

Luca Guido*

College of Architecture, The University of Oklahoma, USA

“The Biennale of Dissent 1977” and Italian Architecture during the 1970s

Abstract: In 1977, “The Biennale of Dissent” was a significant event in the history of the anti-Soviet dissidence. In Italy during the 1970s intellectuals, artists and architects had many connections with Marxist theories and the Soviet Union, but their role, referred to in this event, appears complex and, on occasions, contradictory. The Italian cultural world mirrored a political situation, in which it became a duty to take up a position which opposed Italy’s Fascist past. Artistic and political opinions coincided. For this reason, in Italy the culture of dissidence led to a heated debate. One generation of architects was born in this context and few were able to think outside the box. The interpretation proposed for Italian architecture and the masters of the time should prompt a consideration of the current absence of Italian critics and architects in international debates.

Keywords: Venice Biennale, Soviet dissidence, Italian architecture, Italian Communist Party, Italian Socialist Party

Soviet Dissidence

The political picture taking shape at the end of the 70s in Italy was of extreme interest in the history of anti-Soviet dissidence. During those years, numerous Western, cultural institutions concentrated on giving voice to intellectuals considered persona non grata by the Soviet regime. This resulted in the political solution of the Cold War, aimed at seeking a strategic, military equilibrium and cultural events which represented crucial moments of public confrontation between opposing blocks.

The year 1977 stands out as a moment of intense activity of dissent, of diplomatic crises, of initiatives linked to the world of art, all directed at promoting non-aligned, non-conformist artists. However, every attempt to voice artistic dissent was seen by the Soviets as a form of political protest, which state censorship often naively amplified. The reason behind so much resentment lay in the fact that 1977 became a symbolic date for the Communist world, as it was the sixtieth anniversary of the October

* Author contact information: lucguido@gmail.com

revolution.¹ Therefore, the easing of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, which had, until then, been based on their respective arms control, was shaken several times by actions in the campaign for international law.²

The first event in this direction was undoubtedly of a diplomatic nature: the *Helsinki Accords* signed in August 1975 by the USA, Canada, and all the European states, including the Soviet Union and the Communist countries, inevitably became the legal foundation for many initiatives of cultural dissent, involving their respective nations in the process of recognizing man's fundamental rights. By the summer of 1976, the Polish *June protests* proved a significant episode of popular discontent to become the forerunner of the climate of reform of *Solidarnosc*. In the same period, the path was paved for *Charta 77*, the document drawn up by Vaclav Havel and other dissident Czechs, which caused an international sensation following the arrest of the Plastic People, a rock group involved in a process to encourage cultural insubordination.³ The territory of the political and diplomatic opposition moved to a cultural level and effectively contributed to the diffusion of demands for freedom and independent expression. Between 1975 and 1977, numerous exhibitions hosting works of 'unofficial' Soviet artists were held in major, international capitals, including Paris, London, Washington and Berlin, whereas in Italy the culture of dissent was expressed and channeled in the Venice Biennale.

The Italian Cultural Frame

Nevertheless, thirty years on, the role of Italian intellectuals appears complex and, on occasions, contradictory. The university world and consequently the world of architecture and visual arts mirrored a political situation in which it became a duty to take up a position in opposition to Italy's Fascist past. The most influential university lecturers in the schools of architecture were left-wing. The protagonists of Italian rationalism, such as Giuseppe Terragni, who died at a very young age in 1943, or Luigi Moretti, a talented architect with good composition skills who continued to work after the war in speculative, residential construction, were only rehabilitated with great difficulty over time.

The main protagonists of Italian architecture at the time revolved around three cities: Rome, Milan and Venice.⁴ In Rome, Bruno Zevi was to isolate himself from the

¹ The event was 'celebrated' by a new constitution coming into effect, the brainchild of Leonid Brezhnev, replacing Stalin's constitution of 1936. Brezhnev's rise to power marked the so-called *Era of Stagnation*.

² One example is the policy advanced by Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) via his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

³ The *Plastic People of the Universe* was a rock band formed by young musicians who, together with *DG307*, represented the emerging *underground culture* in Prague, influenced by the music of Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground.

