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## **Salon Suisse – Criticism and Dissent. 1977 re-enacted: La nuova arte sovietica**

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**Abstract:** In 1977, the Biennial of Dissent took place in Venice. Exhibitions, concerts and conferences about different thinking and dissent were organized. Tonight's salon will revive the main art venue in that context: the group exhibition of Soviet unofficial artists La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale, curated by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada Di Milia. The atmosphere of this pivotal event will be evoked by the display of original artworks shown in 1977 and by a reading of texts such as letters by the organizers and newspaper articles. This time-travel will recall the then fiercely debated questions of “right” and “wrong” in ideology and art. Crispolti and other witnesses from the time will be present.

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## SALON SUISSE – CRITICISM AND DISSENT:

### 1977 RE-ENACTED: LA NUOVA ARTE SOVIETICA

#### **S.F.:**

Before starting I would like to give warm welcome to our guests Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella di Milia-Moncada, we are very glad to have them both here tonight.

Today's Salon Suisse, which will also be the last of the year, is dedicated to the so-called Biennale del dissenso, the "Biennale of Dissent", which took place in Venice exactly 36 years ago, in November 1977, between two official Biennale years. The then president of the Biennale, the socialist Carlo Ripa di Meana, had introduced in the previous years a tradition of thematically and politically oriented Biennales: the 1974-1975 edition was titled "Freedom for Chile", and in 1976 the Biennale was dedicated to Post-Francoist Spain. On 25 January 1977, Ripa di Meana explained his notion of a "Biennale of Dissent" in an interview to the newspaper *Il Corriere Della Sera*: the phenomenon of alternative thinking and its consequences was to be investigated in the framework of symposiums and conferences, and this different culture – an alternative to the official aesthetics of the Eastern Bloc countries – was to be illustrated through films, musical, dance and theatre performances, literary events and exhibitions. Long before the opening of the Biennale, such an approach already caused a certain political disgruntlement. Among others, the Soviet ambassador in Italy Nikita Ryšëv issued an official protest against the project to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: in his opinion, a culture which was not recognized in the Soviet Union should not be presented abroad as Soviet culture. Thus, the politically alternative programme became a political issue, and eventually Ripa di Meana resigned from his post. However, he was later reinstated so that the "Biennale del dissenso culturale" could open as scheduled on 15 November 1977. The same day saw the opening of one of the sections of the Biennale of Dissent in the basement of the Palasport next to the "Arsenale", the exhibition "La nuova arte sovietica" curated by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella di Milia – who at the time was still Gabriella Moncada – with more than 100 Russian Soviet artists. This exhibition is the focal point of this evening's event.

#### **M.B.:**

Although we chose to call it "1977 re-enacted", what we would like to present to you tonight is not a classical re-enactment in the sense of a detailed reconstruction of the exhibition as in the case of Harald Szeemann's famous display "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Prada Foundation. Rather, we would like to revive the atmosphere and context of that debate. During an hour or so, we

will reconstruct the history of what happened before the opening of the exhibition, as well as the debates that followed its opening, with the help of original documents such as letters written by artists and curators, or newspaper articles in their original language. As for the exhibition itself, you can watch it here in the form of a large projection, a tracking shot by an unknown author meticulously documenting every single artwork and every section of the exhibition. Moreover, you can watch the projection of the original slides of the group “Dviženie”, which were also presented at the 1977 exhibition (valuable artworks could not be taken out of the Soviet Union, and were therefore presented in the form of slides), and with the projector we could also show you several artworks from Italian collections, lent to the exhibition “la nuova arte sovietica”.

Before starting our re-enactment, we would like to thank, once again, Gabriella di Milia as well as Enrico Crispolti, who made available his extensive archive for our preparatory research. After the re-enactment, we will have some time for questions or comments, or just to have a chat while sharing a glass of wine. We hope you will enjoy “1977 re-enacted: la nuova arte sciatica”.

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**S.F.:**

**Already in 1975 Gabriella Moncada wrote in her newspaper article “Three painters beyond dissidence” (“Tre pittori oltre il Dissenso”) in *Il Giorno*, 8 June, about soviet nonofficial artist:**

**G.M.:**

"Con una cattiva abitudine, si parla di artisti sovietici in quanto «artisti del dissenso». Ma poi si è costretti ad ammettere che si tratta quasi sempre di «conformisti» dal punto di vista pittorico. Invece, esistono in Unione Sovietica artisti realmente indipendenti dai modelli culturali predominanti e che non risultano deludenti per lo spettatore occidentale. Fra gli artisti che ho incontrato negli ultimi anni, i più interessanti mi sembrano Ilja Kabakov, Vladimir Jankilevskij e Jurij Sobolev, tutti e tre residenti a Mosca".

**S.F.:**

“There is a bad habit of describing Soviet artist as ‘dissident’. But then one is forced to admit that they are almost always ‘conformist’ from a pictorial standpoint. However, there do exist in the Soviet Union a number of artists who are truly independent from the dominant cultural models, and who won’t disappoint a Western viewer. Among those whom I met in the past few years, I found the most interesting ones to be Ilja Kabakov, Vladimir Jankilevskij and Jurij Sobolev, all based in Moscow.”

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**S.F.:**

**In Summer 1977 Gabriella Moncada and Enrico Crispolti were appointed to curators of the visual arts section of the Biennale of dissent. After a meeting August 29<sup>th</sup> they reported the following:**

**G.M.:**

"Nei giorni 26, 27, 28 e 29 agosto si sono svolti a Venezia i lavori di impostazione della mostra di arti figurative e del convegno relativo, sul tema della ricerca attuale nell'area culturale est-europea.

