Czechoslovakia at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s

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The international art exhibition, the Venice Biennale, which took place for the first time in 1895 in the Giardini of Venice, has since its inception developed into the most prestigious of cultural events, a gathering of not only important figures from the art world, but also from the world of politics and society in general. For more than a hundred years it has witnessed a whole range of world events, among them: the grand inaugural exhibition opened by the Italian royal couple (1895); visits by the twice-refused applicant to the Vienna Academy of Art, Adolf Hitler (1934); artists representing the fascist Slovak state exhibited in the Czechoslovak pavilion (1942); the nonparticipation of the Soviet Union and its satellite states during the Stalin dictatorship of the early 1950s; the student protests in 1968 with the shouts of “Burn all the pavilions!”; the introduction of awards for the best national pavilions (1938); the discontinuation of these awards (1970) and their reintroduction (1986). After this brief but very telling list of events, there can be no doubt of the fact that the oldest and currently most important exhibition of contemporary art from all corners of the world had and retains a very strong involvement in the cultural politics of individual coun-
tries (both those that exhibit and those that do not), as well as national and international politics in general.

The Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918 after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Officials and diplomats of the first government of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk fully realized the importance of presenting their new state on the international stage and made the decision to participate in the very next Venice Biennale, which was held in 1920. In 1926, Czech and Slovak art was exhibited in the country’s national pavilion, whose construction was financed by the Czechoslovak government. By the mid-1920s, there were only eight countries with their own pavilions in the Giardini (Belgium, Hungary, originally Bavaria but from 1912 Germany, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Russia, and Spain). All of the other countries displayed their art in the Central Pavilion.

Before World War II, the Czechoslovak functionalist pavilion built by the architect Otakar Novotný housed a wide range of artistic style, from traditional conservative works (e.g., Viktor Stretti and Jakub Obrovský), to those reflecting the modernist aesthetics inspired by the School of Paris (e.g., Emil Filla and Josef Čapek). The selection of works representing Czechoslovakia was meant to emphasize cultural connections with France and Western Europe. The communist takeover of the country in February 1948 resulted in cultural politics taking a completely different direction.

The opening of the Venice Biennale of 1948 showed only a subtle left-leaning national direction. Jiří Kotalík, in the foreword of the exhibition catalog, noted that in February of that year, Czechoslovakia had turned down the path of socialism, meaning that art would no longer be only for the elite of the country, but for every citizen. At the time, art democratization as a value remained only a part of the rhetoric, and in spite of these words, the artists represented were highly individualistic and had strong roots in modernism: Jan Zrzavý, František Gross, František Muzika, Josef Wagner, and Emil Filla. It seemed that the new political regime had very little influence on the selection of artists. All throughout 1948, internationally as well as domestically, official exhibits of works created in the socialist realist and avant-garde styles coexisted. Radical changes, however, were not long in coming.

1 After the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, it remains the property of the Czech and Slovak Republics in a ratio of 2:1.
In April 1948, the Union of Czechoslovak Artists was established, unifying all other existing art organizations and becoming the single countrywide artistic organization. This union directed the jury responsible for selecting works for the Biennale. After two years of rather vague policies, the union began to impose a very hard line of cultural ideology, and the period between 1950 and 1952 represents an era of the strictest Stalinization of Czech and Slovak culture. This also applied to international exhibitions. While the instructions given during the years of the Nazi occupation during World War II were very clear and specific—the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were only permitted to participate in those exhibitions in which the German Reich was participating—during the communist dictatorship there were no such definitive instructions. This left state officials uncertain and wavering, which meant that they issued an official announcement of Czechoslovakia’s participation in the Venice Biennale and then almost immediately reversed of a decision, twice in succession (1950 and 1952).

