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THE POLITICS OF ABSTRACT ART: FORMA 1 AND THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY, 1947-1951

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RESUM. Este artículo examina el papel del grupo de artistas abstractos Forma 1 en relación con la política cultural del Partido Comunista Italiano durante la posguerra, como ejemplo de los intentos de superar la dicotomía establecida en Italia entre arte abstracto y realismo socialista y producir una alternativa a la confrontación entre ambos discursos estéticos. Mientras los artistas realistas socialistas subrayaban la necesidad de expresar contenidos políticos explícitos con un estilo que asegurase su máxima legibilidad para una audiencia de masas, los artistas de Forma 1 argumentaban que la abstracción significaba una crítica de la representación pictórica que podía contribuir a la crítica de la ideología burguesa, armonizando de este modo el marxismo con los desarrollos artísticos más avanzados. El PCI, por su parte, basaba su política artística en amplias alianzas de artistas e intelectuales antifascistas, que cada vez eran más difíciles de mantener en el clima de creciente confrontación política y cultural que siguió a la II Guerra Mundial.

PARAULES CLAU. Historia del arte, política, Italia, siglo XX, Forma 1, Abstracción, realismo, estudios culturales, Partido Comunista Italiano, comunismo.

ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the role of the Forma 1 group of abstract artists within the cultural politics of the Italian Communist Party during the Post-war period, as an example of the attempts carried out in Italy to overcome the established dichotomy between abstract and socialist realist art, and produce an alternative to conflicting post-war aesthetic discourses. Socialist realist artists stressed the need for unambiguous political contents and easy readability. In turn, the Forma 1 artists argued that abstract art meant a critique of pictorial

representation that could contribute to a critique of bourgeois ideology, harmonising Marxism with advanced technical developments in the field of art. The PCI, for its part, pursued a policy of wide alliances of anti-fascist artists and intellectuals, which was increasingly difficult to hold in the climate of growing political and cultural confrontation in Italy that followed the War.

KEY WORDS. History of Art, politics, Italy, 20th Century, Forma 1, Abstract art, Realism, Cultural Studies, Italian Communist Party, Antifascism, Communism.

After fascism was defeated in 1944, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) pursued a wide and progressive social alliance based on the common experience of the war and the Resistance. The PCI policy towards the arts was tailored to this end and the party supported associations of artists for anti-fascist political purposes. In 1947, the *Fronte nuovo delle arti*, a group that was the artistic counterpart of the political left, was established. It included artists from most modern trends active in Italy, on the basis of a broad social and political commitment.

Nevertheless, Italian politics became increasingly polarised as the post-war period went on. The communists were expelled from the christian-democrat-led government in 1947 and faced successive electoral defeats in 1946 and 1948. As a consequence, many PCI members started questioning the policy of alliances and openness pursued by the party thus far. Culture became dominated by a Stalinist, anti-modern trend and the need to produce easily readable works with «non vague, but specific subject-matter linked to the communist fight» was stressed.¹

These changes were bound to clash with the artistic experimental effervescence of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although no official statements on the form in which a communist content should be presented were issued in Italy, the imperative of «readability» linked left wing, socially committed art with a concept of «realism», while artistic freedom was equated with abstract art.

¹ Emilio SERENI, *Relazione sui lavori dell'ufficio per il lavoro culturale, Rome, 14-15 June 1949*, Documents of the Central Committee Cultural Commission, Gramsci Institute Archive, Rome, p. 1

The debate on modern art: cubism and the Italian left

In the 1930s Italian isolationism had detached younger artists from the regime and signalled the exhaustion of the project of intellectual fascism that had earlier gained Mussolini a wide support. These young artists welcomed every novelty from Europe but it was, perhaps, expressionism that best reflected the horror of living under a dictatorship with no short-term perspective of change.

After the war, however, confidence in social and personal reconstruction returned and cubism became the main subject of discussion, while expressionism began to be perceived as too attached to individualism, as an immediate retreat to personal feelings which was not in keeping with the times. In particular, Pablo Picasso in the 1930s became one of the symbols for the post-war generation of Italian artists with works such as *Guernica* and *Dreams and Lies of Franco*. The social protest of these works favoured the image of an engaged Picasso, fully immersed in the world events, while their formal novelty was also seen to exemplify a scientific, rationalist Picasso, who critically distanced himself from these events.

From 1944 left-wing artists and critics such as Ennio Morlotti, Ernesto Treccani, Renato Guttuso and Giulio Carlo Argan promoted a reading of cubism as the starting point of a new socialist period in the arts and for humanity in general. Reflecting upon the significance of Picasso's *Guernica* to Italian left-wing art in the immediate post-war period, Achille Bonito Oliva has described the painting as an example of «socialist cubism». In *Guernica*, «as in advertising, the image at the service of the message prevails over the design». For these reasons, Picasso was celebrated in Italy as «the standard bearer of a dialectical and revolutionary culture, always aligned [...] with the democratic and popular forces».²

This was not, however, the only interpretation of Picasso that circulated in the post-war Italian artistic milieu. In contrast to political readings, art critic Lionello Venturi emphasised cubism's ethically neutral attitude. Venturi argued, in respect to Picasso, that he did not promote any politics or world-view, but presented the viewer with open fields for the

² Achille BONITO OLIVA, «Come Picasso realizzò la diretta», *La repubblica*, 26 April 2000, p. 44

working of the mind and the eye: «The dissection of objects into parts and their cubist arrangement are attempts to suggest view of every part of the object. The result is, of course, that the perception of the object is missing, and an interpretation by the imagination becomes necessary».³