La mostra di arti figurative per la quale si propone il titolo:

Biennale 1977 / Arti visive

ASPETTI DI RICERCA IN URSS/CECOSLOVACCHIA/POLONIA/UNGHERIA

Venezia, Novembre-Dicembre 1977

sarà costituita da quattro elementi concorrenti in un discorso unitario

[...]

Sarà così documentata:

ricerca d'avanguardia nell'U.R.S.S. negli ultimi due decenni (praticamente due generazioni) per quanto riguarda la pittura e la scultura, ed eventualmente (da approfondire subito) architettura; documentazione attraverso la presenza di opere di una quarantina di artisti (pittori e scultori), e una consistente informazione supplementare data attraverso proiezioni "carousel"

[...]

In pratica la situazione sovietica verrà documentata nel suo insieme, essendo sostanzialmente malnota; mentre per le situazioni cecoslovacca, polacca e ungherese si è tenuto presente il già largo grado di conoscenza, anche attraverso le stesse mostre e partecipazioni ufficiali (compreso nella stessa Biennale di Venezia)

[...]

Per la documentazione relativa all'U.R.S.S., pittura e scultura, in base al materiale raccolto e organizzato da Gabriella Moncada e da Enrico Crispolti si è proceduto alla strutturazione della mostra stessa in tutti i suoi elementi e componenti, riservandosi invece di approfondire, a tempi brevissimi, la possibilità di realizzare un discorso parallelo per quanto riguarda l'architettura

[...]

Crispolti approfondirà a Roma le informazioni (anche eventuali contatti con Vieri Quilici e Paolo Portoghesi) relativamente alla possibilità di realizzare la sezione architettura

Gabriella Moncada si occuperà particolarmente del reperimento delle opere e dell'ulteriore documentazione relativamente ai pittori e scultori e comportamentisti, ecc. sovietici, attraverso il materiale disponibile in collezioni in Francia, Inghilterra, Germania, Italia ed eventualmente anche

Stati Uniti. Alla scelta definitiva delle opere, sul posto, parteciperà, compatibilmente con gli altri impegni nel quadro di questo lavoro, anche Crispolti. Moncada e Crispolti mettono a disposizione della documentazione da inserire nella mostra e nel catalogo il materiale in loro possesso, indipendentemente e precedentemente raccolto. Tale materiale potrà cioè essere duplicato dalla Biennale, mentre gli originali saranno restituiti".

**S.F.:**

"On the 26, 27, 28 and 29 of August, preparatory works were carried out in Venice in view of the exhibition of figurative art and of the related conference on the topic of current research in the Eastern European cultural area.

The exhibition of figurative art, whose provisional title is:

"Biennale 1977 / Visual arts

RESEARCH ASPECTS IN THE USSR / CZECHOSLOVAKIA / POLAND / HUNGARY"

Venice, November-December 1977,

will combine four competing elements within a unitary discourse.

[...]

It will be documented as follows:

Research on the avant-gardes of the U.S.S.R. in the past two decades (practically two generations) in the fields of painting, sculpture, and possibly (to be explored in the shortest possible delay) architecture; documentation through the presence of artworks by about forty artists (painters and sculptors) and substantial additional information conveyed through a carousel slideshow.

[...]

In practice, the Soviet situation shall be documented as a whole, as it still is substantially unknown; as for the situation in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, the exhibition takes into account that the public is already quite familiar with it, partly thanks to the official exhibitions and participations (including in the Venice Biennale).

[...]

As for the documentation of painting and sculpture in the U.S.S.R., the materials gathered and organized by Gabriella Moncada and Enrico Crispolti served as the basis to structure the exhibition itself in all its elements and components, with the intent to explore, in the shortest possible delay, the possibility of developing a parallel discourse with regard to architecture.

[...]

Crispolti, in Rome (also through possible contacts with Vieri Quilici and Paolo Portoghesi), will study the possibility of creating a section on architecture.

Gabriella Moncada will be in charge of finding the artworks and of preparing additional documentation about Soviet painters, sculptors, performers and other kinds of artists, through the material available in French, English, German, Italian and possibly American collections. Compatibly with his other obligations in the framework of the present work, Crispolti will also be involved in the final, on-site selection of the artworks. Moncada and Crispolti will provide the documentation and the materials in their possession, previously and independently collected, to be integrated in the exhibition and in the catalogue. The Biennale will be able to make copies of the materials, while the originals will be returned to their owners.”

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**M.B.:**

**The conceptual artists Rimma and Valerij Gerlovin wrote a letter to Enrico Crispolti from Moscow:**

**S.F.:**

Уважаемый господин Криспольти,

Мы посылаем Вам те материалы, которые Вы просили. Здесь в Москве мы не имеем возможности выставлять свои работы. Недавно нам запретили участвовать в официальной выставке в доме учённых, несмотря на то, что был уже готов каталог, афиши, пригласительные билеты. Мы с интересом следим за всеми итальянскими выставками, но не всегда имеем каталог. Просим Вас, прислать нам все материалы, в которых Вы использовали наши работы. В этом случае мы будем Вам прислать новые работы.

С уважением,

Римма + Валерий Герловины

**M.B.:**

Dear Mr. Crispolti,

We are sending you the materials you requested. Here in Moscow we have no possibility to exhibit our work. They recently banned us from taking part in an official exhibition at the House of Scientists, although the catalogue, the posters and the invitations were ready. We are following all of your Italian exhibitions with great interest, although we don't always have the catalogues. We would be grateful if you could send us any material in which you have used our works. And in any case we will send you some new pieces.

