

‘A Taster of Political Insult’: The Case of Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune, 1968-71

In the former Yugoslavia, Students' Cultural Centres played host to what came to be known as the ‘New Art Practice’, fostered under the system of ‘socialist self-management’.¹ Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune, founded in 1954 and located in the largest city of the multinational, Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, represented one such site where the ‘New Art’ crossed with social engagement. During the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, it became a lively zone of collaboration between writers and artists from the entire territory of Yugoslavia, with editorial boards that were in several ways decisive for the country’s alternative cultural scene. At this time, the clustering of cultural phenomena that took place in the city was unparalleled in the rest of Yugoslavia, not only in the field of visual arts, but also literature, and the film production of the city’s notorious Neoplanta film company.

This paper focuses on a specific episode in the history of the Youth Tribune, when it came into conflict with municipal socio-political organisations, which sought to ensure the space’s basic function remained education and discipline. It follows the centre’s increased bureaucratisation – the resistance to it, and the coercive consequences – along with the ultimate dilution of radical practices in Novi Sad, which forced its key players to appeal to an ‘Invisible Art’. Though Yugoslavia is frequently characterised as a country in which all were ‘at least verbally encouraged to participate in public debate’, considering the important, and often overlooked, case of the Youth Tribune reveals the consequences of a direct confrontation with the city’s cultural apparatus at a moment marked by the reaffirmation of

¹ I am grateful to Branka Ćurčić, Kuda.org and Slavko Bogdanović, who offered their valuable insights and provided me with much of the archival material featured in this text; The term ‘New Art Practice’ refers to the neo-avant-garde scene that emerged in several of Yugoslavia’s republican capitals from the mid-1960s. Its first adequate and timely appraisal was the the landmark ‘New Art Practice’ exhibition of 1978, organised by Zagreb’s Gallery of Contemporary Art. The show’s supporting publication consisted of a series of introductory essays written by key critics associated with their local art scenes, along with extensive photographic documentation and biographies, contributed by artists affiliated with the phenomenon. For further information, refer to Marijan Susovski (ed.), *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978*, Zagreb, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1978

party control and the brief reinstating of central authority.² It represents a vital precursor to the struggles experienced by alternative artists in Yugoslavia, who sought an autonomous form of activity within the framework of ‘self-managing’ relations, directed against the prevailing cultural bureaucracy, which in turn fought for the power to appropriate such freedoms.

Translating the ‘New Art’

After being expelled from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948, Yugoslavia began to pursue a political path in staunch opposition to both the liberal West and the statist socialism of the Soviet Union. The most important outcome of the break was an introduction of forms of self-management: envisioned, in its broadest possible sense, as a system that would grant workers the autonomy to manage their own factories and enterprises, in order to work towards ‘a society without a state, classes or parties.’³ In the cultural sphere, self-management would, according to the 1958 *Programme of the League of Communist of Yugoslavia* (LCY), enact the ‘liberation of educational, scientific, artistic and cultural life from administrative intrusion.’⁴

Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune was founded during this modest democratisation of Yugoslavia, which marked a shift from dogmatic socialism to ‘self-managing democracy.’ Established in 1954 as part of the People’s University, it was envisaged as a cultural catalyst for free speech on contemporary socio-political issues. Editor-in-chief from 1968-71, Judita Šalgo defined the Tribune’s dominant aims as accessibility and the cultivation of ‘an

² Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State That Withered Away*, Purdue University Press, Lafayette, Indiana, 2008, p 226

³ *Seventh Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia*, (Ljubljana, 1958), translated in Prelom Kolektiv (ed.), *SKC and Political Practices in Post-Yugoslav Art*, Museum of Yugoslav History, Belgrade, 2008, p 63

⁴ Ibid

atmosphere of spontaneous discussion and thought'.⁵ Above all she maintained that the organisation of the Tribune should not just serve as entertainment to the youth – that the standard of its programmes should never be disputed through the position of 'certain mass social structures, groups, local interests or the so-called interest of the youth.'⁶ Only by 'overcoming local surroundings' would the Youth Tribune be able to commit itself to an invigorating dialogue with the public.⁷

If the fulfilment of remaining 'open' rested on an expanded, intercultural dialogue, it was the Tribune's editorial boards that facilitated a lively collaboration between writers and artists from the entire territory of Yugoslavia. The centre's framework included two editorial offices: *Polja* (Fields) Magazine for Art and Literature, inaugurated in 1955, and *Új Symposion* (New Symposium), magazine for culture, art and politics in Hungarian, since 1965. Publishing and translating works of both Serbian and Hungarian historical avant-gardes, as well as the contemporary proponents of new writing and art from Yugoslavia's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic space, the Tribune's editorials enabled a cross-fertilisation of dialogue.

Another important contributor to the city's cultural scene was *Index, Magazine of the Student's Association of Vojvodina*, published since 1957. Though only a student newspaper, *Index* was decisive for the Yugoslav alternative art scene, gathering and publishing some of the most important names in the country's intellectual and artistic scenes. It also became a platform for the activities of Grupa KÔD – an art group established around the Youth Tribune in April 1970 by Slobodan Tišma, Janež Kocijančič, Mirko Radojičić (then editor of *Index*'s culture section), Miroslav Mandić, Branko Andrić and Slavko Bogdanović.

