

Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The “Dissident Biennale”, Venice, 1977

Edit Sasvári

RESÜMEE

Osteuropa durch westlichen Blick. Die “Dissident Biennale”, Venedig, 1977

Die „Biennale del Dissenso“ war 1977 der ambitionierte Versuch des damaligen Biennale-Vorsitzenden Carlo Ripa di Meana, das doppelgesichtige Profil der venezianischen Großausstellung radikal zu erneuern. Diese Veranstaltung war schon immer sowohl repräsentativ-*mainstream* als auch wegen des Wettkampfes der teilnehmenden Nationen politisch geprägt gewesen. Ripa di Meanas Vorhaben war es nun, diesen politischen Aspekt zu betonen, ihn allerdings anders und neu zu definieren. Unter seinem Vorsitz wurde die Politisierung zum Programm der sonst eher traditionell angelegten Biennale Venedig, zum Beispiel durch das Thema der lateinamerikanischen Diktaturen oder die Kunst des östlichen Europa in den 1970er Jahren. Zugleich wurde damit westlichen Erwartungen entsprochen und ein politisches Verständnis der osteuropäischen Kunst stark gemacht, dem zufolge nur die Kunst als wertvoll gelten könne, die sich jenseits des offiziellen Kulturbetriebs der Diktaturen positioniert. Dies ist bis heute die dominante, wenn auch längst nicht mehr frisch wirkende Perspektive, die es zu überdenken gilt, u. a. deshalb, weil eine derartige Schilderung der „oppositionellen“ Kunst für die westliche Öffentlichkeit mehr von den Selbstbestätigungsversuchen und Legitimationsbestrebungen der westlichen Linksparteien der 70er Jahre motiviert war und weniger mit einer treffenden Darstellung und Einschätzung der Kunstsituation in Osteuropa zu tun hatte.

Although art events rarely attract the attention of high politics, this is what happened in the winter of 1977. *Dissenso Culturale* was a grand event organized in the framework of the Venice Biennale, one of the most prestigious expositions of the international art world, and brought the unofficial contemporary cultures of Soviet bloc countries into

sharp focus. Writers, filmmakers, visual artists, theorists and scholars were invited to the Biennale from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Soviet Union. In addition to art exhibits, film screenings, and lectures on music, literature, and theater, debates were also held on issues of historical, political, literary, musical, religious and scholarly life in the East European region. These debates were mostly an exchange of ideas between experts on Eastern Europe or leftists intellectuals from the West and East European artists and dissidents, most of whom lived in exile at the time.

The Biennale del Dissenso was uniquely important because this was the first time the issue of East European art appeared programmatically in the Cold War period. Just as significantly, in the complex and contradictory political context of interpreting East European art, the nuanced formulation of the related ideas was exceptional. In the present study I aim to depict some problems related to this “dissident biennale”, determine its presumptive goals as well as present the people and intentions at work in the background. How did the Biennale del Dissenso help construct a politically charged image of East European culture and what impact did this construct have on the two opposing sides? I will also reflect over how the event brought about a lasting transformation of the Biennale as an institution.¹

Although the Venice Biennale has long been established as one of the most prestigious institutions of the international art world, its declared ideal of political neutrality has, in fact, never been that far from the world of politics. The ensemble of national pavilions, the link between freshly produced art and the goal of national representation were subsumed in the overarching program of supra-nationality, which turned into a system rife with political challenges and tensions caused by the rivalry of national pavilions. It is noteworthy that the institution of modern Olympics – starting almost concurrently with the Biennale in 1896 – also plays off the idea of supra-nationality against national rivalry. These structures are magnets for highly political issues and conflicts, bringing them to ostensibly “politically neutral” spaces and enabling the demonstration of opposing political conceptions.²

Under Carlo Ripa di Meana’s directorship, the seventies saw a sharp turn in the relationship of the Venice Biennale to politics.³ Like many other outstanding curators of the period, Ripa di Meana was interested in the current concerns of contemporary art, but he

1 The present study is the partly revised version of an earlier Hungarian-language text. Original publication: *Művészet és hatalom. A Kádár-korszak művészete*, Eds. Kisantal Tamás, Menyhért Anna, Budapest, L’Harmattan, 2005. 83-93. In the present version, I am relying most on documents found in the Hungarian National Archives (MOL), the Historical Archive of State Security Services and the Open Society Archive.