Kind regards,

Rimma + Valerij Gerlovin.

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**S.F.:**

**The sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyj, back then living in Zurich, wrote to the director of the Biennale Carlo Ripa di Meana September 3<sup>rd</sup>:**

**M.B.:**

“Gentile Signor Ripa, sono d'accordo di fare parte della Biennale, ma vorrei che la mia partecipazione fosse rappresentativa. Ora ci sono tanti dei miei lavori in Europa, ma dall'inizio dell'anno prossimo, saranno tolti in America [...] Fra l'altro, ho fatto tredici grandi lavori in gesso - forse loro potranno le far fare fondere in bronzo. In ogni caso vorrei esporre alla Biennale, ma non lavori casuali, ma seri. Se questo sarà possibile, io sarò molto felice. Il 28 ottobre si aprirà una mia mostra nella Galleria municipale a Leverkusen, dove ci saranno molti dei miei lavori. Gli organizzatori della Biennale potrebbero vederle lì”.

**S.F.:**

“Dear Mr. Ripa, I agree to be part of the Biennale, but I would like my participation to be representative. There are quite a lot of my works around Europe, but as of next year they will be sent to America. [...] By the way, I made thirteen large plaster works – perhaps they could be cast in bronze. In any case, I do want to exhibit my works at the Biennale, but not just any works, serious ones. If this can be arranged, I would be very happy. On 28 October there will be the opening of my exhibition at the Leverkusen city gallery, with several of my works. The Biennale organisers could see them there.”

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**M.B.:**

**In a letter dated September 7<sup>th</sup> to Vera Linhartova, a Czech art historian and poet, Enrico Crispolti explained the following:**

**E.C.:**

"Cette exposition sera rigoureusement critique, sans questions politiques, même si elle sera une exposition réalisée en Occident par des gens de gauche, mais sans aucun lien officiel au moins pour URSS et Tchécoslovaquie (je ne sais pas encore pour Pologne et Hongrie)".

**M.B.:**

“The exhibition will be strictly critical, devoid of political issues, despite being an exhibition set up in the West by people from the left, but with no official connection to the USSR or Czechoslovakia (I don’t know yet about Poland and Hungary).”

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**M.B.:**

**On his way to emigrate to the US the artist Vasilij Sitnikov stopped in Austria and wrote to Carlo Ripa di Meana from Kitzbühel October 11<sup>th</sup>:**

**S.F.:**

Я жил в Москве и продавал мои картины дипломатам разных стран. Если Вы предложите Khaled Baly, Tunisian Embassy, Warszawa, Poland, этому господину прислать на Вашу выставку мою картину «Русский монастырь зимою» то я буду счастлив, Вы с удовольствием посмеетесь, владелец моей картины удивится огромному повышению ее стоимости в результате упоминания в каталоге выставки на биеннале. В этом Вам его надо убедить. [...] В Москве я имел много денег, но я бежал на Запад без белья... Здесь я нищий пока-что. У меня даже для писем не хватает денег. Работаю я медленно. Здесь я делаю картину на толстом картоне [...]. В Нью Йорке в музее модерн арт шесть моих картин или больше я не знаю. Знает Нина Стивене жена американского корреспондента в Москве и у нее тоже несколько моих картин. [...] В Риме Prof. Franco Miele, он устраивал мои выставки в Авецано и поэтому у него есть несколько хороших моих работ...

**M.B.:**

“Back when I lived in Moscow, I used to sell lots of paintings to diplomats from all over the world. If you should propose to Khaled Baly, from the Tunisian Embassy in Warsaw, to send my painting ‘Russian Monastery in the Winter’ to the exhibition, I will be delighted, please don’t hesitate, and the owner will be astounded to discover the increase in value of my painting after being published in the Biennale catalogue. You must stress that point [...]. Back in Moscow I had plenty of money, but then I had to flee to the West with nothing but the shirt I had on my back. Here I am living like a bum. I don’t even have the money to post a letter; my work is going slowly. At the moment I’m working on a painting on a piece of cardboard [...]. The MoMA in New York has six of my works, maybe more. I don’t know for sure. Maybe Nina Steven does, she’s the wife of an American correspondent in Moscow and she has a couple of my paintings too [...]. And in Rome there’s prof.



Franco Miele, via Lucina 10. He organized two exhibitions about me in Avezzano and has some good works of mine.”

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**S.F.:**

**The Russian emigrant artist Aleksandr Leonov, who was also involved in the organization of the exhibition, contacted Gabriella Moncada and Enrico Crispolti:**

**M.V.:**

Добрый день, дорогие друзья!

Вчера я возвратился из Венеции в Париж и дома меня ждало письмо из Ленинграда. Я пересылаю его Вам, так как его содержание тесно связано с Биеннале, думаю что это интересно как Вам, так и прессе, которая освещает работы выставки.

Некоторые из художников, имена которых есть в этом письме, представлены на Биеннале в информационном разделе, было бы большой поддержкой с Вашей стороны в их тяжелой борьбе за свободное искусство в России, если Вы опубликуете в прессе информацию об открытии выставки в Ленинграде.

**S.F.:** “Hello dear friends!

I just came back to Paris from Venice yesterday. At home I found a letter from Leningrad which I am forwarding it to you, as its content is closely related to the Biennale. I think it will be of interest to both you and the press, especially for clarifying the work of your exhibition.

For some artists mentioned in the letter and present in the informative section of the Biennale, it would be of great help to their struggle for artistic freedom in Russia if you could provide information about the opening of the exhibition in Leningrad.”