⁴ A book containing a series of original contributions on the topic is *Italia 60/70, Una stagione dell'architettura, [Italy in the 60s/70s, a season of architecture]* Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2010, edited by Marco Biraghi (et al.)

Italian academic scene by leaving the university voluntarily in 1979 to retire fourteen years early. He left the cultural hegemony of Rome in the hands of Ludovico Quaroni, the maestro for many young architects, and Paolo Portoghesi, who had just been nominated director of the new architectural sector of the Venice Biennale (1979). The latter had moved from his role as Head of the Faculty of Architecture in Milan.

Although Zevi was active as a militant within left-wing settings and remained an expert, polemical observer, he was one of the few historians and critics of architecture not to become involved in the left-wing trends and stereotypes of the period.⁵ As such, the epithet 'Marxist critic', recently circulated around Anglo-Saxon circles by Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt in the catalogue for the exhibition *Postmodern, Style and Subversion, 1970–1990*, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2011, appears amiss and mistaken.⁶

Bruno Zevi followed a different path from the one embarked on by the Italian Marxist critics involved in studies of the contemporary city, and during the 70s he turned his attention to the theories of architectural language and engaged in a battle against the theses of Postmodernism and the infant *Tendenza*.⁷ However, new protagonists crossed the thresholds of universities and cultural environments. Appearing on the scene were some young, leading lights from the School of Architecture in Venice (Iuav), such as Carlo Aymonimo with his "Architecture Group", and the architectural historians Manfredo Tafuri, Francesco Dal Co, Giorgio Ciucci and Mario Manieri Elia, who indulged in criticising the ideology of the project. These leading figures were joined at the Iuav by two future protagonists of the architectural scene: Aldo Rossi and Vittorio Gregotti, who had worked together on the Milan review *Casabella-Continuità*, edited by Ernesto Nathan Rogers. In a very short time they wiped away whatever was left of the experimental and laboratory structure of Samonà (and of Zevi himself, from a historic viewpoint) in the Venetian university, and outlined a new strategy of teaching for a school of architecture which had changed from a school for the elite into a university for the masses.⁸ Extrovert or solipsistic figures such as Giancarlo De Carlo and Carlo Scarpa were marginalized.⁹

⁵ Bruno Zevi was one of the few people who could boast not only international contacts but also training with a wide appeal, but radically diverse from that of other Italian intellectuals. He began his architectural studies at the Faculty of Architecture in Rome in 1936. Following the proclamation of racial laws by the Fascist government in 1938, he was forced to emigrate to England, where he attended some courses at the London Architectural Association. At this juncture, he began to make contact with a few political exiles and worked with them in anti-fascist activities abroad. After a brief stay at Columbia University in New York, he completed his studies in architecture at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., and graduated with Walter Gropius in 1941.

⁶ Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, ed., *Postmodern, Style and Subversion, 1970–1990* (London: V&A Publishing, 2011), 18.

⁷ In 1973, Zevi published his book *Linguaggio moderno dell'architettura*, (English edition: *The Modern Language of Architecture*, 1978).

⁸ Cf. Carlo Aymonino, "Pour une Université de masse," *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* 181 (September/October 1975) (issue entitled "Italie 75").

⁹ Cf. Luciano Semerani, ed., "The School of Venice," *Architectural Design* 55, 5/6 (1985).

Italian Architectural Publications

Some evidence of this can be found in the architectural publications on the Italian market. The contribution by the maestri and by the conquests of Modernism was demythologized to give space to urban analyses and to the formal origins of architecture and urban fabric, with the intention of readdressing the discipline. Publications in the 50s concentrated on spreading the ideas of the maestri of Modernism, but by the 60s and 70s different topics and politicized interpretations came into play, whereas the historical studies took a different turn. Once the twenty-year interlude of Fascism had been overcome the Italian *Intelligentsia* bonded with left-wing politics and formed a special *liaison* with Marxist movements, and therefore indirectly with the Soviet Union itself.

