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“Made in Yugoslavia”: Struggles with Self-Management in the New Art Practice, 1965-71

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In September 1978, Zagreb’s Gallery of Contemporary Art staged the first survey exhibition of conceptual and performance art in Yugoslavia: *The New Art Practice, 1966–78*.¹ Forty years on, the phenomenon is relatively well known, largely because of its internationally-renowned affiliates, such as Marina Abramović, Sanja Iveković, and Mladen Stilinović, among others. But academic work on the subject has been hesitant to address the more complex political, economic, and institutional factors that underpinned the New Art’s emergence and secured its prolific development. In this article, I argue that the New Art Practice both came out of, and responded to, a complex and contradictory moment in Yugoslavia’s history, when the country began to integrate itself deeper into the Western capitalist world system. I map the emergence of the OHO group in Ljubljana and two particular episodes in the

¹ Organized by art historian Marijan Susovski, this show was the first timely appraisal to recognise a singular thread of young artists and collectives working across many of the federation’s republican capitals. Following the exhibition, the term “New Art Practice” became a locally-accepted umbrella term for a form of artistic engagement that emerged in the cities of Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Subotica, Belgrade and Split, which, fueled by the youth movements of 1968, took on a more socially engaged form in the early 1970s. For further information, consult *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966-1978*, ed. Marijan Susovski (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978), exhibition catalog. This research was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. I am grateful to Branka Ćurčić, Slavko Bogdanović and Želimir Koščević, who offered their valuable insights, and to Sven Spieker and the anonymous peer reviewers for their generous comments and feedback.

youth cultural centers of Zagreb and Novi Sad against a brief, but decisive period of political and economic liberalization, which began with a massive economic reform in 1965 and was briefly interrupted by a crisis in federal politics in 1971/2. During this period, growing personal, regional, and sectorial inequalities began to refuel nationalist resentments, culminating in the so-called “Croatian Mass Movement” and the purging of liberal leaderships throughout the entire federation. I propose that 1971 was not only a crucial turning point for the political direction of Yugoslav “self-managing” socialism— counteracting its promises of grassroots participation and a more experimental political culture— but also the New Art Practice itself, driving many of its early proponents to stop making art altogether.²

<Set Figure 1 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: SMALL.> Front Cover of *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia* exhibition catalog. Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978. Image courtesy of Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, Zagreb.

² In its broadest possible definition, workers’ self-management was envisioned as a system that would grant workers the autonomy to manage their own factories and enterprises, in order to work towards a society in which “classes and all traces of exploitation and the oppression of man by man will disappear.” In the cultural sphere, self-management would, according to the 1958 *Programme of the League of Communists*, enact the “emancipation of educational, scientific, artistic and all other cultural life from the administrative interference of government authorities.” See *Seventh Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia*, (Ljubljana, 22-26 April 1958), trans. The International Society for Socialist Studies, *The Programme of the League of Yugoslav Communists*, (London: Aldgate Press, 1959). For a comprehensive and nuanced account of the numerous and often contradictory definitions of self-management, consult Branislav Jakovljević’s *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945-91*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

To this end, I chart how the artists belonging to the New Art Practice were initially able to nurture new models of artistic engagement, by locating the phenomenon within the institutional structures that enabled its emergence and secured its prolific development. While scholarship on Yugoslavia's New Art Practice has noted the galleries of the Students' Cultural Centers (SKCs) as key sites for the introduction of new forms of self-organization in art and culture during the 1960s–1980s, rarely have it acknowledged their roles as what I'm calling "state youth institutions."³ There has been a reluctance to analyze these spaces as entities of the federation's expansive, decentralized youth infrastructure, which supported both mainstream and alternative politics and culture, blurring the lines between what was understood to be "alternative" and "oppositional," versus what was seen as "institutional" and "official." I highlight some of the ways in which the SKC galleries became both porous and accommodating to new forms of artistic expression by encouraging a vibrant cross-fertilization of ideas and initiatives. In other words, I show how they were recast, reinvigorated, and reinvented through various distribution channels.⁴

³ The most notable of these is the large-scale project for rethinking the *Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art (PPYUart)*. Initiated by Prelom Kolektiv (Belgrade), WHW (Zagreb), New Media Center_Kuda.org (Novi Sad) and SCCA/pro.ba (Sarajevo), *PPYUart* was a long-term interdisciplinary research project which articulated the interrelationships between Yugoslavia's visual arts and the wider socio-political context. It included Prelom's project on Belgrade's Students' Cultural Centre Gallery and a contribution on Novi Sad's Youth Tribune by the New Media Center_Kuda.org. For more information, consult *Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art: Retrospective 01*, eds. Jelena Vesić, Zorana Dojić, Ivana Bago and Dušan Đorđević Mileusnić, (Belgrade: Prelom Kolektiv, 2010), exhibition catalog.

⁴ The 1978 New Art Practice exhibition in Zagreb itself came from a desire to document a movement that fused beyond the borders of the republic, the nation state, and even beyond language barriers. It was mounted in the midst of a swiftly deteriorating social climate,

OHO's "Popular Approach"

In 1965, the founding members of the OHO group, Marko Pogačnik and Iztok Geister, moved to Ljubljana to study at the Academy of Fine Arts. Initially joined by the filmmaker Naško Križnar, their circle of collaborators expanded rapidly, largely through their involvement in several youth publications, including the university newspaper *Tribuna*, which enabled them to circulate their ideas more widely. Within the narrow space of five years, the artists were internationally embraced as pioneers of the “dematerialization of art” in Yugoslavia. Not only did the group participate in the landmark Information show at MoMA in 1970, but they were also the only group from Socialist Europe to be featured in Lucy Lippard’s canonical book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. In her retrospective essay “Escape Attempts,” Lippard enthusiastically announced that “by 1970 [...] Yugoslavia had also kicked in” as part of the worldwide turn to “post-object” or “idea” art, attributing, in parentheses, this achievement to the OHO group exclusively.⁵

Yet, in spite of their rapid and unprecedented ascent to international recognition, OHO’s reception in Yugoslavia continues to be presented though

scarred by more than a decade of political and economic crisis, that would eventually contribute to the country’s disintegration. Because of the country’s violent dissolution in the 1990s, providing a “federalist” approach to the study of the country’s diverse, densely interconnected art scenes remains difficult to this day.

⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, eds. Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1973), xix.

two different, but related, frames. On the one hand, they are seen as both benefiting from and being disadvantaged by a cultural space that lacked an “art market” or an “art world,” which, as art historian Ksenya Gurshtein has put it, served as both a “constraint and source of freedom” to the group’s pursuit of a collective art practice.⁶ On the other hand, as Miško Šuvaković has argued, their participation in (or “transferral” to) the cultural spaces of Yugoslavia’s other capitals is seen as an attempt, on the part of the authorities, to decontextualize their work.⁷ Both interpretations have a lure: they reproduce the familiar and accessible picture of young artists struggling against a repressive socialist regime and its powerful system of institutions. However, both interpretations suffer from a crucial oversight— that being the fact that OHO did actually receive widespread recognition in Yugoslavia at the time, and that this support was in fact facilitated by the particular historical moment in which they first emerged. OHO’s members were part of a generation whose coming of age coincided with significant political and economic reforms. These were the conflicting times of “market reform,” retrospectively understood as the “tolerant years” when Yugoslavia oriented itself towards the West and its markets, and when—following the ousting of the Secret Police Chief Aleksandar Ranković in 1966— party hardliners who favored state interventionism and centralism stood

⁶ Ksenya Gurshtein, “An Experimental Microcosm on the Edge of East and West,” in *L’Internationale. Post-War Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*, ed. Christian Höller, (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2012), 238.

⁷ Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group*, (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., 2010), 45.

temporarily defeated. As liberal currents within the League of Communists (LCY)—the official name of the Yugoslav Communist Party—began to gain a brief upper hand, the mid-1960s also became a pivotal moment for Yugoslav youth politics, and for the OHO group itself. Already in 1971, the leading Yugoslav critic Ješa Denegri declared that the spread of “conceptual art in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Novi Sad was conditioned by the impression left by OHO exhibitions on young artists.”⁸ OHO successfully made their mark on these “young” artists by exhibiting in the country’s expansive network of state-funded youth cultural institutions, with the group’s first exhibition outside of Slovenia being shown at Zagreb’s Students’ Centre (SC) Gallery in April 1968.⁹

<Set Figure 2 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: MEDIUM.> Vlado Jakolić, Photograph from OHO’s *Izložba cipela* [Exhibition of Shoes], April 1968. Galerija Studentskog Centra, Zagreb. Image courtesy of Arhiv za likovne umjetnosti HAZU, Zagreb, Inv. No.: SC-41/F3.

It was through the works shown at the so-called *Izložba cipela* (Exhibition of Shoes), together with an accompanying lecture and series of

⁸ Ješa Denegri, “Primjeri konceptualne umjetnosti u Jugoslaviji,” *Život umjetnosti*, 15-16, Zagreb, 1971, 151.

⁹ Zagreb’s SC Gallery was founded in 1957, precisely when the League began the process of extending self-management from the workplace to the political sphere. Under the direction of Želimir Košćević, from the mid-1960s it became a key site for the New Art Practice in Zagreb. For a more thorough analysis of the activities of Zagreb’s SC Gallery during this period, see Sofia Gotti & Marko Ilić, “Points of Origin: From a History of Alternative Art to a History of Alternative Institutions,” in *Collaboration and its Discontents*, eds. Meredith Brown and Michelle Fisher, Courtauld Books Online, 2017, accessed March 7, 2018, [http://courtauld.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/cbo/Chapter%203_Collaboration%20and%20its%20\(Dis\)Contents.pdf](http://courtauld.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/cbo/Chapter%203_Collaboration%20and%20its%20(Dis)Contents.pdf)

happenings, that Zagreb's new generation of young artists and critics were introduced to OHO's unique intellectual framework of "Reism." In its broadest possible definition, Reism has been understood as a philosophical project aimed at discovering the radical independence of "things" from man. In Zagreb, this intellectual approach was most evident in the display of Marko Pogačnik's *Bočice* (Flasks): a multitude of industrial bottles transformed into ghostly, pastel-colored plaster casts, molded from products of everyday consumption, such as plastic bottles and containers, and strewn across a series of white pedestals of varying heights. According to Tomaž Brejc, OHO's earliest historian, the *Flasks* were intended to be "viewed in light of their actual existence that has been obliterated because of their utilitarian function."¹⁰ In other words, as simulacra of commodity items, these objects encouraged spectators to extract information from them visually, by looking at them, and not through speculation or association.

