23

Zagreb as the Location of the "New Tendencies" International Art Movement (1961–73)

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Within the narrative of life in the former Communist Bloc, socialist Yugoslavia was (and still is) always represented as "something else," as a country with a relatively liberal lifestyle, open borders, free circulation of people, and an intensive cultural exchange with the world. Yugoslavia's "authentic path to socialism"—a political project produced by a complex combination of historical circumstances marking the beginning of the Cold War—unquestionably belonged within the framework of communist ideology, but its approach was one of greater flexibility and an understanding of socialism as an essentially modern, experimental social model that has to be constantly adapted to the "level of self-awareness of the working class." It was a state of permanent transition that critically marked life in socialist Yugoslavia and resulted in quite a specific historical experience of totalitarianism that was hard to compare—at least at the level of human freedoms and freedom of expression—with the experiences of the communist countries of the Western Bloc. However, such a radical break with Soviet political practice certainly would not have happened without the experience of the Second World War, when the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP) organized and waged a war against fascism and al-

most single-handedly liberated most of southeast Europe. Although an obedient member of the postwar "communist brotherhood," it could not accept just partial independence, and in 1948 the YCP was punished by being excluded from the international Communist Information Bureau. Almost immediately, the YCP started to suffer numerous, harsh, and pointless attacks by the USSR and other European communist parties that turned at the beginning of 1949 into a raging anti-Yugoslav campaign, reaching its culmination at the World Congress for Peace in Warsaw in 1950.[1] Rather restrained in its previous reactions to such events, the YCP decided to respond and to organize a countermeeting, the International Conference for the Defense of Peace, which was due to take place in Zagreb in 1952. By deciding to invite the most prominent left-oriented European artists, writers and cultural activists who were not members of pro-Soviet communist parties—Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, for example—the YCP wanted to stress the profound difference between Yugoslav and Soviet political choices and to demonstrate a much broader and more tolerant approach to different positions on the European left. Apart from the translation of Sartre's works, preparations for the conference also included the exhibition of *French Modern Art* arranged with the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The international press coverage and the success of the exhibition—that was presented in the capitals of all the Yugoslav republics—transformed a politically motivated cultural event into a project of almost symbolic meaning, marking the beginning of the new era in official cultural policy. As early as the end of 1953, the Yugoslav government established a federal commission for "international cultural exchange," which started to organize numerous traveling exhibitions of Yugoslav art in Latin America, Europe, Asia, and countries of the Western Bloc (after 1956), presentations of Yugoslav artists at major international exhibitions, and presentations of European modern art in Yugoslavia. Up to the end of the 1950s, there were at least twenty major surveys of Italian, French, Swedish, German, and American modern art presented in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, accompanied from 1956 by numerous exhibitions based on direct exchanges between Yugoslav and foreign museums or on private con-

1 It seems that for Yugoslav artists and intellectuals, most painful was the fact that these attacks brought together two antifascist icons of Europe—Pablo Picasso and Paul Eluard. For more on the Yugoslav perception of the Congress, see Krsto Hegedušić, "Dva Jacques Loius Davida i mi," *Republika* 7/10 (October 1951): 765.

tacts; this soon became normal cultural practice, resulting in much more accurate information about the situation on the international art scene.

The dynamics and intensity of Yugoslav engagement in international politics (participation in the Non-Aligned Movement) resulted at the beginning of the 1960s in another very important political decision. In 1960, all Yugoslav citizens received their passports and were free to travel wherever they wanted and import whichever "cultural products" they wanted—books, magazines, records—tax-free. More information generated different perceptions of art and a demand for different types of cultural production, to which federal and local authorities responded with a number of international cultural manifestations, initiated between 1961 and 1963, which enlivened the Yugoslav cultural scene. The intention of these manifestations was to stimulate collaboration with foreign artists and to prove the self-awareness and ability of Yugoslav society to establish creative interchanges with the international art scene without losing its historical and ideological perspective. Thereby, at the music biennial (launched in 1961), the Croatian/Yugoslav public had an opportunity to hear and see the performances of John Cage, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, Dieter Schnebel, Pierre Schaeffer, Ann Halprin and Dancers' Workshop Company, and a lot of other artists from all over the world. In addition to the New Tendencies exhibitions in Zagreb, it was possible to attend public lectures by Umberto Ecco, Abraham Moles, Max Bense, Giulio Carlo Argan, Gillo Dorfles, or Filiberto Menna. However, if you were not particularly interested in the visual arts you could always visit the island of Korčula, enroll at the Korčula Summer School of Philosophy (from 1964 to 1974) and listen to lectures by Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, or Henri Lefebvre, as well as to a number of other West and East European and Yugoslav philosophers, sharing the values of the European New Left. If we add to the list the Genre Experimental Film Festival (GEFF, launched in 1963) that was presenting impressive international selections of contemporary filmmakers, translations of contemporary literature and philosophy,[2] the eruption of rock music and the expansion of mass media and popular culture, we get a