After a brief, shared experience, which embraced the trends of Neo-Cubism and Abstractionism in the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (1946–1950), left-wing artists, including Emilio Vedova, Giuseppe Santomaso, Armando Pizzinato, Renato Birolli, Ennio Morlotti, Renato Guttuso, Giulio Turcato, Pietro Consagra and Afro Basadella, separated into two opposing factions. On the side of 'realism' stood Guttuso, on the other Vedova and the "Group of 8", backed by Lionello Venturi, who were more interested in freedom of expression. The attempt by some of them to declare themselves "formalists and Marxists" was not sufficient to hold the *Fronte* together.¹⁰ Besides, the rift between the two factions seemed inevitable as far back as 1948, when Togliatti exacerbated the party position on the role of the intellectual by excluding any relationship with abstract art which was not politically committed, in other words with the art of the "monstrous things" of "errors and utter rubbish" and of "doodles".¹¹

In architecture, affiliation of broad sectors of the university and publishing to the Communist and Socialist left-wing launched a great deal of research into Russia, similar to what was happening in France, thanks to the work of Anatole Kopp (*Ville et Revolution*, 1967). However, in the wake of the first publications devoted to avant-garde Constructivism there followed books which began to seriously consider Stalinist town planning and architecture as an alternative to the capitalist model of town planning. The evolution in the titles of some major Italian publications on Russian architecture and town planning are a clear demonstration.¹² Issue number 262 of the magazine *Casabella-Continuità* (1962), edited by Guido Canella and dedicated to the Soviet Union, was the first publication in a series which included: *URSS, architettura*

¹⁰ This refers to a definition used by members of the group Forma 1, including Piero Dorazio, Pietro Consagra and Giulio Turcato.

¹¹ Such denigrating definitions were published by Roderigo di Castiglia (alias Palmiro Togliatti, at the time secretary of the Italian Communist Party) in the Communist cultural periodical *Rinascita*, year V, no. 11, November 1948, commenting on "The First National Exhibition of Contemporary Art" in Bologna, organised by the "Alliance of culture".

¹² For a brief on the series of Italian books on architecture, we recommend reading the book by Fiorella Vanini, *La libreria dell'architetto, progetti di collane editoriali 1945–1980* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012).

1917–36 (1963) by Vittorio de Feo; *Architettura Sovietica Contemporanea* (1965) and *L'architettura del costruttivismo* (1969) by Vieri Quilici; *La costruzione della città sovietica 1929–31* (1970) by Paolo Ceccarelli, with contributions from Soviet authors and documents from the Soviet Communist Party; *Quaderni di documentazione 1: alcune realizzazioni di urbanistica e architettura nelle città della Repubblica Democratica Tedesca: metodi e tecnologie* (1971) edited by Carlo Aymonino (Gruppo Architettura); *Socialismo città architettura URSS 1917–1937* (1971), with essays by Francesco Dal Co, Manfredo Tafuri et al.; *Architettura e urbanistica nella Repubblica Democratica Tedesca* (1975) by Lorenzo Spagnoli; *URSS 1917–1978: La città, l'architettura* (1979) by Jean Louis Cohen, Marco De Michelis, and Manfredo Tafuri. Together with studies on Soviet experiences interest developed in the criticism of the contemporary city and in its analysis, and in the study of urban morphology and types of building construction, claiming autonomy for the discipline of architecture.¹³

Carlo Aymonino makes a general confirmation of what has been said in the introduction to the updated, second edition of his key work *Origini e sviluppo della città moderna* (1971) [*Origins and development of the modern city*], which identifies socialist experiences as having “the ‘positive potential’ of a possible alternative” to the model of capitalist development and to the search for “an opulentism which, if it still exists, is merely the fruit and reason of imperialism”¹⁴. Aymonino’s observations on the Soviet city and on the contribution of scientific socialism towards defining the contemporary city combined a Marxist interpretation with an attempt to identify “the contradictions in view of a *shape* which is not merely the mechanical recording of current changes” in the metropolis, just as contemporary considerations on the type of building construction suggested.¹⁵

All these interests represented a very special situation, in which the Marxist interpretation of architecture became an expression of dissent towards the middle-class city and capitalist speculation. Not by chance were many essays by Francesco Dal Co and Manfredo Tafuri published in the journal *Contropiano, materiali marxisti* edited by Alberto Asor Rosa, Massimo Cacciari and Toni Negri; the journal *Controspazio*, directed by Paolo Portoghesi, was also an important means to publicise projects by Aldo Rossi. Despite the fact that the two journals had almost nothing in common, it became clear that being against was understood to be a cultural model capable of exercising a discreet, communicative fascination.