**S.F.:**

15 ноября в Ленинграде открывается выставка художников-нонконформистов. [...] Культурное движение переживает сейчас сложный период. Однако, несмотря на гонения и эмиграцию талантливых художников и писателей, творческий поиск продолжается.

[...]

15 ноября открывается Биеннале-77. Фестиваль искусств в Венеции впервые широко представляет неофициальное искусство. Это праздник для художников всех стран, это – праздник искусства.

Мы воспринимаем фестиваль как событие актуальное и радостное. Одновременно в Ленинграде по инициативе Музея и художников [...] открывается выставка. Это выставка является приветствием фестивалю искусств в Венеции – Биеннале-77.

А. Путилина и Евгений Есауленко, Питер, 13 ноября 1977

**M.B.:**

“An exhibition of painters / nonconformists will open in Leningrad on November 15 [...]. This cultural movement is currently going through a difficult time. However, in spite of the persecution and of the emigration of talented artists and painters, the creative search is continuing.

[...]

“The Biennale of 1977 will open on November 15. The Venice Art festival will feature for the first time an exhaustive presentation of non-official art. This is an event to be celebrated by artists worldwide, a celebration of Art.

To us, the Festival is of topical importance, and we welcome it with joy. At the same time as this event, another exhibition will open in Leningrad upon the initiative of the [Unofficial] Museum [of Contemporary Painting] and of the artists [...]. This exhibition is a tribute to the Venice Art Festival – the 1977 Biennale.”

A. Putilina and Evgenij Esaulenko to Aleksandr Leonov, Piter, 13 November 1977

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**M.B.:**

**November 15<sup>th</sup>, the exhibition opened and the official press release was published *La Repubblica*, titled “What is the value of new Soviet art?” (‘Che valore ha la nuova arte sovietica’):**

**E.C.:**

"La mostra «La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale», tenta [~~invece~~] per la prima volta un discorso critico complessivo esteso su tutta l'ampiezza delle diverse tendenze e su un lavoro che ormai va avanti da una ventina d'anni. In questo senso la Biennale sarà certamente la più ampia e documentata rassegna finora organizzata di nuova arte sovietica. Molti i nomi nuovi.

Quale quadro ne viene fuori? Forse quello d'una cultura artistica provinciale? Personalmente ritengo che alcune frettolose prese di posizione di questi giorni verranno smentite dall'ampiezza delle motivazioni che la rassegna veneziana offre. D'altra parte si tratta sempre dell'Unione Sovietica e non di un piccolo paese del Terzo mondo. Dunque, l'interesse è indubbio e anzitutto quello

sintomatico di una realtà culturale pluralistica al di là del monolitismo ufficiale. La stessa cosa d'altronde accade in campo letterario.

I temi vanno dal recupero di memorie collettive (anche d'accento mistico) agli spazi di lirismo individuale, fino a proiezioni verso il futuro, cibernetica inclusa. Queste motivazioni ricorrono nelle sette sezioni nelle quali la mostra è articolata. Esiste insomma una nuova arte sovietica e chi si recherà a Venezia potrà conoscerla non superficialmente. E' un'arte che può dialogare con l'avanguardia occidentale contrapponendo, alla pari, un proprio patrimonio di risultati.

**M.B.:**

“The exhibition ‘La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale’ (“New Soviet Art: an Unofficial Perspective”), is a first attempt to present a critical, overarching discourse, and to extend it to the whole spectrum of tendencies and works of the last twenty years or so. In this respect, the Biennale will certainly be the largest and best documented exhibition on new Soviet art. There will be plenty of new names.

What emerges from this exhibition? Is it the picture of a provincial artistic culture? I personally believe that some of the hasty judgments pronounced in the past few days will be proved wrong by the range of motivations offered by the exhibition in Venice. After all, we are talking of the Soviet Union, not of some small Third World country. The interest is therefore undeniable, especially in terms of a pluralist cultural reality beyond the official monolithic one. This is also the case in the literary field.

The themes range from the recovery of collective memories (also of a mystical nature) to spaces devoted to individual lyricism and projections towards the future, including cybernetics. These motivations run through the seven sections in which the exhibition is articulated. In other words, there is a new Soviet art and whoever comes to Venice will have a chance to discover it in a way which is far from superficial. This art can engage on a par with Western avant-garde, proposing its own wealth of results.

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**S.F.:**

**Gabriella Moncada wrote an “An introduction to the exhibition” (*Una introduzione alla mostra*) in a booklet accompanying the official catalogue:**

**G.M.:**

"Nell'ordinare questa rassegna abbiamo inteso presentare i reperti di una cultura che in Unione Sovietica è minoritaria, e che chiede ancora diritto di cittadinanza. Si tratta di una cultura che, pur

attenta ai modelli culturali occidentali, innesta su questi, riattualizzandoli, temi costanti della tradizione russa. C'è come una eternità culturale panrussa che supera il codice d'epoca e che si riafferma di continuo: è quel misticismo, quella concezione cosmogonica, quel panteismo, quell'amore per la perfezione geometrica, quella forte radice rurale, quella aspirazione al primitivo, che costituiscono un sottofondo costante nell'arte dell'Ottocento e delle avanguardie storiche degli anni Venti. Ancora oggi dietro l'immagine, senti una sacralità, l'icona, un luna-park cinetico diviene santuario tecnologico".

Nota

"Questa mostra si propone di presentare un panorama delle arti figurative in Unione Sovietica, dall'inizio degli anni Sessanta ad oggi.