2 The first translations of Lefebvre's works were published in Yugoslavia in 1958; up until the mid-1960s almost everything Erich Fromm had written was also published. Benjamin's essays appeared in specialized magazines as early as 1965, and his *Illuminations* were published in 1974, three years after the first translations of Althusser's works.

general outline of the intense process of "opening" that had far-reaching cultural and psycho-social consequences.

The situation on the Croatian art scene at the time was much like in other European countries—the mainstream was dominated by numerous variations of modernist abstraction, while in its margins there were the activities of the art group Gorgona, a member of the international Fluxus network, as well as the remnants of geometric abstraction still highly influential in the field of graphic design. Each of these art phenomena were at least partially connected to the work of Radoslav Putar, Mića Bašičević, and Božo Bek, a team of agile, well-informed art critics who ran the Zagreb City Gallery and were interested in new art practices. Thanks to their activities, at the beginning of the 1960s Zagreb became a lively city of arts providing a proper framework for yet another art phenomenon that already existed, but in the form of numerous, unconnected individual art practices scattered around the globe. The initial impulse to bring them together came from the young Brazilian painter Alvin Mavignier (who lived in Germany at the time) and was the outcome of his encounter with the Croatian art critic Matko Meštrović, who had also had a rather negative impression of the Thirtieth Venice Biennale, where they first met, and who shared the artist's opinion that such an "apotheosis" of gestural abstraction deserved a proper response.[3] Accepting Mavignier's initiative, Zagreb City Gallery organized a survey of art practices from the margins of the European mainstream, that—in contrast to the social indifference of modernist abstraction—were advocating an experimental, rational approach to art, as well as an active and socially engaged relation to existential reality. The gallery provided space and the appropriate technical conditions, while Mavignier selected the works of art and made preliminary arrangements with foreign artists who took part in the exhibition entitled *New Tendencies*, held in August 1961 in Zagreb.[4] The common ground of art presented at the exhibition was an exceptionally critical relation to high modernist abstraction expressed through a multiplicity of themes and

3 The Grand Awards of the Thirtieth Venice Biennale were given to Jean Fautrier and Hans Hartung; see Renato Boschetto, ed., *30. Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice: Longo & Zoppelli, 1960).

4 The twenty-eight artists present at the first exhibition of New Tendencies included Piero Manzoni, Maurizio Castellani, Alberto Massironi, Alberto Biasi, Gruppo N, Getulio Alviani, and Piero Dorazio (Italy); Alvin Mavignier, Günter Üecker, Otto Piene, and Heinz Mack (Germany); Andreas Christen and Karl Gestner (Switzerland); Robert Cruz-Diez and Julio Le Parc (Argentina); Hugo Rodolfo da Marco (Venezuela); Ivan Picelj, Vjenceslav Richter, and Julije Knifer (Croatia); and François Morellet (France).

subjects and in rather disparate ways: from neoconstructivist, concrete, and object art, to tautological and monochromatic painting and system-oriented types of visual research. The outcome of the exhibition was a spontaneously organized artistic international network that continued to be operative well into the following year, when a larger group of artists exhibiting in Zagreb met again in the Parisian studio of the art group GRAV and came to the conclusion that they supported the idea of further collaboration, joint research, and joint presentation of their works. Following this decision they all appeared at the *NT2* exhibition, which was again held in Zagreb City Gallery in August 1963, this time giving the impression of an already defined international art movement. A number of discussions that were going on simultaneously with the exhibition defined the basic outlines of the future program of New Tendencies and generated a new concept of art which fitted into the theoretical framework of the movement. According to the general conclusion of these discussions, art had to be understood as a rational, experimental activity rejecting any type of subjectivism, individualism, or romanticism, encouraging the use of new media and new technologies, requiring closer ties between art and "material production," insisting on the measurability of the aesthetic effect and on the complete abandonment of aesthetic judgment. Bringing a rational model of art to the very edge of self-abnegation and its subsequent reestablishment within the normative framework of science, *NT2* established theoretically and aesthetically rather rigid, socially engaged lines of future action, which opened a range of complex questions regarding its relation to society. Firmly believing that rational, technologically sustained industrial production of art objects could annihilate the fetishist and socially exclusive character of the work of art as it was defined by a hegemonic conception of high modernist abstraction, the ideologists of New Tendencies expected—as did all the avant-garde movements before them—that it would affect not only social relations within the world of art, but social relations at all levels of existential practice. However, the products of "new art for the new technological age" that were supposed to radically transform our living environment and refine our perception of reality required clarity of vision, which has to be trained and brought to human consciousness by the very quality of art objects produced by the members of New Tendencies, or as it was formulated by Matko Meštrović in his retrospective assessments of the move-