2 The Biennale was only canceled in exceptional circumstances, which were always critical historical periods, World Wars I and II and the international tensions in their aftermath. In 1920, the former Central Powers made a show of staying away. The pavilions were damaged in World War II, which provided a good excuse in the fifties for the socialist countries not to participate in the Biennale. It was actually in protest of the Dissenso Biennale that the next large-scale boycott was declared by the Soviet Union and joined by its satellite states.

3 Carlo Ripa di Meana was a socialist politician of aristocratic origin, involved in cultural policy. He was a Director of the Venice Biennale between 1974–1978, the period in question. He co-authored the book *L’ordine di Mosca. Fermate la Biennale del dissenso* with Gabriella Mecucci in 2007.

almost exclusively focused on political themes, which was a risky strategy for a number of reasons. Inasmuch as the basic structure of the Biennale was a dual one, humanist-universalist (whereby apolitical) and simultaneously national-rival (whereby political), Ripa di Meana's concept could be seen as curtailing apolitical humanism in order to face the Biennale's other, political side, while also trying to reinterpret the political aspects of the Biennale. Ripa di Meana cared little for engaging in national rivalry or displaying national specificities. Contrary to cultural political designs manifested in the competition of pavilions, he had a vision and a robust curatorial conception. He thought the fundamental political and cultural division of the European continent could not be captured through granting each system the opportunity to display an idealized self-representation in the language of an aestheticizing apolitical humanism. This is a remarkable goal setting even if the Biennale del Dissenso was doomed to failure in several respects.

Carlo Ripa di Meana was Director of the Biennale between 1974–1979, during which period he had three large-scale projects. In 1974, he arranged an exhibition in the framework of the Biennale devoted to the criticism of the Pinochet regime of Chile, which was an unusually speedy reaction and was in accord with the leftist critique of the period. In 1977, a grand-scale exhibition, comprehensive in its objectives, and a series of events were to provide an overview of East European “dissident culture.” Thus, both initiatives dealt with sensitive issues of current world politics. Such an agenda was alien to the general spirit of the Biennale, and there was no consensus whether or not Ripa di Meana's program should be continued. Ripa di Meana's last, explicitly apolitical endeavor is a clear sign of reservations about the direct and immediate treatment of political issues: the exhibition “From Nature to Art, from Art to Nature,” was the Director's return to the Biennale's humanist-universalist foundational idea a year before his term came to an end.

The case of the Biennale del Dissenso is particularly interesting because it allows the tracing of all the issues and conflicts that led to the political changes of the détente process. The emblematic human and civil rights issues of the seventies, the new developments of Eurocommunism and the relationship between the western Left and the Soviet Union once again intensified tensions between the two different world orders. It was incidents between 1968–1975 that led to the international discussion and subsequently the codification of human rights affairs in Eastern Bloc countries. After signing the Helsinki Accords, the hope of the so-called “third basket”⁴ proved unrealistic in light of the wave of reprisals against civil rights movements in the Eastern Bloc. The so-called “third basket” of the Helsinki Accords was signed in 1975 and addressed issues of cooperation in humanitarian and other affairs, including stipulations about the enforcement of human rights and the problems of regional cultures.

4 The so-called “third basket” of the Helsinki Accords, signed in 1975, contained issues related to cooperation in humanitarian and other affairs, including stipulations about the enforcement of human rights and the problems of regional cultures.