Venturi wrote these lines in 1946. Nevertheless, by 1948, Picasso's work was included in the first post-war Venice Biennale with a catalogue written by his comrade Guttuso. Braque, in turn, was awarded the first prize.⁴ When commenting on the Biennale, Venturi distinguished revolutionary Picassoism from cubism as understood by Braque, ie., as a genuine artistic concern about technical development, «Picasso is a gifted adventurer, [whereas] Braque is a quiet French bourgeois who has worked all his life to develop himself as an artist», he argued then.⁵ These two interpretations of cubism led critics such as Leonardo Borghese to write in *Il corriere della sera* that Italian painting was «divided in two».⁶

From 1947 there followed a period of more intense engagement by the Communists in art matters. Their electoral setbacks in the late 1940s and the failure of the governments of national unity that followed the war had caused their policies to strengthen in all fields, including culture. And then controversy was set off in 1948 by Palmiro Togliatti's unexpected attack on the Fronte artists, launched in the *Rinascita* journal on the occasion of an exhibition organised by the –left-wing- *Alleanza della cultura* at Bologna's Re Enzo Palace. There, several well-known «modernistic» works were exhibited by Giulio Turcato, Emilio Vedova, Armando Pizzinato, Renato Birolli and Guttuso, works which had already been shown in the Biennale. No communist official had intervened then, but now Togliatti felt that it was his right to do so as the *Alleanza* was a Communist-sponsored organisation and Bologna was one of the party's

³ Lionello VENTURI, «Considerazioni sull'arte astratta», *Domus*, XVIII, January 1946, p. 34-35.

⁴ There were also one man shows of Miró, Harp, Ernst, Klee, Arp, Marini, Giacometti, Mondrian, Douanier Rousseau, the fauves and the futurist. Peggy Guggenheim's collection occupied the Greek pavilion with works by Calder, Moore, Pollock, Matta, etc. For an account of the 1948 Biennale see Peggy GUGGENHEIM, *Out of this Century. Confessions of an Art Addict*, New York, Universe Books, 1979, pp. 325-332.

⁵ Lionello VENTURI, «Terribile confessore Pablo Picasso ci parla dei mali del nostro tempo», *La gazzetta*, Livorno, 16 September 1948.

⁶ Leonardo BORGHESE, «Divisa in due la pittura italiana», *Corriere della sera*, Milan, 6 June 1949.

showpiece cities:

It is a huddle of monstrous things: reproductions of so-called paintings, drawings and sculptures, organised by the 'Alleanza della Cultura' of Bologna, have been exhibited in that city in a 'First National Exhibition of Contemporary Art'. How can this be called art and, what is more, 'new art'; and how is it possible that they were able to find in Bologna, a city of such rich cultural and artistic tradition, so many brilliant people ready to pass this off as an artistic event. These people have used their authority to put before the public this exhibition of horrors and imbecilities. Let's tell the truth: these brilliant people agree with us; none of them believes that any of this foolishness is art, but they think, perhaps, that, to look like 'men of culture', it is necessary [...] to pretend to be super-experts and supermen and pile up nonsensical sentences. Go ahead! Be brave! Do as the little boy in Andersen's tale did: say that the king is naked and that foolishness is foolishness. You will gain because you will be sincere and the artists, or the so-called artists, will get angry in the beginning but, then, it will do them good.⁷

This statement signalled a major point of friction between the PCI and the Fronte nuovo delle arti. It seemed as if Togliatti intended a sort of purge of the Fronte, to provoke a split by which cultural «fellow travellers» were left politically deactivated; and a more cohesive group of communist artists could be organised. For Togliatti, there was, indeed, a contradiction between the artists' means of expression and the social commitment that inspired the exhibition. He underlined that the artists should consider the characteristics of their public, so that an effective communication could be ensured. Even though the show was aimed at a working class public, the paintings exhibited were not easily understandable by the workers. Togliatti was suspicious of the uncritical rush to assimilate international languages and feared that the artists' «snobbery» in relation to international modern art could infect his constituency. If events such as the Re Enzo exhibition were to signal the paradigm for left-wing cultural activity, this meant that the rank-and-file might end up «liking» modern art just because highly respected artists, who happened to be their comrades, had told them to do

⁷ Roderigo di CASTIGLIA (Togliatti's pseudonym), «Segnalazione», *Rinascita*, October 1948, p. 470. All further references are abbreviated to *S*

so. Togliatti argued that the cultural level of the average Italian was still very low and, therefore, events such as the Re Enzo exhibition could only produce mechanical equations of modern and politically progressive art in the workers' minds, which would, in turn, prevent a deep rapport between art and the proletarian public: «Serious damage would be done if we did not fight such a spiritual state of the public, and particularly amongst our public».⁸ The Re Enzo exhibition was not, for Togliatti, a mere artistic event, but an act of hierarchic cultural politics.⁹

The «artists with a party card»¹⁰ who had exhibited in Bologna, immediately reacted and published an article in the following issue of *Rinascita* in which they made a claim for artistic freedom and stated the main outlines of their politically engaged art: firstly, internationalism and modernism were essential for the de-fascistisation of Italian culture. They argued that:

[...] The characteristics of Italian bourgeois reactionaries deny intellectuals the avant-garde positions they held in countries where the bourgeoisie played a more vital role. Instead, [the Italian bourgeoisie] has isolated intellectuals. Fascism produced a theory of such isolation and blocked the intellectuals in cultural autarky.