Within broader, regional accounts, Pogačnik's *Flasks* are often contextualized as an important departure from "modernist" traditions. But while OHO's method of critiquing modernist painting by "substituting ordinary objects for it" was, as Piotr Piotrowski has argued, commonplace to 1960s neo-avant-garde practices throughout the world, locally, it came out of a climate in which Yugoslavia, through a series of economic reforms, was integrating itself

¹⁰ Tomaž Brejc, "OHO as an Artistic Phenomenon, 1966-1971," in *New Art*, 14.

more and more into the Western capitalist world system.¹¹ In 1965, a year before OHO published their first manifesto in *Tribuna*, the League of Communists had announced a new series of reforms that aimed to remove political involvement from economic decision-making, and to open the country up towards a market economy. On a federal level, these reforms brought about a struggle over who should be responsible for the redistribution of national income: the federation, the separate republics or the banks.¹² On a local level, the reforms gave more decision capacity to enterprises, which defined the levels of capital accumulation and the recruitment of new workers. As a result, Yugoslavia witnessed the emergence of a new technocratic class of local functionaries and regional political and economic elites that struggled against the old, centralised federal authority over investment and the accumulation of capital. During the 1960s, both became the core of a rising “middle class” that was consciously disassociating itself from lower social groups because of its higher income levels and individualized attitudes and lifestyles.

In what was becoming an increasingly stratified society, OHO was formulating an artistic approach that sought to emancipate objects from their use and brand value, and to offer an “anti-commodity” model of seeing. Aimed at imaging new relationships between objects and man, OHO’s doctrine of

¹¹ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 189.

¹² Gal Kirn, “On Yugoslav Market Socialism through Živojin Pavlović’s *When I am Dead and Pale*, 1967,” in *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and its Other*, eds. Dijana Jelača et. al., (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 145.

Reism could be seen as a timely reflection of the dangers of consumerism for Yugoslav society, at a time when its spread was enabling large portions of society to slightly improve living standards, while economic reform continued to strengthen pro-capitalist tendencies, exacerbate power inequalities in socialist companies, and increase unemployment rates.

In spite of Reism's more critical dimensions, it is generally accepted that OHO's early practice was rarely political in intent. As Igor Zabel has proposed, OHO's approach was ultimately a "popular" one, whereby creative processes would become an integral aspect of everyday life for all, and "aid in developing society's relation to the world." However, while OHO's practice may not always have been overtly political, reading their early work before the background of Yugoslavia's "1968" may further illuminate the way it addressed the impact of market reforms on Yugoslav socialism, including the repercussions of these reforms on the federation's previously guaranteed protections of social and economic equality, as well as shared sovereignty.

Yugoslavia's "1968" began at the University of Belgrade in June of that year as a long series of strikes and demonstrations condemning police brutality and campus living conditions. Though it encompassed voices from a broad ideological spectrum—ranging from those "who adhered to the idea of socialism with a human face to those who were anti-socialist," as Kemal Kurpahić, then an editor at Belgrade's *Student* magazine, put it—it has largely been historicized as an expression of resentment over the country's rising "red

bourgeoisie,” and the class stratification that came with Yugoslavia’s turn towards market socialism.¹³ Proclaiming a strike in the institution they had renamed the “Red University – Karl Marx,” students lashed out against “socialist barons” and “enrichment at the expense of the workers.” According to mainstream accounts, they wanted to expand social justice, reform the economy, and spark an ideological reorientation from *within* the framework of self-management. However, they lacked a clearly articulated “alternative” vision. Insisting that their program was the “program of the Yugoslav Communist Party,” it was the lack of ideological differentiation from the Party’s official politics that allowed Tito, through a skilful and conciliatory speech, to put an end to the protests.¹⁴

Looking back at the events of 1968 today, it seems reasonable to conclude that the students failed to hold the ruling elite accountable for the lack

¹³ Kemal Kurspahić, “Moja ‘68’: poziv na ljudski, pravedeniji, bolji svet,” in *Šezdeset osma – licne istorije*, ed. Đorđe Malavrazić (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2008), 202, trans. Ljubica Spaskovska, *The Last Yugoslav Generation: The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 43.; For a summary of the events underpinning Belgrade’s “1968,” see Boris Kanzleiter, “1968 in Yugoslavia: Student Revolt between East and West,” in *Between Prague Spring and French May: Opposition and Revolt in Europe, 1960-1980*, ed. Jacob Pekelder, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 84-100.

¹⁴ For Performance Studies scholar Branislav Jakovljević, the almost immediate suppression of the protests not only resulted in numerous arrests, trials, and prison sentences for some of its participants, but also constituted a clear historical departure point from which to trace the “beginning of Yugoslavia’s end.” Reading Belgrade’s “1968” through the theatre performances that spontaneously erupted at the demonstrations’ most critical moments, his argument follows how the radical and revolutionary calls of the students were suppressed and transformed through the “double track of authoritarian law and illicit enjoyment,” which would in turn become integral to the rise of intolerant nationalism in Milošević’s Serbia during the late 1980s and 1990s. See Branislav Jakovljević, “Human Resources: June 1968, *Hair*, and the Beginning of Yugoslavia’s End,” *Grey Room 30*, Winter 2008, 38-53.

of egalitarianism, self-management, and solidarity in Yugoslav society. But though it feels fitting to read the apparent shortfalls of the student demonstrations through the lens of Yugoslavia's eventual disintegration, on a cultural level at least, the 1968 "moment" also signaled a temporary strengthening of artistic freedoms in the country. For Denegri, this strengthening involved a proliferation of artistic activities defined by their "urbanity and detachment from traditional national cultures as well as a pronounced desire to keep pace with the latest artistic practices in global art centres such as New York, London and Paris."¹⁵ It is the resistance towards national cultures that will be central to my reading of OHO's *Triglav* project, staged just six months after the events of June 1968.

