Biennale del dissenso '77

Interview with Enrico Crispolti
Biennial of Dissent ‘77
Archives in Translation
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An interview with Enrico Crispolti, the curator of the exhibition “New Art from the Soviet Union. Unofficial viewpoint,” which was held during the “Biennale del dissenso” of 1977
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Interviewed by Maria-Kristiina Soomre

Please explain the background of the “Biennale del dissenso.” It has been claimed that behind it was primarily the biennial’s political ambition to be reconciled with the US Government, whose actions had been previously criticized by events of the Venice Biennial of 1974, held under the banner headline “Freedom for Chile.”

I have not heard of this. I do know, of course, that the CIA used cultural events, and perhaps also the biennial, for their own propagandistic purposes, but the origin of the dissident biennial is, in fact, directly linked to Italian local politics. The president of the biennial was a socialist – Carlo Ripa di Meana. The problem was that the Socialists (PSI) wished to play against the Communists (PCI) to get the upper hand, even when they were seemingly collaborating and were in alliance. In the government, the Socialists were in alliance with the Christian Democrats (DC). However, the DC never took them too seriously, since in the post-war period the Communists were constantly stronger than the Socialists. Hence, the Socialists also had a certain inferiority complex, and they tried to achieve cultural self-assertion through Ripa di Meana. The way I see it, this was the motive force behind the biennial. Naturally, the international context was also favourable.

How did you become the curator of the “Biennale del dissenso” art exhibition?

Partito Socialista Italiano, Italian Socialist Party.
Partito Comunista Italiano, a former Italian communist party.
Democrazia Cristiana, an Italian political party.
The Italian communists were against this event because Ripa di Meana too heavily exploited the fact of dissidentism, which was the main anti-Soviet propaganda argument. I received a call and was offered the opportunity to organise this exhibition because I had been a co-curator of the biennial a year earlier, and our “Ambiente sociale” was definitely a political exhibition. I was, and still am, a Leftist, and I was very close to communists at that time, but of course I used my own head and I had a feeling that this exhibition was an interesting opportunity. The initial idea was to hold an exhibition on the avant-garde art of all the Eastern European countries.

I had connections with many avant-gardists of those countries. I had organised a series of important exhibitions in L’Aquila in the 1960s. L’Aquila is a town in Abruzzo, to the east of Rome, that has a beautiful Spanish-built fortress from the 16th century. I organised exhibitions of contemporary art there in 1962, 1963, 1965 and 1968. In 1965, I managed to also exhibit Soviet art, primarily from Roman private collections, for example, from Antonello Tombadori. I cannot remember exactly whether the works of Ülo Sooster were also at that exhibition, but I do remember the small drawings of Ilja Kabakov. Works from both of them were part of the exhibition, not as representatives of Soviet art, but as interesting artists. The title of the exhibition was “Alternative attuali” (“Actual alternatives”) and it focused on different pursuits of young artists. Under different topics, we exhibited Jankilevski, Sooster, Kabakov and many others.

In other words, I accepted the offer from the Venice biennial gladly. We organised that exhibition together with Gabriella Moncada. She is a linguist who presently teaches art history at the Brera Academy in Milan. Additionally, there was a scholar of literature
in our team, the first to research Russian post-war avant-garde literature. We began to work together. Since I knew different artists from Czechoslovakia and Hungary, I compiled the first list, a draft of how the exhibition could be organised. The idea was to exhibit avant-garde artists. We were not interested in dissidentism. I remember how I once argued with Bruno Vespa (an Italian TV journalist), who was just a youngster then and came to L’Aquila as a reporter for Radio Pescara. He was a Christian Democrat and, at the time, desperately wished to have a story about persecuted (Soviet) artists. I told him that the avant-garde has historically always been marginalised. Avant-gardists are repelled, and it is safe to say that they are persecuted, but this is the case always and everywhere. All those stories about open air exhibitions in Moscow and other places – the main problem after all was that these artists were not members of the Artists Union. Therefore, they were not artists according to their social status, for instance, Nussberg, Infante Arana – kinetic artists. They were unable to publish their works in art magazines; they could do that only in architecture magazines. But this does not mean that they were persecuted. Some of them worked in the Soviet Union, some in the West. I was not that interested in the political side of it.

In short, I compiled an exhibition project for the administration of the biennial, an outline of ideas with possible names. Ripa di Meana accepted it, held a press conference and announced – without consulting with me – that this was an art exhibition of the “Biennale del dissenso”. This created a mess. The Embassy of the Soviet Union was furious. The participation of the satellite states was blocked, and cooperation with us was banned. I tried to go to Warsaw, as well as to Budapest, to discuss the matter. I had managed to bring Czechoslovakian artists to the exhibitions in L’Aquila in 1965 and

Enrico Crispolti
Film still from the interview
1968, through an institution that dealt with art propaganda in foreign countries. They had then paid for the transport of the works I had chosen as far as the border of Italy. In short, I hoped that something similar could also be done for the Venice exhibition.