During the months of debate prior to the Biennale, both the East and the West were pointing to Helsinki. According to the West, basic human rights and liberties were not being respected in the East Bloc any more than before, whereas the leaders of socialist countries assessed the advocating of these ideas as a withdrawal from the consensus of the détente process after the cold war. At the same time, the dilemma concerning human rights and national sovereignty was also articulated in the West: after Helsinki, individual countries had no prerogative to influence other countries' internal political affairs. As formulated by *The Guardian*: "it is a fact, tragic as it is, that the fight for human rights needs to be subordinated to the fight for disarmament and nuclear understanding between governments because of the horrible possibility of nuclear war."⁵

In 1976, more than a third of Italian voters opted for the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano or PCI), the largest communist party in Europe which was a significant player in Italian domestic affairs from 1945 onwards.⁶ The PCI wanted to achieve socialism through structural reforms from the sixties on, and increased their distance to the political practice of East European countries. This process was sharpened when Palmiro Togliatti's "political testament" was published. Palmiro Togliatti led the PCI from 1927 to his death in 1964. In his notes on Yalta, written before his death, Togliatti severely criticized socialist countries, tackled the questions of political pluralism, the political opposition, of ideological and cultural freedom as well as human rights. At the time of the 1976 elections, many expected that the communists, having engaged in constructive oppositional politics, would secure a position in government. All of this jeopardized the position of the other left-leaning party, the socialists, at the time members of a social-democratic coalition. Despite the PCI's impressive election results, the Christian Democrats' decades-long anticommunist rhetoric came out winning: Giulio Andreotti, the new prime minister, eventually included no communist or socialist politicians in his government coalition.

Italian communists were nevertheless popular in the seventies. They had never been in government, so corruption did not cast a shadow over them, and a turn in western communist ideology was also favorable to them. Some of the key moments of this turn were the conference of European communist parties in Berlin in 1976,⁷ and the book *Eurocommunism and the State*, authored by the Spanish first secretary Santiago Carillo

5 [Imperialist radio and press propaganda against the Republic of Hungary], 1977. 1st Quarter. MTI, n.d. MOL M-KS-288-36/1977, depository unit 25 (From here on, English translation of the titles and contents of Hungarian archival document by Katalin Orbán).

6 The PCI with a membership of nearly two million (1,910 451 including those registered abroad) won 34.4% of the votes at the election [The status and political profile of PCI]. Rome, March 14, 1977. MOL-XIX-J-I-j, box 103, 117-2001618/1.

7 Conference of European Communist and Workers Parties, East Berlin 29-30 June, 1976. Italian and French papers (*Corriera della Sera* and *Le Monde*) saw the roots of problems in Eastern Europe and the strengthening of opposition movements in the Helsinki Accords and the Berlin Conference. After the endorsement of Eurocommunism in Berlin, *Corriera della Sera* wrote: "Things have just become hard for East European regimes: it is difficult to deny their citizens what western members of the party family now deems justified." [Imperialist radio and press propaganda against the Republic of Hungary], 1977. 1st Quarter (note 5).

and subsequently banned in the Eastern Bloc. Communist parties across Europe tried to bolster their increasingly shaky positions – deteriorating since the late forties – through critically analyzing the market economy on the one hand and, on the other, condemning “actually existing socialism.” Bearing in mind the realities of western societies, they had to give up on the idea of adapting the Soviet model in their own countries. They had to clarify to voters and sympathizers – and not the least to themselves – that the kind of socialism they advocated did rest on Marxist foundations but was not a western replica of the eastern pattern. In addition to protecting civil liberties, they also had to prove their political independence from the Soviet Union. They felt compelled to find arguments for the compatibility of liberty and socialism despite the fact that civil liberties were never realized in the Eastern bloc. As western intelligentsia, too, was relinquishing illusions about the political Left, communist parties’ best chance to strengthen their positions in politics and public opinion was taking up the defense of East European dissidents. Although the communists were increasingly open to vilifying state socialism, it was not until the end of the seventies that they openly criticized the Soviet system.