Il compito fondamentale è stato quello di riequilibrare una prospettiva sbilanciata apparsa in mostre precedenti. Queste sinora, privilegiando gli artisti residenti in Occidente, la cui opera, come naturale, è la più facilmente reperibile, avevano messo in secondo piano quegli artisti che operano in Unione Sovietica.

Il nostro scopo è stato quello di presentare tutti gli artisti che operano nella vasta area del "Dissenso" senza far pesare la distinzione fra residenti ed emigrati. Di alcuni degli altri residenti in URSS, esempio massimo quello di Ilja Kabakov, la nostra mostra offre una scelta varia e inedita per l'Occidente".

**S.F.:** "In organising this selection, we aimed to present the artefacts of a culture which is still in a minority position and claims a right of citizenship in the Soviet Union. While interested in Western cultural models, such a culture grafts upon them a modernised version of Russian recurring traditional themes. There is a kind of pan-Russian cultural permanence which transcends the codes of a given period and which is constantly reaffirmed: that particular mysticism, cosmogonic conception, pantheism, that love of geometric perception, strong rural roots, aspiration to the primordial, constitute the constant backdrop to nineteenth-century art and to the avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s. Up to this day, behind the image, one can perceive the sacredness, the icon, and the kinetic fun fair becomes a technological sanctuary."

Note

"The exhibition aims to present an overview of figurative art in the Soviet Union from the 1960s to the present.

The primary task is to re-adjust the unbalanced perspective that emerged from previous exhibitions. Up to this day, such exhibitions have focused on artists residing in the West, whose works are understandably easier to get hold of, leaving in the background those active in the Soviet Union".

We aimed to present all the artists working in the wide area of “dissidence”, without stressing any distinction between residents and emigrants. Regarding those residing in the USSR, most notably Ilja Kabakov, our exhibition offers a varied selection, unprecedented in the West.”

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**M.B.:**

**In the exhibition catalogue Enrico Crispolti published his main text entitled “An unofficial exhibition of new Soviet Art” (*Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica*):**

**E.C.:**

"Respingere l'invito alla discussione e al confronto che la documentazione proposta avanza equivale a voler negare l'evidenza di fatti il cui peso è già notevole, e più ancora lo sarà negli anni a venire, entro e fuori l'URSS. Parlare di opere da spazzatura, o qualcosa di simile, come si è letto di recente, detto con puerile astiosità accademica, sulla «Literaturnaya Gazeta» in preventiva polemica, non ha alcun senso, e si pone fuori del limite minimo di serietà accettabile per una discussione culturale.

[...]

Quella che presiede la mostra veneziana è una prospettiva [~~invece~~] non ufficiale, come si ha tutto il diritto di rivendicare sotto un profilo di libertà di circolazione delle idee e di libertà di esercizio culturale e specificatamente critico

[...]

Dunque una prospettiva non ufficiale, che vuol dire non forzosamente contestatoria, forzosamente alternativa e ostile verso la linea ufficiale: soltanto con questa molto ampiamente divergente, e tuttavia non senza qualche occasione di contatto

[...]

Non forze eversive, sono invece forze che aspirano a una libertà di proposizione, a uno spazio di riappropriazione individuale o collettiva, di patrimoni diversi, che rappresentano mozioni di commento franco, scontento e contestatorio a volte, altre volte mi sembra addirittura consenziente alle realtà sociologica sovietica attuale.

La Biennale 1977 dunque, se effettivamente è politicizzata, non smentisce - e certo questo in particolar modo nel settore delle arti visive - il suo ruolo di proposizione di fatti culturali. [...]

Ben venga l'intenzione di politicizzazione (in quanto consapevolezza dell'inscindibile nesso tra cultura e politica) se libera dal gioco del mercantilismo, che trovi ora riproposto al di là dell'interessato rimpianto di qualche critico per la libertà dell'arte (in occidente, s'intende). Del resto, proprio soltanto sul fondamento politico la stessa dimensione del dissenso può essere ricollocata in una prospettiva più propria, che non l'attribuisca in esclusiva alla condizione culturale

dell'est-europeo (ove non è escluso comunque si verifichi, ma in modi determinati e non totalizzanti), ma sappia riconoscerla come realtà permanente, anche a noi vicinissima, sempre là dove si eserciti la prepotenza del potere culturale e politico".

**M.B.:**

“To reject the invitation to dialogue and comparison extended by the proposed documentation amounts to wanting to deny a fact which is already overwhelmingly evident, and which will become even more so in the years to come, within and without the borders of the USSR. To describe these artworks as trash, or similar things, as recently written in an academically sullen and pre-emptively controversial statement in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, makes no sense whatsoever and remains below the minimum acceptable limit of a cultural discussion.

[...]

The exhibition in Venice is marked by an unofficial perspective which everyone should be allowed to claim in the name of the free circulation of ideas, free cultural practice and, in particular, free critical thought.

[...]

We are therefore dealing with an unofficial perspective, i.e., not forcibly polemic, alternative and antagonistic to the official line: only widely divergent from it, and yet not without a few occasions of contact.

[...]

Rather than seditious forces, these are forces that inspire freedom of proposal, a space for the individual and collective re-appropriation of various forms of heritage, representative of a desire to comment in a way that can be honest, dissatisfied or dissident, but sometimes – so it seems to me – also in agreement with the current Soviet sociological reality.

Thus, if the 1977 Biennale is undoubtedly politicised, it does not renounce – particularly in the visual arts sector – the role of proposing cultural facts.

[...]