<Set Figure 3 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: LARGE.> OHO, Milenko Matanović, *Mt Triglav*, performed by Drago Dellabernardina, Milenko Matanović, David Nez. December 30, 1968. Zvezda Park, Ljubljana. Image courtesy of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

According to *Triglav*'s principal author Milenko Matanović, the idea behind the work was simple. On the penultimate day of 1968, Matanović, together with OHO members David Nez and Drago Dellabernardina positioned himself in the center of Ljubljana's Zvezda Park city square. They had cloaked

¹⁵ Ješa Denegri, *Primeri konceptualne umetnosti u Jugoslaviji*, eds. Biljana Tomić and Ješa Denegri, (Belgrade: Salon Muzeja Savremene umetnosti, 1971), exhibition catalog, trans. Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects*, 146.

themselves in a black cloth that enveloped their bodies, while leaving their long-haired heads visible. Together, the artists arranged their silhouetted figures to replicate the craggy outline of Mount Triglav, the highest peak of the Julian Alps. By “bringing the mountain to the city,” the three participants wanted to offer a late December gift to the citizens of Ljubljana, and were particularly mindful of those who were physically unable to visit it themselves.¹⁶ But regardless of the author’s own personal motivations, there is still an undeniably ironic dimension to this action. Triglav is not only the highest mountain in Slovenia, yet was, and still remains, a symbol of the Slovene nation. In Ljubljana, the action was first performed when the country’s political and economic decentralisation had reopened the question of “national identity,” with the Slovene press increasingly focusing on issues pertaining to the republic’s sovereignty and Slovene statehood. This was also a moment when leaders of Yugoslavia’s wealthiest republic became openly critical of the federal tax system, which aimed to fund the less developed southern republics’ growth by redistributing profits from the wealthier north-western regions.¹⁷ Seen in the

¹⁶ Milenko Matanović in interview with Beti Žerovc, ‘The OHO Files: Interview with Marko Pogačnik’, *ArtMargins Online*, 24 August 2011, <
<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interview-with-milenko-matanovi>>

¹⁷ One year later, in December 1969, OHO came to Novi Sad to mount an exhibition at the Youth Tribune and performed *Triglav* for the second time. By then, the situation in Slovenia had reached breaking point. Dissatisfaction over the Federal Executive Council’s failure to submit a funding proposal for road construction projects in that republic to the World Bank had erupted in full blown public protests in Ljubljana that threatened the collapse of the Federal government, and prompted the personal intervention of Tito himself. For a detailed account of the events underpinning the crisis, see Steven L. Burg, *Conflict and Cohesion in Socialist Yugoslavia*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp.88-100.

light of Yugoslavia's growing national crisis, spurred by Party divisions on economic decentralization and constitutional change, OHO's staging of the three-peaked mountain acted as a subtle reflection on the complex intersections between consumerism, nationalism, and political conservatism following the party's turn towards market reform.

Triglav seemed to both inhabit the national symbol and to claim it for itself, replacing the anonymous peaks of the mountain with the scruffy and unshaven faces of 1960s counterculture. However, to the casual passer-by strolling through Ljubljana's historic city squares, it may have looked more like an irreverent mockery of the Slovene nation than a nuanced political commentary. The action's countercultural credentials were fully cemented when photographs of the happening appeared in the first issue of *Rok*, a magazine published in Belgrade in early 1969, and edited by the "blacklisted" experimental prose writer Bora Ćosić. Self-defined as a "periodical for literature and the aesthetic study of reality," and announcing a fight against writing that increasingly "took the wrong tack" by pleasing individuals and making them happy," *ROK* was central to introducing OHO's writings and actions to Serbo-Croatian readers through the prism of the "OHO movement in the space of mixed media."¹⁸ On the pages of *Rok*, OHO's actions and texts were printed alongside various Fluxus texts by Ay-O, George Brecht, Hi-Red Center, and

¹⁸ Ed. Bora Ćosić, *Rok: časopis za književnost i estetičko ispitivanje stvarnosti*, no. 1, Belgrade, 1969.

George Maciunas, and a discussion between Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp. These were in turn interspersed with photographs of battered students from the protests of May 1968 in Paris, and processions in Prague commemorating the death of the young Czech student Jan Palach who died in January 1969 after setting himself alight to protest the end of the Prague Spring.

Encountering large, detailed photographs of *Triglav* on *Rok's* pages gives a vivid sense to how ideas circulated across the Yugoslav cultural space and how a fleeting and ephemeral gesture staged in a small city square in Ljubljana was able to reach larger and unanticipated audiences in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Novi Sad. It also, more broadly, unveils the complexity and breadth of ideas that informed the artistic production that emerged in and around the watershed year of 1968, not only in Yugoslavia but throughout the world. But while engaging with, and participating in, these international debates, the development of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia was by no means analogous to, or derivative of, similar currents in America and Western Europe. Instead, it emerged in parallel with a series of seismic political developments following the events of 1968—a critical position that becomes increasingly apparent when examining some of the landmark events staged at Zagreb's SC Gallery.

1968 Against 1971

In February 1969, OHO returned to Zagreb to mount their first exhibition at the Gallery of Contemporary Art. OHO's transferral from parallel youth spaces to a

reputable contemporary art institution such as the Gallery of Contemporary Art demonstrates the esteem that the collective had carved out for itself within the Yugoslav cultural space. Shortly after OHO had secured this institutional validation, the city's more "informal" SC Gallery began to support a new, young and unknown group of artists from the city's Academy of Fine Arts by announcing, in June 1969, a competition intended to "encourage all explorations in the visual, or plastic, or any other field, to enable the realisation of progressive ideas."¹⁹ In the same month that SC Gallery initiated this "Competition," it also announced the opening of *Izložba žena i muškaraca* (Exhibition of Women and Men): an exhibition that would, according to the short press release, "close straight after the opening."²⁰ On June 27, at 9pm visitors waited at the Gallery's entrance where copies of *Novine GSC* (SC Newspaper)—the gallery's self-published monthly broadsheet, which recorded exhibition activities, and often acted as an exhibition catalog—were distributed, proclaiming that the exhibition they were about to enter would give them the "opportunity to look at themselves."²¹ In the same text, confused and bewildered visitors were informed of what was expected from them:

For God's sake, be the exhibition itself! At this exhibition, it is you who is art and figuration, you are the Social Realism. Art is not

¹⁹ "Galerija studentskog centra objavljuje i raspisuje," *Novine GSC*, no. 5, Zagreb, 1968-69, 20.