So I went to Budapest and Warsaw, trying to get in touch with these administrations. I wanted to include avant-gardists and I knew exactly who they were. All I needed was help with the transaction of affairs and transport. What I did was, of course, politically not correct. Namely, I went there with a tourist visa, because obviously I could not tell them that the purpose of my visit was to arrange the matters of the biennial. When I arrived in Budapest, the police were already waiting for me. The comic side of it was the fact that I went there as an honest communist. At the Milan airport, I met an old friend of mine, Mario Verdone, a film critic who worked for UNESCO and was a Christian Democrat. So he, a Christian Democrat arrived in Budapest and was received with official greetings. And I, a communist, was welcomed by a police car that followed me. There was no point in covering my tracks, since they knew my hotel. I took the metro, not a taxi, but when I arrived, they were already waiting for me. I spent two or three days there trying to meet the necessary people. Every time I went to an office, I received a reply that the required officials had already left. Yet, I did manage to communicate with different artists, of course under strict supervision. I met an abstractionist who worked in the spirit of Vasarely and was officially also very highly valued. As far as I know, he even belonged to the Central Committee. Hence, there probably was no official opposition to the avant-garde. Nevertheless, I was unable to achieve anything. The Hungarians were very slow: for two or three days nothing happened.
In Poland, I wished to visit Łódź, the location of an important abstract art museum. When I got there, I received a phone call from Warsaw, urging me to return immediately, since a functionary was waiting for me. My flight back was scheduled for the next day. In the end, I never met the official, and I also missed the museum. A big mess and no results. Thus we finally decided to organise an exhibition based solely on Soviet art, because in Italy, Germany and especially in Paris, France there were enough works of art in private collections to succeed in this endeavour and, above all, to succeed in the way we envisaged it. If you have seen the catalogue, you know that there was art from figative expressionism to conceptualism and behaviourism. There were Komar, Melamid and the Gerlovins, in other words a very contemporary selection. An interesting find was Sooster, who had been exhibited already at the exhibition of 1965. That means a good selection had already been made ten years earlier, when important artistic personalities were accentuated. And so, with Gabriella, we assembled this large and comprehensive exhibition on Soviet art in the sport palace near Arsenale, which has never been used for exhibitions since. In the end, everything worked out well, and of course Ripa di Meana even managed to play his games.

Did you also participate in organizing the rest of the programme of the “Biennale del dissenso”?

Around the exhibition, there were indeed also a lot of other elements, the whole “Biennale del dissenso”: literature, films and other events in which I did not participate. We were strongly opposed to the notion “dissidentism” in the title of the event, and in the title of the exhibition we renounced it on principle. Our understanding was that the choice of the works of art was based on an unofficial point of view, because it
was unofficial art. There was also an informative side to the exhibition. There were pictures of how unofficial exhibitions were taking place in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, there was also one slide show from the official art exhibition discourse, for example, on official exhibitions in the USA, and on exhibition catalogues. It is highly interesting that my exhibition and the official exhibitions organised by the Soviet Union also had common elements. Some artists were represented in both selections. For me, this was extremely interesting.

I was attacked by the Communist Party, the PCI and Tortorella – an important cultural official at the time. He told me: “You have let yourself be instrumentalised, used.” I told him that I had only done what I had wanted to do from my own professional position. Looking back, I believe that I behaved politically very correctly. Still I was forced to write a letter in defence of my opinions. It was published in l’Unita. I remember writing it in Venice, explaining our position ...

How would you assess the relationship between art and politics, especially when looking back at the unofficial Soviet art?

Culture, especially figurative art, has little impact on society. Back then, 30 years ago, it was about something else. There was a Union of Artists in the Soviet Union, a dominant corporation. If you wished to be an artist, you had to be a member of the Union. Since all the representatives of academic art and social realism were in the Union, others simply had no impact. The situation could have been similar in the West if a force with the same structure had dominated here. But this does not make one or another art form “political” in itself.

At the beginning of the 1950s, during the time of Guttuso and social realism, the connections between art and politics in Italy were
close. Art had the desire to have a political say. I believe that art must be socially responsible, responsible regarding the real world, a sense of criticism. There is a specific contingent in politics with their own game rules and interests. An artist has liberty to be critical of that, for instance, George Grosz and his criticism of capitalism and the Weimar Republic. But an artist can be critical also of the world in general, of the reality and the destiny of the human race. Comparing Grosz and Otto Dix, the latter generalised everything to the human race, but Grosz dealt with capitalism, the working class and the environment. Hence, it varies from artist to artist. I think that good art takes a critical approach in relation to reality, and also makes a critical judgement about the society in which it has been created. Because, when dealing with the avant-garde, we deal with an attempt to renew the world. And thus it is definitely critical.

Soviet artists were really not very critical at the time. Because they had, how to say that ... Lets take Sooster as an example. He was a surrealist who tried to distance himself from reality, to overcome reality in some special dream-like world. You cannot exactly say that in doing that he was being subversive, can you? I gave an example of the 1920s and Dix. There were clear oppositions. Sooster did not have that, could not have that. The opposition to Soviet society came into art later, when Kabakov began to approach life sociologically, to analyse Soviet life. But none of these artists created a black-and-white criticism of the regime. Yes, they knew what they were willing to risk. But maybe they also thought that their world-view could, in a sense, raise them above reality.

The biggest problem in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern Bloc was that the personal creativity of individuals was suppressed. And in that sense these artists were even privileged. They had their own
niches, an opportunity to concentrate on their creation. The creation of the Soviet artists was much more interesting during those years than it was later. Because later they dealt with their sociology and literacy, defending themselves with the model of American pop, which remained empty even though it was not exactly imitated. When they worked under pressure, the result was much more authentic. The same pattern is noticeable in Czechoslovakia. There are some extraordinary personalities to be found in the 1950s and the 1960s and not so many later.

However, many of these artists are considered to be dissidents in the historical context ...

I believe that every true artist is in essence a dissident, even Giorgio Morandi. In the 1940s, when fascism was still ascendant, Guttuso, by the way, painted still-lifes that are maybe his best works. These works were meant to oppose Morandi. Guttuso displayed dramatic reality in still-lifes, while Morandi was being lyrical. He was accused of aventinism and opposition through withdrawal and seclusion. Thus, even Morandi was, in a way, a dissident, because he opposed fascist propaganda. Consequently, every single artist who has new ideas that oppose fixed traditions is a dissident, a nonconformist.

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View of the exhibition

Photo: Stanislav Stepaško