The political intent (intended as an awareness of the unbreakable connection between culture and politics) is more than welcome insofar as it manages to free us from the game of mercantilism, which is now being brought up again behind some critic's self-interested nostalgia for the freedom of art (in the West, of course). Besides, politics is the only basis on which the dissident dimension can be considered under a more appropriate perspective: not as an exclusive condition of Eastern Europe (where it can take place, but in specific rather than all-encompassing forms) but as a

permanent reality, extremely close to us and present wherever the oppression of cultural and political power is felt.”

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**S.F.:**

**In her article in the exhibition catalogue “Notes on Nussberg, Jankilevskij, Kabakov, Melamid and Komar, Rimma and Valerij Gerlovin” (*Note su Nussberg, Jankilevskij, Kabakov, Melamid e Komar, Rimma e Valerij Gerlovin*) Gabriella Moncada focused on some artists in detail:**

**G.M.:**

"A contatto con l'uomo gli oggetti di Kabakov determinano sempre una situazione ironica e hanno un'azione provocatoria nei confronti dei personaggi dei quadri. Ma cosa dicono questi personaggi? Un cumulo di ovvietà: un mondo piccolo-borghese sovietico è presentato con una fedeltà così «ebete» da favorire il paradossale. Il messaggio affidato alla parola, l'inserimento di elementi sostanzialmente extra-estetici da parte di Kabakov, ha aperto la strada, nell'Unione Sovietica, all'accentuazione esclusiva della dimensione mentale a discapito dei valori puramente estetici. Con gli artisti concettuali Aleksandr Melamid e Vitalij Komar, «artisti della distensione», come essi stessi si definiscono, siamo ben lontani dal clima torturato e sofferto dell'espressionismo astratto sovietico degli anni sessanta".

**S.F.:**

“In contact with men, Kabakov’s objects always determine an ironic situation and a provocative impact on the characters of the paintings. But what do these characters say? A bunch of platitudes: a Soviet, petty-bourgeois world is presented with a fidelity so ‘moronic’ that it becomes paradoxical. In the Soviet Union, Kabakov’s choice of entrusting the message to words and of inserting essentially extra-aesthetic elements has paved the way to an exclusive focus on the mental dimension, to the detriment of purely aesthetic values. With conceptual artists Aleksandr Melamid and Vitalij Komar, self-professed ‘artists of the *detente*’, we are quite far from the tortured, agonized atmosphere of the Soviet Expressionism of the 1960s.”

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**S.F.:**

**Before the international press reacted, Peter Spielmann, director of the Museum Bochum and curator of the 1974 exhibition *Progressive tendencies in Moscow* (*Progressive Strömungen in Moskau*) thanked Carlo Ripa di Meana in a letter:**

**M.B.:**

I want to express you my greatest respect that you have consequently showed and honoured the art of the persecuted. As a second even more important result of the Biennale I consider the fact that you placed the movement of the dissidents in a progressive left status, where it rightly belongs, whereas the permanent placement of the politically persecuted of Eastern Europe in a right locality of our political landscape seems to me very dangerous.

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**S.F.:**

**The first reviews appeared in the local press, e.g. Paolo Rizzis "The traces of the Russian soul" ("Le impronte dell'anima russa") in *Il Gazzettino*, 15 November 1977:**

**M.B.:**

"Davvero una Solgenitsin-parade, come vaticinava Argan? uno squallido circo dei «parassiti» come continua a tuonare Popov? o un patetico salon dei ritardatari? La mostra sulla «nuova arte sovietica», che si apre oggi nel grande bunker del palasport, era attesa come il clou - almeno dal punto di vista spettacolare - di tutta questa travagliatissima Biennale del dissenso. Prime impressioni: migliori del previsto. Intanto l'allestimento a reticolo aperto, appare indovinato, anche se non certo originalissimo; poi, il panorama è vario, ben articolato (sette sezioni), spinto sempre verso la sorpresa, lo choc, comunque la scoperta sollecitante del proibito. Tutto è, naturalmente, indietro sul quadrante del linguaggio. Ma - sarà forse anche una nostra prevenzione psicologica - tutto appare anche dolcemente frustrato, mortificato, inguaribilmente nostalgico. E pregno d'una sorta di misticismo pan-russo: il mal sottile della dittatura".

**S.F.:**

"Is it indeed a Soljenitsin-parade, as foretold by Argan? A dismal circus of parasites, as Popov so strenuously and vocally claimed? Or a pathetic salon of latecomers? The exhibition of 'New Soviet Art', which opens today in the large Palasport bunker, was awaited as the highlight – at least from a spectacular point of view – of this bumpy ride of a Biennale of dissent. The first impressions are better than expected. For a start, the open-network set-up was a rather good idea, if not an extremely original one; then the panorama is varied, well-articulated (seven sections), and oriented toward effects of surprise, shock, or in any case toward the stimulating discovery of what is



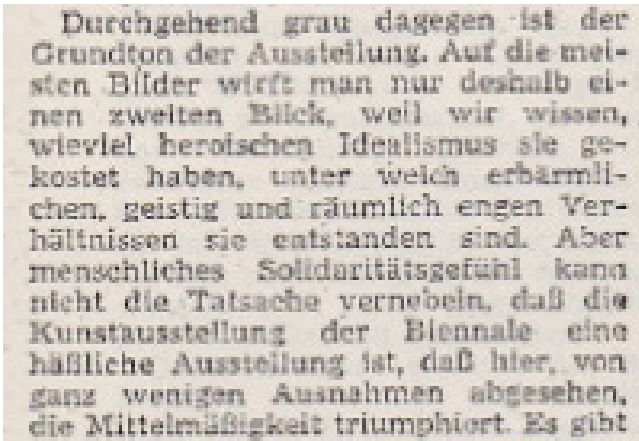
prohibited. In terms of language, of course, everything is quite *passé*. Still – maybe because of our own psychological bias – everything appears pervaded with a feeling of sweet frustration, mortification, and incurable nostalgia. And with a kind of pan-Russian mysticism: the regime’s insidious disease.

