



## Non-Aligned Pop: Case of Slovenia<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

During the late 1950s and early 1960s in Slovenia echoes of various movements within figurals were limited to individual artists; however, in the second half of the decade, “new figurals” established itself mostly among the younger generation. Pop became an umbrella term for an artistic portmanteau encompassing newer forms of figurals painting. Slovene pop art could not hope to go head to head with already established groups of authors who had ensconced themselves in the key positions of the art world and therefore had almost no possibilities to get shown internationally. This is why in Slovenia interesting new authors and opuses are still discovered today.

**Keywords:** pop art, painting, Slovene painting, figurative painting, Slovene pop art.

### 1. Looking back on the pop art era from South-Eastern Europe

More than four years have passed since P74, a small independent Ljubljana gallery, set up the exhibition by a female painter who was at the time better known to the Slovenian general public as a participant in two Olympic Games. The artist was 9<sup>th</sup> in the shot put in Melbourne in 1956, and 10<sup>th</sup> in Rome in 1960. The exhibition *Milena Usenik: Lost pop art* presented the artist’s almost unknown early opus, patched the historic gaps that seem to be ever present in Slovene art history, and was also a popular “vintage” exhibition for “hipsters, an exhibition for today” (Mrevlje, 2014).

The interest shown by the visitors, the immediate purchase of Milena Usenik’s works for the collection at the central national institution in a period in which collection purchases were rare, combined with the huge 'boost' in large international exhibitions which attempted to re-evaluate pop art, draw attention to the fact that the moment has come to re-evaluate art which has – since the mid 1960s – tried to confront the invasion of consumer culture into socialist Yugoslavia and survive in an art space dealing with a power struggle between the “dominant understanding of culture (which in the context of post-war socialist societies denotes ‘high culture’ [in painting abstract art, the legacy of the Paris school, informel, intimism... note by author]) and the attempts for culture to become widely accessible (understandable) to the broadest possible circle of users [in painting predominantly naive art, amateur activities... note by author]” (Kolešnik, 2013). Lilijana Kolešnik ascertained that both sides understood the invasion of visual culture to be a

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<sup>1</sup> This combination of words was contributed by dr. Nadja Zgonik, a Slovene art historian, who is responsible for thorough analysis of collage in the work of the painter Marij Pregelj.

threat. During the 1960s and 70s works that belong to the same conceptual notion as pop art<sup>2</sup>, “expressive figural art”<sup>3</sup>, new realism and narrative figural art<sup>4</sup>, capitalist realism<sup>5</sup>, etc., emerged in Slovenia.

When the art historian Jure Mikuž was writing his book on Slovene and Western painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the themes of appropriating the foreign and the seeming shortfall of genuine Slovene art were still painful due to the modernist ideology of authenticity and uniqueness. Numerous paintings by a number of Slovene artists are formally similar to paintings by international artists, however, this could be a result of copying, a reaction, internalisation, use, coincidence or deliberate likeness. Today it is clear that works similar (also in quality) to American, English, German, French or Italian works were also created in other countries and on other continents. They were created wherever there was at least some sort of a consumer society. Collectively, today this art is known as “pop art”<sup>6</sup>.

The title Variants of New Figural Art would be more appropriate, for it would draw attention to the fact that the world is not simple and that the discussed art did not merely include pop, but a mixture of influences from different art centres, divided into existing local art practices, local reality and the local horizon of expectations of the public and the expert public, which was also co-created and directed by the micro-policies of the Slovene world of art. But the term “pop

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2 The term was first used by the English critic Lawrence Alloway in his 1958 article *The Arts and the Mass Media*. Today the term describes art that includes previously existing mass culture images, which have been processed into two dimensions and are most commonly found in the mass media, and which emphasise two dimensionality and frontal presentation. On the other hand American pop is dominated by a central composition and flat colour surfaces that are framed with sharp edges, mechanical and other non-expressive techniques, which hint that the artist’s “hand” has been removed and the process has been depersonalised (typical for mass production), non-apologetic decorativeness, a jump into the field of kitsch and popular taste (which were until then exempt from the field of “high art”) and focusing on contemporary contents and integral sources that the artist uses. The following artists belong to Alloway’s frame: Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist and Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Richard Smith, Peter Blake, Roger Coleman, R.B. Kitaj, Allen Jones, David Hockney and Derek Boshier (see e.g. Livingstone, 2003).

