

Igor Zabel

Art in Slovenia in the Eighties

[2.580 words]

Slovenia



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Igor Zabel

Art in Slovenia in the Eighties

It may be said that a new era for Slovenian art began in 1980. That was the year when new Zeitgeist together with the influence of some important exhibitions, like Aperto '80 triggered an incredibly vibrant outburst of new art, in particular of painting. The phenomenon of the "New Image" is closely related to a generation of young artists who began to work in the mid-seventies. At that time, these young artists were forced to work on the margins of the Slovene art scene, ignored by most of the institutions; but, in spite of what the institutions saw as their marginal position, they developed a wide variety of significant activities. In the Gallery of the Students' cultural Centre (ŠKUC), in their own studios and in other alternative venues, they organised exhibitions and discussions, which were often very polemical. Their broad aim was to rethink (the basic dimensions and characteristics of) a work of art. This project was of course related to the then topical movement of "fundamental" and "analytical" abstract art. The reception of "fundamental" art in Slovenia, however, involved a re-consideration of modernism in general and of its basic premises ("flat" painting, "all-over", bodily dimensions). It also meant introducing models that had not previously appeared in Slovene art. (Slovene modernism of the fifties, sixties and early seventies was based on European models, such as "lyrical abstraction", "informal painting" etc; later also "new figurative" and "new constructive art. The young artists of the seventies, however, drew their inspiration from the American tradition, from Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction to Minimalism, Post-Minimalism etc.)

It might therefore seem extraordinary that artists who had so recently been occupied with the issues of the "last paintings" and the "zero point" of the painting, should change their style completely and begin a fervent

production of "New Image" works in fact, this shift was not as radical as it seems. The way "through" high modernism may also be understood as the way leading to the fundamentals of art work. Once reached these fundamentals made possible new, firmly based beginning; and since art now began from the zero point, so to speak, the old restrictions vanished, and suddenly everything was possible. Indeed, the work of several "New Image" or NeoExpressionist artists from the eighties show that modernist premises were closely adhered to. For them, the flatness of the painting (or the interdependence of the painting's structure with the form and size of its support) were no less important than the "artistic nomadism" or the "personal mythologies".

Modernist (especially American) abstract artists, "newly" discovered in the mid-seventies, provided the artists, as well as the art critics, with an intense and genuine experience, and also sparked off discussions about the fundamental issues of art and even about existence itself. The artists therefore could not simply change their style in compliance with the new fashion. On the one hand, they preserved in their work some of the issues that were discovered to be central to "fundamental" abstract art.

On the other hand, they tried, through the new stylistic approach, to escape from routine and to maintain the original intense nature of their work. Tugo Šušnik, one of the leading abstract artists in the seventies and outstanding representative of the "New Image" in the eighties, is a good example of this attitude. In 1979, he spent a year in New York, studying at the Pratt Institute. There he discovered that abstract painting in the USA had become mere routine, he found an unproblematic mass production of uninteresting paintings. He therefore decided to abandon his former approach and began to paint in a more complex (figurative) style, in order to preserve the intense experimental content that Slovene artists of the seventies had found in modernist abstract works. It should be noted, however, that not all the important representatives of the "New Image" art of the eighties had previously belonged to the "analytical abstraction" group. Some of them, like Živko Marušič or Jože Slak, had developed quite a personal style as early as in the seventies; and some of the younger artists, like Milan Erič, began their careers in the context of the "New Image".

In the first half of the eighties the centre of the new art moved from Ljubljana to Koper. As previously mentioned, the extremely strong generation of artists that introduced "New Image" art in the eighties, were not given an adequate response from the leading museums and galleries in Ljubljana. As a reaction to this lack of interest, the artists formed a group

called Equrna (named after a local Roman goddess) and with a great deal of effort succeeded in opening their own gallery in late 1984. Meanwhile, the Obalne Galerije ("The coast galleries"-an organisation that includes three exhibition spaces in Koper and Piran on the Slovene coast) after the arrival of Andrej Medved, art critic, philosopher and poet, became an important centre for new art. (One could say that at that time Koper, together with Zagreb and Beograd, represented one of the three leading Yugoslav centres for new art. It was not until the mid-eighties that Ljubljana regained its role as the leading art centre on Slovenia.) They organised numerous exhibitions with contemporary Slovene artists, exhibiting the work of interesting artists from other parts of the then Yugoslavia, as well as of important international artists.