⁵ Judita Šalgo, 'neka pitanja tribine mladih I njenog "parket salona"' ('Some Questions regarding the Youth Tribune and its "Parquet Salon"'), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 4 April 1970, p 3; All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Judita Šalgo, 'tribina mladih: otvorena – zatvorena' (Youth Tribune: Open – Closed'), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 21 October 1970, p 7

⁷ Ibid

Consisting of students from the city's university, that came together from a variety of disciplines (mostly Literature), the group endeavoured to remove art from its consecrated pedestal, favouring 'direct communication'.⁸ The name of the group itself stood as a metaphor for its activities – a 'code' being a system of signs which enables communication, and carries messages from one system to another. Significantly, this group was acting from inside an 'official' youth state institution – it was only through the financial assistance of the Tribune, and particularly Šalgo's support, that its members were able to carry out some of their first works. Working in the editorial board of *Index* further enabled KÔD to distribute some of their most important works, including manifestoes and the documentation of actions and interventions.

January's Messages of Insolence

Throughout KÔD's brief but critical history, their practice represented a form of social engagement that was not aimed at politicisation, but rather at the 'democratisation' and 'de-institutionalisation' of art. They identified their key aim as freeing 'art of all the functions ascribed to it, starting from the educational and cognitive functions to the religious and ideological ones'.⁹ But by acting as a counterpoint to the institutional configuration of the 'art system', KÔD demonstrated the inert functioning of cultural consumption in Yugoslavia. The fervour with which KÔD members carried out work at *Index* consequently came to a premature halt, with their dismissal from the editorial board by Vojvodina's Students'

⁸ Mirko Radojičić, 'Activity of Group KÔD', in Susovski, *New Art Practice*, op cit, p 38

⁹ Ibid, p 40; KÔD's activities largely sought to reduce the importance of authorship, and to challenge to traditionally passive relationship between art institutions and its audiences. In the essay 'Galleries', published in *Index*, Miroslav Mandić for instance wrote about the functioning of the gallery, which is frequently a 'cultural representative for the policy of a given state apparatus'. The notion of participation was the only factor that could liberate the gallery from total fetishisation: a gallery as a 'stable in which we [the public] will create the gallery space [...] so that it become a part of us, of our perceptive consciousness'; so that 'we are no longer integrated into it as "passive consumer."' See Miroslav Mandić, 'Galerije', *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, 21 October 1970, p 7

Association. The last issue of *Index* to be edited by the group members was published in November 1970; after that the conservative replacement of new staff was unfavourable to experimental art practices.¹⁰ At the same time, the city's Youth Tribune had come into conflict with the municipal socio-political organisations of Novi Sad, which had little understanding of its programmes, and frequently complained that the Tribune did not 'fulfil the interests of a wide circle of youth [...] and, especially recently, insists too much on the so-called avant-garde currents, experiments neglecting the affirmative majority'.¹¹

The infringement that was eventually implemented at the Youth Tribune represents a clear instance of the contradictions inherent in the administration of self-management. While the system was supposed to offer a considerable amount of flexibility and adjustment, it struggled to achieve the anti-institutional element of workers' politics.¹² Milovan Đilas, Yugoslavia's most notorious dissident, and previous leader of Agitation and Propaganda for the LCY, wrote of the two possible paths that socialist democracy could follow: 'in the direction of its own disappearance to the extent that socialism strengthens itself, or in the direction of the strengthening and transformation of bureaucracy into a privileged caste which lives at the expense of society as a whole.'¹³ In Novi Sad, the alternative practices that

¹⁰ Radojičić, 'Activity of KÔD', op cit, p 44; According to Želimir Žilnik, the disbanding and replacement of the staff was enforced because the local Party organisations 'knew what the power of the magazine was: though *Index* was a student newspaper, it was well edited in its time, and was pointing out anomalies in politics and offered alternatives, which resulted in the banning of several issues.' See Želimir Žilnik, in Kuda.org (ed.), *Omitted History*, Kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2006, p 64

¹¹ Šalgo, 'tribina mladih: otvorena – zatvorena', op cit, p 7; This was a clear confrontation between a new generation of free-thinking cultural workers, and the dominant, conservative cultural bureaucracies of the state apparatus. An essay titled 'What Will Become of the Youth Tribune?', published in *Index*, reported the conflicts of interests that existed in the management of the institution. A month earlier, a local paper had declared news that the founders of the Tribune, the Municipal Youth League, were intending to take the institution and its editorial boards under their patronage, to ensure that its basic function remain 'education and discipline'. It was the first of such news that the Tribune's editorial team had received. Though such stringent action was yet to be taken on the programmatic orientation of the Tribune, it marked the beginning of interventions by local socio-political leagues. See 'Šta će biti sa Tribinom Mladih?' ('What Will Become of the Youth Tribune?'), *Index: List Studenata Vojvodine*, Novi Sad, 11 November 1970

¹² Gal Kirn, 'From the Primacy of Partisan Politics to the Post-Fordist Tendency in Yugoslav Self-Management Socialism', in Gal Kirn (ed.), *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, 2010, p 264

¹³ Milovan Đilas, 'The Critique of Stalinism' (March 1950), in Robert Vincent Daniels (ed.), *A Documentary History of Communism and the World, From Revolution to Collapse Volume 2: Communism and the World*, I. B. Tauris, London, p 166

occurred through the co-operation of *Index* and the Youth Tribune – and consequently state funding – were precisely tempered in their agency through their institutionalised status. The local administrations prevailed and oversaw the events – to quote Đilas again: ‘authority [continued to be] the basic means of communism and every true communist. Thirst for power [was] insatiable and irresistible...careerism, extravagance and love of power [were] inevitable, and so [was] corruption.’¹⁴