3 A term used by the Slovene art critic Aleksander Bassin for paintings by Slovene artists bound to the new figural influences. Even though time showed that the term was unsuitable, it was used by other writers at the time as well as in later texts. It was also used by the curator and art historian Zdenka Badovinac when she curated the exhibition *Expressive Figural Art* in the Ljubljana Modern Gallery in 1987 (she also graduated on this topic).

4 The expression new realism (nouveau réalisme) was first used by Pierre Restany, a French critic and advocate of this art movement, in his 1960s Manifesto in which he discussed the works by Yves Klein, Arman, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, Raymond Hains, Jacques de la Villeglé and César. New realism and narrative figural art have their roots in European art history, for the first examples consciously emerge from Duchamp’s ready-made. New realists use cheap, mass produced objects, often in large quantities. They often establish a narration with elements of mass consumerism and express clear opposition towards consumer society. They see art as an intellectual challenge and share the desire to rehabilitate the object. They are also interested in the phenomena of the industrial civilisation. Figuration narrative is a term dating to 1960, which was used to discuss the works by Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo, Henri Cueco, Gérarde Tisserand and other artists. Their engagement, belief in the social function of art and their leftist attitude is characteristic of these artists and this quickly pushed them into a situation in which their works were criticised as the new version of social realism (see e.g. Millet, 2006).

5 Capitalist realism was the title of the exhibition prepared by painters Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Wolf Vostell and Konrad Lueg in Düsseldorf in 1963. See Special Issue on Capitalist Realism, *Art Margins*, 4(3), MIT Press, Cambridge, 2015.

6 See e.g. *The Ey Exhibition. World Goes Pop*, which was curated by Jessica Morgan in the Tate Gallery in London, 2015.

art” is globalized today and is a more familiar expression. Slovene new figural art – when it is included into overviews of “pop art” exhibitions does not wish to elude this name.

The first time Yugoslav painters classified by the critics as new figural artists were exhibited was at the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Yugoslav Triennial of Fine Arts* in Belgrade in 1967. The painter Zmago Jeraj was the only Slovene artists to be included in this exhibition. In March and April of the following year the people in Belgrade could visit the exhibition *Contemporary Slovene Art*, which was prepared by the Ljubljana Modern Gallery in the Belgrade Museum of Modern Art. One of the greatest experts on Yugoslav art at the time, the art critic Ješa Denegri, wrote: “One can notice that over the last decade the reflections of the dominating art languages in the general international panorama (in the alternatives of other versions of pop art including optical and kinetic art) was not strongly felt in the art of the Ljubljana circle” (Denegri, 1968). The critic's precise observations were a result of two things: on one hand the spread of new figural art in Slovenia at the same time as he was writing about it and the art critic Aleksander Bassin set up the exhibition *Expressive Figural Art of the Young Ljubljana Circle* in Belgrade in December of the same year.<sup>7</sup> This exhibition put together a few artists of the younger generation who painted in this manner.

The second reason was that the Belgrade exhibition *Contemporary Slovene Art* was conservatively curated by the Ljubljana Modern Gallery – during this period the institution was channelling all of its energy into the Graphic Biannual, where it planned to launch a selected part of Slovene art into international waters, hoping that they will create a possibility for developing an art market within socialism. Maybe this were the reasons why it failed to open the doors to art practices developing within the younger generation.

The inclusion of new figural artists into the official mainstream took place belatedly. The first step was only made in 1987, when an overview exhibition of expressive figural art was prepared in the Modern Gallery. This process continued in 2001, when Tadej Pogačar and Tanja Mastnak prepared the exhibition *70+90* in the Centre and Gallery P74, in 2003 Igor Zabel included the works by the painters Berko and Franc Mesarič into the overview exhibition of Slovene art between 1975 and 1985 in the Modern Gallery, while in 2011 the new setting of the permanent collection in the Modern Gallery presented paintings from this period as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art movements.

