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**Slovene Art of the Nineties – Some
Remarks**

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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.

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Slovene Art of the Nineties - Some Remarks

It seems that in a second half of this century, each decade (intuitively, this seems somehow to be the proper division of time and artistic movements within it) has been said to show "radical diversity" as its only unifying factor. To say that a radical diversity of art practices is characteristic of the Art of Nineties, as we see it today (that is, directly and without historical distance) is not to say very much. The real question is whether we can nevertheless discern certain basic forces, of the "spirit" or "interest" of the time among the constellation of heterogeneous elements, whether we can approach the point at which the cross-fertilisation of local and global trends, traditions, modes of thought, forms and interests establishes what we could call the "Slovene art of the nineties". If I try to imagine the complex formation which defines "Slovene art of the nineties", above all I find that I cannot comprehend it as an immobile condition or solid configuration, not even as something independent and sealed off; rather, I can grasp it only through processes, I metamorphoses and breaks with earlier practices and ideas. In fact, many of the perspectives which determine the current situation in art have become clearer and 'explicit in the ten years since around 1985, and in some sense, many extend even further back. The mid-eighties, the period in which many decisive aspects of current practices were thus established, was a kind of crisis period. Two basic tendencies which had previously dominated the dynamics of Slovene fine arts, and its visual culture generally, began to show signs of exhaustion and decreased vivacity and occasionally drifted into mannerism; I refer to the so-called New Image (i.e. the Slovene version of the "trans-avant-garde", and "neo-expressionism") and the "alternative scene". This

concerned mainly the question of reaching beyond the relatively narrow and confined space with its specific determinants and Imitations, the need to move away from the repetitive production of merely "local "iconography and "images" towards a relevant artistic practice. The "alternative scene" carried out this shift through some of its most vital links, such as Neue Slowenische Kunst, Marko Kovačič, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid. The New Image crisis was somewhat different. It also had to do with an exhibition of a phenomenon that had been embraced-"by a large number of Slovenia's major artists, an exhaustion which a few individuals, strong artistic figures overcome. (For example, Dušan Kirbiš, who, proceeding from experience of neo-expressionist painting, developed the problematics of painting in an era distrustful of the idea or original painting or direct brushstrokes). Yet underlying these more or less obvious shifts was another transition that was more crucial to the art practice of the nineties, namely, the "deconstruction" of what we could perhaps call the real objective nature of the artistic work. Behind the formal and iconographic characteristics of the "trans-avant-garde", Slovene art of the New Image was still to a postulate established in the mid-seventies when (in the context of "fundamental" and "analytical" abstract art) the abstract tradition, particularly American, was submitted to a re-evaluation. The postulate concerned the identity of the painting with its material basis or the painting's identity with itself. Its significance was so long-term and profound because Slovene artists on the whole did not comprehend it as a notion of the sheer materiality of the work, but rather interpreted it through ontological and existential categories. The flat substrate to which colour is applied is something which ultimately evades our understanding and interpretation; through its opacity and incomprehensibility it asserts its own autonomous and independent existence. The specific ontological, existential and even ethical position thus spoke through the requirement that the painting should be flat, confined within the borders of the base, and so on. Even New Image art could therefore rely on this postulate. Despite its materiality, the painting could have multiple meanings and admit of infinite interpretations, as is after all true of reality itself. Yet the extreme horizon of the observer's experience was always the opaque, inexplicable material presence of the painting, the mere-being manifested in Malevich's black square. The "deconstruction" of the material base of the painting thus signified more than just a change in the formal determinants of the painting; it implied a different conception of reality. When non-materiality entered the very nucleus of material presence, when in the light of "digital ontology" this material phenomenality was purely the function of an abstract pattern, material presence could simply no longer serve as the extreme existential horizon in experiencing the work. This deconstruction was carried out by,