As a platform that could transcend institutional boundaries, in its most critical period, *Index* represented an important channel for KÔD’s work. After their dismissal, the only locus which remained open to the group in their pursuit of experimental art practices was the Youth Tribune, and its small visual arts space – the ‘parquet salon’ – despite the fact that ‘programmes continued to be conceived in a traditional way’.¹⁵ Joining forces with other members of Novi Sad’s alternative scene, who had experienced similar feelings of marginalisation, under the leadership of Vujica Rešin Tučić – experimental writer and editor-in-chief of *Polja* from 1967-71 – KÔD participated in a collective, whose name would be changed every month after that particular month. Working together represented a combination of efforts to create a space for their artistic activities, of which they had all been deprived.¹⁶

The ‘January’ group first appeared together at the Youth Tribune on 21 January 1971, in an action documented in the Tribune’s diary as the ‘Work Day of the January Group’, between twelve and nine o’clock.¹⁷ During the event, former KÔD members investigated issues that had prevailed in their previous practice.¹⁸ Yet these more ‘objective’ exhibits were

¹⁴ Milovan Đilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, New York, 1957

¹⁵ Radojičić, ‘Activity of KÔD’, op cit, p 41

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ A chronology of events at Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune has been amassed in Gordana Đilas, Nedeljko Mamula, *Tribina Mladih: 1954-1977*, Kulturni Centar Novi Sad, Novi Sad, 2004

¹⁸ For example, Bogdanović nailed several books together and exhibited them, to produce an art out of matter, or a vowed return to the object itself, where the book no longer represents a ‘text to be read’, but rather an immediate presence. Tišma made a legend of signs from a geographical atlas onto the wall, while on the floor he put a crumpled white canvas along with other objects. In an accompanying text he stipulated that the objects

overshadowed by the most provocative work shown – a poster featuring a real ten dinar note, inscribed with the caption ‘how we are’, beneath which were featured numerous swear words, paired with their authors’ signatures. These words of a ‘ludic-political’ nature were hastily interpreted by local citizens as qualifications ‘directed against our society and system’ – ‘false-avant-gardism’, calling for ‘opposition to the politics of the Communist Party’.¹⁹ A week later, a newspaper referred to the heterogeneous display exclusively as the ‘exhibition of swear words’, and reported of how it had since brought the existence of the Tribune into question.²⁰ Apparently this gesture had provoked one group of Novi Sad’s workers to complain to the Municipal Committee for Culture, and demand that the house, due to its ‘open-mindedness, have its funds cut’.²¹

Triggering a threat to the possible liquidation of the Tribune, these ‘anti-social’ four-letter expletives had penetrated a deeper taboo of Yugoslav society. Writing for Zagreb’s *Studentski List* (Student Paper), Hrvoje Turković recognised that this gesture had happily ‘coincided with the day of an announced devaluation of the new dinar’.²² By appropriating a symbol of Yugoslav economy, the action had intercepted real social concerns – real economic conditions. The new dinar was introduced in 1965, through the broad economic reform that resulted in the increased liberalisation and bureaucratisation of self-management.²³ Never very stable, and suffering from an inflation rate of fifteen to twenty-five per cent per year, this currency was arguably emblematic of the beginning of self-

should be arranged according to the legend – a play on the index, establishing meaning along the axis of a physical relation to referents, disrupting the autonomy of the sign.

¹⁹ These disqualifications were collected and quoted in Hrvoje Turković, ‘Farsa oko Novi Sad’s Tribina Mladih’ (The Farce over Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune), *Studentski List*, no 4-5, Zagreb, 15 February 1971

²⁰ ‘Izložba psovke’ (‘Exhibition of Swear Words’), *Novosti*, Belgrade, 30 January 1971

²¹ *Ibid*

²² Turković, ‘Farsa’, *op cit*

²³ The 1965 reform sought to remove political involvement from economic decision-making. It aimed at integrating the Yugoslav economy into the world market, at liberalising foreign trade, and at achieving a convertibility of the dinar. State investment planning and price reform were abandoned with the intention of placing the distribution of profits at the discretion of enterprises, creating added incentives and profitability. See Kim ‘Partisan Politics’, pp 253-302

management's economic contradictions, under which a 'new class' of bureaucrats and technocrats had consolidated control over society.²⁴ Supplemented with the caption 'how we are' (which appropriated a pronoun synonymous with socialist phrases and the political rhetoric of the LCY), January's simple gesture, charged for containing 'anti-socialist ideas', had awakened the insufficient involvement of the broad masses in political life – the difficulty in creating democratic institutions, in spite of the Party's proclamations of working in the name of the people.²⁵ It revealed and raised accusations which the LCY were themselves guilty of, including 'false avant-gardism'.

February's 'Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public'

Condemned in Novi Sad, the Youth Tribune's collaborators were forced to seek a new audience, and organised another political happening at Belgrade's Youth House, further testing the local state apparatuses' tolerance. On 9 February 1971, the group 'for new art, February from Novi Sad' invited the public to a 'Taster of the New Art', consisting of 'verse, painting, songs, plays and film projections'. The display included some twenty panels of KÔD's conceptual works, on which documentation is sparse. Yet, again the most memorable aspects of the evening rested in the open, performative, attacks on Novi Sad's cultural and political establishments – forcing the public to 'demonstratively abandon the hall', and creating strong negative feedback from the media.²⁶ According to press reports, the public and the organiser of the event had been brazenly deceived: under the guise of 'new', 'conceptual', 'poor' or 'neuro-art', publicised by the event's programme, February carried out an open political demonstration against the 'Party management of Vojvodina and against