The role of Italian intellectuals in these years consisted in becoming conscious of their objective historical isolation and included speeding up the assimilation of artistic expressions produced in other countries. However, such a rush to catch up prevented a deep critical judgement of these tendencies, although this does not mean that [Italian artists] assimilated them merely in a mechanical and passive way.¹⁰

These artists argued that such a process of de-fascistisation was not free from the risk of falling into snobbery or superficiality, but they lamented Togliatti's sweeping criticism «because, despite being justified, it does not bear in mind that all young progressive Italian artists and ourselves, as party members, are already engaged in this issue; we fight to

⁸ R. di CASTIGLIA, 'S', p. 470.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Pietro Consagra, Renato Guttuso, Aldo Natili, Paolo Ricci, Mario Mafai, Giulio Turcato, Ninio Franchina, Leoncillo Leonardi, Mario Penelope, Saro Mirabella, G. Vittorio Parisi, Giuseppe Mazzullo, Concetto Maugeri, Paolo Bracaglia Morante.

transform contemporary art».¹¹ Secondly, they criticised Togliatti's ignorance of contemporary artistic practice, and hinted that he was overstepping the limits of his competence as the head of the PCI:

Moreover, the *Rinascita* article makes indiscriminate judgements on an exhibition which was aimed at showing the different tendencies in Italian modern art, seeing a whole series of dissimilar works and artistic values as «monstrous things». [...] We know that we ought to free ourselves from intellectualist positions, that is: from an art which is detached from the world and reality as it develops, [and] which objectively [works] at the service of the ruling class [...] However, we cannot proceed according to the principle of «*tabulae rasae*» [...] Instead, we want to enrich the expressive possibilities of a kind of art which is able to merge with the struggle of the working class; and also with recent [artistic] experiences. Such an art can only come into being and spur our fight if it is truly art; and not merely naturalistic illustration [...].¹¹

Finally, the artists emphasised that the show had been warmly welcomed by Bologna's workers: «The fact that the Emilian co-operatives have helped the Italian artists [in the organisation of the exhibition] is a very relevant *cultural fact* [...] Initiatives such as this tend to create new "consumers" in place of the old ruling class, which is already unable to absorb the new products of modern culture».¹²

Modernism and engagement

Neither of these contending perspectives was illegitimate as such. Nevertheless, the controversies between communist artists and politicians led to the practical impossibility of a broad left-wing Fronte of artists able to reconcile social engagement with cultural breadth. Between 1944 and 1947, however, many anti-fascist and communist artists and critics had set out to achieve a compromise between the two sides and reflected upon how the artist or writer could participate in politics without renouncing his independence. In the *Secondo manifesto di pittori e scultori* (1944), also

¹¹ Various Authors, «Per una nostra "segnalazione"», *Rinascita*, October 1948, pp. 469-70. All further references are abbreviated to *NS*

¹² Various Authors, *NS*, p. 470

called *Oltre Guernica*, painters Ennio Morlotti and Ernesto Treccani developed a philosophy of the history of art, from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century, that conceived communist political engagement as the culmination of a long period of crisis. They argued that the emotional state of the intellectual in the face of the schism in taste and outlook between masses and elite (which mirrored the extreme division of labour under the conditions of capitalism), could be taken as the starting point of a process towards communist art. For them, such art was not the result of a mere personal adhesion to the revolution. Neither did they believe that it should be born out of the liquidation of modernism, as was the case with Soviet socialist realism. Rather, the new art would constitute the logical and historical consequence of modernism:

Until Raphael Sanzio we have art as a social product expressed by the individual [...] Henceforth, the crisis between man and society opened up; that is, the individual claims to overcome society. He becomes exasperated and critical: there is exasperation in Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Delacroix, Van Gogh, Modigliani and the «fauves» [...] After them, the crisis became even more exacerbated and gave rise to alienation, disorientation, and mysticism (in the surrealists, dadaism and metaphysical painting). Therefore artists have to confront once more the question of the individual in society [...] Picasso reproduced decadence in himself. Eventually however, the Twentieth Century learned from cubism and, with its new means, was able to express the crisis of a faltering bourgeois society. Picasso [...] simultaneously closes the crisis period and shows the way forward in the visual arts, to a Proletarian society.¹³

Morlotti and Treccani presented themselves as members of a politicised 'post-avant-garde', insofar as they conceived the avant-garde as a concluded historical episode characterised by the artists' detachment from social life. To them, *Guernica* represented the turning point from the individualism of preceding artists or, rather, a new stage of modern art in which the contradictions between artistic and political freedom had been blurred. With this painting Picasso had joined the anti-fascist cause both as

¹³ E. MORLOTTI, and E. TRECCANI, «Secondo manifesto di pittori e sculttori», 1944, in P. BAROCCHI (ed.) *Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia*, Turin, Einaudi, 1992, p. 42. All further references are abbreviated to *SMAI* and are to this edition.

an artist and as a citizen, not just because of any rejection of his «bourgeois» past as a modernist, but, rather, as the result of his artistic evolution from modernist premises.

Oltre Guernica provided the theoretical basis for a politically conscious art that would develop into organised groups of artists over the following years. In 1947, Renato Birilli, Giuseppe Santomaso Bruno Cassinari, Vedova, Giuseppe Marchiori, Giovanni Cavicchioli and Alberto Rossi issued the *Manifesto della Nuova secessione Italiana*, with the support of Venturi, Michelangelo Maschiotta, Umbro Apollonio, Marco Valsecchi, Argan, Corrado Maltese, Luigi Ferrandi, Antonio Banfi, Mario Mafai and Marino Marini. In this manifesto they stated that their contrasting styles would eventually converge on ethical and political basis:

Eleven Italian artists, substituting an aesthetic of forms for a dialectic of forms, intend to make their apparently contrasting tendencies converge in a synthesis only recognisable in their future works. This clearly contrasts with the preceding syntheses, which have been the result of theoretical and a-priori determinations [...] [These artists] intend to reach an essential basis of moral necessity by means of their singular affirmations in the world of images, their observations, accumulating them as acts of life. Painting and sculpture, thereby converted into instruments of declaration and free exploration of the world, will become increasingly in tune with reality. Art is not the conventional depiction of history, but history itself, which cannot ignore men.¹⁴

