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The Biennial of Dissent in Eastern European (1977). The controversial role of the Italian Communist Party in supporting the venetian cultural

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Abstract: This paper aims to retrace the events that fueled the heated debate regarding the difficult and controversial position by the Italian Communist Party during the *Biennial of Dissent* in 1977, a cultural event with international resonance that was strongly politically charged. The focus is the expression of dissent in the visual arts, offering reflections on the exhibition *The New Soviet Art: A Non-Official Perspective*. The most contested edition in the history of the Venetian institution since its foundation in 1895 was entirely dedicated to the theme of dissent in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. The aim was to retrace the long history of protest and opposition to political orthodoxy in the name of autonomy from party affiliation.

Keywords: Dissent, Biennial of Venice, Berlinguer, Soviet art.

This paper aims to retrace the events that fueled the heated debate regarding the difficult and controversial position by the Italian Communist Party during the *Biennial of Dissent* in 1977, a cultural event with international resonance that was strongly politically charged. The focus is the expression of dissent in the visual arts, offering reflections on the exhibition *The New Soviet Art: A Non-Official Perspective*. The most contested edition in the history of the Venetian institution since its foundation in 1895 was entirely dedicated to the theme of dissent in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. The aim was to retrace the long history of protest and opposition to political orthodoxy in the name of autonomy from party affiliation. During Brezhnev's leadership (1964-1982),



organized dissent consolidated significantly¹. The Venetian event brought into question the problematic relations between the Italian State and the Soviet Union and raised serious domestic political issues: the two main left-wing parties, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, took opposing stances.

The main promoter of the initiative was Carlo Ripa di Meana, an active member of the Socialist Party and president of the Biennial exhibition from 1974 to 1978. He strongly pushed for a politically engaged edition of the international exhibition and immediately gained unanimous support from the Biennale scientific committee, as well as the backing of Bettino Craxi's Socialist Party. Initially, he also received the Italian Communist Party approval, expressed by Adriano Seroni, the head of the Venetian institution's council. The strong echoes of the 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which concluded with the signing of fundamental human rights and cultural autonomy by 35 countries, played an important role in shaping the political climate in Italy at the time. Despite great initial enthusiasm, numerous obstacles arose between the announcement of the exhibition in January and its opening on November 15. These led to a decline in support, particularly among communist intellectuals. The "*Cronache della nuova Biennale*", published in 1978, documented the timeline of events, starting from the proposal by the president of the Venetian institution to its governing council. Ripa di Meana referenced this text in his detailed reconstruction of what he described as an untold story expressing personal disappointment over the reactions following Moscow's directive, which was firmly against the Biennale (2007)².

A series of actions complicated the organizational process, posing a concrete risk of blocking the inauguration. On February 5, 1977, the Soviet newspaper "*Izvestija*" published a harsh attack on Ripa di Meana, accusing him of undermining cultural collaboration between East and West and threatening the Helsinki Accords. In March, Soviet ambassador to Rome, Nikita Rijov, explicitly asked the Italian government, on behalf of all Warsaw Pact countries, to cancel the Biennial's program, threatening to withdraw the Soviet Union from the 1978 edition of the exhibition. Later, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) intervened with the secret plan Measures to Counter Anti-Soviet Propaganda in Italy, a document sent to the Italian Communist Party, which also included a personal letter to Enrico Berlinguer. The full content of this plan, proving Moscow's direct involvement in opposing the Biennale, only became public 17 years later, in 1994. The pressure on the Italian government was

* The images accompanying the essay are taken from the catalogue edited by Enrico Crispolti (Crispolti *et al.* 1977a), today the only source available for the reconstruction of the sections of the exhibition and therefore of the works on display.

¹ Clementi (2007).

² Ripa di Meana *et al.* (2007).

severe, with threats of negative economic consequences that could hinder fruitful Italo-Soviet cooperation, including economic relations. This explains why many business figures refused to support the event. Pressure was also directly exerted on the PCI, emphasizing serious concerns about the participation of some party representatives in what was considered an anti-Soviet and anti-socialist campaign³.

One of the most striking responses was an article published in "Espresso" by Giulio Carlo Argan, mayor of Rome and one of Italy's most influential art historians, who contemptuously referred to the Biennale's moves as a «red cross nurse zeal»⁴. In July, the sector directors of the Biennale resigned: Vittorio Gregotti (visual arts), Luca Ronconi (theater), and Giacomo Gambetti (cinema).