On the occasion of the Venice Biennale, the PCI maneuvered itself into a particularly tight corner; in the end, they could barely make up their minds whether they should support the event at all.⁸ As a reassuring response to the complaints of the Hungarian leadership, Giorgio Napolitano, secretary of the PCI, stated that his party was not supporting the program of the Biennale; moreover, communists in the Biennale’s board voted against the event. According to Napolitano’s account, their delegates were instructed to refute any criticism of the party, and *L’Unita*, the central paper of the party, also vowed loyalty.⁹ Members of the PCI sitting on the Biennale’s board of directors vigorously criticized the program devoted to the “dissidents” of the socialist countries and reminded all of the original topic: the relationship between power and the cultural avant-garde rather than the topic of the dissidents.¹⁰

Biennale director Carlo Ripa di Meana was a prominent figure in the Italian socialist party during the seventies and there is little doubt that Bettino Craxi, the leader of the socialist party also supported the cause of the Biennale. Craxi correctly predicted that the radical program of “lending a hand” to the East European opposition demanding civil liberties could win them sympathy within Italian society. Interestingly, however, the majority of the party members did not favor the Biennale, even if they did not go as far as rejecting its general spirit. This might be explained by the fact that, in the seventies, a younger generation came to be prominent within the party whose political views were

8 Cf. the following memorandum: “The Soviet comrades have successfully put their Italian comrades under pressure; many city and local committees called off their participation.” November 4, 1977. MOL – XIX-J-1-j (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Classified Information Management documents), box 1o5, 117/7 oo1968/11.

9 [Information update about the Venice Biennale], October 21, 1977. MOL M-KS-288-36/1977, depository unit 25. The November 23, 1977 issue of the Hungarian daily *Népszabadság* quotes an article published in *L’Unita* a few days earlier: “The organizers of the Venice Biennale apparently aim to use the issue of human rights protection to drive a wedge between West European communist parties, including the PCI, and socialist countries.”

10 Viharos ülés Velencében. Külföldről írják [Stormy Meeting in Venice. Notes from Abroad], *Népszabadság*, November 13, 1977, 14.

shaped by post-68 polemics between the western Left and the socialist countries. Thus, generational differences also played a part in Italian socialists’ acceptance or rejection of the Biennale.

Soviet protest and threats did not only force the Italian political elite to make excuses but also generated defiant national reactions, which justly shows how contradictory the situation was within Italian domestic affairs. The anti-Biennale group included politicians as influential as Carlo Giulio Argan, mayor of Rome, who derided the event as a “Solzhenitsyn parade”.¹¹ When, however, Deputy Minister of Culture Vladimir Popov threatened the dissident topic might result in the deterioration of economic relations with Northern Italian, the pro-Biennale camp suddenly expanded and *L’Unita*, too, began publishing laments over the possible failure of the Biennale.¹² This was the moment when Ripa di Meana announced his resignation the second time, claiming that he found it impossible to meet so many different political demands. His first resignation was in response to the announcement of Nikita Ryjov, Soviet ambassador to Rome, who demanded on behalf of all Warsaw Pact countries that the Italian government retract the program of the *Dissenso Biennale* or else, the Soviets would never participate in the Venice Biennale ever again.¹³ The public outcry following Ripa di Meana’s announcement nevertheless returned him strengthened to the directorial position.