Also in 1947, Guttuso and Argan proposed to rename the group *Fronte nuovo delle arti*; and emphasised the need to address concrete historical subject-matters. Even though they stressed the instrumental character of art in social processes, they made it clear that these artists were not exclusively pursuing any single artistic programme. The realist character of their works would be apprehended as a result of the experience of the works themselves. Their value would reside in the extent to which the artists had undertaken a direct treatment of the object, and not in the extent to which they conformed to pre-determined aesthetic rules or a given subject-matter. Thus the *Fronte* artists rejected the production of a common

¹⁴ Various Authors, «Manifesto della Nuova secessione Italiana», 1947, in P. BAROCCHI, *SMAI*, p. 53

style, but they were committed to democratising art and to working for a mass public. This audience, however, was perceived to be politically progressive but also aesthetically conservative and in need of some preliminary artistic education. Artists knew that they could only reach this audience by both taking art down to their intellectual level and counting on the Italian Communist Party, since this was the only post-war party with a consolidated mass organisation and a programme which catered for both cultural and social renewal. If politicians had always needed artists to illustrate their programmes, it was artists now who needed politicians in order to bring their intellectual dynamics to a conclusion.



1. Renato Guttuso, *Occupazione delle terre incolte (Marsigliese contadina)*, 1947, watercolour, tempera, ink and pencil on paper, 70 x 90 cm., Galleria Nuovo Segno, Forlì. (Picture: J. J. Gómez)

This strategy of critically recovering the achievements of international modern art and linking them to political revolution was quite distinct from the anti-modernism of Soviet-inspired aesthetics which, since 1934, had developed separately from the main course of Twentieth-Century

art, although sharing with it a commitment to realism. Italian left-wing artists acknowledged that the expressive means produced in the Twentieth-Century were also valuable for the depiction of contemporary life, so long as they were employed to represent reality more accurately. The main reference for communist-inspired art was Guttuso, who had set out to produce «a grand popular painting [...] in which the influences of Delacroix and Picasso were mixed». ¹⁵ (*Illustration 1*)

The reaction against realism: Forma 1

The idea of the autonomy of art was viewed by the majority of communist artists and politicians as neglect of art's social duties, but there did exist the possibility of another reading of abstract art, from a left-wing perspective. In 1947 the *Forma 1* journal was established in Rome as the mouthpiece of formalist Marxist art. It grouped together Turcato, Concetto Maugeri, Achile Perilli, Carla Accardi, Ugo Attardi, Mino Guerrini, Antonio Sanfilippo, Piero Dorazio and Pietro Consagra. These artists vindicated formalism as the only way to free contemporary painting from tendencies that subordinated the arts to alien intellectual disciplines. Their manifesto declared:

We hereby proclaim ourselves 'formalists' and 'Marxists', convinced as we are that the terms Marxism and formalism are not 'irreconcilable', especially today, when the progressive elements of our society must maintain a 'revolutionary' and 'avant-garde' position instead of settling into the mistake of a spent and conformist realism that in its most recent experiences in painting and sculpture has shown what a limited and narrow road it really is.

Forma 1 contemplated a technical renewal of Italian art inspired by the developments of European abstract art. But they also intended to problematise artistic trends based on «traditional practices» and the «illustration» of ethical or political values. In their manifesto, they went on to assert that:

1. In art, the traditional, inventive reality of pure form is all that exists.

¹⁵ R. GUTTUSO, «Un marinaio ammanettato, come diventò comunista Renato Guttuso», *Vie nuove*, 25 December 1949, p. 12.

2. We recognise formalism as the only means to avoid decadent, psychological and expressionistic influences.
3. Painting and Sculpture have as their means of expression: colour, draughtsmanship, plastic masses and, as their goal a harmony of pure forms.
4. Form is a means and an end; painting must also be able to function as a decorative complement to a bare wall and sculpture as a furnishing in a room -the goal of a work of art is usefulness, harmonious beauty, weightlessness.
5. In our work, we use the forms of objective reality as the means to attain objective abstract forms; we are interested in the form of the lemon, and not the lemon.

They also explicitly rejected:

1. Every tendency aimed at inserting human details in the free creation of art, by the use of deformations, psychologisms, and other contrivances; the human is determined through the form created by man as artist and not by his a posteriori preoccupations with contact with other men. Our humanity is realised through the act of life, and not through the act of art.
2. Artistic creation that posits nature, sentimentally understood, as the starting point.
3. Everything not of interest to the goals of our work. Every assertion of ours originates from the need to divide artists into two categories: those positive, who are of interest to us, and those negative, who are not of interest to us.
4. The arbitrary, the apparent, the approximate, sensitivity, false emotionality, psychologisms, as spurious elements that compromise free creation.

Rome, 15 March 1947. Accardi, Attardi, Consagra, Dorazio, Guerrini, Perilli, Sanfilippo, Turcato.¹⁶

Forma 1's reading of modern art was thoroughly different from 1930s abstract rationalism or any other antecedent of Italian non-figurative art. Take, for instance, the 1930s Lombardy group of abstract artists with headquarters at Milan's Galleria del Millione. They produced a nationalist

¹⁶ Various Authors, «Forma 1 Manifesto», Rome, 15 March 1947, in P. BAROCCHI, *SMAI*, pp. 65-66. The English translation is taken from *The Italian Metamorphosis*, edited by G. CELANT, New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1994, appendix.