²⁴ Đilas, *New Class*, op cit

²⁵ 'izložba psovke', op cit

²⁶ Sava Dautović, 'Zakuska političkih uvreda' ('A Taster of Political Insult'), *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 2 March 1971

one leading politician of that province'.²⁷ Reporting on this 'fault at the Youth House', a member of the then-current editorial board of the Tribune, Miroslav Antić claimed that this disgrace had 'blackened, spat and spoilt the culture of [Novi Sad], and there was no epilogue in sight. Novi Sad remains silent.'²⁸ Pero Zubac, editor of *Polja*, further added that the events left a 'bitter taste, like mud had been stuffed in [his] mouth'.²⁹

These two proponents of the Youth Tribune's new editorial team had clearly denigrated what they understood as 'acts of political reckoning'.³⁰ Yet, having been mentioned by Antić as one of the witnesses who 'ran away from the disgrace of the Youth House in Belgrade', Želimir Žilnik – Novi Sad's notorious film-maker and previous editor-in-chief of the Tribune – offered his thoughts on the implications of this 'tastelessness and insolence'.³¹ Žilnik had remained until the termination of the 'taster', because he was bothered by 'what was really the disgrace' – not that 'young people write slogans, shout, play and swear', but rather the 'shame that in the city where we ourselves live, there is a lot of truth in which the youth speak in agitation'.³² As he testified, the editorial team of *Polja* had been locked in fear before its own staff and editors, there was no way for the Youth Tribune to reach self-managing rights, and most disturbingly 'young people [were] being manipulated by various forums and being cheated'.³³

Though few photographs of the event remain, all of which barely testify to the levels of destruction mentioned in official press statements, one detail was frequently observed in the accounts – a verse that dominated the chants of the group. Throughout the course of the

²⁷ Ibid; In a recent video interview, Rešin Tučić spoke of how he 'talked against [the] local government structure. When Makavejev heard what I was saying, Žilnik and he came to me and said "tell them you were drunk", and I said "I wasn't drunk, I meant to say that". Video Interview owned by Kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2006

²⁸ Miroslav Antić & Pero Zubac, 'Žurnal Miroslava Antića; Neki Feler u Mladima' ('Miroslav Antić's Journal: Some Fault in the Youth'), *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 23 February 1971

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Dautović, 'Zakuska', op cit

³¹ Želimir Žilnik, 'Žilnik demantuje' ('Žilnik Denies'), *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 24 February 1971

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

night the group proclaimed the slogan ‘we love the Russians, the Russians love us, the Russians will save us.’³⁴ Certainly, it was a proclamation that in itself would have caused severe contention, considering Yugoslavia’s complex and often strained relationship with the Soviet Union.³⁵ No wonder then that one newspaper chose to refer to this specific feature of the ‘taster’ as an ‘imbecile song-melody’.³⁶ Yet this slogan contained a more subtle relevance within the specific frame of events, being a reference to Karpo Godina’s film *Zdravi Ljudi za Razonodu* (Healthy People for Fun), produced by Novi Sad’s Neoplanta Film company – a state-independent organisation.³⁷

Healthy People for Fun depicted the diversity of the autonomous province of Vojvodina, screening the harmonious co-existence of nations and ethnic groups. While the short film documented the tradition of the same ethnic groups painting the facades of their houses in the same colour (Croats – red; Hungarians – green; and Slovaks – blue), it was nevertheless through a playful and humorous approach, delighting audiences and receiving a prize at its premiere at Belgrade’s Documentary and Short Film Festival. The film’s scenes were structured by announcements from the respective ethnic groups, followed by the repeated song lyrics, written by Predrag Vranešević, ‘we love the Russians/ Croats/ Hungarians/ Slovaks/ Gypsies’ (finally concluding with the line ‘we love them all!’). Still, this film was soon banned, because the ‘system’ was not clear on whether Godina had remained dedicated to the concept of Brotherhood and Unity – Yugoslavia’s guiding

³⁴ Referred to by Dautović, ‘Zakuska’, op cit, and more recently corroborated by Rešin Tučić, in an interview with Peđa Vranešević, ‘Čemu umetnost’ (Why Art), *Vreme*, no 1159, Belgrade, 21 March 2013, <<http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1105012>>

³⁵ The USSR had provided a constant threat to Yugoslavia’s independence, especially following the events of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 – seen by Yugoslavia as a crushing of the attempts of Czechoslovakia’s leadership to implement reforms similar to the ones self-management had been pursuing for the past fifteen years, and a cataclysm which would define the loyalties of Eastern European countries in relation to the Soviet Union for the next decade. See Ragna Boden, ‘Soviet World Policy in the 1970s: A Three-Level Game’, in Marie-Janine Calić, Dietmar Neutatz, Julia Obertreis (eds.), *The Crisis of Socialist Modernity*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2011, p 192

³⁶ Dautović, ‘Zakuska’, op cit

³⁷ This allusion was revealed more recently by both Rešin Tučić and Vranešević, ‘Čemu umetnost’

principle, adopted during the National Liberation Struggle as a triumph over all ethnic diversities – on whether he had chosen to glorify, or ridicule it. Not being ‘readable’ enough, *Healthy People for Fun* was considered an attack on one of the key emblems of Yugoslav society, receiving almost immediate censorship.