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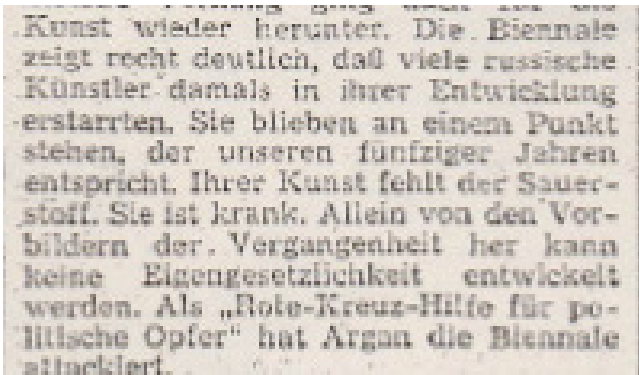
**M.B.:**

A few days later, November 19<sup>th</sup>, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung published a review, entitled “Die verlorene Avantgarde. Die Dissidenten und die Biennale in Venedig” (‘The Lost Avant-Garde. Dissidents and the Venice Biennale’):

**S.F.:**



Durchgehend grau dagegen ist der Grundton der Ausstellung. Auf die meisten Bilder wirft man nur deshalb einen zweiten Blick, weil wir wissen, wieviel heroischen Idealismus sie gekostet haben, unter weichen erbärmlichen, geistig und räumlich engen Verhältnissen sie entstanden sind. Aber menschliches Solidaritätsgefühl kann nicht die Tatsache verneinen, daß die Kunstausstellung der Biennale eine häßliche Ausstellung ist, daß hier, von ganz wenigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, die Mittelmäßigkeit triumphiert. Es gibt



Kunst wieder herunter. Die Biennale zeigt recht deutlich, daß viele russische Künstler damals in ihrer Entwicklung erstarrten. Sie blieben an einem Punkt stehen, der unseren fünfziger Jahren entspricht. Ihrer Kunst fehlt der Sauerstoff. Sie ist krank. Allein von den Vorbildern der Vergangenheit her kann keine Eigengesetzlichkeit entwickelt werden. Als „Rote-Kreuz-Hilfe für politische Opfer“ hat Argan die Biennale attackiert.

**M.B.:**

“Grey is the exhibition’s underlying colour. Most of the artworks are granted a second glance only because we know the heroic idealism and miserable circumstances of spiritual and material restrictions in which they were produced. However, the feeling of human solidarity is unable to obscure the fact the Biennale art exhibition is a poor one, dominated as it is – but for a few exceptions – by mediocrity.

[...]

The Biennale shows quite clearly that the artistic progress of many Russian artists has become ossified, frozen at a certain point which corresponds to our 1950s. Their art is oxygen-deprived. It is sick. One cannot develop one’s own laws on the sole basis of models from the past. Argan attacked the Biennale as a ‘Red Cross for political victims’.”

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**M.B.:**

**One day after the opening of the exhibition, November 16<sup>th</sup>, Moscow Literaturnaja gazeta published an open letter by 43 members of the United Committee of Graphic Artist:**

**S.F.:**

Уважаемая редакция!

В советской печати, в частности в «Литературной газете», писалось о намерении президента «Биеннале» Ди Меаны организовать в Венеции выставку так называемого неофициального искусства стран социализма.

Эта выставка шумно рекламируется и носит ярко выраженный антисоветский характер.

Как нам стало известно в экспозицию будут включены работы некоторых членов живописной секции объединенного комитета художников-графиков. К сожалению, творчество наших художников используется некоторыми «деятелями культуры» на Западе для раздувания антисоветской истерики, что не способствует духу развития искусства и нормального культурного сотрудничества.

Уже более двух лет при Московском объединенном комитете художников-графиков работает секция живописи. Было организовано немало выставок. Ряд из них, в том числе зимняя отчетная выставка секции, выставка портрета и другие, привлек к себе широкое внимание московского зрителя.

Мы, коллектив художников, не считаем себя ущемленными или отвергнутыми. Более того, если итальянский зритель пожелает познакомиться с нашим творчеством, мы готовы в плане культурного обмена показать наши произведения.

Характер «Биеннале-77» в Венеции не соответствует духу свободного развития искусства. Мы против того, чтобы наши произведения использовались в спекулятивных политических целях, на выставке с антисоветским уклоном.

Просим вас через «Литературную газету» довести до сведения устроителей «Биеннале-77», что мы, художники, возмущены тем, что наши работы экспонируются без ведома авторов, и мы не хотим иметь с этим мероприятием ничего общего.

**M.B.:**

“Dear Editors,

The Soviet press, and in particular the newspaper *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, has recently mentioned that the president of the Biennale, Mr. Di Meana, intends to organize an exhibition of so-called unofficial art from Socialist countries in Venice.

This loudly advertised exhibition has an explicitly anti-Soviet character.

It has come to our attention that the exhibition will include the works of several members of the Section of Painting of the United Committee of Graphic Artists. Unfortunately, the works of our artists are being used in Europe by some 'men of culture' to stir anti-Soviet hysteria, doing little to help the development of artistic freedom and of peaceful cultural cooperation.