version of abstract art and functional architecture stripped of any decoration which was inspired by the Quattrocento and Mediterranean classicism. In the case of Forma 1, on the contrary, there were no attempts to link their art with the national heritage, in the search for the a priori conditions of aesthetic experience. Forma 1 did not conceive abstraction as the contemporary and historic form of social perception, but as the standard-bearer of artistic freedom; and as an antidote against ideology -which they intended to connect, albeit controversially, with the cultural politics of the communist party. They were interested «in the form of the lemon, and not the lemon»;¹⁷ postulating that the pictorial sign has an arbitrary relationship with the referent. Form was presented as human production, and not as naturally linked to the object. As Argan explained in the *Ulisse* journal, «[the new abstract art] [...] aims to put “ab ovo” the problem of art as an activity of the spirit, that is, to formulate a new aesthetics».¹⁸ In this way, even though stress was put upon aesthetics, in Forma 1 art was conceived both in an anti-metaphysical yet at the same time universalist sense. In this case, universalism was achieved by means of the rejection of both melodramatic calls to action and expressionist psychologism induced by contingent individual or historical needs. In Argan's words:

It would be a mistake to consider abstract art as mere aestheticism, as art for art's sake. On the contrary, the common programmatic motif of the different abstract trends is the justification of the artistic event as a social event [...] In answering the undoubtedly legitimate question of how the explicit, destructive historicism of abstract art can be combined with the undoubtedly positive scope of its social interests, it can be argued that this art does not constitute itself as an achieved social end (which indubitably supposes a full consciousness of history). Rather it intends to define the condition of the man's social consciousness, his way of being in reality and the limit of his horizon. In its detachment from all interest, it acknowledges [...] the condition of a kind of life that is «engaged» and «involved», instead of detached and merely reflective.¹⁹

¹⁷ Various Authors, «Forma 1 Manifesto», in P. BAROCCHI, *SMAI*, p. 66.

¹⁸ G. C. ARGAN, «L'arte astratta», *Ulisse*, II, 1948, in P. BAROCCHI, *SMAI*, p. 72.

¹⁹ G. C. ARGAN, «L'arte astratta», in P. BAROCCHI, *SMAI*, pp. 73-75

Forma 1's reflection upon the historic limits of human perception of being-in-the-world postulated that society and the self are constructed and controlled by systems of representations. The artists conceived their commitment as a liberating diagnosis and revelation of the manner in which these representational systems operated. In this way, they thought, Marxism and modernism would become harmonised. Accordingly, artists did not transmit edifying examples of existence through picturing. Instead, by means of art's autonomy, art acted upon the viewers' psyche, questioning their schemes of perception and predisposing them to a more lucid experience.

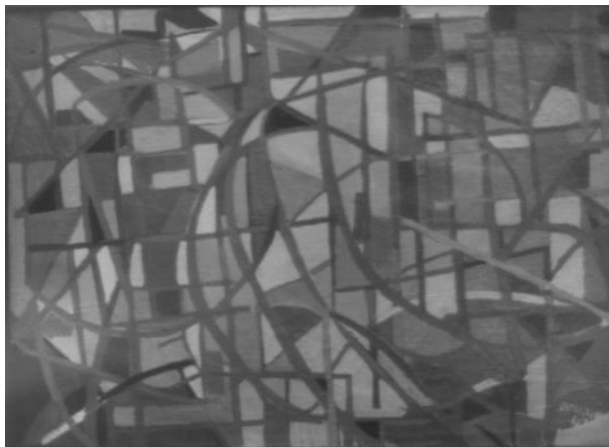


2. Achille Perilli, *Praga (Prague)*, 1947, oil on canvas, 57 x 47 cm., Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. (Picture: J. J. Gómez)

In this respect their argument was, indeed, on the very foundations of the *Oltre Guernica's* thesis on the 1930s Picasso as the frontier artist between modernist criticism and socialist construction. The Forma 1 artists looked rather at the works produced by the cubists in the early years of the century, as well as Italian exponents of divisionist scientific explanations of the constructed character of figures, such as Giuseppe Pellizza Da Volpedo and their later development in the futurists Balla and Boccioni. In Forma 1, however, the complexity of analytic cubism is reduced to the minimum, and the artists tended to use indicative titles, in the search of a maximum of economy and readability. A representative work in this sense is Perilli's *Praga* (1947), where he reflects on the problems of the translation onto a flat surface of the spatial articulation of a three-dimensional urban landscape. He argues that the conventionally figurative structure of painting, according to Renaissance perspective, has resulted from an automatic process; it has metamorphosed from a tool for the knowledge of reality to a hierarchical entity that fixed the standards of «adequate» representation. This limited the collective power of imagination and corresponded to the contemporary repressive social structure. Perilli showed how it worked by dismantling it. Sharp triangles, which were evocative of Prague towers, are superimposed on the canvas, with mixed, impure colours on a grey background which still handled, albeit evocatively, the idea of a unified landscape. (*Illustration 2*)

Dorazio undertook an investigation into the constructed character of the idea of pictorial unity in *Petit poème socialiste* (1948), a painting defined by art historian Paola Serra Zanetti as «the anatomy of routine».²⁰ In it, Dorazio produced a rhythmical repetition of countless groups of lines and tonal harmonies, painted on the occasion of the Prague Youth Festival, which was intended to reproduce the structure of optimistic socialist rhetorics. Other works by Perilli and Maugeri, such as *Ferrovia Roma-Vetelli* (1947) and *Filobus no 1* (1950), respectively, seem to look closer at Balla's futurist research into the connection between the movement and the fragmentation of the figure, questioning the validity of a chronological discourse. (*Illustrations 3-4*)

²⁰ P. SERRA ZANETTI, *Arte astratta e informale in Italia (1946-1963)*, Bologna, CLUEB, 1995, p. 39



3. Achille Perilli, *Ferrovia Roma-Vetelli (Rome-Vetelli Railway)*, 1947, oil on canvas, 52 x 42.5 cm., private collection, Todi.
(Picture: J. J. Gómez)