¹³ Cf. Giorgio Ciucci at al., *La città americana dalla guerra civile al New Deal* (Rome: Laterza, 1973) and the catalogue of the exhibition on socialist residential experiences edited by Manfredo Tafuri, *Vienna Rossa: la politica residenziale nella Vienna socialista, 1919–1933* (Milan: Electa, 1980); Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio, 1966); Vittorio Gregotti, *Il territorio dell'architettura* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966); Giorgio Grassi, *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* (Padova: Marsilio, 1967).

¹⁴ Carlo Aymonino, *Origini e sviluppo della città moderna* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1971), 11.

¹⁵ “The central nucleus of the theses set forth here was first compiled during the conference ‘The Communists and the large cities’ held in Milan from 8th to 10th March 1963, [...] This nucleus was subsequently developed by myself in an essay which appeared in *Critica Marxista* (No. 2, 1964) as a critical reply to that of Leonardo Benevolo *Le origini dell'urbanistica moderna* [...]” *Ibid.*, 7–12.

The discernment of this approach and the conviction with which the young scholars worked can be seen in the details which we can begin to examine with hindsight. An essay titled *La città del capitale. Per una fondazione materialistica dell'architettura* (1972) by Marino Folin, despite its ingenuous, pretentious subtitle, was published by the editor De Donato di Bari in the prestigious series "Dissensions", dedicated to emerging scholars on Southern Italy and Marxist overtones.

The Venice Biennale

Without this brief but necessary preface little would be understood of the reactions aroused in Italy and overseas by the organization of the exhibition on anti-Soviet Dissent launched by the Biennale in 1977. The large exhibition on Dissent was actually the conclusion of a cycle of initiatives held under the auspices of the new 'democratic' statute (1973), developed to replace the Fascist statement.¹⁶

In fact, the Board of the Venice Biennale had already been severely criticized at the end of the 60s for its ideological tendencies. It continued to be a general review of 'figurative arts', organized even with an anachronistic office for the sale of the works of art and with no coordination between the national pavilions and the central exhibition. This situation was overturned by some of the provocative ideas of the new president Carlo Ripa di Meana, an ambitious exhibitionist, who was later elected Eurodeputy for the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in the European parliament.

The executive Board of the Biennale chaired by Meana designed a *Four-year Plan*, and decided to assign a common theme to the various events (exhibitions of art, cinema, theatre, architecture, photography, music).¹⁷ An experimental project was set out, which was able to boost news and international debates. In 1974, on the basis of these considerations, the Biennale inaugurated a series of first-hand accounts against international fascism with the cycle of events entitled "Freedom in Chile", during which Chilean painters of the *Brigada Salvator Allende*, under the guidance of Roberto Sebastian Matta, created the installation entitled *Angel atacado por los United Snakes of America*. In 1976, initiatives such as these subsequently led to activities dedicated to anti-fascist Spain, that is a project in "Homage to democratic Spain", which turned into the major exhibition "Spain, artistic Avant-garde and social reality 1936–1976", as well as parallel activities in the sectors of cinema and theatre at the Biennale.

¹⁶ The Law no. 438 of July 1973 transformed the Biennale, which had been accused during the protests of 1968 of being a "festivaesque" organisation and a place for "dealers". The mission statement of the new statute became: "The Venice Biennale is a democratically organised Institute, which aims to ensure total freedom of ideas and expressive forms, in order to promote permanent activities and organise international events for the documentation, knowledge, critique, research and experimentation in the field of the arts."

¹⁷ Piano quadriennale di massima delle attività e delle manifestazioni 1974–1977.

From 1974, Vittorio Gregotti, director of the new sector "visual arts and architecture"¹⁸ supported the initiatives of the Biennale and encouraged events for architecture which were not always linked to the official themes,¹⁹ but involving national and international architects in the exhibitions and debates. However, Gregotti's attitude towards the Biennale of Dissent of 1977 was ambiguous and was probably the fruit of an astute, political calculation.