It is worth looking in more detail at exactly what took place behind the scenes leading up to the occasions when Czechoslovakia failed to participate. At the beginning of October 1949, officials of the Biennale sent the Czechoslovak legation in Rome an invitation to participate in the Twenty-fifth Venice Biennale set to open on 3 June 1950. The envoy finally responded in February 1950, writing that the invitation had been forwarded to the appropriate authorities and was awaiting a decision. There followed a long series of urgent telegrams from the Italian side, emphasizing the importance of an answer. The officials also contacted the Italian envoy in Prague to ask for assistance in obtaining a response. It was not until 24 March 1950 that the envoy in Rome sent a telegram announcing the participation of Czechoslovakia in the exhibition. The Biennale immediately requested a list of artists and their works with photographs for the catalog. This nevertheless did not happen. As a result of the delay on the Czechoslovak side, the catalog was sent to the printer without any information about the works of the Czech and Slovak artists. The Czechoslovak envoy assured the organizers that the country would participate in the exhibition. The biggest surprise, however, came on the exhibi-

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2 Decision published by the Office of the Reich Protector, National Archive (NA), Prague, fond PMR, sig. P1681, No. 3777, No. 5201/39/Ko.
tion’s opening day, when a telegram arrived stating simply that Czechoslovakia was canceling its participation. Two weeks later a letter of explanation was sent, which included the sentence: “The Envoy, with regret, must inform the Biennale directors that the appropriate Czechoslovak authorities were unable to overcome in time all of the technical difficulties, which caused them to withdraw from this year’s Biennale.”

This unusual behavior continued in the following year as well. Almost the identical situation repeated itself when the directors of the Biennale received no response from Czechoslovakia to their invitation to participate in the twenty-sixth exhibition. The country’s decision-making process is illustrated in an internal memo from the Ministry of Information and Propaganda, dated 14 January 1952. Before any decision could be made, it was important to take into consideration the position of other communist countries as well as communist organizations in the West. Part of the memo stated that from the envoys of the People’s Democracies, there had thus far been responses only from Warsaw, Sofia, and Bucharest, each stating that a decision had yet to be made. Referring to an article by Renato Guttuso that appeared in the magazine *Rinascita* in November 1951, the author of the memo wrote: “The position of our Italian friends can be said to be that they welcome our participation in any national cultural event, because in this way we strengthen their position. In case of any obstacle on the part of the Italian government, it is always possible to use this situation in the leftist Italian daily political and propaganda press.”

After many urgent telegrams, finally on 1 March 1952, it was announced that the government had decided to participate in this international art exhibition. Architect Karel Stránský, then director of the Union of Czechoslovak Artists and an active promoter of socialist realism, was named commissioner of the pavilion. The result was a scene that looked very much like that of 1950. The organizers of the Biennale were pressing for com-

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4 Renato Guttuso, because of this demonstration of his leftist political orientation, had his figurative paintings displayed in a very extensive exhibit in Prague (immediately in 1954, and later in 1968, 1973, and 1979). In 1972, he was awarded the Lenin Prize for his work to strengthen peace between nations.
5 NA, fond MI-D, sig. 561, No 174, No 1506/52.
plete information about the artists and their works for the exhibition catalog. In spite of the delay from Prague in responding, a number of other factors seemed to indicate that Czechoslovakia this time had indeed decided to have its artists participate. In addition to the official announcement in March 1952, there is the fact that a list of artists and works of art destined for Venice was sent by express airmail to Italy on 3 May 1952, as shown by Stráník’s telegram. A further indication that they definitely were expecting the participation of Czechoslovakia is the inclusion of the nation’s flag, along with those of all other participating countries, on the cover of the official catalog. The exhibition preparations were in their final stages when on 27 May 1952, the Biennale organizers received an unexpected telegram, stating: “It is with regret that we inform you, that due to serious technical difficulties, Czechoslovakia will not participate in this year’s Biennale. Envoy of Czechoslovakia.” What specific technical (or political?) difficulties could possibly be the problem could not be determined. Technical difficulties must be excluded as the reason, as in 1948, the pavilion underwent a complete—and not inexpensive—reconstruction.