This crucial detail reveals the general motivation behind the happening, not directed against ‘self-managing society’ explicitly, but rather the cultural potential of Novi Sad, which had experienced a constant ‘arbitration of political organs and functionaries in art and culture’ – a ‘normalised method for disqualifying new occurrences’.³⁸ The significance of the event was further clarified by the February group in their *Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public*, dated to 12 February 1971. Addressing the public was a bold gesture – it represented a plea for protection from local political organs. Yet this text, which spoke out about the situation surrounding the Tribune, and endeavoured to clarify the intention of the events in Belgrade, raised in advance its reservations with regard to any absolute political readings that could be extrapolated from it, appealing to an ‘artistic language’ instead. But in spite of this strategic petition, the letter was taken as another perpetuation of political suspicion. Writing in the Croatian daily paper *Vjesnik* (News) – in itself demonstrating how wide-spread news of Novi Sad had become – Sava Dautović used the letter to denounce, rather than illuminate, the events of Belgrade, in order to ridicule the ‘young rebels’, ending his article with quoted words from Mirko Čanadanović, Secretary to the Provincial League of Communists in Vojvodina:

‘There is a distorted understanding of cultural creativity and political activism. Freedom is, rightfully, understood as something which is given, provided or inhibited from others, and not as a result of just creating – something which is

³⁸ Grupa za nove umetnosti ‘Februar’ (Group for New Art ‘February’), ‘Otvoreno pismo Jugoslovenskoj javnosti’ (‘An Open Letter to the Yugoslav Public’), published in *Student*, Belgrade, 23 February 1971; Bogdanović’s unpublished letter, ‘Dear Jaša’, also mentions that it was published in Ljubljana’s student paper, *Tribuna*, See Slavko Bogdanović, ‘Dragi Jaša’, published in Miško Šuvaković (ed.), *Grupa KÔD, GRUPA (Ā, Grupa (Ā-KÔ: Retrospektiva*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 1995

given through real and consistent efforts. In the future there will be less of those who will credulously assign these public forums to these provocateurs, who have nothing to show other than their creative impotence and primitivism.’³⁹

The tenor of Čanadanović’s declaration aptly demonstrates the kind of ‘repressive tolerance’ that was being enacted at the Youth Tribune – identifying freedom as ‘something which is given’, or gifted.⁴⁰ These ‘warnings’ did not go unaddressed – writing in Zagreb’s *Tjedni List Omladine* (Weekly Youth Newspaper), Zvonko Maković responded to these declarations in an essay titled ‘When Will the Pumpkins Blossom’, in which he sought to retaliate against Dautović’s mockery and Čanadanović’s slogans, by complaining of how the words of the letter had been distorted and taken out of the context in which they had been written, to be denigrated.⁴¹ The essay’s title referenced Dragoslav Mihailović’s celebrated novel of 1968, *Kad Su Cvetale Tikve* (When the Pumpkins Blossomed), which initially received popular and critical acclaim, and was reworked into a play, only to be banned after a few performances.⁴²

When the Pumpkins Blossomed depicted Belgrade’s violent suburbs through the story of one young hooligan – Ljuba Šampion – a boxing champion, whose life is unsettled by the imprisonment of his father and brother as Cominformists.⁴³ While depicting the bold theme of the plight of supporters of the Russian line after the break with Moscow, it also pointed to a deeper social ill – the alienation of youth. By referencing Mihailović’s novel, Maković was not only perhaps alluding to another instance in the violation of the freedom of speech, but

³⁹ Dautović, ‘Zakuska’, op cit

⁴⁰ Herbert Marcuse, ‘Repressive Tolerance’, 1965, in in: Robert Wolff, Barrington Moore & Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, pp 95-137

⁴¹ Zvonko Maković, ‘Kad li će procvjetati tikve’ (‘When Will the Pumpkins Blossom?’), *Tjedni List Omladine*, no.49, 9 April 1971, p.26

⁴² Dragoslav Mihailović, *Kad Su Cvetale Tikve* (When the Pumpkins Blossomed), Novi Sad, 1968

⁴³ The family’s tragedy unfolds as Ljuba’s brother is sent to the Goli Otok concentration camp; his father returns home as a broken man, his sister is raped and commits suicide, and his mother dies of grief. Ljuba’s own career prospects wane as a consequence of his father’s and brother’s ‘disloyalties’ and he ends up a murderer and renegade. For information on the book’s reception, see Jasna Dragović-Soso, *Saviours of the Nation: Serbia’s Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*, (Montreal, 2002), pp.23-24

also, through analogy, the dark underside of the ‘Communist Revolution’, that was jeopardizing the development of a generation brought up under the new system. In the Youth Tribune, this translated to the state’s intervention that was to deprive the youth of an active forum for critical engagement, even if in terms of an exclusively ‘artistic’ language.

Did the ‘pumpkins’ ever blossom at Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune? Following the events of Belgrade and the *Open Letter*, an article entitled ‘February Sentenced in March’, announced that four Novi Sad Cultural Associations sent a letter to the Municipal Cultural Committee with 1,200 signatures of high school and university students, distancing themselves from the activities of the Tribune.⁴⁴ The letter announced a ‘unanimous condemnation of the newest orientation of the group at the Youth Tribune’, and demanded the Municipal Cultural Committee and Municipal Youth League ‘take the necessary social measures to ensure the programme of this youth cultural institution does not alienate the general living and cultural interests of workers, high-school youth and university students of our city’.⁴⁵ Clearly, the Belgrade events were the final straw – having confronted the local cultural apparatus so directly, February’s actions had entered the sphere of broad public knowledge.