The Biennale archives show that as far back as 1975, Meana (with Gregotti) had begun official relationships with the Ministry of Culture of the Soviet Union, in order "to offer the Soviets a series of collaborations in the various sectors of activity for 1976–1977–1978", and specifically for the sector of visual arts, in order to organize, amongst other things, two exhibitions "on the architecture from 1917 to 1950" and "on the young Soviet generation [of artists, editor's note]."²⁰ Within the space of 1976, Ripa di Meana and the Soviet Ministry set out the programme and details of collaborators,²¹ whereas on 6th November 1976, Gregotti, as director of the sector, invited Szymon Bojko, Troels Andersen and Manfredo Tafuri²² to join the project to create an exhibition with the provisional title of "The contribution of the visual artists to the construction of the new environment in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1930."²³

The defections received by Gregotti led to an enormous polemical aftermath caused by the declarations released on 25 January 1977 by the president of the Biennale to *Corriere della Sera*.²⁴ Ripa di Meana added to the drama by complaining to the newspaper of the Italian government's funding problem for the Biennale, and

¹⁸ The sector of architecture was only to become autonomous when Paolo Portoghesi was nominated as the new director in charge under the presidency of Giuseppe Galasso (1979–1982). In 1980, after the creation of Aldo Rossi's World Theatre (1979–1980), Portoghesi was to curate the first International Exhibition of Architecture at the Venice Biennale with the programmatic title of "The presence of the past".

¹⁹ With reference only to the activities concerning architecture in 1975, Vittorio Gregotti promoted the exhibition *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, held at the Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere. Instead, in 1976, three themed exhibitions were held: *Werkbund 1907. Alle origini del design*, at the Museum of Modern Art in Cà Pesaro; *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il fascismo*, at the former Church of San Lorenzo; *Europa-America, Centro Storico-Suburbio: 25 Architetti Contemporanei*, at the Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere.

²⁰ ASAC-Fondo Storico "La Biennale di Venezia", visual arts series, Report by the President Carlo Ripa di Meana of the "Trip to the Soviet Union by the delegation from the Biennale. 18th-22nd May 1975." As shown by the document written by Ripa di Meana, Vittorio Gregotti himself, together with Maria Roncali Doria as translator and expert, took part in this trip.

²¹ We were able to consult the paperwork in the Biennale archives which highlights an intense effort to cooperate.

²² ASAC-Fondo Storico "La Biennale di Venezia", series of visual arts, letter by Vittorio Gregotti dated 6 November 1976 addressed to the three experts to be nominated according to the agreement with the Soviets, identified as Szymon Bajko (Warsaw), Troels Andersen (Silkeborg), and Manfredo Tafuri (Venice-Rome).

²³ Gregotti officially presented the idea of dedicating the sector of visual arts and architecture to the theme of "Environment and Revolution in the Soviet Union" at the meeting of the commission for visual arts and architecture on 6 November 1976, which was later confirmed at a meeting on 18 February 1977. Cf. ASAC-Fondo Storico, "La Biennale di Venezia," visual arts series, B. 267, vol 10.

²⁴ About the defections see: ASAC-Fondo Storico, "La Biennale di Venezia," visual arts series, letter of reply from Szymon Bajko (art critic from Warsaw) on 12 November 1976, those of Troels Andersen (director of the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum) on 12 November 1976 and 21 January 1977, and that of Tafuri on 13 November 1976. Gregotti received full approval only from Tafuri.

announced his intention to present the board with a proposal of conferences and exhibitions on cultural Dissent in the Soviet Union and in Eastern European countries. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient data to understand whether the project of Dissent was an impromptu creation, as the facts appear to suggest, or whether it was designed and programmed a long time beforehand with the intention of placing the Soviets with their backs to the wall. However, it was immediately evident that the proposal undermined the relationships struck up with the Soviet Union during the two preceding years.

