

La Casa Frollo
The Venice Conference, September 1969
by Gianfranco Sanguinetti, August 2014¹

At the beginning of 1969, a little imprudently, to tell the truth, because I had had no experience in such matters, I proposed to organize a conference of the SI in Italy. This would be a meeting of 18 situs coming from the Old and the New Worlds, as well as their wives or girlfriends, in a place worthy of us. A meeting that would expose such a place and its surrounding areas to the unforeseeable effects of the most unexpected critique.

A rich Italian friend possessed an old villa, slightly run down but elegant, located on a lake north of Milan. It was large, pleasant and sufficient to lodge the committee. On the walls were hung baroque paintings, some of them religious, other profane, whose principle fault was that they gave themselves up perfectly to a remarkable number of détournements. The villa seemed perfect to me. Thus, I announced to Paris, New York and Randers that the [right] place had been found.

I learned soon afterwards that young Antoine Gallimard also used to frequent it, being a friend of my friend: having heard that the next conference of the SI would take place there, Antoine retorted that the situs would become part of the stable of young writers at Gallimard.

When I told Guy this anecdote, he was infuriated and he said, in so many words, “What?! This young cunt treats us like employees of his father’s publishing house?! His presumptuousness will be immediately punished!”

There then followed a lively exchange of letters, become famous since their publication, between the SI and Claude Gallimard,² who was quite sporty in his

¹ *Translator’s note*: included in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n’est fini, tout commence* (Paris: Editions Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 28 October 2014. Footnotes as noted.

² *Translator’s note*: see letter from the SI to Claude Gallimard dated 16 January 1969: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-16January1969.html>.

response.³ This casualness cost him a second letter, a definitive one, cosigned by Vaneigem and Viénet, who had been published by Gallimard.⁴

The plan for the villa was thus canceled. I knew that, in Venice, on [the Island of] Giudecca, there was a beautiful Palladian palace, half-elegant and half-dilapidated, with a superb view of the town. The palace was now a charming inn that answered to the name *Casa Frollo*, already inhabited by Gabriele D'Annunzio and Eleonora Duse. The façade faced the canal, and behind it was a half-hectare garden – something rare in Venice, where suitable places for a garden don't exist. It was magnificent and perfect for the usage that we wanted to make of it. Marino Soldan and his mother, Flora, who ran the place, were adorable and spoke only in Venetian dialect. We agreed about all the details. I asked if I could send a boat with bottles of Chianti aboard, and they had a place to keep it. No problem.

Guy was enthusiastic that this was not in the country, but in the center of Venice. He came to see me that summer and we went down from Milan to Tuscany in August. It was on a hill near Florence that we discovered a small village called *Osteria Nuova*. The name was promising, and Guy proposed to stop in the *osteria*⁵ that gave the village its name and taste the wines. We chose one, young and bright, which particularly pleased us, after a long sampling that left no bad effects.

“How much will we need in Venice?” I asked. Guy did some brief calculations, after which 220 liters was deemed sufficient for the week-long duration of our stay, with the idea that we would have lunch or dinner out somewhere once a day. As shown by an invoice in my archives dated 28 August 1969, four *damigiane*⁶ of red wine, with 54 liters in each one, for a total of 216 liters, were sent to Venice.

Meanwhile, the police had contacted the manager of Casa Frollo, who wrote to me on 26 August that he wanted to receive “clarifications with respect to the final arrangements for your meeting. As you surely know,” he went on, “in order to meet in a public place, an authorization from the police authorities must be obtained and precise notices furnished.” Guy told me to respond in a fantastic manner, something that I didn't fail to do: we were going to hold the biennial

³ *Translator's note*: see Debord's letter to Sanguinetti dated 22 January 1969: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22January1969.html>.

⁴ *Author's note*: see “Correspondence with a Publisher,” *Internationale Situationniste* #12. [Translator: see also Guy Debord's letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert dated 27 August 1991: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-27August1991.html>.]

⁵ *Translator's note*: Italian for tavern.

⁶ *Translator's note*: Italian for demijohns.

meeting of researchers in urbanism and history, residents of other countries who want to see the results of their research.

I came to Venice by car on the appointed day, with my little friend Connie, Raoul Vaneigem and his girlfriend Fatima. On a *vaporetto* at the Piazzale Roma, a large elegant man, dressed in black or dark blue, with white hair – not seeming to be Italian – awaited us and followed us silently until we reached Guidecca. The same man, who was spotted many times during the course of our Venetian excursions, had also followed other situationists, which was something we learned later.

At the same time, the Italian Communist Party was holding its Festival of Unity on Guidecca. Some Stalinists took pains to unroll, right down to the ground, a large red banner with the hammer and sickle on it, directly in front of Casa Frollo. A situationist, Alain Chevalier, decided to bombard it with wine bottles thrown from the terrace. In response, the brave Stalinist workers started a veritable riot, seeking to force open our palace's door, which was ready to give way at any moment. It took us, Madame Flora and myself, a good half-hour to convince the Stalinists that they should stop their assault on the palace. All our efforts at discretion were sunk. This incongruous action led the SI to expel Alain Chevalier. Our conference was off to a bad start.⁷

The Casa Frollo was perfect, pleasant, with an old elegance; the food was good; we met around a large table that was in a hall on the second floor. The social climate in Italy just before the unleashing of the “hot autumn” was thrilling. Apart from us, there were very few guests. Among them was an Australian woman, Germaine Greer, who was writing a book. I remember that Viénet and I had several disagreements with her concerning her conception of the Hegelian dialectic.

Although the setting was favorable, the logistics of the conference were well organized, and the simultaneous translation [of the discussion] into four different languages was perfect, there was the general feeling of abstraction and insufficiency that the most impoverished sought to hide behind a façade of disembodied radicalism. Several months later, all the insufficiencies and

⁷ *Author's note:* at the same time, as one could read in the “Report of the Italian Section to the Venice Conference,” “wildcat strikes have experienced a truly formidable increase in Italy. The extension of this radical practice is such that (...) *Le Monde Diplomatique* has declared that, ‘even among management, the feeling has begun to spread that the Italian Communist Party could constitute the ultimate resource of the social-political system, that is, if one accepts the idea of enrolling it as a guard against subversive actions in the protests organized by the workers and the youth.’” (Sanguinetti Archives).

abstractions appeared in broad daylight, in a suite of exclusions, resignations, complications, rivalries and interpersonal conflicts that marked the end of the situationist adventure.