This withdrawal led to yet another unpleasant incident. The Italian organizers responded with a telegram the next day, stating that while they regretted the absence of the Czechoslovak artists, they requested the use of the pavilion for a special exhibit. So that the pavilion would not remain closed to visitors, they proposed an installation of Italian and French divisionism, and would of course cover all expenses related to the maintenance of the pavilion for that period. As there was no response from the Czechoslovak side, the Biennale directors decided, given the time constraints (the exhibition opened on 14 June) and an expected positive response, to complete the installation. Therefore, it was a very unpleasant surprise when a letter, dated 21 June 1952, arrived stating that Czechoslovakia had decided not to make its pavilion available. In response, the president of the Biennale, Giovanni Ponti, wrote a very apologetic letter to the Czechoslovak envoy in Rome, explaining in detail why the organizers decided to allow the use of the Czechoslovak pavilion.

6 ASAC. Telegram dated 2 May 1952, sent by Karel Stráník, commissioner of the Czechoslovak pavilion, Prague, addressed to Rodolfo Pallucchini, general director of the Biennale, Venice.
7 There was reference to Paragraph 14 of the general rules of the exhibition, which, among other things, stated that during the exhibition, all spaces of the Biennale must be put to the fullest and best use.
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Ponti showed the extent of his diplomatic skills and obtained the grudgingly given agreement of the Consul.8

In March 1953, Josef Stalin died, and two weeks later the first communist president of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, also died. During that year and the following year, critical voices were heard very high up in the regime, criticizing the overly dogmatic following of socialist realism, saying that artists have the right to some degree of individualism. A certain rehabilitation of a few artists from the older generation also occurred. There was a new appreciation for those who used their canvases to capture the beauty of the Czech countryside and the life of farmers, even though the same artists had previously been criticized for working for bourgeois society.

These changes were also immediately reflected in the 1954 Venice Bien­nale, when Czechoslovakia and two other countries in the Soviet sphere of influence (Romania and Poland) participated.9 The exhibition at the Czechoslovak pavilion was a reflection of what the politicians considered to be good art. Canvases from the earlier generation of artists (e.g., Ludvík Kuba and Václav Rabas) mostly predated World War II and came from the postimpressionist tradition. A notable example was the almost ninety-year-old Kuba, whose impressionistic light was lovely and beautiful to look at, but more importantly, politically harmless. Because of his style, he was able to exhibit and be appreciated by the fascist and communist regimes. Both dictatorships had in common the desire for art to evoke a feeling of optimism in the viewer, and these light-filled paintings succeeded in doing so. At the Twenty-seventh Biennale, paintings belonged to the category of retrospective (excluding graphic works), while sculpture was in line with the official art doctrine. It is important to note that while painters had difficulty in adjusting to the requirements of socialist realism, sculptors—thanks to the strong realistic tradition of the nineteenth century—were less uncertain. The sculptures displayed were completely within the artistic and aesthetic parameters prescribed by the Communist Party: truthful representations like those of the nineteenth century, but with

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8 It is important to note that in past years when a country did not participate, the pavilion was used, if not outright offered, for the installation of retrospective and national exhibitions.

9 In 1950, none of the communist countries participated in the Venice exhibition, and in 1952, only Poland came. Tito’s Yugoslavia falls into a special category, as in the late 1940s he managed to remain outside Stalin’s influence. This meant that they took part in all Venice exhibitions from 1950 until 1990 and promoted abstract art very early on.
leftist subject matter. This is illustrated even in the titles of the works themselves: *Mine Worker, Cooperative Member, Bricklayer, Brotherhood,* or *Lenin,* by the sculptors Kozák, Kostka, Malejovský, Pokorný, and Lauda, respectively. In the foreword of the catalog of artists, pavilion commissioner Miroslav Míčko wrote that older, deserving artists were selected, those who “did not stray from reality, their native land and its people, even when Czech and Slovak art was removed from society and used in a crisis of subjectivity and formalism.”

This sounds like a harsh criticism of the avant-garde artists of the pre- and interwar years, who strongly resonated in the earlier art scene. The rest of the art of the younger generation followed the main tendency of contemporary art: socialist realism. Míčko emphasized that while there was one philosophy for artists, there was enough room for individual expression. Visitors to the pavilion must have doubted his words in relation to individual expression, but there was no doubt about the one ideological path. A completely different reality greeted them at the other national pavilions, where they were showing very contemporary works by Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, or Paul Klee. The majority of the Italian press commented that the socialist realist works were limited to describing something completely devoid of any intellect, leaving them unable to compare them with European contemporary art.