for example, a group of sculptors who emerged in the second half of the eighties, namely Jože Barši, Mirko Bratuša, Marjetica Potrč and others. These artists consciously abided by certain modernist requirements, such as "fidelity to the material" and the "material presence of the work", but in such a way as to undermine the obviousness of this "presence" and raise the question of how materiality in fact exists. Marjetica Potrč Particularly exploited the fact that we can never simultaneously see both sides of her wall sculpture and thus radicalised the inevitable incompleteness of our experience of objects, since we apprehend them as "wholes" only in the form of temporal sequences of fragments. The fragmentariness of the object is equivalent to the fragmentariness of the observer himself, whose himself corporeal and therefore does not only see, but can also be seen. Jože Barši's strategy was somewhat different; he portrayed slight shifts in reality, small differences, a play on image and reality which subvert the obviousness of our comprehension of reality and its encoding. Space and time, subject and object, observer and observed - in the space enclosed by these sculptors, all such relationships determine each other mutually and interact to form a never complete, always fragmented space, an environment in which the observer can no longer maintain a distance because he can only be an "inside observer". In a similar way several painters, among them Tadej Pogačar, while apparently returning to the formal model of high modernism, e.g. Art Formalin fact undid the homogeneity and uncontradictoriness of "paint-on-support". They exploited, for example, a cut in the pictorial field in order to problematise the synthetic aspect of the painting (what in fact unites the separate heterogeneous elements in the painting?), or else by layering elements on the canvas, they demonstrated the sheer impossibility of determining the ultimate material reality of the painting, since it is ever elusive. Deconstructing the material basis of the art work therefore led to different ontological determinants. The integrality and the irreducibility of objects are an illusion. The work emerges from the interactive tensions of situations and functions. This tension does not recognise the outside observer, but the observer, being necessarily on the inside, consistently affects the environment he is observing. Indeed, he is part of it and therefore does not control it but is caught within it. Hence the observer and his environment can only ever be open, temporal, "incomplete". The transition from the individual object in which this kind of situation is implicitly present to a work which actually forms such an environment is, of course, a logical one. The consequences go even further: in the light of such a paradigm any confinement to traditional media, forms and materials is senseless. This kind of experience was especially radically present in the integral "space paintings by the V S.S.D.group. (The notion of

Gesamtkunstwerk, already radically developed in their first "space paintings", and the crucial role played in it by the image clearly advent to the link between V.S.S.D. and the "alternative scene".) In these works, the observer enters infinitely fragmented spaces in which diverse materials, media and techniques interact. Recognisable images or solid structures constantly emerge from this chaotic mesh, only to dissolve once more into fragments. The fragile visual structure of these works corresponds to their real physical fragility; these are spaces in which the observer finds enjoyment, but he is nevertheless lost, endangered even, since the "tools" with which he ordinarily organises and interprets the world as it were fall apart. The activities of Pogačar's P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum can also be understood as, among other things, thematising the transition from painting as the production of materially founded images to the construction of environments, environments which in Pogačar's case comprise not only physical elements (from his own paintings, through ready-mades to objects from the collections of host institutions), but also contexts, hints, quotations, intimated, yet unformatted possibilities of interpretation, etc. Because these deconstructions were initially undertaken in the context of more or less radically comprehended modernist postulates, it is logical that these works, in spite of their "disjointedness" and "incompleteness", were often highly abstract in the sense that they placed the observer in a very concrete and intense situation, but one that seemed somehow purged of all local, historical another accidents, a situation that touched upon the "essential". Terms such as "view", "body" or "observer" here operated very generally and abstractly. The work of Mirko Bratuša, who in fact problematised the hypothetical "abstract" validity of the media and procedures of modern tradition, was something of an exception in this respect. Bratuša incorporated materials and techniques taken from rural areas into his art; the processuality of traditional art materials was replaced in his case with the processuality of materials such as a rotting tree trunk or wine, while instead of "neutral" technique she adopted and mastered traditional crafts. This logically led him to abandon the modernist, even formalist framework and to begin building polysemantic figures and wholes which paradoxically synthesise the rural world with its traditional techniques and the postmodern world of simulation, digitalisation and mass televisual imagery.) On the other hand, the experience of the image as an active thing, the image in its manipulation and its manipulative power, social determination and functionality, was radically developed in another important art field: the vigorous "non-institutional" "multimedia art or the "alternative scene", as it came to be known. The special status of the image in this regard is adverted to in the very expression "image", which became established here not only as a term for exterior personal appearance, but as

a rather general term for the overall external effect. There is an essential difference between the "image" of the eighties and, for example, the notions of exterior appearance from the sixties and seventies. While unconventional attire and behaviour were ways of expressing one's "real essence", which is otherwise concealed and suppressed by coercive social conventions, "image" in the eighties meant something put on in order to achieve an envisaged effect. There is therefore a crucial distance between the "image" and its bearer. "Image" was a key idea in the alternative culture of the eighties and indicated that appearance was conceived as a means of manipulation, as a way of asserting real power and hence also as a battlefield on which to resist and undermine power by subverting visual codes (i.e. connecting socialist and Nazi iconography), aggressively asserting the forbidden and suppressed, etc. (These strategies of perversion were not aimed solely against the codes of socialist system, although this was indeed its cost-conscious expression because of its provocativeness, as in the association of socialist and Nazi symbols and images; this became clearer after the collapse of socialism. At least in the work of the strongest representatives of the "alternative scene" one can also find an ironisation and perversion of Western ideology, for example the idea of freedom, which links modernist painting, or the free market and in fact serves real political, economic and even military power.) The image could in no way remain innocent and direct, nor could it continue to be original (moreover, the "directness" and "originality" of modernist paintings in this context were seen, for example, as something ideology could exploit directly for its own objectives). The "alternative scene" thus consciously and eclectically appropriated, combined, transformed and processed images. In this respect it was closely related to the notion of postmodernism as art that refers to other art, yet it differed from it in its accentuated perversion of the ideological function of the image, its acts of traumatising based on subverting self-evident (that is, ideological) codes. From the very outset the Irwin group radically renounced some of modern artist's basic values, such as individuality, innovation and originality; they substituted the principle of avant-garde with the principle of "retro-garde" or "retro-avant-garde" (and announced radical eclecticism and the principle of collective work as their points of departure. (It is in the strict system of the multi-media group or movement Neue Slowenische Kunst, or NSK, that collectivity - even formalised organisation - are most clearly evident. Recently, this movement has transubstantiated into the NSK State, which possesses all the attributes of a real state from passports and postage stamps to embassies and consulates, presented as the media events organised by the NSK in various places; however, it does not possess a territory of its own - it is therefore a "state in time, not space"). This