There was no doubt that socialist countries should boycott the Biennale, refusing to participate even in preparatory meetings. They notified the Italians via diplomatic channels and drew up action plans for the necessary countermeasures.¹⁴ According to the Hungarian statement, it was “unacceptable for an event calling itself an international art meeting to determine participants from invited countries not on the basis of artistic merit, but by explicitly political criteria and geographical affiliation, thus insinuating the existence of an organized opposition in Hungary. The arbitrary selection of invitees, the planned joint appearance of artists living in Hungary and beyond its borders, and the deceptive statements about participation issued without prior consultation all go against the established practice and rules of international cultural cooperation. This procedure can be considered an interference with Hungary’s internal artistic affairs.”¹⁵ Among other things, the plan of action recommended the rejection of passport applications of those intending to travel and the persuasion of all invited “artists with a professional reputation” to turn down the invitation. Another proposal was to identify which cultural events planned to take place across Italy under the duration of the Biennale could be used for purposes of counterpropaganda. Hungary’s ambassador to Rome conveyed the Hungar-

11 Thomas Petz: Papierschiffen auf der Lagune, *Süddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1977. November 23.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 [Measures related to the Venice Biennale (Secretariat of the Ministry) Meeting of the Secretariat of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party on October 10, 1977], MOL – XIX-J-1-r 53. d. 152/PF/1977; [Information update on the measures taken in the German Democratic Republic regarding the Venice Biennale]. MOL M-KS-288-36/1977, depository unit 25.

15 [Action plan on enforcing the Hungarian position formulated on the issue of the “dissident Biennale” in Venice] MOL M-KS-288-22/1977 depository unit 14.

ian government's position to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁶ Italian ambassador Antonio Paolucci refused to take responsibility, claiming that despite the Biennale receiving substantial state funding, it was an autonomous body outside state administration, hence the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could not interfere with its program.¹⁷ This was a new situation: while Italy's bilateral economic, political and cultural relations with the socialist countries worked quite well, developments on this particular plane showed a different picture. The discrepancy between the will of the state and Biennale-related public propaganda signaled a new situation compared to the experience of preceding years. Italy's parliament also put the case of the Biennale on its agenda. The Hungarian Ministry' position was, however, that Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Arnaldo Forlani restricted himself to mere diplomatic statements. Since Forlani did not commit to either party, he clearly favored the organizers of the Biennale, the Hungarians thought.¹⁸ The resulting tensions had to be dealt with, so one of the suggestions made by the Italian side was to invite "orthodox Marxists" to Venice a few days before the Biennale's opening. Invitees, however, found this an unfortunate idea, saying that they would not be able to leave without mention the arrest of Charta 77 leaders and of the Prague trials.¹⁹ Numerous state companies "sabotaged" the event under Soviet pressure.²⁰ On behalf of the Association of Hungarian Film and Television Artists, director Zoltán Fábri wrote a letter of protest in which he objected to the "arbitrary screening" of Hungarian films at the Biennale and possibly attributing a meaning to these films that might be at odds with the intentions of their authors.²¹ The Milan-based Ricordi music publishing house refused to grant permission to play a Shostakovich opus written specifically as a score for Grigory Kozintsev's 1929 film "New Babylon," the screening of which was going to be one of the concluding events of the Biennale.

The socialist countries resorted to the tactics of "counter-events" for the purpose of "political neutralization." Hungarians popularized the Kodály system in Italian cities, the Children's Choir of the Hungarian Radio gave a concert series, music and film festivals were organized. The GDR organized a book exhibition in Milan; lectures on cultural life in the GDR were held in Rome, Venice, and Florence. The most significant East-German museums put up an exhibition of the works of German Neo-Classical and

16 [Information update about the Venice Biennale], 1977. október 21. MOL M-KS-288-36/1977, depository unit 25.

17 [Venice Biennale, memorandum], Rome, October 24, 1977. MOL – XIX-J-1-j (note 8).

18 Cf. note 16.

19 There were 34 Hungarian citizens who signed a protest against the imprisonment of the members of the Charta 77 movement; this event was the first public and joint action by the Hungarian opposition. No retaliation followed from the side of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. The Party leadership later thought that the Biennale fundamentally contested their "tolerance" towards Hungarians involved in the Charta-situation.

20 The Soviet government intervened in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with various Soviet-Italian joint ventures and holding companies to prevent additional funding to the Biennale. [The Soviet Position on the Venice Biennale]. MOL – XIX-J-1-j (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Classified Information Management documents), box 1o5. 117/7 oo1968/1o.