Naturally, the Italian leftist press had the opposite opinion. *L'Unità,* at that time the official daily of the Italian Communist Party, gave a long praise to the contents of the Venice pavilions of the People’s Democracies, stating that their artists created works “directly serving people, art that is clear, simple, and folk art that helps man build a better society.”

Preparations for the next Venice Biennale were also preceded by completely unexpected political events. At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union held in February 1956, the party’s first secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, openly criticized the practices of his predecessor in a secret speech entitled “On the Personality Cult and Its Consequences,” which de facto was the beginning of the process of de-Stalinization. This new situ-
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Figure 26.1.
Czechoslovakia at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s

ation immediately affected the Twenty-eighth Venice Biennale, in which the Soviet Union participated following a twenty-two-year absence. Of the satellite states, present again were Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania. Miroslav Mičko was again named commissioner of the pavilion, and for the first time, a deputy commissioner was also appointed. This was Vlastimil Rada, a painter whose works were among those chosen for the Czechoslovak pavilion in 1956. Rada belonged to the older generation of artists, and was not new to Venice, as his works showing the beauty of the Czech countryside were presented at the Biennale of 1930, 1934, 1938, and 1940. Again, a few of the statues that appeared were of a political nature, but in comparison with years past, it was less noticeable and they could not be categorized as purely socialist realism. What widely attracted attention because of the themes, forms, and artistic quality, all of which are recognized even today, was the selection of works hanging on the wall. In place of canvases, there was an extensive collection of book illustrations, which in 1950s Czechoslovakia was a very seriously regarded medium, on par with painting and sculpture. Turning their

Figure 26.2.
artistic talents to children’s book illustrations was one way for many gifted artists to express themselves while avoiding themes required by the regime. Because of the superior works created in the field, these illustrations caught the attention of viewers, even in Venice. Illustrations by Antonín Pelc for the book *Jacques Vingtras: L’Insurgé* by Jules Vallès were awarded the prize for graphic works, which also included a monetary award of 100,000 lira. Because of the selection of book illustrations for fairy tales and works of world literature (for example: *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *Penguin Island* by Anatole France, *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, and *Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek), the works of art in the Czechoslovak pavilion were able to move outside of the narrow limits dictated by the existing political situation in the country. Though it was still too soon for a bold move away from the communist government’s rigid dictates, the book illustrations were an elegant solution to escape from having to produce propaganda art.

In 1958, Czechoslovakia won the Grand Prix and thirteen other awards at Expo 58 in Brussels, which was the first major world’s fair to be held since the end of WWII. During the preparations for the exhibition, there was a certain cultural liberalization, with the state granting artists a degree of freedom. The international success that followed was a great awakening for many Czechs and Slovaks and marked a turning point from which there was no going back to the artistic and aesthetic values from earlier in the decade. The Czechoslovak Expo 58 pavilion, whose architectural structure was rooted in the Czech avant-garde tradition, included an abstract stained glass panel by Jan Kotík. The nascent freedom did not apply completely to the Venice Biennale: works selected for the exhibition continued to be much more conservative. In fact, the first abstract painting to be seen in the Czechoslovak pavilion did not appear until 1964, and by coincidence it was also a work by Jan Kotík. While on the surface the regime was still moving in the old direction, there were small steps taking the country away from

13 Graphic works also received awards at the Biennale in 1958. One went to Vincent Hložník, who was awarded the prize of the David E. Brigit Foundation in Los Angeles for a graphic artist under forty-five years old along with 100,000 lira, and Ernest Zmeták, whose work *Flight into Egypt* was given a special award for art with a religious theme by the International Institute for Liturgical Art, along with 200,000 lira.