The harshness of Soviet threats caused the PCI to waver and ultimately take a stance that, while not authoritative, was unequivocally disapproving. The party adopted a highly critical position towards the initiative without much ambiguity. To justify this shift, Adriano Seroni, in a lengthy interview published in "L'Unità", referred to the exhibition as a provisional program and a cultural mishap. The risk of falling into an anti-socialist propaganda spiral was cited as the main reason for these decisions.

The party cautiously navigated an issue in which it had always shown great interest, while also being acutely aware of the difficulties in dealing with Moscow due to the "dangerous" nature of the topic. In many ways, the PCI complex relationship with dissent reflected the challenges of Berlinguer's so-called third way towards autonomy from Soviet communism; a very cautious but not entirely unambiguous path towards socialism and democracy that never fully gained the approval of a significant part of the Party⁵.

Regarding the Venetian issue, the minutes of the PCI meeting on September 21, 1977, preserved at the Gramsci Foundation and published by Ripa di Meana, state: «We adopt the position of expressing our critical stance towards the event and distancing ourselves from it. Our intellectual comrades who may participate in certain Biennale meetings should take this into account»; an even more explicit statement appears in the minutes of the October 11 meeting, stating that PCI members attending the event would, in any case, «represent the party's positions»⁶. This led to many cultural figures within the party turning their backs on the event, including Adriano Secchi, the head of the Venetian institution's council group.

A particularly notable case involved historian Rosario Villari, who was accused of anti-Sovietism and having an unrealistic view of international relations after speaking at

³ For a more detailed discussion, see: Lomellini (2010); Lomellini (2010-2011), 505-538.

⁴ Argan (2007), 22.

⁵ Zanchi (1979), 3.

⁶ Ripa di Meana (2007), 60, 61.

a conference in Venice organized by “il Manifesto” just days before the Biennale inauguration. Villari sided with Russian dissidents in support of freedom and democracy, expressing his views in an article in “L’Unità”. Berlinguer promised to raise the issue in the Central Committee but ultimately failed to do so. These ambiguous behaviors highlighted the PCI struggle between public opinion which wanted it to be independent of Moscow and intense Soviet pressure⁷. The Partys once unquestioned leadership over intellectual circles was now under serious scrutiny. Despite these challenges, the Biennale was inaugurated on November 15, with Bettino Craxi as the sole political representative attending. The Italian Socialist Party had supported the initiative from the start, alongside groups such as Lotta Continua and other autonomous left-wing movements.

A clandestinely recorded video of Andrej Sacharov was screened at the event opening, encapsulating its deeper significance: “I hope that the Biennale will reveal the tragedy of creative life in socialist countries and, at the same time, show that, despite everything, a non-official culture exists and develops in the USSR and Eastern Europe, contributing to the free culture of the entire world”⁸. Among the numerous sections of the exhibition, the one dedicated to visual arts undoubtedly played a significant role, if only for explicitly interpreting the Venetian event as a hypothesis of dialogue, not just in an anti-Soviet sense. The exhibition, titled *The New Soviet Art: An Unofficial Perspective*, was curated by Gabriella Moncada and Enrico Crispolti, who carefully chose not to use the term dissent, distancing himself both from socialist speculation and from the condemnation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the name of cultural autonomy⁹.

In the realm of artistic research, there was a clear distinction between the external protest represented by exiled dissidents and an internal dissent that never took on a protest-like or oppositional nature but rather sought space for new and free experimentation, excluded from official channels. Noting that in visual arts the content is certainly less politicized compared to literature, Enrico Crispolti, in the introduction to the catalog, emphasized the need to move beyond the reactionary connotation of dissent understood as an irreconcilable opposition, in favor of a constructive cultural pluralism linked to the idea of a Marxism capable of renouncing hegemonic and exclusionary aspirations. The curatorial strategy aimed, for the first time in Europe, to provide a critically structured documentation of contemporary artistic research in Russia and a historicization designed to highlight the interesting dialectic of the proposals, far removed from official rigidity and closure. From the outset, the critic had to deal with reactions triggered by

⁷ Ajello (1997), 131-132.

⁸ Ripa di Meana (2007), 23.

⁹ Crispolti *et alii* (1977a). See also Cantone (2007).

Meana's announcement during a press conference presenting the event, where he prematurely revealed the provisional list of artists, provoking adverse reactions from pro-Soviet countries.