Turcato, in turn, attempted to synthesise a «cubistic» attention to form with the communist commitment to a «realist» subject-matter. The result can be seen in works such as the 1949-50 series of *Rovine di Varsavia*, produced after a trip to Poland in 1948. The paintings sought a suitably modernised «abstracted» representation of the ruined walls of Warsaw buildings after the Nazi repression of the August 1944 uprising. Although the events told are immediately recognisable, they are treated as a series of visual impressions deprived of the emotiveness that the subject-matter could convey in the immediate post-war period. There is no narrative, but



4. Concetto Maugeri, *Filobus no 1*, 1950, oil on canvas, 59 x 66 cm., Maria Grazia Maugeri collection, Arzignano.
(Picture: J. J. Gómez)

impressions of colour and rhythm. Thus, in this case, the relationship that Turcato establishes between content and the means of expression prevents the works from becoming mere decoration but they cannot become instrumental to any specific political programme either. They do not provoke any direct sympathetic response but rather they invite the viewer to reflect upon the way in which such subjects were commonly represented. (*Illustration 5*)



5. Giulio Turcato, *Rovine di Varsavia (Ruins of Warsaw)*, 1948, oil on canvas, 48 x 71 cm., Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. (Picture: J. J. Gómez)

The detachment, rationalism and anti-expressionism that characterised the work of the majority of the Forma 1 artists contrasted clearly with Consagra's dramatism as shown in works such as *Totem della liberazione* (1947). This sculpture is conceived as a symbol of an epoch of uncertainty. Concrete and iron, industrial materials, transmit a strong feeling of historic contemporaneity. These elements are left uncovered in

order to achieve «a higher dramatic effect»²¹ and they are also arranged in enigmatic forms, organised according to an interplay of masses and voids. The arbitrary relationship between the Liberation, the precise geometric composition and the semantic inscrutability of the metallic construction puts forward a political statement: despite all expectations to the contrary, it is impossible to find a widely shared language capable of securing a reference to the contemporary social and political situation. (*Illustration 6*)



6. Pietro Consagra, *Totem della liberazione*, 1947, painted iron, 210 x 43 x 64 cm., artist's collection, Rome. (Picture: Juan José Gómez)

The Rupture with the PCI

Like Consagra, Perilli declared in 1977 that «art is abstract today because all values and conservative constructions have collapsed for good in the last two crises that have shaken the world».²² In an interview with Nadja Perilli, Lucio Manisco added that: «The philosophical perspective consisted of the rejection of bourgeois society, because it no longer had any valid content. We needed to move towards abstract art because there was nothing to represent in that society».²³ With the division of the country and the world into opposed factions supported by powerful mass propaganda apparatuses, ideology came to be perceived as a social feature of the epoch rather than as a distinctive trait of capitalism. Under such circumstances, *Forma 1* artists

²¹ P. Consagra, interview with G. di Milla on June 1964, in Giovanna BONASEGALE and Simonetta LUX (curated by), *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti, 1947-1997* (exhibition catalogue), Roma-Prague, Galleria comunale d'arte moderna e contemporanea-Obrazárna Pražského hradu, Argos, 1998, p. 120.

²² *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti...*, *ob. cit.*, p. 77.

²³ *Ibidem*.

opted for a committed, active and deconstructive nihilism as the In sum, it was acknowledged that art should intervene in society with its own weapons. Under capitalism there was the problem of art itself since the very foundations of modern art research, particularly abstract art, were established upon the unavoidable return to form. Form was supposed to be alive, to be the powerful agent that could generate vivid social consciousness upon any viewer.

Hence, the objective of a kind of art that aimed to represent the «form of the phenomenon»²⁴ was the discovery of sociality and commitment in themselves. And the goal was to justify them in the present, rather than to simply assume them because of pre-ordered party directives.

Dorazio pointed out that their manifesto also involved an explicit reaction against Stalinist art²⁵ because, as Argan explains, socialist realist artists «gave up their own autonomous research and expression because they had already achieved their moral freedom, when they made their ideological choices».²⁶ From the point of view of the Forma 1 members, the socialist realists had ceased to be artists in order to become party officials. Further, they made it clear that it was impossible to be a socialist artist if one is was not an artist at all; that was, somebody primarily concerned with aesthetic issues. To the question «why has the PCI always fought Forma 1?» Manisco replied to Nadja Perilli that «It was the period of Stalinist culture; and art was required to serve the party. (N.P.) And why could not abstract art do so? (L.M) because they wanted art to be propaganda, to support the social struggles of the PCI. That's why Guttuso was so esteemed».²⁷

However, it is an indication of the openness of the Italian situation that, despite these differences, the Forma 1 manifesto was actually produced in Guttuso's studio at 48 via Margutta in Rome. Moreover, at one point Guttuso was able to obtain PCI sponsorship for Forma 1 when he convinced the party to give Maugeri, Consagra, Turcato, Accardi and Sanfilippo a grant to travel to Paris.²⁸ Guttuso's studio was a major centre

²⁴ G.C. ARGAN, «Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus», 1951, in BARROCHI, *SMAI*, p.75.

²⁵ P. DORAZIO, «Per Salvatore Scarpitta» in Luigi SANSONE (ed.), *Scarpitta*, Milan, Mazzotta, 1999, p. 31.

²⁶ G.C. ARGAN, *L'arte moderna 1770-1970*, Florence, Sonsoni, 1970, p. 633

²⁷ *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti...*, ob. cit., p. 77

²⁸ Their relationship with the PCI also allowed Forma 1 to display their works at an Young

of Rome's artistic life. In Consagra's words: «Both the new and old ones were welcomed. Some of them popped in to find out what was boiling in the party's pot and have peace of mind. Some of them went to find relief from their little sins in the Fascist times. It was like a "baptistery" of Bottega Oscura²⁹ where one could visit for a glass of wine and a hug»³⁰.