14 The architects of the pavilion were František Cubr, Josef Hrubý, and Zdeněk Pokorný.

15 An exhibition of Kotík’s work from 1948 to 1956, which took place in the spring of 1957 in Prague, was one of the first exhibitions of nonfigurative art since 1948, and it caused quite a sensation in the press of the day.
the dark period of the early 1950s. These evolutions were generally invisible to the public, but the organizations working behind the scenes were indeed reflecting these coming changes.

In 1958, art historian Jiří Kotalík was the commissioner of the pavilion, and he fulfilled his function very professionally and responsibly. Gone were the maneuvers and behavior characteristics of the beginning of the decade. Proof of this improved atmosphere of cooperation is that the general director of the Venice Biennale, Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua, personally intervened with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to expedite the issuance of a visa to Kotalík. The biggest news of this Biennale, however, was the granting of permission for five of the exhibiting artists to travel to Venice to study contemporary art. Commissioner Kotalík even requested that the organizers arrange for invitations to the opening and all social events for the artists. As regards the selection of works themselves, 1958 was a hybrid year, with works celebrating socialist working people (Kostka and Klimo), the interwar avant-garde (Zrzavý and Wagner), and contemporary tendencies (Černý and Jiroudek). Completely surprising was the exhibition of two woodcuts with religious themes: *Flight into Egypt* by Ernest Zmeták and *The Flood* by Orest Dubay. The choice was unexpected because in communist Czechoslovakia any religious expression or demonstration of faith was strongly repressed, and the church and its representatives suffered to varying degrees.

In 1960, the successful cooperation between the organizers of the Venice exhibition and the reappointed commissioner Jiří Kotalík continued. Four painters and four graphic artists (no sculptors) were selected by the jury of the Union of Czechoslovak Artists as the best representatives of the then current tendencies in Czech and Slovak art. Even though overtly leftist propaganda works were in decline in the pavilion, the overall selection of works was bland and boring. The exhibited works did not offend, but neither did they excite any interest, and even less so because of the growing international competition. Even the Italian press was not interested, commenting only

16 Jiří Kotalík (1920–1996) was an associate professor at Charles University in Prague and was later rector at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. Kotalík is primarily known for his long tenure (thirty-three years, from 1967 to 1990) as director of the National Gallery in Prague.

17 The grand opening was attended by Bohumír Dvorský (painter), František Jiroudek (painter), and Jozef Kostka (sculptor). In September, the exhibition was visited by Karel Černý (painter) and Josef Malejovský (sculptor).
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twice during the whole exhibition on the Czechoslovak pavilion, and then in negative terms.¹⁸

The Venice Biennale, as an important international art exhibition, was strongly influenced by political pressures, each country’s understanding of its own national cultural identity, and the desire of participating nation states to project an accurate image of themselves to the rest of the world. This all contributes to the notion that the history of the twentieth century could only be written through a careful analysis of this exhibition. Political events played an increasingly prominent role at the Venice Biennale, always mirroring the state of affairs at the domestic and international levels. The events of the 1950s are a perfect example of this. During Stalinism, Czechoslovakia suddenly cancelled its participation (1950 and 1952). In 1953, the Soviet and Czechoslovak leaders died, and the following year, the country participated. In February 1956, Khrushchev criticized the cult of personality of his predecessor; and in May of that year, the Venetian public viewed the work of Soviet artists with great curiosity while the Czechoslovak artists were escaping into book illustrations. In 1958, several Czech and Slovak artists were allowed to travel to Venice to study contemporary art, something that a few years earlier had been unimaginable. Looking at political changes through the lens of what was happening at the Venice Biennale could also continue into the subsequent decade. Dramatic changes at the Czechoslovak pavilion did not occur until 1964, when after several years of exhibiting works by mediocre artists, good-quality and thoroughly contemporary works, including abstracts by the previously mentioned Jan Kotík, were presented. In the same year, only a few months later, the Union of Czechoslovak Artists was finally able to change its leadership; in this case, the selection of artists had anticipated imminent changes. This change was a direct result of the new era of liberalization within the communist regime, which culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968. Other similar examples can be found in more recent history, and not just in the case of Czechoslovakia. The Venice Biennale must be understood not only as a contemporary art exhibition, but also as an event that has paralleled major turning points in world history.