²⁰ Announcement featured in *Večernji list*, Zagreb, June 27, 1969, 4.

²¹ Želimir Košćević, "Izložba žena i muškaraca," *Novine GSC*, no.8, Zagreb, 1968/69, 29.

outside of you. Either there is no art, or that art is you...live here
intimately with your ideas, even if you don't have any.²²

The existing photographic documentation captures a bright, floodlit space, with around some 100 visitors gradually realizing that they themselves were the subject of the exhibition. At that point, they slowly began to move from the center towards the wall to minimize their exposure. But it was too late—visitors found themselves staring “eye to eye, face-to-face, all united in a unique exhibit, where the exhibits move, sounds resonate, and heat is formed.”²³ Soon an element of frivolity swept in: while some visitors transformed the distributed newspaper into paper airplanes and launched them into the gallery space, others turned the sheet into paper masks.

<Set Figure 4 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: MEDIUM.> Vlado Jakolić, Photograph from *Izložba žena i muškaraca* [Exhibition of Women and Men], June 26, 1969. Galerija Studentskog centra, Zagreb. Image courtesy of Arhiv za likovne umjetnosti HAZU, Zagreb, Inv. no.: SC-46/F1.

Staged one year before Lippard's estimated date for Yugoslavia's entry into the global shift to “idea” art, The Exhibition of Women and Men is today considered a pioneering gesture of dematerialization, which played out in Zagreb when there was little of a critical understanding of Conceptual art. But whereas Western Conceptual art was, according to leading accounts, deeply

²² Košćević, “Izložba,” 29.

²³ Košćević, “Izložba,” 29.

rooted in structures of advanced capitalism, this exhibition was motivated by broader social fears over the infiltration of capitalist influences that came with Yugoslavia's opening to Western markets. As Ivana Bago has argued persuasively, The Exhibition of Women and Men was, at its core, an expression of "leftist opposition to bourgeois ideology," and more specifically, towards the "Art of the West, or what has been deemed the negative influence of the West."²⁴ Bago's interpretation provides a nuanced sense of the connection between the New Art's growing disenchantment with Western Conceptual art's commodification, on the one hand, and its deeper fears over the failures of Yugoslav socialism, on the other. But it also raises the important question of what might have been considered "bourgeois" at this time. Which "Western" artistic influences were considered reactionary by the "leftist" artists and workers who gathered at the SC Gallery?²⁵

A closer look at the Exhibition of Women and Men's supporting statement may provide a potential answer to this question, particularly with its impassioned demand that the visitor become not only the "exhibition itself," but also, through this transformation, the "figuration" and "social realism."²⁶ In Yugoslavia, Socialist Realism was disbanded as the official style following the country's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948. As more "freedom" was

²⁴ Ivana Bago, "Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s," *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No.1, Spring 2014, 15.

²⁵ Bago, "Dematerialization," 9.

²⁶ Košćević, "Izložba," 29.

granted in culture after this event, the focus of the debates shifted to the aesthetic relationship between figuration and abstraction. According to Šuvaković, the “moderate modernism” that emerged in the 1950s and persevered throughout Yugoslavia’s history represented:

A middle path between the abstract and the figurative, between the modern and the traditional, between regionalism and internationalism [...] On the one hand this allowed artists to approach the mainstream of international Western modernism, while on the other it was a voice of resistance to more radical versions of modernism (from abstraction to the neo-avant-gardes).²⁷

Šuvaković’s description of “moderate modernism” gives a strong sense of the scattered, eclectic, and contradictory nature of this phenomenon—poised as it was between the “abstract” and “figurative”, the “modern” and the “traditional.” It also reveals the difficulty when it comes to Yugoslavia, of approaching this “moderate modernism” as a monolithic construct. For it clearly embodied a rather disparate field of practices associated with a variety of individuals, and encased within a wide range of institutions. In Zagreb, at the time of The Exhibition of Women and Men, it was not so much modernism that was viewed

²⁷ Miško Šuvaković, “Introduction: Art and Politics,” in eds. *Impossible Histories: Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, eds. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 11.

as a “bourgeois” force by the SC Gallery’s collaborators.²⁸ Instead, it was, according to Košćević, a group of figurative painters, “infected by the virus from Zagreb’s Fine Art Academy,” along with a “traditional, conservative milieu, a bourgeois civil milieu,” that stood in conflict with the “free, explorative, avant-garde, experimental line.”²⁹ The SC Gallery had first come into conflict with this group of figurative painters in 1966, when students from the Academy of Fine Arts stormed into the opening of the *Hit parada* (Hit Parade) exhibition and destroyed the objects on display. By 1970, this faction of painters came to be associated with a group called “Biafra,” which believed that “non-figurative art could not deal with essential issues of humanity, which should be the main concern of artistic creation.”³⁰ Biafra’s activities came from a position that was, according to Košćević, “definitely right wing,” and arose from questions regarding the “national” role of art.³¹ Their position was fortified by a political climate in which the incompleteness of the economic reform of

²⁸ After all, by 1969 Zagreb had already witnessed not only the emergence of the progressive “modernist” group of painters and architects that went by the name Exat 51 (in 1950); it had also played host, from 1961 onward, to the trailblazing and international New Tendencies Movement. For more information on New Tendencies, refer to Armin Medosch’s *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016).