## 2. Context: Yugoslavia in the sixties

In 1965 an important economic and financial reform took place in Socialist Yugoslavia. For the first time questions were posed as regards the convertibility of the currency (Dinar), international competition and trading with other countries. The increased production of consumer products (which was encouraged by the state), the industry income, the development of the distribution system, tourism and port activities (partially as a result of the membership in the non-alignment movement) led to the rise of the living standard. Between 1965 and 1968 the income per inhabitant increased by 18%, while spending increased by 20%. The level of education also

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<sup>7</sup>The painter Gabrijel Stupica had been responding to new practices since the end of the 1950s. In the middle of the 1960s he was joined by the painter Marij Pregelj, and in the second half of the decade by avantgardist Avgust Černigoj and painter Stane Kregar. The group OHO went through its pop phase between 1965 and 1969, and the first wave of painters – those that Bassin called “expressive figural artists” – created this sort of opus post 1967. Over the following years numerous young artists more or less successfully joined this manner of painting: hyperrealism appeared at the end of the 60s or beginning of the 70s with the painters Berko and Franc Mesarič, Duba Sambolec's sculpture triptych dates to 1976/1977, and by the end of the decade the responses to the new figural art movement ended or transformed to the measure where it was no longer possible to talk about pop art, “expressive figural art”, new realism, new or narrative figural art.

improved. The overall “appearance” of Yugoslavia changed, especially in urban centres. State borders opened and travelling became more popular. People could now buy a car, new household appliances were on offer, the shelves in shops were better stocked, the marketing industry was expanding, the presence of television, magazines and photographs could be strongly felt and the connections with Western European countries were becoming stronger. Slovene painter and today cult comic book author Kostja Gatnik, who importantly influenced an array of visual art branches over the 1970s, stated that he ordered numerous magazines to be sent to Ljubljana through a branch of Mladinska knjiga. Most of them were on art, culture and alternative, but he also ordered some on how to make synthetic drugs at home, and yet the supply never stopped.

In the 1960s rock music came to Slovenia, at first as Slovene copies of foreign hits. Rock music was not played on Slovene radios, but it was played in youth clubs, which were being opened across the country, and which were followed by the first night clubs and the first student radio station in Yugoslavia, Radio Študent (1969). The first student demonstrations in Ljubljana and the occupation of the Faculty of Arts followed (1968-1972). As regards culture, most of the students still fluctuated between elite and autonomous culture, they drew attention to social inequalities and other pressing issues of the time. Certain communes and broader family and friendship communities appeared. Most of them shared a characteristic appearance and sensitivity for ecological issues, and emphasised a healthy natural lifestyle, practised yoga, studied eastern philosophies, smoked marihuana, etc., all of which enticed the interest of artists. However, during the 1970s, the social climate was becoming increasingly repressive.

Since the fifties foreign art publications started making their way into the Yugoslav world of art and in the sixties international connections and exhibitions were on the rise. Josip Broz Tito, the president of the state, publically warned against the negative influences from abroad and the modern, especially abstract art from the West in his speech at the Seventh Congress of the Yugoslav Youth in January 1963 as well as in four concurrent speeches that he delivered throughout the winter of 1964. Politics had an ambivalent attitude towards modern art, which was partially a result of the micro-physics of the government, which did not trickle down from the top, but was circling and on the lower levels did not reproduce the general forms of leadership, thus it was not a simple projection of the central authorities (Foucault, 2010). Even the federal policy was ambivalent as regards the reduction of the role of Western, especially abstract art. Due to different reasons – different views on art, personal ties, political connections, financial and other benefits – local politicians and bureaucrats allowed such art and unless they received serious bans from the top positions, such which could threaten the entire structure, they also supported it. The world of art functioned relatively autonomously.

