material.

To this gaze I want to intertwine that of Jan Morris, one of the greatest travel writers of the twentieth century. Journalist, historian, masterful narrator, Morris wrote luminous pages on Venice. Before her transition, she signed as James Morris; under that name she published celebrated reportage—like the one on the conquest of Everest—and historical essays of rare sharpness. But it was as Jan that she found her true voice, giving cities an interior anatomy, an emotional depth. In her book *Venice*, she gathered insights that remain definitive:

- “Venice has always been an implausible city.”
- “A city founded on water is a perpetual contradiction.”
- “Venice is an illusion, a mirage made permanent.”

Three sentences that describe not just the city but its state of being: a place that should not exist and yet continues to do so, defying its own laws.

And then there is Jean Clair. In *La cité des anges* he describes winter Venice as a melancholy organism, in which everything has already known death. He writes that the city does not show its wounds: it breathes them. And this breath is what I felt in the Fondazione’s palazzo when I encountered Tolia Astakhishvili’s work.

That palazzo is not merely a building: it is a body. A body that has known Renaissance festivities, the quiet of Ettore Tito’s studio, the fragility of a medical practice, and now the living precariousness of art. Its walls hold shadows, traces, imprints of time. And Tolia enters them with the same attention with which one listens to a breath.

nicoletta

fiorucci

foundation

At this point I want to invoke Rilke. No one like him has been able to describe the gesture of exposure: the letting oneself be traversed by the world. In the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* he writes: “There are things that cannot be said, but that ask to be endured.” Tolia’s rooms are exactly this: things that cannot be explained but must be felt. And then Cristina Campo, who wrote: “The essential is never ostentatious.” And again: “The invisible is what remains when everything seems to collapse.” Her words illuminate Tolia’s work: an architecture of the invisible, a poetics that does not add but unveils, that does not embellish but reveals what was hidden. Ruskin too, in *The Stones of Venice*, describes the city as a vulnerable organism. He writes: “Perfect surfaces are lifeless. Only the crack bears witness to time.” Tolia brings the crack to the center. Every exposed pipe is a confession. Every torn piece of plaster is a resurfacing memory.

And then Sebald, who in *The Rings of Saturn* describes walking as an act of drifting, of deviation. The rhizome is not only a theoretical metaphor: it is the way one crosses Venice and the way one crosses this exhibition. There is no single path; there is a geography of intensities, encounters, resonances.

And this is where Tolia enters. Her practice does not seek a result but a process, an inhabiting. Heidegger says that to dwell means “to safeguard what exceeds us.” Tolia safeguards the palazzo by listening to its contradictions: the weight of time, the matter that gives way, the returning dust. During my first visit I perceived something precise: the place does not receive the works, it generates them. The works emerge from the walls like deposits of an ancient breath. They do not break in: they return. They are presences that surface, like water slowly rising through Venetian floors. Tolia builds houses within houses, thresholds within thresholds. The pipes become veins. The walls become skin. The rooms become resonant cavities. We enter as into a living body, and the exhibition invites us to breathe with it.

In a world that demands order, clarity, linearity, Tolia—and Venice—remind us that another way of seeing exists: made of cracks, of deviations, of unfinished surfaces. It is a form of resistance, a form of love. A vulnerability that, precisely because it does not defend itself, is able to touch.

And so I return to Brodsky. He said: “Time does not pass: it settles.” In these rooms time settles. On the scraped walls, on the pipes, on the photographs, on the works that seem to rise from the dust. It settles on us. And in this settling we recognize something essential: that there is no truer way of inhabiting a place than accepting to be transformed by it.

It is what Venice teaches us.

It is what this palazzo whispers to us.

It is what Tolia’s work asks of us: to enter, without defenses, into the breath of another.

– Rita Selvaggio

nicoletta

fiorucci

foundation