ment: "I believed the artists' emphasis on the purely visual would strengthen the perceptive capability of the viewer, allowing the development of a mental attitude which will permit him to perceive reality with greater clarity, and more lucid awareness of its meanings. And above all the opportunity which it offers to act."[5] The heroism surrounding Meštrović's vision—deeply incorporated in the program outlines of New Tendencies and insisting on strong interrelations between art and modern society—was rather close to the impetus of historical avant-garde and could be positioned on the line of continuity of productivist tradition. However, the very process through which it was defined revealed a range of insurmountable differences among the members of the movement, announcing its slow disintegration. The transposition of interest from artistic to critical and theoretical discourse, and the glorification of technology, science, and rational views on art estranged from New Tendencies the artists who were engaged with the spiritual origins of modernism, and in 1963 the poetic framework of art produced within the movement became rather narrow. Some sixty-two artists and art groups from twelve countries and two continents (Europe and Latin America) exhibited at *NT2*, but the group of artists presented in Zagreb in 1961 was rather small and included only those artists who were ready to accept a strictly rational notion of art, joined for the first time by members of the French group GRAV, the Italian Gruppo "T" and the Spanish Equipo 57.

However, by 1965 when the third New Tendencies exhibition was supposed to take place, the cultural, political, and social context had changed. An international art movement that had initially gathered artists advocating a type of artistic expression in the margins of the European art scene at the beginning of the 1960s moved unexpectedly into the mainstream. Awards, exhibitions, and participation in the major art shows (*Oltre l'informale*, San Marino, 1963; *Nouvelle Tendance*, Musée d'Arts Decoratifs, Paris, 1964; Thirty-second Venice Biennale, 1964[6]) resulted in the accelerated commodification and musealization of New Tendencies. This became even more obvious after the exhibition *Responsive Eye* (New York, MOMA, 1965), which suc-

5 Matko Meštrović, "Computer and Visual Research—Ways of Thinking and Scope of Acting," in *Dispersion of Meaning: The Fading out of the Doctrinaire World?* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 18.

6 At the Twenty-third Venice Biennale, Julo le Parc won the Grand Biennale Award in the category of painting. As his work did not match any traditional art category, the Biennale jury had to abolish all categories, which were never applied again.

Figure 23.1.
Ivan Picelj, exhibition poster for *New Tendencies 2*, Zagreb, 1963.
Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb.

cessfully neutralized the ideological timber of the movement and equalized the ideologically and socially motivated optical research of European artists with purely decorative American Pop art.

The weakening of ideational coherence and the trivialization of previous achievements and problems in the social perception of New Tendencies became the only topics of the third exhibition, entitled *New Tendency 3*, held in Zagreb in August 1965[7] following the concept defined by the Italian artist Enzo Mari. However, the intended outcome of his concept—"ideological concentration and unity of objectives" based on the synthesis of art, science and technology and a shared view of art as a rational, experimental, collective activity firmly integrated in modern industrial society—was not justified by the art production itself. The new membership of the movement, increasing almost daily, did not make any significant contribution to the advancement of its working procedures, while the older members of New Tendencies "have already exhausted all of their initial enthusiasm," and according to Alberta Biasi, "became either the eclectics or plain craftsmen."[8] A range of mediocre works from *New Tendency 3* clearly pointed to the fact that New Tendencies, as modernist abstraction before it, was entering a period of crisis, which seriously undermined the socially progressive program orientation of the movement, as well as its intention to take the avant-garde position in European art.