²⁹ Želimir Košćević, *Galerija studentskog centra Zagreb (konceptcija, djelatnost, dokumentacija)*, ed. Želimir Košćević (Belgrade: Salon muzeja savremene umetnosti, 1975), exhibition catalog, 11.; Želimir Košćević, “We Succeeded in Creating a Beautiful and Instructive Thing That’s Inevitably Been Irredeemably Lost, But Such is Life,” *Newspaper Galerija Nova*, No. 18, Zagreb, December 2008, 17.

³⁰ Vinko Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra 1970-1978*, (Zagreb: Art Studio Azinović, 2001), 62, trans. Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde and Ecology under Socialism*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 124.

³¹ Košćević, “We Succeeded in,” 14; Srhoj, *Biafra*, 62.

1965 began to refuel popular demands for expanding Croatia's autonomy within the Federation. This agitation was primarily being stoked through one Croatian institution, the Matica Hrvatska, a respected and ancient cultural institution that became an aggressive defender of Croatian national sentiment. By the beginning of the 1970s, nationalist tendencies had spread through many of Croatia's core institutions, culminating in the "Croatian Mass Movement" that included over 30,000 students at Croatian universities going on strike in support of the republic's autonomy in November 1971. One month later, Tito charged the Movement's leadership of pandering to nationalists, separatism, and "rotten liberalism" in the face of "counter-revolution" and forced them to resign along with several of their closest collaborators, ushering in a period in which Croatia was often described as the "sullen republic."³²

Indirectly, the activities nurtured by the SC Gallery marked a conflict in the Croatian cultural scene, which, according to Košćević, can "in a broader scope be read as an issue of different political orientations: 1968 against 1971."³³ 1968 was connected to the student movements, which protested against the "*embourgeoisement*" of Yugoslav socialism and the failure of self-management to create an egalitarian society, while 1971 was fuelled by assumptions about nationalism and the nation-state as principles. It was

³² Jill Irvine, "The Croatian Spring and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia," in *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*, eds. Lenard J. Cohen & Jasna Dragović-Soso, (Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008), 168.

³³ Košćević, "We Succeeded in," 16.

predominantly concerned with strengthening Croatia's position within the Yugoslav federation, as opposed to securing equality amongst its citizens. In the complex and unstable political situation following the strikes and demonstrations of November 1971, critics already noted the public's reluctance to engage with such pioneering gestures. As a result the once youthful optimism that drove the SC Gallery's programs was abandoned. By August 1973, the *SC Newspaper* had announced a "recession," complaining of "an absence of enthusiastic activities, which could free us from the lethargic state in which we have found ourselves."³⁴

At the time when the SC Gallery announced its "recession," the League of Communists pushed through reforms designed to break up the power of local-technocratic monopolies from below. In 1971, it approved a series of amendments, defining republics as "states" based on the "sovereignty of nations." This development reached its apotheosis in 1974 with a new decentralising constitution, making federal politics the object of complicated processes of negotiation between republics and autonomous provinces. In the words of art historian Branislav Dimitrijević: "The second part of 1960s and the 1970s marked the time of the greatest political and economic contradictions, a time when the processes of disintegration commenced, masked by the improvement in the standard of living and the appearance of the new economic

³⁴ Anon., "Recesija?," *Novine GSC*, no.45, Zagreb, August 1973, 189.

elite which took advantage of these paradoxes in the system.”³⁵ These “political and economic contradictions” become fully apparent in the unique and often overlooked case of Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune, where the New Art Practice crossed into direct political provocation.

Going “Underground”

Located in the capital of the multinational, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune was founded three years before Zagreb’s SC Gallery, in 1954. Initially intended as a social space for the city’s universities, during the 1960s it became a lively zone of collaboration between writers across the entire territory of Yugoslavia, and a hotbed for the New Art Practice on account of its two editorial offices and small exhibition space. From 1970, the Youth Tribune also began to serve as a vessel for the activities of the first conceptual art group in Serbia, KÔD, which came together as university students with the determined aim to free “art of all the functions ascribed to it, starting from the educational and cognitive functions to the religious and ideological ones.”³⁶ As in OHO’s case, KÔD began their practice through “official” youth state institutions, and it was only through the Tribune’s financial assistance, together with Mirko

³⁵ Branislav Dimitrijević, “Embarrassment Does Not Bother Me as Much as the Market!,” in *POLET: Economic Propaganda in Yugoslavia from 1968 to 1980*, (Belgrade: Cultural Centre, 2013), 13.

³⁶ Mirko Radojičić, “Activity of Group KÔD,” in *New Art Practice*, 38.

Radojičić's role as culture editor of the city's university newspaper *Index*, that they were able to carry out and disseminate some of their first works.

However, in KÔD's case, it was the "institutional" status of the Youth Tribune that hampered the group's future development. Already in 1970, the Youth Tribune had come into conflict with the municipal socio-political organisations of Novi Sad, which had little understanding of its programs, 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."³⁷ The following year, in 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 program and new council will be constructed."³⁸ According to KÔD member Slobodan Tišma, such conflicts of interest were emblematic of a tension between the "old" and the "new."³⁹ Speaking retrospectively, Tišma explained that it was not the "politicians" that disapproved of KÔD's work, but a group of reactionary artists that "hated our guts and slandered us. The police and the politicians eventually

³⁷ Judita Šalgo, "tribina mladih: otvorena – zatvorena," *Index: list studenata Vojvodine*, October 21, 1970, p.7.