The daily paper *Isvetzia* intervened harshly in its edition on 5 February 1977, accusing Ripa di Meana of undermining the Helsinki Agreements and to "have sold his soul for a plate of lentils" in order to discredit the Socialist countries.²⁵ In the meantime, the Soviet Embassy in Rome also rallied and let it be known that Moscow "strongly opposed and deeply regretted" a choice it considered on a par with "provocation"²⁶. Giulio Carlo Argan, one of the most important critics of twentieth century Italian art, who was mayor of Rome at that time with the support of the Communist party, brought the debate from the media to a cultural level.²⁷ Argan, ironically, entered the debate by accusing the Biennale of improvising its own cultural programme: "There has been a hint of a review of the art of dissent in the Socialist countries, a sort of very original Solzhenitsyn-parade,²⁸ when it is common knowledge that those few semi-clandestine abstractionists are more likeable but, as artists, are no less provincial than the Zdanovist fire-fighters²⁹ [...] I appreciate the Florence Nightingale zeal, with which the Biennale rushes to where a political victim is groaning, however, its function, that is to say its policy, cannot be merely one of human solidarity."³⁰ Moreover, Argan perceptively clarified how "politics in art is neither to consent nor dissent, but rather to carry out those structural transformations within art" which politics carries out in society. However, the question had now become a matter of the state as well as a diplomatic problem.

²⁵ See "Accuse dell'URSS al presidente della Biennale di Venezia," *Corriere della Sera*, 6 February 1977, 4.

²⁶ Gabriella Mecucci, Carlo Ripa di Meana, *Lordine di Mosca, Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso* (Rome: Fondazione Liberal, 2007), 33.

²⁷ Between 1976 and 1979 Giulio Carlo Argan was the first non-Christian Democrat mayor of Rome, elected as an independent candidate in the Italian Communist Party lists. In 1977, during his mandate, the "Estate Romana" [Roman Summer] was devised and set up by the very young municipal councillor for culture, Renato Nicolini (1942–2012), as a great celebration of the "ephemeral". The Roman Summer was an experiment in cultural politics, defined by Argan as "Dadaism for the masses", which combined the promotion of pop events (concerts, festivals, entertainment in the suburbs) with avant-garde reviews (art, cinema, public poetry readings, and experimental theatre).

²⁸ He was referring to Aleksander Isaevic Solzhenicyn (1918–2008), Nobel prize-winner for literature in 1970, deprived of citizenship in the Soviet Union and deported to West Germany in 1974. He was the author of major works, such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and the autobiographical research and investigation *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973).

²⁹ Argan is alluding to Andrej Aleksandrovic Zdanov (1896–1948), promoter of "socialist realism" in art. By the expression "Zdanovist fire-fighters" he means, therefore, the realist artists and those who, as a compromise and out of self-interest, censured the forms of abstract expression.

³⁰ Giulio Carlo Argan, "E' una Biennale o un mercato?," *L'Espresso*, February 27, 1977, 65.

On the 3rd of March, the Soviet ambassador in Rome, Nikita Rjov, made an official protest in the name of all the countries of the Warsaw Pact, asking the Italian government to cancel the programme of the Biennale,³¹ threatening the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from all future events in Venice.³² Criticism was expressed by numerous intellectuals from the Communist area. Renato Guttuso disapproved of the media clamour raised by Meana and stressed the cultural inconsistency of his project, recalling that "Soviet laws [...] do not permit entries which have not been decided by the official bodies."³³ Alberto Moravia,³⁴ not indifferent to the dissent, hoped for a hypothesis which could involve Italian and Soviet communists. Luigi Nono, the most uncompromising of the opponents to the Biennale '77, as has emerged from recent research in the Italian archives and in East Germany,³⁵ made an unsuccessful attempt to thwart the Biennale by trying to dissuade his poet and song-writer friend Wolf Biermann from participating, who was deprived of his nationality the year before and in exile in West Germany.³⁶ Vittorio Strada, a well-known literary critic, after initially supporting the dissent, referred to the Biennale as "a charity fete", arousing sharp remarks by the dissident poet Josif Brodskij, who took part in the events and declared: "one wonders which line the Italian Communist Party might take: because, whatever it may be, it can only be embarrassing. To support the dissidents would bring it into even more conflict with the Kremlin, to condemn them would harm it within its own country."³⁷