Why did February’s appeals to the public, which they sought to engage from the outset, go unheard, to the extent that their dismissal was even demanded? The public’s hostility can partially be explained by the disinformation that was filtering through media outlets, which portrayed the serious, purposeful endeavours of the Tribune as ‘self-serving’, with members of February apparently attempting to seek ‘monopolisation’, in collaboration with Šalgo, who was ‘interfering with the view of this youth institution’ and ‘bringing it to a critical situation’.⁴⁶ The youth of Novi Sad were clearly being manipulated by various official

⁴⁴ S. Božović, “‘Februar’ osuđen u Martu’ (‘February Sentenced in March’), *Novosti*, Belgrade, 4 March 1971

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Quoted in Branko Andrić, “‘Februar’ je prestao da postoji još u januaru’ (‘‘February’’ Already Ceased Existing in January), *Index*, 24 February 1971

⁴⁶ Ibid

organs, most notably the Municipal Communist Youth League. Their authority continued to be maintained through what *Praxis* author Ivan Kuvačić would describe as forms of ‘voluntary obedience’: the ‘press editor replacing the role of the gendarme or jail-keeper’; ‘cudgel succeeded with the technique of suggestion’.⁴⁷ Once the Youth League had defined its values, adhering to the LCY leadership, it ensured these norms were to be followed, and remain a permanent sign-post to guide people in their thoughts and modes of behaviour.

Initially granted ‘self-managing’ autonomy from its founding community of interest, the Youth Council of Vojvodina, the Youth Tribune became completely subordinated to its interests. On 17 October 1971, a local paper announced that ‘Novi Sad [is] Waiting for a Director’ – ‘faced with the extreme activities of the Tribune, the Youth League of Vojvodina was forced to interrupt, a new programme and new council will be constructed.’⁴⁸ The state’s reaction demonstrated the regime’s subtle and strategic tactics of neutralising critical heterogeneity – restoring order through what Belgrade philosopher Zagorka Pešić-Golubović described as its power to ‘decide completely the fate of science, literature, and culture, even if completely incompetent people made those decisions’.⁴⁹

Going ‘Underground’

Following the Youth Tribune’s institutionalisation, Bogdanović, together with Mandić, began to seek different channels through which to engage in their activities – formulating a proposal for a magazine committed to the ‘development of interpersonal relations’ in May 1971.⁵⁰

L.H.O.O.Q. (according to Duchamp’s appropriation of *La Gioconda*), was to only appear as a

⁴⁷ Ivan Kuvačić, ‘Contemporary Forms of Mental Violence’, *Praxis: A Philosophical Journal, Power and Humanity Issue*, 1-2, Zagreb, 1970, pp 130-135

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ Zagorka Pešić-Golubović, quoted in Nebojša Popov, *Contra Fatum*, Mladost, Belgrade, 1989, pp 393-4

⁵⁰ Slavko Bogdanović, ‘PROGRAM ČASOPISA “L.H.O.O.Q.”’ (‘The Programme of the Magazine ‘L.H.O.O.Q.’’), Bosut, Novi Sad, 1971, re-printed in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÓD*, op cit, p 76

part of ‘other official reviews’, mainly due to logistical reasons, since it was impossible to publish independently.⁵¹ The first issue appeared in *Új Symposion* in May 1971 – the only journal which remained accessible to these artists – as a proposal requiring the Yugoslav public and institutions to approve funds and normalise the work of the magazine.⁵² It included texts which dealt with its theorisation, and above all emphasised that ‘the editorial board which wishes to print a number of *L.H.O.O.Q.* can’t condition the terms of printing, eject some texts or correct ideas, inasmuch as they are significant for that number or the general orientation and profile of *L.H.O.O.Q.*’⁵³

Again, this project represented an attempt to overcome institutional intervention and enable ‘progressive thinking and freedom of creation’.⁵⁴ But *L.H.O.O.Q.*’s public existence came to an abrupt but inevitable halt with a violent confrontation between the state apparatus, following the publication of Miroslav Mandić’s ‘Song on Film: Sonnet or Fourteen Stanzas’ in the final issue of the ‘Underground Paper form New Revolution’.⁵⁵ Written in defence of Dušan Makavejev’s film *WR: Misterije Organizma* (Mysteries of the Organism), the text also included a discussion on the creation of films with political themes of the National Liberation Struggle, and most provocatively a ‘script for Josip Broz Tito’, which simply read: ‘to capture Josip Broz Tito, in colour, in one shot, which lasts two hours. The camera is static. Along with the inscription “The End”, the announcer says “it was Josip Broz Tito.”’⁵⁶ Despite its seemingly inert critical position towards the President, Tito’s cult of personality remained an untouchable topic, not to be debated. Attacking the President’s image was

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Radojičić, Activity of KÔD, op cit, p 45

⁵³ S. Bogdanović, ‘PROGRAM’, op cit, p 76

⁵⁴ Grupa za nove umetnosti ‘Februar’, ‘Otvoreno Pismo’

⁵⁵ Miroslav Mandić, ‘Pesma o Filmu’ (‘Song about Film’), *Új Symposion*, 76+77, Novi Sad, September 1971; *WR* was financed by Neoplanta Film and Telepol, a Bavarian TV company, both working in the international market: a film not officially banned, but not publicly screened in Yugoslavia until 1987, and causing the director to be dismissed from the Communist Party and, unable to continue work, emigrate to Paris.