³⁸ Č. Keco, "Novi Sad: čeka se direktor," *Susret*, October 17, 1971.

³⁹ Jadran Boban, 'Kralj šume u transu rock'n'rolla – razgovor sa Slobodanom Tišmom', *Zarez* 146, Zagreb, 2005, trans. Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, "Spit in the Eye of Truth (then Quickly Close Your Eyes Before it)," *Život umjetnosti: časopis za suvremena likovna zbivanja*, 84, 2009, 137.

did the job since they loved to demonstrate power, in the sense of: ‘just point your finger and consider it done.’”⁴⁰

In many ways, Tišma’s account echoes the power struggles between the SC Gallery and its broader cultural context. But at the Youth Tribune, the confrontation between the “old” and “new” would carry far heavier and irreparable consequences for the city’s New Art scene. After the Croatian Mass Movement, the Tito-led coalition conducted a similar struggle against currents of “anarcho-liberalism and opportunism [with] Fractionalism” in the League of Communists of Vojvodina.⁴¹ As in Zagreb, this involved purging all those “who came into conflict with the revolution, revolutionary practice and the line of the LCY.”⁴² Yet in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, objections raised against the leadership went beyond accusations of deviation from the principles of democratic centralism, to include the opposition of “revolutionary continuity and an insistence on the conflict of generations.”⁴³ The latter charge implied that the party leadership in Vojvodina was actively promoting the inclusion of a younger generation into positions of responsibility previously occupied by members of the older, Partisan, generation. Here, there are obvious parallels with the measures that were being taken at the same time at the Youth Tribune, which could be seen as an attempt to stifle free thought and opposition to the

⁴⁰ Boban, “Kralj [...]”

⁴¹ Rojc et. al., *Deseti Kongres SKJ: Dokumenti*, (Beograd: Komunist), 387, trans. Burg, *Conflict and Cohesion*, 178.

⁴² Rojc et. al., *Deseti Kongres*, 387.

⁴³ Rojc et. al., *Deseti Kongres*, 387.

“Party line.” Given that such currents were likely to increase demands over the strengthening of autonomy and independence from Belgrade, it is not surprising that repressions taking place in Vojvodina extended to the cultural youth sphere itself.

<Set Figure 5 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: LARGE.> Cover of *Student*'s “Underground” Issue. Belgrade, December 16, 1971. 52 x 34.5cm.

Image courtesy of Slavko Bogdanović.

The Struggle for Self-Management

With the Youth Tribune now closed to the city's experimental artists, KÔD member Slavko Bogdanović began to seek out different channels through which to overcome institutional intervention. At a moment when the city's institutions weren't in the position to provide guarantees for democratic work, Bogdanović published his “Underground Song for the Youth Tribune, Novi Sad” in the censored “Underground” issue of the magazine *Student* (December 1971).⁴⁴ Printed in Belgrade's leading youth publication, and appealing to wider audiences outside of Novi Sad, Bogdanović's text addressed the current conditions at the Youth Tribune, which, being the “official property of the youth organisation” had just become an “adaptation of young habitants of the city with a consumerist stance to the world...[a] suffocation of all creation, [an exponent

⁴⁴ Slavko Bogdanović, “Pesma underground tribina mladih Novi Sad,” *Student*, Belgrade, December 16, 1971.

of] provincial ideology, de-individualisation, a preservation and conservation of new tradition.”⁴⁵ These accusations were subtly reinforced through the issue’s cover which was designed by Bosch + Bosch group member Balínt Szombathy: a reversed print of the American flag, accompanied with a caption beneath it, stating “Made in Yugoslavia.” Taken in conjunction with Bogdanović’s “song,” this cover appeared to imply that in the country often dubbed “America’s communist ally” a softer style of consumerism was beginning to distract from the urgent work needed to sustain an active and healthy political culture.

Written in 1971, Bogdanović’s “song” anticipated many of the allegations that have become central to recent political histories on the former Yugoslavia—namely that, linked with the market from its inception, self-management was deprived of emancipatory charge from the outset.⁴⁶ Following the removal of the liberal leaderships in 1971/2, a new and strengthened Executive Bureau was introduced, and democratic centralism was, for a brief moment, reasserted as the first principle of political life. But while clearly coercive measures were being taken in the political sphere, softer and more dispersed means were employed to preserve public compliance. At the beginning of the 1970s, austerity measures were lifted, and material comforts and consumerism once again began to cushion the heavy hand of the League of

⁴⁵ Bogdanović, “Pesma underground.”

⁴⁶ Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, “Self-Management, Development and Debt: The Rise and Fall of the ‘Yugoslav Experiment,’” in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*, eds. Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks, (London: Verso, 2014), 42.

Communists, while diverting from the lack of a robust political culture capable of supporting a “self-managing” society. Already in 1971, Bogdanović complained of how the previously progressive Youth Tribune had become a “distributor of mass entertainment,” simply promoting “commercial underground and political talks”—“disco-clubs and socialist indoctrination.”⁴⁷ The Tribune’s programs had been steered away from an active and engaged understanding of culture to a totally conformist and consumerist one, far removed from the state’s ideological pillar of commercial relations theoretically grounded in the “social ownership of the means of production.” The text further confronted the coercive nature of the environment, in which “young men with gentle fingers are running, their eyes goggled, already short-breathed, and behind them inevitably follows Stalin with clenched fists...this could be expected in Russia, but not in Novi Sad.”⁴⁸ For Bogdanović, provocation became the only effective way of challenging an institutional system which, at that moment, could not take any excesses. As a result, the artist received an eight-month prison sentence.