Guttuso, who established a «fraternal friendship» with the young Consagra, «both strived for reinforcing his relationship with the party [along the lines of popular, realistic art art], while integrating with Picassian culture».³¹ But Forma 1's visit to Paris had signalled a turning point and they began to question Guttuso's leadership in the Roman artistic milieu. From then on, young abstract artists and Guttusian realists would take separate ways: «we were the generation opened to Europe. Guttuso's problems were not our problems any more».³²

In spite of Forma 1's principled insistence on being framed within the left, their arguments took, at times, the form of an indiscriminate attack on any other left-wing artists. Then, polemics with the PCI began, and controversies with In November 1947 they published a letter in *L'Unità* in which post-war engaged figurative painting as a whole was treated as:

A return to an antiquated and academicist realism, even near 19th Century verism. They [the realists] have returned to the 19th Century because they did not understand that [...] a revolution in content is only possible if it goes hand in hand with a formal language dialectically evolved out of the preceding one [...]

The commitment to new forms and social renewal meant a dangerous dualism that brought some people to expressionism and some others to illustrative cubism. In this obscure situation [...], painters who clearly followed abstract tendencies appeared. [...]

Italian Art Exhibition organised by the Czechoslovak National Youth Front on the occasion of the First World Youth Festival (Prague, 1947).

²⁹ The PCI Headquarters were in Bottega Oscura street.

³⁰ P. CONSAGRA, *Vita mia*, Milan, Universale Economica Feltrinelli, 1980, p. 46

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*., p. 48

We let the public and the critics judge which one is the really progressive perspective.³³

The communist official and art critic Antonello Trombadori's reply was published alongside the letter. For him Forma 1 members lived «in a chaos of theoretical improvisation, grammatical incapacity and ignorance of the elementary principles of figurative language». He denied the possibility of a kind of painting purely concerned with form, and stressed that criticism of the conventional Renaissance perspective posed, in fact, a geometrical question which could itself be considered as providing a distinct subject-matter: «[Abstract expressions] with theoretical foundations in non-Euclidean geometry treat a series of mathematical questions which belong to contemporary culture».³⁴

Realism, understood as the explicit representation of reality, was a cornerstone of post-war Marxist aesthetics. A concern with form in its own right was viewed as impossible. However Perilli retrospectively argued in 1974 that the form of reality was not the result of the mechanical activity of the eye, but consisted of complex historically definable processes of memory and imagination whose workings had to be unveiled. Forma 1 artists had intended to produce a critique of narration and linguistic codes, that is: «to break our visual routine and mental habits. This is a logical-rational way of using the irrational to activate a complex form of communication. Geometry is not an optical tool for perceiving a true space; but a “machine” used in the mysterious process of human imagination».³⁵

The Forma 1 article and Trombadori's response created an atmosphere of confrontation that prevented progress from these competing positions. The abstract artists' rejection of figurative engaged painting as a whole suited communist critics' claims that Forma 1 was, in fact, merely making «second hand» futurism with the aim of pleasing «American snobs».³⁶ Only Turcato tried to relate both traditions, or at least he did so if we look at it from the perspective of the established stylistic debate between abstract and realist art. That conventional distinction was in fact

³³ Accardi, Attardi, Consagra, Dorazio, Guerrini, Manisco, Maugeri, Mirabella, Peirce, Perilli, Sanfilippo, Turcato, «Gli astrattisti», *L'Unità*, 13 November 1947, p. 3.

³⁴ A. TROMBADORI, «Gli astrattisti», *L'Unità*, 13 November 1947, p. 3

³⁵ A. PERILLI, «Teoria dell'irrazionale geometrico» *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti...*, *ob. cit.*, 159.

³⁶ 33 A. DEL GUERCIO, «Inglese e astratti», *L'Unità*, 23 December 1947, p. 3.

overridden by the objectives he set out to accomplish: initially to stimulate the audience to criticism, and then to fully engage them in political struggle. He argued that critical painting was «intended to disrupt conventional “veristic” visual perception. This is what abstract painting does. At other times, however, a dynamic figurative painting can do it too».³⁷

Despite the controversies, Turcato, Accardi and Sanfilippo were still included in the Fronte's room at the 1948 Venice Biennale; Consagra, Attardi and Turcato continued to take part in left-wing initiatives; while Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli became increasingly involved with State-related Italian modern culture. As Rachele Ferrario puts it, «for these young people, to choose [abstract art] was an ethical question. There were, on one side, the figurative artist -who followed Picasso and Guttuso, and were supported by the communist and protected by Trombadori. On the other side, the young abstract artists [...], who eventually found approval and support from the State's National Gallery of Modern Art».³⁸ Indeed, the catalogue for their 1949 show at Rome's Chiurazzi Gallery was introduced by the Gallery's director, Palma Buccarelli. In it, Buccarelli stressed the social dimension of their painting. There was no explicit reference to Marxism, but politically correct statements of social engagement were voiced: «This art claims to be “social”, that is: opposed to individualism. It rejects humanism in the Renaissance sense [...] It wants to be a collective anonymous and utilitarian art useful for everybody».³⁹ However, these very same artists still kept trying to promote left-wing art in polemical opposition to Stalinism in Italy. In 1950, for example, they organised an exhibition at Rome's Age d'or bookshop⁴⁰ entitled *Civil abstract Art in Czechoslovakia*, showing works by dissident 1920s constructivists, including Karel Teige, Josef Istler and Jan Smetana.