Painting was the prevailing form of visual art in the first half of the eighties, thus "hunger for paintings" can certainly also be seen as a reaction against the "dematerialisation of the art object" in the sixties and seventies, and against the rigidity of abstract art in the seventies. A number of significant artists pursued different forms of "New Image" and "Neo expressionist" painting. In a 1941 text, Andrej Medved rightly names; Jože Slak, Živko Marušič, Andreaž Šalamun, Tugo Šušnik, Milan Erič and Metka Krašovec as the most prominent representatives of the new painting in the early eighties. It was again Medved, the most vigorous promotor of the "New Image" painting, who, in the mid-eighties, declared the crisis of this movement. Indeed the artists' initial energy seemed to be used up and they often got lost in routine and mannerism. But this didn't mean the crisis of art production in general. A number of artists-many of them influenced by the "New Image", Italian "Transavanguardia" or German "Neo-Expressionism"-now developed a mature and more personal approach. (For example, Živko Marušič, Herman Gvardjančič, Dušan Kirbiš or Zdenko Huzjan, and also some older artists, like Janež Bernik or Andrej Jemec.) The term "avtopoetike" (best translated as "personal poetics") became fashionable among art and literary critics, who used it when describing and evaluating works. (It should perhaps be noted that the "Neo-Geo" and the new American art of the mideighties had little, if any influence on art in Slovenia which traditionally has much more affinity to the more expressive and emotional periods of art than to those that emphasize, deconstructive and rational aspects.) Among these artists, the work of the painter Emerik Bernard is especially interesting. His work reached one of its highest peaks of development around 1985, at a time when he was making large, multi-layered paintings (in fact, collages) which he calls "palimpsests". These works are indeed palimpsests they are made of many layers of paint and

various materials. They are, however, rich with images (though often only hinted at) from the region of Istria (where Bernard often works) and with references to its history, landscape etc. Jože Slak is a highly ideosyncratic, totally original artist. In his ironic, witty, but often also emotional pictures, he uses all kinds of visual materials (very often Kitsch). He once described his work as "transforming shit into gold"-a description that I find particularly apt. The five leading sculptures of the first half of the decade-Lujo Vodopivec, Duba Sambolec, Matjaž Počivavšek, Mirsad Begić or Jakov Brdar-can also be named among the artists who developed a highly individual language and approach.

Another group of artists should be mentioned in this context. These artists, however, are not inspired by "New Image" and "Neo-Expressionist" models. They deal with questions of abstract art and continue to pursue the issues already raised in the seventies. But this does not mean that they simply produce unproblematic works of art, e.g. in the manner Šušnik spoke about. The issues of the high modernism (i.e. "flat" painting, the correlation between the form of the support and the inner structure of the painting, etc.) indeed represent their starting point, but they are, in a way, questioning or even deconstructing them. While critics claimed that the modernist picture consisted merely of paint applied on to the surface of the support, and was therefore simply "present" (an idea that found one of its most radical formulations in Michael Fried's term "presentness"), painters like Bojan Gorenc or Sergej Kapus (both authors of interesting essays on art) see the pictorial field as something highly problematic. Seeing is not a simple, "naturally given" process for them. On the contrary, the laws that internally organise the structure of vision are conventional ones, linked to power and ownership structures. For these artists, seeing is not a one-way process and cannot be controlled by the subject of seeing (i.e., the painter or beholder). In one of his texts Gorenc describes the moment when a painting began to return the beholder's gaze. Vision is not something we can control, we are in it, it is central to the human condition. "We are overwhelmed by vision", as Kapus puts it. Gorenc's and Kapus' paintings is, as it were, a permanent questioning of their own work. Questions about vision and seeing, about gaze, its subject and its object (often articulated in the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis are also central to the work of a partnership of two young artists, V.S.S.D. In 1986, for example, when they organised an exhibition in the ŠKUC gallery, they used the walls, ceiling and floor of the space, installed sculptures, paintings and objects, and used sound, light and costumed dancers. The visitor could therefore practically "enter the picture and become part of it. In this context, they often deal with questions of temporariness and the feasibility of the picture (e.g., sand pictures, burning paintings etc.)