As a result, he was forced to invite only artists who were easily traceable, mostly because they had emigrated or because their works were preserved in museums and galleries in France or West Germany. The term new Soviet art referred to artistic production spanning from the Khrushchev Thaw - marked by the central event of the 1957 Youth Festival, which provided an opportunity to engage with Western models - to the 1970s, a period of extraordinary experimental richness hindered by a sort of artists' union that set limits on all proposals alternative to figurative academicism.

The exhibition presented the public with seven sections: 'Expressionist and Lyric Figuration', 'Gesture, Matter and Image', 'Post-constructive and Organic Abstraction', 'Kineticism. The Dvizhenie Group', 'Surreal Figuration', 'Irony and the Everyday', and 'Conceptual Mediation, Actions and Happenings'.

The Western critical perspective prevailed in constructing a path that emphasized the most problematic aspects of modernist and neo-avant-garde trends. The result was the outcome of a study that had already begun with the *Alternative Attuali* exhibitions of 1965 and 1968 in L'Aquila, where the critic started establishing a historical-critical framework that was later enriched in Venice, confirming many insights regarding artists who had previously stood out. In the first section, the expressionist and deforming figuration was accompanied by lyric sublimation, featuring a variety of content that drew both from indigenous popular mythologies and from an existential, individual, and private dimension (fig. 1).

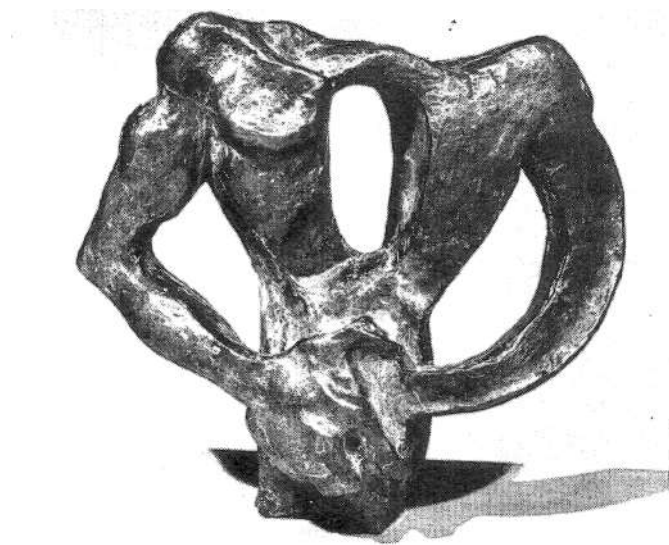


Fig. 1. Ernst Neizvestnyj, *Torso*, 1961, bronze (Crispoliti *et al.* 1977a).

A significant presence among the selected artists was Vyacheslav Kalinin, whose works of sharp realism were evidently inspired by the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Vjačeslav Kalinin, Lunatics, 1973, oil on canvas (Crispoliti et al. 1977a)*

The second section presented a selection of Soviet Informal Art, which represented the first significant reaction to the influences of European Informal Art of the 1950s, focusing both on materiality and gestural tension. Abstract research was represented by the paintings of Vladimir Zhigalov, often evidently inspired by Kandinsky's compositions; the sculptures of Adam Samogit, with explicit references to Jean Arp and organic sculpture; and the works of Igor Selkovskij, which engaged in a fruitful dialogue with

the Constructivist tradition of the Russian historical avant-garde.

Of particular interest to European critics was the section dedicated to kinetic art, represented by the Dviženie collective, a direct heir of Russian Constructivism and Productivism (fig. 3).

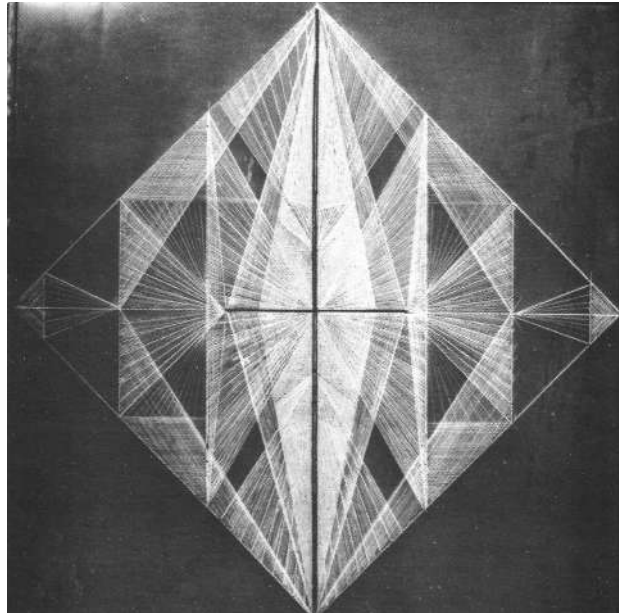


Fig. 3. Vjačeslav Šerbakov, Dviženie Collective, *Composition*, 1962, tempera on paper (Crispoliti *et al.* 1977a).