⁵⁶ Ibid

considered an attack on the body of the state itself.’⁵⁷ As a result, Mandić received a nine month prison sentence, and was banned from further publishing until 1984.⁵⁸

L.H.O.O.Q. was forced to continue its activities deep underground, with a print-run limited to one to four copies, hand typed, and no longer appearing in public.⁵⁹ Outside these intimate projects, Bogdanović continued to publicise the deprived cultural conditions of Novi Sad, including a letter to Slovenian intellectual and editor of Ljubljana’s student magazine *Tribuna* (Tribune), Jaša Zlobec, who had participated in a discussion at the Youth Tribune in January 1971. In this letter, Bogdanović addressed Zlobec’s suggestion of the ‘possibility of acting through the Party in forming some oppositional force’, by noting the regional differences in political climates.⁶⁰ While in Ljubljana working within institutional frames appeared a ‘real and acceptable exit’, since it seemed the ‘Slovene Party left more than other spaces for free breath’, in Novi Sad ‘arguments were [exclusively] handled through force [...] and any kind of divergence resulted in a purge.’⁶¹

⁵⁷ As *Praxis* author Svetozar Stojanović suggested in a 1971 essay, though not explicitly in reference to Tito’s name, the threat of social progress was pronounced in times of state crisis, because the ‘charismatic leader is aware that democratisation [within a socialist system, i.e. a social democracy] would gradually deprive him of power unless he secures for himself a saviour’s role...The charismatic leader [Tito] inevitably resists liberalisation because it “subverts the power of the charisma.” See Svetozar Stojanović, ‘From Post-Revolutionary Dictatorship to Socialist Democracy: Yugoslavism at the Crossroads’, *Praxis International*, no 4, Zagreb, 1973, p 313

⁵⁸ Within a week of the publication’s dissemination Serbian national newspaper *Novosti* reported that ‘Miroslav Mandić seriously offends our nation, state and the President of the Republic [...] through various comparisons of an offensive, ironic and distasteful nature (executed in his words through a ‘clearly-defined aesthetic-ethical stance’). Distorted and misinterpreted as ‘anti-socialist excesses and vulgarisms’, Mandić’s text further resulted in the temporary closure of the *Új Symposion* editorial board by the Youth League. See B. Miroslavljević, ‘Zabrana zbog laži i uvreda’ (‘Banning because of Lies and Insults’), *Novosti*, Belgrade, 11 December 1971

⁵⁹ Only the first issue of *L.H.O.O.Q.* appeared in *Új Symposion*, the other twelve were hand typed with a limited print-run: six as a ‘paper for the permanent destruction of everything existing’; three as an ‘underground paper for developing interpersonal relations’; three as an ‘underground paper for new revolution’. Still, in Bogdanović’s words: ‘twelve existing copies of *L.H.O.O.Q.* [was] altogether enough for one illegal newspaper. One issue included Bogdanović’s *Stripa o Grupi KÔD* (Comic about the Group KÔD), where among other signs he appropriated the semantically-charged sign of the swastika, clockwise and counter-clockwise, to present the history of the group – representing a polemical question towards public values. Other issues included political-ludic texts, such as ‘Drugs and Revolution: Junkies of all Countries, Unite!’, which adopted the form of party revolutionary speech to discuss the topic of drugs – another highly taboo topic of discussion in socialist society. Fusing the seemingly incompatible – irony, paradox, provocation, rebellion, revolution – the text even directly insulted the radical extremists of Serbia. See Slavko Bogdanović, ‘Posle dugog vremena’, handwritten, Bosut, Novi Sad, 20 January 1972, re-printed in Šuvaković, *Grupa KÔD*, op cit, p 77

⁶⁰ Bogdanović, Dragi Jaša, op cit, p 74

⁶¹ Ibid

These practices that dominated Novi Sad, and ‘South of the Sava (except Belgrade)’ can more generally be explained by the reaffirmation of party control over society, following the nationalist conflicts between Croatia and Serbia in the Spring of 1971.⁶² In Serbia, the liberal leadership, elected at the 1968 Party Congress and headed by Marko Nikežić and Latinka Perović, was ousted and blamed for ‘liberal practice and for opposing the new party line’.⁶³ As in the rest of Yugoslavia, it marked the ‘new line’s’ return to ‘a crude form of ideological indoctrination, and the abandonment of all former sophisticated ideas of creating new socialist consciousness through dialogues or struggles of opinion and patient persuasion’.⁶⁴ In short, quoting Zlobec’s sentence professed at the discussion in the Youth Tribune: ‘Something like that could be imagined in Russia, but not in Novi Sad’.⁶⁵

At a moment when the mass-media remained inaccessible and institutions weren’t in the position to provide guarantees for democratic work, Bogdanović pleaded in the same letter that ‘revolutionary action unfold outside the institution’, go underground in order to: ‘DESTROY the Youth League and the Council of Students...conservative and counter-revolutionary organisations which actually don’t exist, but vegetate in the form of bulky, bloated bureaucratic organisations, and represent a sclerotic mind which thinks, and works, in the name...of the Party.’⁶⁶ His ‘underground’ task culminated in the censored ‘Underground’ issue of Belgrade’s *Student* newspaper, printed on 16 December 1971, where he published his

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Noam Chomsky, ‘The Repression of Belgrade University’, *The New York Review of Books*, 7 February 1972; These leaders had earned respect for rejecting the policies associated with radical nationalists by treating the other people of Yugoslavia as equal partners: according to political historian on the former Yugoslavia, Sabrina Ramet, their dismissal represented ‘one of the most fateful errors committed by Tito’. See Sabrina Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2002, p 4

⁶⁴ Chomsky, ‘Belgrade University’, op cit; No wonder then, that Bogdanović’s letter specifically referenced the fact that Čanadanović, who had previously stipulated that freedom was something ‘given’, was thanked on the 21st seat of the representatives of the LCY by Tito for the ‘firm stance which he expressed there’. See Bogdanović, ‘Dragi Jaša’, op cit, p 74

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

Pesma Underground Tribina Mladih (Underground Song of the Youth Tribune). Regarding those who attempted to change this situation, Bogdanović concluded:

‘BEGINNING WITH DEJAN POZNANOVIĆ AND TO THE LAST BANNING
OF ÚJ SYMPOSION IN NOVI SAD

Young men with gentle
fingers are running, their eyes goggled, already short breathered, and behind them
inevitably follows Stalin, with clenched fists, saying the words of Jaša Zlobec,
‘this could be expected in Russia, but not in Novi Sad. But I am here! I am here! I
am here!’