<Set Figure 6 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: MEDIUM.>

Slobodan Tišma & Čedomir Drča, *Primeri nevidljiva umetnost* [Examples of Invisible Art], Novi Sad, 1976. Black and White Photograph of Artists in Street

⁴⁷ Bogdanović, “Pesma Underground.”

⁴⁸ Bogdanović, “Pesma underground.”

Action, 19 x 24.2 cm. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina.

For other artists who refused to adhere to the party line, the only alternative to direct provocation was to stop working through the state institutions. Following the action taken against the Youth Tribune by the local Youth League and the imprisonment of a handful of artists who directly criticized the regressive political situation, former KÔD members Slobodan Tišma and Čedomir Drča withdrew from public art practice. Instead, they began the time-based action called *THE END*, which included the work *Nevidljiva umetnost* (Invisible Art), for which between 1972 and 1977 they drank 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: 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 photographs, the protagonists are captured wearing t-shirts embossed with the caption “THE END” whilst holding empty Coca-Cola bottles. For these artists, these “gestures” represented the “end” of their art, with the photographs serving more as residues of a form of reflection than as documents of an artistic action or performance.

Asked about why he chose not to publish anything until 1995, Tišma recently revealed that the “reason consisted in a great disenchantment with what happened in the early Seventies. The great illusions were crushed. The idea that

life equals art was definitely dead. I didn't want to deal in any way with strategies i.e. politics. I started to doubt everything we did and I simply quit."⁴⁹ Though this urge to withdraw resonated with many of "Global Conceptualism's" key practitioners at around the same time, in Novi Sad, these private acts also spoke to the disappointment sensed by artists at being abandoned by the Youth Tribune. At a moment of oppressive change and political turmoil, it seems that escapism became the only form of artistic engagement left to them. In the same year that Tišma and Drča began to pursue *Invisible Art*, OHO dropped all public performances and embarked on a "period of silence," forming a commune in an abandoned farm house in Šempas instead.⁵⁰ From 1971, Belgrade's newly-opened Students' Cultural Centre and Gallery, founded in reaction to the events of 1968, would inherit the struggle to establish forms of critical artistic engagement that would end in similar

⁴⁹ Boban, "Kralj šume."

⁵⁰ Ješa Denegri, "Prisečanje na rad grupe OHO," *Polja: časopis za književnost i teroiji*, no. 190, December 1974, 20; In the exhibition catalog for the OHO retrospective at Ljubljana's Students' Cultural Centre, which took place in the same year as the New Art Practice exhibition, Brejc explained that OHO's decision to stop exhibiting on the "threshold of their greatest success" was because they never "belonged to the 'art system' dictated by the art market and exhibition policies in the late sixties." Though it is often assumed that OHO dissolved because of its disillusionment with professional art production, in Beti Žerovc's more recent interviews with the group's members, published in *ARTMargins Online*, their reasons are more prosaic and varied – ranging from a growing interest in spirituality, meditation and communal living, to increasingly divergent personal commitments. For more information on OHO's dissolution, see Tomaž Brejc, *OHO, 1966-1971*, (Ljubljana: Študentski kulturni center, 1978), and Beti Žerovc, "The OHO Files," *ARTMargins Online*, accessed August 31, 2018, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/oho-homepage>.

disillusionment, albeit under very different political and cultural circumstances.⁵¹

<Set Figure 7 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: SMALL.> Slobodan Tišma & Čedomir Drča, *Primeri nevidljiva umetnost* [Examples of Invisible Art], Novi Sad, 1976. Black and White Photograph of Artists in Street Action, 19 x 24.2 cm. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina.

It comes as no surprise that accounts of the New Art Practice tend to adopt a defeatist and disillusioned outlook when examining its development. Revisiting these stories today, it might even seem fair to conclude that Yugoslavia's youth spaces were, in the words of Zagreb curator Ljiljana Kolečnik, an attempt to “ghettoise critical art practices and thinking...limiting their effects to a narrow segment of urban student youth.”⁵² As the case studies presented here have demonstrated, the New Art's “golden era” began in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Novi Sad in the latter part of the 1960s, and its development was intimately linked to the country's economic integration into world markets. Able to foster the radical activity necessary the conditions for their own critique, the youth spaces that nurtured the New Art Practice were

⁵¹ Interestingly, in the same year that the Belgrade's Students' Cultural Centre opened, Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art organised the first exhibition of “Yugoslav Conceptual Art” (*Primeri konceptualni umetnosti u Jugoslaviji*) in its gallery, which consisted of works by the OHO, KÔD, and (E) groups. For more information, see the exhibition pamphlet for *Primeri konceptualni umetnosti*.

⁵² *Socialism and Modernity. Art, Culture Politics 1950-1974*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik, (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2014), exhibition catalog, 157.

clearly impacted by a moment of crisis and upheaval, driving many of its early proponents to stop making art at the beginning of the 1970s.

However, as compelling as these accounts of defeat are, they tend to smooth over the many contradictions implicit in Yugoslav socialism. While depriving the New Art Practice of its political relevance, they simultaneously fail to register that the country's experience with self-management was a far more complex, gradual, and multifaceted phenomenon than may be apparent at first glance, with many of the elements that appeared to provide stability to the regime eventually driving the country's violent dissolution. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that during the 1990s, the Yugoslav experiment was condemned in the same way as the rest of European socialism. But the dismissal of nearly fifty years of experience cannot erase the problems that Yugoslav socialism arose to solve. While the literature on Yugoslavia's seventy-year existence continues to recast the entire period in terms of its outcome, understanding what went wrong in Yugoslavia— what led to the country's vast political and economic fragmentation, and eventual disintegration— while at the same time excavating the more progressive potentials of self-management seems timely, not least in view of the worrisome political processes taking place in the world today.