³¹ Although it was an embarrassing request from a diplomatic point of view, the Soviets merely repeated what the US had already done a few years before in Italy in a similar situation. In 1953 the US ambassador had insisted (and his request was granted) that the "Massacre in Korea" should not be exhibited at the Picasso exhibition organised in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, which provoked protests by the Italian Communist Party. Argan also recalled this episode following an argument with the regional secretary for Lazio of the PSI regarding a critical evaluation of the Biennale programme. In a letter sent to the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party, the daily newspaper *Avanti!*, published on 10 March 1977, he further clarified his judgement of the dissident artists and described the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, who went on to become one of the protagonists of the biennale, as a "mediocre, pompous, trite imitator, a bit of Mestrovic and a bit of Lipchitz".

³² The Soviet declarations and the subsequent controversies made a great stir in the Italian press. As a result, Ripa di Meana resigned as president of the Biennale, as he tried to consolidate the political forces in favour of the project. Amongst the numerous articles we recommend reading Barbara Spinelli, "Veto di Breznev e salta la Biennale. Carlo Ripa di Meana si dimette," *La Repubblica*, March 4, 1977, 1–20; Ugo Intini, "Diktat alla Biennale: Meana si è dimesso," *Avanti!*, March 4, 1977, 1–10; Gigi Bevilacqua, "Minacce sovietiche a Roma per la Biennale sul dissenso," *La Stampa*, March 4, 1977, 1; Claudio Martelli, Antonello Trombadori, "PSI e PCI di fronte al 'caso' Biennale," *Corriere della Sera*, March 5, 1977, 2; Vittorio Strada, "Chissà se l'URSS un giorno vorrà!," *La Repubblica*, March 12, 1977, 10–11; Bettino Craxi, "La Biennale deve realizzare il suo programma," *Avanti!*, March 16, 1977, 1.

³³ Renato Guttuso, "Biennale e 'dissenso': i problemi, i pretesti," *L'Unità*, March 17, 1977, 3.

³⁴ Alberto Moravia, "Il dibattito deve esserci ad ogni costo," *Il Gazzettino*, March 6, 1977, 7; "Io avrei coinvolto anche i sovietici," *La Repubblica*, May 19, 1977.

³⁵ Cf. Magda Martini, *La cultura all'ombra del Muro. Relazioni culturali tra Italia e Ddr (1949–1989)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 265–304; see also: Gabriella Mecucci, Carlo Ripa di Meana, *L'ordine di Mosca, Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso* (Rome: Fondazione Liberal, 2007), 93–94.

³⁶ Wolf Biermann himself told the press about the attempt by Luigi Nono.

³⁷ Luigi Nono, "Si chiude tra le polemiche la biennale del dissenso. Nono risponde ad André Volkonsky ma non al cantautore Wolf Biermann" [The biennale of dissent closes amidst controversy. Nono responds to André Volkonsky but not to the songwriter Wolf Biermann], *Il Gazzettino*, December 15, 1977, 1.

In the world of architectural culture, Francesco Dal Co chose not to express an opinion regarding the matter of Soviet dissent and went on to condemn the Biennale organization and, indirectly, Ripa di Meana.³⁸ With the rise to power of their party secretary Bettino Craxi the Italian socialists, on the other hand, gave full political support as they began to withdraw from Marxism.³⁹ In fact, Craxi's guidelines envisaged both Liberal policies and a transversal, cultural approach, which aimed to use the media to exploit the outcomes of some foreign political movements (both from an anti-Fascist and anti-Communist point of view) by diverting illicit funds to a series of foreign organizations, which later led to the complete disappearance of the PSI from the Italian political scene.⁴⁰ The inspiration behind the PSI and its subsequent key role in the government essentially mirrored contemporary European trends.⁴¹

On 7 July 1977, the sector directors Luca Ronconi (theatre) and Vittorio Gregotti, both outspoken supporters of the Communist Party, and Giacomo Gambetti (cinema), handed in their resignations, saying it was no longer possible to do anything of any significance due to the delays and uncertainties as regards funding. In the meantime, fears and minor boycotts by organisations and associations the Biennale had hoped to involve began to show. The University Cà Foscari, Rai TV, the Cini Foundation and the international art Centre of Palazzo Grassi refused to provide spaces; the publisher Ricordi, controller of the Italian rights of some dissident composers, denied the musical scores; and ARCI behaved similarly regarding films. The programme was placed in the charge of four exiles, who prepared an intense programme of debates on literature, history and religion, film screenings, exhibitions and musical performances. The general curators were Jiří Pelikan, a Czech activist subsequently elected to the European parliament in the lists of the PSI, Antonin and Mira Liehm, film critics, and Gustaw Herling, Polish author and essayist.