Considering this uncontested crisis, the next exhibition, *Tendencies 4*, held at various locations in Zagreb from May to September 1969, made a radical turn toward a completely new field of visual research—toward new electronic media (television, computers, video, etc.) and an examination of the phenomenon of mass communication. At the time, computer technology required an experimental, structured, and collaborative approach, which—when conveyed in the field of visual research—was in profound harmony with the ideological orientation of the movement and almost succeeded in returning New Tendencies to their enthusiastic beginnings. Furthermore, after failed attempts to give concrete form to a constructivist utopia using the

7 At the *New Tendency 3* exhibition, there were 108 artists from eighteen countries and three continents. In addition to fourteen American artists, there were also numerous artists from the USSR (the art group Dvizenie), the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary.

8 Alberto Biasis's comment on *New Tendency 3*, quoted in Ješa Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove tendencije* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000), 116.

Figure 23.2.
View of the exhibition *Tendencies 4*, Gallery of Contemporary Art. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

technological, scientific, and cognitive possibilities of modern society, the interest for new electronic media managed to define a completely new utopian horizon of visual arts, whose ideational (and ideological) framework rested on the conviction that the technology of visual mass communication could be the instrument of positive social changes. The culmination of the events that belonged to the process of preparation for the fourth New Tendencies exhibition was an international seminar, "Computers and Visual Research," which began in Zagreb on 3 August 1968, just one day after the opening of the famous London exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity*. However, to demonstrate the possibilities of computer technology, the organizers of the Zagreb seminar also prepared a small exhibition of computer graphics and computer-aided works of art that were—as opposed to the intention of the London exhibition—looking for the possibility to "bridge computer art with social and political implications, as well as with new philosophical and aesthetical theories on Information aesthetics."[9] The seminar and exhibition induced an extraordinary and unexpected outburst of creative energies and generated a number of important discussions on a broad range of subjects—from human–machine "interaction" and the philosophical and social implications of

9 Christoph Klütsch, "The Summer of 1968 in London and Zagreb: Starting or End Point for Computer Art?" *Creativity & Cognition* (2005): 109.

the imminent transfer from industrial to information-based society, to the still limited contribution of computer technology to the democratization of mass communication and the realization of artistic ideas and concepts.

Long and serious preparations resulted in an exhibition that, despite a relatively small number of participants[10] and an equally modest quantity of works of art, gave a theoretically convincing and methodologically comprehensive survey of a (short) history of art in new media. Another very important result of the events surrounding Tendencies 4 was a magazine—*bit international*—which was the first professional publication in the Yugoslav cultural space strictly dedicated to the theory of art and theory of mass media, and one of the earliest European magazines of its kind launched at the end of 1968. *bit international* almost immediately acquired a broad network of contributors writing on information aesthetics (Max Bense and Abraham Moles), on cyber aesthetics (Herbert Franke[11] and Evan Harris Walker) on participative and generative aesthetics (Michael Noll, Frieder Neke, Georg Nees, and Kurd Asleben) and a number of other topics concerning the interrelation of art and media of mass communication, producing the articles that lay the theoretical foundation of the phenomenon that would be defined only thirty years later as new media art.

The fifth and last exhibition of New Tendencies, held in Zagreb in June and July 1973, established by its very title—*Tendencies 5*—a clear distance to the principle of "ideological concentration and unique objectives" and to the very idea of the art movement. In addition to the section "Computers and Visual Research," there was also—presented for the first time in Yugoslavia at an exhibition of such magnitude—an international selection of conceptual art, signifying the final break with the ideology of high modernism to which New Tendencies firmly belonged. Although it was cultural phenomena that attracted to Zagreb a really impressive number of foreign artists, New Tendencies was not met with a particularly positive response on the local art scene, possibly because of its initial formal and poetical heterogeneity, elitism,

10 At *Tendencies 4* there were 102 artists from twelve countries, but only 61 of them exhibited within the section "Computers and Visual Research," while the others were included in the small retrospective of the movement or in the section *Typoezija*/Typoetry/, curated by Željka Čorak, Želimir Koščević, and Biljana Tomić.

11 In 1970, Herbert Franke curated the exhibition *Art and Technology* at the Thirty-fifth Venice Biennale, proving that as early as the 1960s, computer technology was yet another social phenomenon that radically undermined the modernist notion of art.

uncontested exclusivity, and the preponderance of theoretical explanations that were not always in line with actual art practice. From the perspective of the international art scene, interest in New Tendencies ceased after 1965, and was renewed only recently, boosted by the interest in the history of new media art and in Zagreb which, although not the only location of New Tendencies, certainly was the one that provided this international art movement with a functional institutional framework and a sense of continuity.