Parallel to this, a quite different type of culture and art was developing the first punk concerts (in 1977) with their accompanying iconography marked the beginning of the so-called "alternative scene", which evolved into an extremely rich and vivid cultural scene in the first half of the eighties. It included music, performance and theatre, photography (e.g. Jane Štravs), fashion (e.g. the Linije sile group: Ema Kugler, Alan Hranitelj), video (e.g. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid) and the visual arts. (There were, however, few interesting literary works) These works shared a multi-media character; rock bands, for example, included performances, video screenings, and .stage settings in their concerts They published low-budget often visually interesting; "fanzins", etc Exhibitions, multi-media performances and concerts were organised in the ŠKUC Gallery, FV Club and other (often marginal) venues. In the early eighties the rock group Laibach shocked Slovene audience with their music, their name (Laibach, the German name for Ljubljana) and their appearance (they wore Nazi-like uniforms). Laibach were linked to the visual arts, through the so-called Laibach Kunst, from the very beginning. This was in fact the beginning of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), formed in 1984; an organisation uniting artists and groups who shared similar ideas and worked closely together. The core of the NSK consists of Laibach, the theatre group Red Pilot (former Sisters Scipio Nasice Theatre) and the group of visual artists, Irwin. The NSK introduced principles and modes of work totally new and alien to Slovene art: the idea of individual artistic expression and originality was replaced by the idea of group work and the "appropriation" of given visual materials, loaded with symbolism and often also with provocative political messages. This method of "appropriation", combining traditional art with the use of symbolically loaded images, was named "retrogardism". Irwin's paintings are collages which combine elements and images taken from the history of art with references to the imagery of totalitarian politics. These works therefore often have an uncanny and productive effect. There were quite different reactions to, and interpretations of the NSK's work. Some people simply accused the group of being Nazis. Left wing opinion, however, saw these works as a sort of demonstration of the way the ideology functions. This dimension is undoubtedly present in the activity of the NSK. However, in my opinion these works are much more complex than that. Their character is ambiguous; their effect is not only one of estrangement, but also of identification.

In spite of the above mentioned and some other excellent sculptures, painting was undoubtedly the prevailing form of art in the first half and

middle of the eighties. But an exhibition held in the Equrna gallery in 1988 was to change this situation

Five young artists (Marjetica Potrč, Jože Barši, Mirko Bratuša, Roman Makše and Dušan Zidar), exhibiting together with their academy professor and mentor Lujó Vodopivec, formed an extremely talented (and surprisingly mature) new generation. As a result of this, and of some later exhibitions (at least Rene Rusjan should also be mentioned in this context), "young Slovene sculpture" has turned out to be one of the most outstanding and interesting phenomena of the late eighties and early nineties. Although each of the artists mentioned has an easily recognisable personal style, some issues are common to the whole generation. We could, in brief, say that they deal with the relationships between object, subject and space, "deconstructing" the model of the linear perspectival space (or even the Euclidian concept of space in general) as well as the idea of the object as something that is "given" to the beholder. Marjetica Potrč, perhaps the leading figure of this generation, always builds her sculpture in such a way that the distinction between the two sides of the sculpture becomes evident. Sometimes she even uses "theatrical" effects that help to deconstruct our assumptions about objects, space and our own position. For example, when we view the sculpture from one side, we form certain expectations about how the other side should look. When we walk around the work, we see that the other side is completely different from what we expected. Thus, instead of grasping the object as a whole, as a momentary, timeless phenomena, we radically experience its unwholeness. (We can never experience the whole of the sculpture. As we move forward to see the not-yet-seen, at the same time we lose what we already possessed.). We also sense its temporality (to understand the structure of the work, or simply to see it, we have to move around it).

Similarly, in the younger generation painters' work (Zmago Lenardić, Tadej Pogačar, Marko Tušek, and others) we may trace a process of deconstructing the pictorial field. In their approach the seemingly homogeneous pictorial field appears to be built up out of differences. And if the modernist painters and critics understood the flat paint on the support as the ultimate and irreducible reality, these artists construct perplexing spatial systems on their canvases, showing that there is no ultimate "substance" to be found. By applying the principles of collage, building the picture with discrete elements, cutting into its "flesh", or incorporating objects into it, etc., they extend the concept of the picture that often turns it into an installation in space.