21 [Protest of the Hungarian Association of Film Artists against the Arbitrary Actions of the Venice Biennale]. Népszabadság, November 22, 1977, [Letter of film director Zoltán Fábri to the board of the Venice Biennale]. Népszabadság, November 23, 1977, 7.

Romantic painters on St. Mark’s Square. The choice of locations is significant: in the fall of 1977, it was precisely the cities listed above that hosted sympathy events in support of the East European opposition. In Rome, a “Sakharov hearing” was held on November 25-27, 1977, to which socialist deputy mayor Ottavio Colzi had personally invited the Nobel Laureate writer when he had visited Moscow in August. The City Council of Florence held a debate earlier that year on “Problems faced by dissident thinkers in Eastern Europe”, and in September Elio Gabbuggiani, the communist mayor of the city, officially received Andrei Sakharov’s wife, who was visiting Italy at the time.²²

The “brotherly” East Bloc countries carefully coordinated their efforts to prevent their dissidents’ participation in Venice. According to an official memorandum, country leaders reckoned that the Biennale went against the spirit of the Helsinki Accords. The “arbitrary” selection of artists was considered an interference with internal affairs and the aim of presenting “dissident culture” was seen as an attempt to organize the opposition. It is not known if János Kádár, the Hungarian First Secretary, had any information about the planned event during his visit to Rome that summer, but his speech there foreshadowed, as it were, the official view of the event. “The issue of human rights is not a problem internally. But if there is an attempt to use it for interfering with our internal affairs, we must refute all such attempts.”²³ The Soviets clearly designated the Biennale as an “unfriendly step” timed to coincide with the Belgrade Conference and the 60th anniversary of the Great October Revolution. They claimed that the organizers, through giving moral support to the opposition, pushed socialist countries in a defensive position at the Belgrade Conference.²⁴ The Soviets were the most cynical, perhaps, when they returned Andrei Sakharov’s invitation to the Biennale with the note “addressee unknown.”

The names of those who were denied permission by their own countries to travel to the Biennale were read out aloud by Carlo Ripa di Meana at the Belgrade Conference. Based on information obtained by the Hungarian daily *Népszabadság*, the board of the Biennale was less than delighted with this action, in which Ripa di Meana virtually acted as a private individual. Such gestures were not considered to benefit the cause of the Biennale; on the contrary, “they exacerbate problems that are complicated by nature and contribute to the domination of the Biennale by propaganda considerations.”²⁵ However, communist board members did not merely object to Carlo Ripa di Meana’s appearance in Belgrade, but also to the fact that he had excluded from the preparatory process the scholarly committee whose duty was to professionally supervise the Biennale.

Due to the nonparticipation of the socialist countries, the Eastern Bloc was mostly represented by intellectuals and artists who had formerly emigrated to the west such as the

22 [Information update on Italian bourgeois propaganda against socialist countries], 1977. October 18. MOL – XIX-J-1-j 1977/ box 1o5, 117-8 oo1627/2.

23 Csizmadia Ervin: A magyar demokratikus ellenzék, 1968–1988 [The Hungarian Democratic opposition]. T-Twins, 1995, 102-103.

24 [Venice Biennale, Rome, memorandum], 1977. március 7. MOL – XIX-J-1-j (note 8).

25 Jenő Faragó: Kudarcba fulladt a velencei biennale [The Venice Biennale in shambles]. *Népszabadság*, November 17, 1977, 7.

Polish Leszek Kolakowski, Yosif Brodsky, Viktor Nekrasov or Edward Goldstücker, the ex-president of the Czech Writers' Union, all based in Britain. Artur London, the émigré former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Czechoslovakia, attended the screening of a documentary on an 1952 trial²⁶ in which he himself had been sentenced to life imprisonment at the time.