And also on the Congress of Cultural Action: to protect you, to protect you under
my roof.

Now it is clear that in this fucked up city, everyone who thinks of something
smart and is honest or dares to do it,

is fucked over

and the only change for the boys from the Tribina Mladih is to,

like Boško Ivkov

in *Polja*,

foster socialist kitsch, commercial underground,

Surrealism

and nothing beyond that, because beyond it people get killed,

because this disgusting city

shows its black soul every time.

The Tribune will never become a stronghold of avant-garde thought,

since there is no need for it in this fucked up city

and therefore it doesn't stand a real chance.⁶⁷

While from the outset Tito's government emphasised the risk of making the same error

‘being made by the leading communists in many countries’, including the Soviet Union's

⁶⁷ Slavko Bogdanović, ‘Pesma Underground Tribina Mladih’ (Underground Song of the Youth Tribune), *Student: Underground Issue*, Belgrade, 16 December 1971

failure to implement the slogan ‘the factories for the workers’ into practice, it seems that, in Novi Sad at least, the state was still relying on certain tenets of an authoritarian rule.⁶⁸ Could it be that Yugoslavia had entered an affair similar to Makavejev’s fatal romance in *WR* between Vladimir Ilyich (a Russian ice-skater who is visiting Yugoslavia with his ice-ballet troupe, whose words in the film are often direct quotations of his namesake, Lenin), and Milena (a young Yugoslav communist)? According to Vladimir: ‘We Russians, appreciate your efforts to find your own way. You are a proud and independent nation. However, we are sure you will find out yourselves that the course we’ve chosen is the best one’. In Novi Sad, Stalin followed with ‘clenched fists’, in a city where to remain loyal meant to completely identify with the will of the party leadership. Breaching the ‘rules of the game’, Bogdanović’s ‘song’ broke through the facade of the system to expose the base foundations of power.⁶⁹ The regime responded with repressive measures – as a consequence, Bogdanović received an eight month prison sentence.

Towards an ‘Invisible Art’

After the reaction of the local state apparatus, former KÔD members Slobodan Tišma and Cedomir Drča withdrew from public art practice. According to Tišma, the only solution that remained was to ‘go round institutions (that had become occupied by state apparatchiks), to leave the state and society out of everything, [so that] everything be strictly private, intimate’.⁷⁰ In such an unalterable situation, they created the time-based action called *THE END*, involving the work *Nevidljiva Umetnost* (Invisible Art), between 1972-77. In that time,

⁶⁸ Josip Broz Tito, ‘Workers Manage Factories in Yugoslavia’, Belgrade, 26 June 1950; In the words of *Praxis* author Svetozar Stojanović: ‘Discipline, hierarchy, duty, responsibility and appointment came at the cost of diversity, initiative, democracy, rights, and choice.’ Svetozar Stojanović, *Between Ideals and Reality: A Critique of Socialism and Its Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p 78

⁶⁹ Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), Routledge, London, 2009, p 21

⁷⁰ Slobodan Tišma, Video Interview owned by Kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2006

Tišma and Drča drank American Coca-Cola and Russian Kvas every day with friends in front of a local store. Today, these ‘invisible’ actions exist only through sparse photographic documentation: framing still life displays composed of detail reproductions of Ancient Greek imagery; empty coke bottles and coke pencil holders perched on a shop front window, or on the front windshield of the nationally produced ‘Yugo’ automobile. In other images, the protagonists are captured wearing t-shirts embossed with the caption ‘THE END’, whilst holding empty Coca-Cola bottles. For these artists, this ‘gesture’ represented the ‘end’ of their art, with these photographs behaving more as residues and remnants of a form of reflection, than documents of an artistic action or performance.

In retrospect, these private acts were a result of the disappointment sensed by these artists at being abandoned by the Youth Tribune. Engaging in escapism and emphasising the invisible – disappearance, cancellation – these artists were opposing the instrumentalisation of art by an administrative society. While purporting to be ‘invisible’, *THE END*, at least on reflection, constituted the sole means of expression against an official socialist ideology unable to fully integrate difference, and marked the end of experimental art production in Novi Sad’s official cultural institutions.⁷¹ As becomes clear, Novi Sad’s local art infrastructure at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s did not possess the mechanisms to process the rich cultural activities that were occurring, forcing artists to cease provocation and instead completely withdraw from the ideological dictates that threatened their practice. Escapism became the only means to resist an otherwise anaemic cultural mechanism at a moment marked by oppressive change and political turmoil.

⁷¹ S. Božović, “‘Februar’ osuđen u Martu”, op cit. The ultimate thwarting of progressive artists and intellectuals from the Tribune marked a dilution of radical practices – a difference that can be observed when tracing the programmes from 1971 to 1975 – before it became the Sonja Marinković Students’ Club in Novi Sad (the cultural art society of Sonja Marinković in Novi Sad being one of the committees which demanded the Tribune’s provocative activities be ceased).