paradoxically led to the intensification and condensation of the iconographic load of their art. In the new context, the heterogeneous imagery used in paintings by the Irwin group takes on surprising iconographic extensions, the ideas and images which somehow spirally "circle" around the group as if in some particle accelerator become ever denser and more complex. Besides its radical thematization of the image the "alternative" scene" was important to the art of nineties in another respect: the notion of multimedia art, or even the'. "Gesamtkunstwerk". Very rarely were individual art forms practised in isolation', rock concerts incorporated performances, scenography and video screenings, music was virtually a compulsory element at art exhibitions, and so on. The work of Marko Kovačič, in which art in the narrow sense (sculpture, painting, etc.) is linked to installations, video, scenography and performance, is very characteristic of this. To be sure, this is no Baroque Gesamtkunstwerk which might reveal a unified rationale behind all its diverse decoration. This multimedia, space, in all its internal connections and totality is fragmented and evasive; it can be understood as a response to the flexible, evasive, sensational, yet at the same time manipulated and managed structure of the media-age world. It would be wrong, however, to view the idea of the "Gesamtkunstwerk" here only in terms of resistance and struggle. The "alternative scene" (and even more the art of the nineties) did not know revolutionary asceticism; on the contrary, the art works it produced were always also spaces for enjoyment which the perversive function only enhanced. The nineties are heavily based on the paradigms created by these shifts. The space of these works is integral yet "unwhole", evasive and interactive. They are replete with images and their fragments, with historical and personal allusions, with perversions and deconstructions, with emotion and irony. It is a space that is familiar with the experience of manipulation, as well as the experience of telematics and the immaterial. Yet it is also defined by experiences which were foreign to the art of the eighties. Grand, broadly posed themes, from the problem of the body in space to that of resistance to political power, have been replaced by diminutive personal narratives and histories; the works often compel the observer to come closer, to a proximity which recalls their habitual environments: living rooms, kitchens, streets and shops. And in this proximity the works tell of marginal histories, ironic shifts, challenged and suppressed desires. Marjetica Potrč, for example, draws the observer into all kind of urban structure, into spaces of intertwining, recognisable, sometimes even theatrical city backdrops with a personal experience of territory, anonymity and amorphousness which defines today's urban structure, into which surprising elements are introduced (such as smells, sounds or a Baroque figure). Marko Kovačič places the observer in a living

room and stages theatre for an audience of one in old televisions, theatre in which grand themes (ideology) power, history) are turned into intimate emotional experiences, while small figures perform grand plays. Petra Varl Simončič, on the other hand, places the observer in a kitchen, a space which is in fact neither an exhibition space nor a real domestic environment, but which has become one of the scenes for the stories she weaves and develops in her work. Yet this by no means signifies a withdrawal into comfortable privacy. Rather, it speaks of a world in which the difference between the private and the public, between the living room and the forum, and thus between the marginal and the world-historical, is no longer clear. Moreover, another characteristic of these works is the dimension of the active dialogic relationship in which "grand" and "little" stories are linked, exchanged and transformed. The artwork has thus become a field in which the observer can seek his own path and perhaps create a work of his or her own. Instead of fundamental issues, these works can rely on idea, memory, caprice or a tiny drawing. The object is somehow no longer dignified, timeless or heroic. It has become ironic, fun or anxious, "unheimlich". It provokes and perverts desires, stages and annihilates fears. It can internalise personal obsessions or become lost in anonymity. The artist can operate in the world of common material reality, modify, manipulate, copy or simulate it, play with it or incorporate incompatible elements into it while not having to shoulder the burden of all history and of Being itself. The collection of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of contemporary Art is, by nature and structure, exceptional, which you shall shortly see for yourselves. Its strength and uniqueness lie in the strategy of the fictional and the temporary, and its clear symbolic structure makes its effect convincing. There can be no art without museums, and in times of ecological and social collapse, the artist must become the agent by which new constructs and models are established. It is because of this that we are witness to the rise of a continuing stream of new "utopian territories", social structures and "institutions", since art today is more isolated than it has ever been. The artists contributing to this collection are deeply aware of this.