A historical colloquium with seven sessions, entitled “Freedom and Socialism, historical monuments of dissidence” was held in the Napoleon Hall on St. Mark's Square.²⁷ Prominent East European dissidents and western historians, artists and politicians debated on the issues of human, political, economic, social rights as well as the freedom of artistic expression. Speakers included Jean Daniel, editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Ante Ciliga as one of the founders of the Yugoslav communist party, Gilles Martinet, the international secretary of the French socialist party, Monty Johnstone on behalf of the British communist party, French sociologist Edgar Morin, as well as Giuseppe Boffa, Leszek Kolakowski, Alain Besançon, Piero Melograni, Leonid Pljušč, and Andrei Amalrik. Hungarians were represented by members of the emigrant group in Paris; Tibor Méray lectured on literary taboos, while sociologist Péter Kende analyzed the prospects of East European democratic institutions and democratic movements using Polish, Czech and Hungarian examples. General debates centered on György Konrád, who was living in West Berlin at the time, gave a lecture on “Dissidence in literature”.²⁸

Nearly all major western leftist parties sent observers, whereas a good number of Italian professors suddenly found very important university commitments preventing their attendance. Some were not allowed to participate by their institutions, and others decided to stay away themselves. “Not only the East Europeans not allowed to travel were absent from the first major working group session “Freedom and Socialism”. The white-gold Empire-style meeting rooms had plenty of empty seats on the other side too.”²⁹ As some reports reveal, the relationship between western and East European intellectuals was like that of two parallels never meant to meet in infinity. The correspondent of *Die Welt* characterizes the grotesque situation vividly: “Viktor Nekrasov (author of the widely read novel *Stalingrad*), Vladimir Maximov, Andrei Siniavsky, Alexander Galich, and poet Iosif Brodsky were all sitting there modestly and silently – while a talkative professor from Texas explained to all those present how things stood with contemporary Soviet literature. When, during one of the breaks, old warhorse Nekrasov recognized the famous Polish dramatist Slawomir Mrožek standing modestly in the shadow of a pillar, he shouted out: ‘So you are that Mrožek! Come, let me give you a hug!’”³⁰ Another, less beneficent

26 In the so-called Slanský trial Stalin sent the Czech communist elite to the gallows. The film *The Confession* (La Confesión) was by Costa Gavras in French-Italian co-production in 1970.

27 References to the Biennale's program are based on *Annuario 1978/Eventi del 1976-77. A cura dell'Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee - La Biennale di Venezia, Venezia, 1979.*

28 Later published as “A függetlenség lassú munkája” [The Slow Work of Independence], *Irodalmi Újság*, 1977. No. 11-12., p. 10-11.

29 Josef Schmitz van Vorst: Luigi Nono warnte Wolf Biermann vor Venedig, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 23, 1977.

30 Carl Gustaf Stroem: Du bist Mrožek? Lass dich umarmen!, *Die Welt*, December 6, 1977.

exchange took place between world-famous communist composer Luigi Nono and pol-beat singer Wolf Biermann who had been expelled from the GDR the year before. Nono had tried beforehand to convince Biermann not to participate in the Venice event, trying to scare the fresh emigrant away and arguing that those Biennale organizers merely wanted to use him for their own purposes. Biermann then wasted no time in sharing this "sensitive information" with his audience as he began his successful concert in Venice.

A satellite event to the session on Nationalized Film Production was held at the Olympia Cinema, where 54 films were screened under the title *Film and Eastern Europe*. Andrzej Wajda, having recently fought the censorship of his latest film, *Man of Marble*, sent a telegraph to Venice declaring his lack of interest in a conference on nationalized film.³¹ Another invited film director, the Hungarian Miklós Jancsó also canceled his appearance even though he had previously had a rather good relationship with the Italian Left.³² The visual art program entitled *Neo-avantgarde Tendencies in Eastern Europe* was organized by university professor Enrico Crispolti, art historian and critic – and a member of PCI. Eventually three exhibitions were realized: *The Unofficial Perspective on New Soviet Art; Modern Art in Czechoslovakia; and Books, Journals, Samizdat*. More than three hundred works by forty-nine Soviet artists were on display in the newly completed reinforced concrete basement of the Palazzo dello Sport. The majority of the selected artists were based in the Soviet Union but the works were on loan from western collectors. Presumably under pressure from the authorities, forty-three of them sent protest letters to Venice, objecting to the misuse of their works, acquired from private collections, at the "anti-Soviet" exhibition.