The selected works highlighted the technologically advanced aspect of the Soviet Union through their compositional complexity and use of industrial materials. In the surrealist section, the work of Julio Sooster stood out, laden with connections to historical, especially Central European, surrealism (fig. 4).

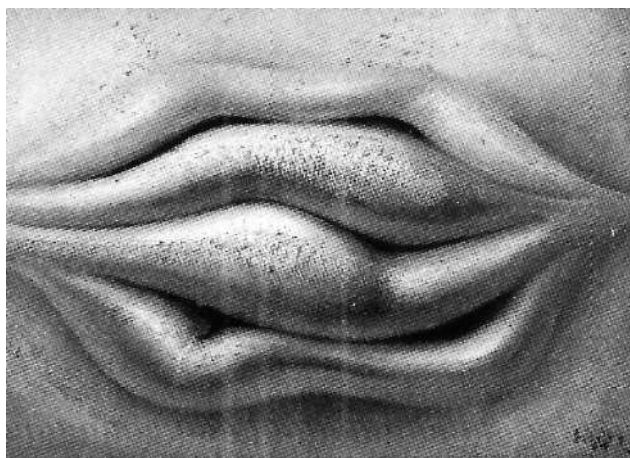


Fig. 4. Julio Sooster, *Composition*, 1964, oil on canvas (Crispoliti *et al.* 1977a).

Some works in the section dedicated to the everyday recalled the Pop universe, at least from a purely figurative standpoint, carrying, as Crispolti wrote in the catalog, ironic inflections toward «the average Soviet man»¹⁰.

The final section focused on conceptual mediation, collective actions, and participatory stimuli. It featured Melamid and Komar with their Soz-Art, ironically inspired by the stylistic features and slogans of Soviet propaganda, as well as the performances of the A.R.G. group, the Infante group, and the collective associated with Alekseev and Kizeval'ter (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Gennadij Donskoj, Miša Rošal, Viktor Skersis, *Iron curtain*, action, 1977, Moscow (Crispolti et al. 1977a).

In the introduction to this section in the catalog, Crispolti highlighted the connections with the Environment as Social section of the 1976 Biennale and with actions carried out in urban contexts rather than with the Western tradition of behaviorism¹¹. Many parallels could be drawn with key issues that shaped Italian artistic debates in the 1960s and

¹⁰ Crispolti et al. (1977a).

¹¹ Ivi

1970s, from the dematerialization of the art object to social participation and the deconstruction of aesthetic form. These were all elements of a neo-avant-garde research that constantly faced hostility from the Italian Communist Party, which was firmly oriented toward the cautious realist direction of Togliatti influence. The Biennale of Dissent was a great public success and proved to be a launchpad for many Soviet artists. Crispolti repeatedly emphasized the importance of engaging with the most pressing contemporary issues at the 1977 edition¹².

In the European context, Paris undoubtedly stood out as the city most attentive to artistic production from the Soviet world, partly due to the presence of many exiled artists. In Italy, however, the idea persisted for a long time that Russian abstractionism was the most significant and interesting expression of the entire Soviet avant-garde, followed by a void. There was almost a complete lack of awareness of more recent artistic production from the 1960s and 1970s. Even Soviet Socialist Realism did not attract much attention, as both center-left governments and the art market were largely uninterested in promoting or exhibiting it. Thus, the Venetian exhibition represented an extraordinary opportunity for the dissemination and appreciation of new Soviet art in the Italian context.

Despite many obstacles from anti-socialist instrumentalization to Moscow pressure the Biennale confirmed the PCI recognition of dissent in cultural terms.

Although there was never any advancement on the level of the Party's active presence in political terms, lacking in fact a concrete plan to recognize dissent from the East as a political interlocutor, the importance of dialogue on the cultural level was never questioned by 'Botteghe oscure' under the secretariat of Enrico Berlinguer.

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¹² Crispolti (1977b), 2.

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