Faced with a range of conflicting demands and pressures, Forma 1

³⁷ G. Turcato, interview with G. Dalla Chiesa, March 1986, in *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti...*, *ob. cit.*, p. 223.

³⁸ See Rachele FERRARIO, *Regina di quadri. Vita e passioni di Palma Buccarelli* Milan, Mondadori, 2010, p. 126. Buccarelli followed Venturi's approach to modern art and opposed communist-sponsored social realism. In politics, she supported the Partito socialista dei lavoratori italiani, a fraction of the Socialist Party that rejected communist alliances.

³⁹ P. BUCCARELLI, «Catalogue of the Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli exhibition at the Chiurazzi Gallery», in «Cronaca di Forma 1, 1946/1951», (Various Authors, 68)

⁴⁰ A bookshop and gallery run by Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli

dissolved in 1951. Thereafter, its members would go their own separate ways: Turcato joined the Venturi-sponsored Gruppo degli Otto in 1952, alongside artists who had somehow been related to the PCI but were now also somehow «disenchanted» with the communists.⁴¹ Turcato, however, was still a PCI member. For their part, Accardi gave up politics and Attardi shifted to engaged, politically explicit figurative painting; finally, Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli joined Gillo Dorfles, Mario Balloco, Gianni Monet, Munari and Atanasio Soldati in establishing in Milan the Movimento d'arte concreta (MAC).

From the point of view of the communist party, the fact that these artists had dropped the term «Marxist» from their manifestos, after Forma 1 dissolved, was proof of their theoretical confusion and evidence that they had come to a dead end. To the communists, Marxism was a matter of politics, and not of culture. Although there was an ethical attitude in Forma 1, the movement lacked proper revolutionary agency, and a politically constructive dimension was missing from their programme. As Corrado Maltese wrote in *L'Unità*, «abstract art intends to reject so-called bourgeois content and ends up rejecting every content, and it is not even able to communicate its feeling of revolt».⁴² Besides, since Culture was part of the wider activity of the party, the PCI was reluctant to accept any definitions of Marxist art issued by individual manifestos rather than produced by collective party debate.

The questions raised by PCI cultural policies were deeply felt by artists in the period of post-fascism and post-war reconstruction. The *Secondo manifesto dei pittori e scultori*, or the *Manifesto della nuova secessione italiana*, which were characteristic texts of the Italian artistic situation in the mid-1940s, were issued in a climate of anti-fascist fervour in which the way to integrate these questions seemed clear and straightforward. Nevertheless, it soon became evident that not all artists who had joined anti-fascism and the left-wing parties at the end of World War II could succeed in harmonising their art with long-term communist

⁴¹ The «Gruppo degli otto» was composed by Birolli, Morlotti, Antonio Corpora, Afro Basaldella, Santomaso, Turcato, Mattia Moreni and Emilio Vedova. See L. VENTURI, «Otto pittori italiani», Rome, 1952, quoted in M. De MICHELI, «Realism and the post-War Debate' in Emily BRAUN (ed.) *Italian Art of the 20th Century. Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988*, Munich and London, Prestel-Verlag and Royal Academy of Arts, 1989, p. 287.

⁴² C. MALTESE, *L'Unità*, 16 February 1949, 3

politics, and accordingly transform themselves as easily as they had supported the anti-fascist struggle. The main limitation of the PCI's cultural politics was the party's failure to reconcile the claims of these artists with its own political programme as the immediate post-war period went on. Italian communist artists had regarded Picasso's *Guernica* as the first example of their new art. The painting had been a fairly successful attempt to reconcile modernist aesthetics and left-wing political concerns. *Oltre Guernica*, the funding manifesto of the Fronte of artists, intended to go beyond it and substitute *Guernica*'s sense of outrage with the complete articulation of art with the communists' political programme. Yet this ambitious project of producing a great work of art beyond *Guernica* was never achieved. Instead, most communist artists and critics tended to fall into regressive aesthetic positions. In practice, political concerns prevailed in them; the consequence of the party's need to maintain links with its uneducated constituency was a need for an «understandable» art.

However Forma 1 conceived revolutionary art as anti-ideology, that is, as criticism of conservative ways of thinking, examining nodal key problems between knowledge, ideology and reality. In this case, the resulting stress on formal radicalism circumscribed their questions within the exclusively artistic field. Their main weakness therefore became a political one linked to the question of popularity.

One might argue that an art that surprises and consciously and controversially frustrates established expectations cannot be popular, but that it, nonetheless, remains a revolutionary and avant-garde art; and that its unpopularity is not its fault. Rather, it was the result of it taking place in a society ruled by conventions and not by freethinking. The Forma 1 artists accordingly rejected «familiarity» in art. But, for communist culture and in the conditions of any 1940s left-wing political movement, «familiarity» was precisely the condition for an effective rapport with the workers and the only means by which they could establish a relationship with aesthetic products. Achieving a positive rapport between «high culture» and the working class was a cornerstone of the PCI's cultural politics. Yet, in practice, most realist communist artists exchanged aesthetic quality for political quantity, while modern artists disregarded large parts of their potential working class audience, in the name of intellectual sophistication.

The questions of popularity and avant-gardism in Italian post-war

culture were beset by a series of historical dilemmas which were never properly resolved. Rather, they were overtaken by social changes which affected the composition of the working class. After the immediate post-war period, the spread of urban life and the increase of white collar workers, who were far more educated than conventional blue-collar workers and peasants, largely placed the question of popularity into the background of debates about the relationship of art and politics. Once the immediate post-war period of reconstruction had passed, and social modernisation had really begun to have an effect in Italy, the ground of cultural-political struggle shifted. In the new mass culture arguments about the rights and wrongs of «high art» lost much of their political *raison d'être*. The Italian projects for a politically conscious fine art passed into history.