Our Committee has set up a Painting Section more than two years ago, where several exhibitions have been organized. Many of them, in particular the yearly retrospectives and the Portrait Exhibition, have obtained a tremendous response from the Moscow public.

We, artists of the Collective, feel neither rejected nor hurt. If the Italian public wishes to find out about our works, we are ready to show them in the framework of a cultural exchange.

The character of the 1977 Venice Biennale does not encourage the development of freedom of art. We refuse to let our works being exploited for political and speculative purposes within an exhibition that has an Anti-Soviet bias. We therefore ask the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* to inform the promoters of the 1977 Biennale that we artists are outraged at having our works exhibited without our consent, and that we do not intend to have anything to do with such an initiative."

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**M.B.:**

**Enrico Crispolti defended himself and the exhibition in his article "Crispolti's letter on Soviet painting at the Venice Biennale" ("Lettera di Crispolti sulla pittura sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia") in the newspaper of the Italian Communist Party *L'Unità*, 21 November 1977:**

**E.C.:**

"Come responsabile di fatto della linea politica della mostra «La nuova arte sovietica, una prospettiva non ufficiale» nella Biennale di Venezia credo necessario precisare alcuni punti in relazione alla notizia di una lettera di protesta di 43 pittori sovietici.

E' del tutto vero che la presenza degli artisti nella mostra in questione è avvenuta a loro insaputa, giacchè si è lavorato - come detto chiaramente in catalogo - su materiali esistenti nell'Europa occidentale (e anzitutto in Italia) e cioè attraverso «citazioni» a livello critico e direi saggistico-museografico, senza rapporto diretto con gli artisti in questione. E' assolutamente falso invece, invece, che la mostra stessa sia una iniziativa antisovietica, ove le opere «vengono sfruttate per fini politici speculativi». Vi sono infatti presentate unicamente nel tentativo di configurare una prospettiva oggettiva, dichiaratamente «non ufficiale», della nuova arte sovietica nella sua molteplicità delle sue tendenze e nell'emergenza delle sue personalità.

[...]

Nella lettera di protesta [...] si legge: «Se il pubblico italiano vorrà conoscere la nostra produzione, siamo disposti, nel quadro degli scambi culturali, a fargli conoscere le nostre opere». E una simile dichiarazione non può non risultare rilevante e positiva, e va preso subito in parola, proprio per la possibilità di avviare dall'esperienza veneziana una più ampia ricognizione della realtà di base, di fatto pluralistica, della nuova arte sovietica, stabilendo un dialogo, come era nelle intenzioni della mostra della Biennale di sollecitare. Mostra francamente critica rispetto alla linea ufficiale dell'attuale politica culturale artistica sovietica, ma appunto in un'ipotesi di dialogo e davvero non in senso stoltamente antisovietico. In proposito concordo con quanto detto in una recentissima intervista dal compagno Antonello Trombadori (La Repubblica, 14 novembre): «Uno dei modi di disarmare l'antisovietismo consiste proprio nell'assumere sempre nei confronti della realtà sovietica un libero e sincero rapporto critico, fino all'aperto rifiuto di ciò che nella sua struttura socialista col socialismo non ha nulla a che vedere». Ed è proprio quanto nella mostra di Venezia (dico quella di arti visive), pur nei suoi limiti e nella portata dell'argomento - comunque non marginale - si è cercato di realizzare".

**M.B.:**

“Being *de facto* responsible for the political line of the exhibition ‘La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale’ (“New Soviet Art: an Unofficial Perspective”) at the Venice Biennale, I find it necessary to clarify a few points relative to the news about a letter of protest signed by 43 Soviet painters.

It is quite true that the inclusion of the artists in the exhibition occurred without their knowledge, as we worked – as clearly stated in the catalogue – on the pieces present in Western Europe (and primarily in Italy), that is on ‘quotations’ on a critical and, I would say, essayistic-museological level, with no direct relation to the artists in question. However, the claim that the exhibition as such is an anti-Soviet initiative, where the works are ‘being exploited for political and speculative purposes’, is entirely false. The works are presented with the sole aim to outline an objective, openly “unofficial” perspective on new Soviet art in its multiple tendencies and emerging personalities.

[...]

We can read in the letter of protest: ‘If the Italian public wishes to find out about our works, we are ready to show them in the framework of a cultural exchange.’ Such a declaration cannot fail to be perceived as relevant and positive, and must immediately be taken at its word, precisely because the Venetian experience paved the way to a wider exploration of the underlying, *de facto* pluralist

reality of new Soviet art, based precisely on the kind of dialogue which the exhibition aimed to advocate.

If the exhibition is openly critical toward the official line of the current cultural policies of the Soviet regime, it is so within the hypothesis of a dialogue and not in a stupidly anti-Soviet sense. In this respect, I agree with what our comrade Antonello Trombadori has quite recently stated in an interview (*La Repubblica*, 14 November): ‘One of the ways to disarm anti-Soviet feeling is precisely to always adopt an attitude of free and open criticism towards the Soviet reality – an attitude which can go as far as openly rejecting those elements of the Socialist structure that have nothing to do with Socialism.’ This is precisely what the Venice exhibition (I mean the exhibition of visual arts), within its limits and the relevance of its topic – which is far from marginal – has tried to achieve.’

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**S.F.:**

A short final observation: The controversy around the exhibition “La nuova arte sovietica” seriously strained the diplomatic relations between Italy and the USSR, to such an extent that the Soviet Union refrained from any official participation in the following two editions of the Biennale in 1978 and 1980, and did not use its national pavilion until 1982.