The West-German press aptly pointed to this blunder: had the Biennale organizers responsibly considered what consequences participation at the Biennale would have for East-European artists? Or had they at all contemplated whether or why dissident artists should want to sacrifice a hard-won status quo back at home for the role of the extra offered to them within some clumsy political game? Yet another unanswered question to what extent the spirit of the artistic avant-garde was identical with that of political dissidence also remained unanswered. Why would it have been in Grotowski's interest, for instance, – to call himself a political dissident considering that he was leading a state-funded theater in Poland? In general: is an artist to be regarded a dissident if censorship prevents the display of his or her works?

The Biennale secured a certain approach for the western public for a long time to come, the dangers of which were identified practically simultaneously by a number of theorists. For the label "political" came to be attached to East European art produced under the circumstance of "repressive tolerance" (to quote Marcuse), it could not show its real face

31 Ibid.

32 Jancsó's conduct was not left without comment: "Given that Jancsó distanced himself from the Biennale, it would be desirable if he participated in a Hungarian film festival organized by us, the head of the Department of Culture at the City Council of Venice opines. If the proposal is approved by the center, he could attend the film screenings and discussion on December 9 or 10 during the Hungarian Days in Urbino." [Venice Biennale, memorandum], 1977. November 15. Rome, MOL-XIX-J-1-j, box 105, 1177/7001968/13.

and actual professional values. This subsequently resulted in an image of “this half of Europe [...] full of blanks and the myths of official art and suffering dissidents.”³³ The Biennale presented a dilemma for many who were ready to take into account the realities of *détente*: does the West indeed need the dissidents? And contrariwise, having fought for and won their little cultural freedoms, do East European intellectuals have an interest in risking their remaining room to maneuver?

Whether explicitly or not, the Biennale’s chief aim appears to have been to demonstrate the narrow path between communism and social democracy by way of the example of East European dissidents. Its emblem, a Soviet star with one of its segments opening up, alluded to the same vision. Leszek Kolakowski, however, pointed out the error of looking for a path that did not exist on the very first day of the event. “The term ‘dissident’ is misleading because artistic creativity is only conceivable in the form of political opposition – at all times and everywhere – and because the basic nature of communism excludes any tolerance of such an opposition.” For him, tolerance as practiced in Eastern Europe was no sign of the gradual improvement of the regimes, but were “symptoms of an ideological paralysis from which these systems were extremely unlikely to recover.”³⁴

From the very start, director Ripa di Meana’s program centered around the sensitive issue that the Biennale was indeed a politicized institution, and this had to be acknowledged and radically interpreted. How well his program succeeded is another question. The decentralization of the Biennale’s institution and the shift away from an obsolete mainstream towards alternative artistic positions were among his ultimate goals to structurally reform the Biennale, and were both a grand vision and an enormous achievement. Although his contemporaries were far from unanimous in favoring his notions, the processes set in motion were irreversible. In addition to restructuring the Biennale, his ideas also opened new paths in the discourse on the relationship of art and politics. His Biennale del Dissenso drew attention to art in countries behind the Iron Curtain, a subject field still being processed today.

Translated from the Hungarian original by Katalin Orbán

33 Zdenka Badovinac: Body and the East, in Body and the East, From the 1960s to present, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, Ljubljana, 1998, 11. See also Adrian Henri, Environment and Happenings, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, 128.

34 Hansjacob Stehler: Kongress gebrannter Kinder, Die Zeit, December 1, 1977.