³⁸ Francesco Dal Co, "Manca la programmazione. Intervista a Dal Co," *Venezia Ottanta*, November 15, 1977, 3.

³⁹ In 1978, with the publication of the "Socialist Gospel" Craxi freed his party from Marxist ideology and led it towards a platform of Liberal Socialism. During Craxi's tenure as secretary, this change could also be seen in a skillful media campaign. For example, the red carnation, historic socialist emblem, was increasingly used as the party symbol to replace the traditional hammer and sickle in tribute to the Portuguese Carnation Revolution in 1974.

⁴⁰ For example, the Italian Socialist Party funded Arafat's Organisation for the Liberation of Palestine, Lech Walesa and Solidarnosc, some Czech exiles, various democratic movements in Latin America, and the Spanish and Portuguese Democrats during their respective dictatorships. For further details we recommend reading the articles of *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*:

<http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmssezioni/politica/201001articoli/51267girata.asp>

http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2000/gennaio/21/Nelle_carte_segrete_verita_sui_co_0_000121987.html

⁴¹ Claudio Martelli, responsible for the cultural sector of the Italian Socialist Party, declared to *Corriere della Sera* on 25 February 1977 that "the authentic democratic forces, in our country as in the world, feel they have to intensify international support for the victims of political persecution in every corner of the world. Organisations, such as Amnesty International and the various editions of Listy have moved in this direction with increasing vigour and authority for years. Socialist International used it as its own motif. Willy Brandt, president of Socialist International and of the SPD spoke of it in his introduction to his party's Central Committee. Similarly, Bettino Craxi did the same to the Central Committee of the PSI, as did François Mitterrand on many occasions."

On 15 November 1977, after various polemics from the Soviets⁴² in reaction to the international presentations,⁴³ the Biennale of Dissent opened in the hall of mirrors in the Napoleonic Wing of the Correr Museum in Piazza San Marco with an underground, video-recorded message from the Russian scientist Andrej Sacharov, who had been denied a visa. The evening included a screening of the film *The Confession* [*L'Aveau*, 1970] by Costa Gavras, inspired by the life of Arthur London, with London in the room. The exhibition inauguration was held simultaneously with the clandestine and self-produced press "Samizdat" and the large review of dissident art by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada, "The new Soviet art: an unofficial perspective", set up in the Palazzetto dello Sport dell'Arsenale. With hundreds of artists involved, dozens of speakers and intellectuals took part in the Biennale of Dissent, too many to mention here.

To give significance to these episodes and place them in the wider picture of a historical perspective today serves not only to gain greater understanding of the Italian cultural context and its reactions in the 70s but above all to reflect on the state of freedom of thought and expression, on the humiliating condition of subordination in which Italian politics lies today. The partial interpretation proposed for Italian architecture and the masters of the time should, on the other hand, prompt the question of the current absence of Italian critics and architects in international debate today: the postmodern 'cheerful state of uncertainty' has replaced the rigor of disciplinary autonomy. Italy will have to work extremely hard to acquire a sufficiently varied range of critical, historical and planning tools to carefully assess those cultural phenomena, which many have not wished or known how to take into account.

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⁴² This is a reference to articles published in *Sovietskai Kultura*, on April 8, 1977; *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, June 29, 1977; and the communication released by the Soviet press agency *Novosti*, Year X, no. 170, October 13, 1977.

⁴³ On September 15 Ripa di Meana wrote an article-invitation to American intellectuals in *The New York Review of Books*, and on October 14, 1977 he presented the programme on dissent at the Hotel Lutetia in Paris.

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