### 3. Pop art in Slovenia

#### 3.1 *The arrival*

One could say that South-eastern Europe got acquainted with pop art at the 1964 Venetian Biennial. Robert Rauschenberg’s paintings were awarded the prize for the best international work, and the exhibition also included works by Jasper Johns, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg. The pop art exhibition was on display in a temporary structure in front of the official American pavilion in the Venetian Giardini and at a parallel exhibition in the former American consulate in San Gregorio. Both were prepared by the American private gallery owner Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend, his wife at the time and later an independent gallery owner, while the main secretary of the Biennial Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua confirmed that the additional exhibition was necessary due to the size and number of artworks. Even though the event was not officially endorsed by the American government, the La Fenice Theatre accompanied the exhibition with Merce Cunningham’s ballet, Robert Rauschenberg’s set design and John Cage’s music. This was a planned American attempt to help pop art make its breakthrough into Europe. The awarded prize

led to strong criticism of the work performed by the international jury, while French and numerous other European critics accused the Venetian Biennial of cultural colonialism. The appearance of pop art at the Biennial under the new American general consul Gordon E. Ewing was not merely an artistic, but also a political event, for the last elections and Pope John XXIII. brought Italy to the verge of communism. The award, which Rauschenberg undoubtedly deserved, was also a result of the skilful American diplomacy, “which had to do something also on the cultural field” (Salvagnini, 2006).

In the 1960s Yugoslavia encountered a first-hand experience with pop art. The formation of this movement in the capital of the country, Belgrade, was aided by two travelling exhibitions, both of which arrived from New York. In 1961 the exhibition of American painting entitled *Contemporary American Art* was shown in Belgrade and Ljubljana, while in 1965 the same two towns hosted Rauschenberg’s illustrations for *Hell*. In Belgrade, Đorđe Kadijević, the promoter of the local new figural art scene, wrote that the movement was born as a rebellion against the formalism of abstract painting. In 1963 the Ljubljana Modern Gallery showed a travelling exhibition which included the works of D’Archangelo, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Wesselmann, Wesley, Dino, Jones, Laing and Phillips. At the 5<sup>th</sup> Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic arts in 1963 Robert Rauschenberg received a large prize for a series of graphic prints even before he was awarded the Golden Lion in Venice. In 1968 *40 American Graphic Prints* were placed on display in the lower rooms of the Ljubljana Modern Gallery, while in 1966 a travelling exhibition of graphic prints by eleven pop artists (Allan d’Arcangelo, Jim Dine, Allen Jones, Gerald Laing, Roy Lichtenstein, Peter Phillips, Mel Ramos, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselman)<sup>8</sup> was shown in the same premises. In 1969 they were joined by the exhibition *New Expressions in American Graphic Prints* which showed the works by twelve artists, including Dine, Johns, Kitaj, Rivers, Rauschenberg and others. This exhibition was passed on by the Smithsonian Institute from Washington.

There were plenty of opportunities to get acquainted with American pop art in Yugoslavia, and in the second half of the 1960s Slovene artists also travelled a lot, while some of the younger generation even studied abroad.

### 3.2 *The reception*

By the end of the 1960s artworks marked by echoes of the various new figural art movements were beginning to be created in Slovenia. Established painters, Gabrijel Stupica, Marij Pregelj and Stane Kregar reacted on these impulses, and they were joined by the reborn former constructivist Avgust Černigoj. In the second half of the 60s the “expressive figural artists” started appearing, and they were followed by two photorealists (Berko and Franc Mesarič), the group Junij with installation artist Stane Jagodič and some other artists<sup>9</sup>, amongst which one of the more visible positions was occupied by opuses created by female artists – Milena Usenik, who worked between 1971 and 1976 and Tinca Stegovec, who also worked in the 70s.

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<sup>8</sup> Jure Mikuž states that the exhibition presented 15 artists (Mikuž, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s the move towards new figural art in painting could be noticed at Janez Bernik, Lucijan Bratuš, Srečo Dragan, Tomaž Gorjup, Gustav Gnamuš, Štefan Hauk, Kamil Legat, Adriana Maraž, Ivo Mršnik, Lado Pengov, Miša Pengov, Vladimir Potočnik, Ratimir Pušelja, Marjan Remc, Nejc Slaparj, Matjaž Schmidt, Branko Suhj, Jože Trobec Peter Vernik, Tomo Vran ...

### 3.2.1 *Gabrijel Stupica*

Gabrijel Stupica's bright period, in which the pseudo collage with images and collages and a true presence of the mass media appear for the first time, begun when the artist moved to a new, brighter studio in 1957. In 1966 Stupica received a mention in the overview of Slovenian painting, a richly illustrated book, which was written by the art historian Špelca Čopič. She described Stupica's use of concrete materiality as the painter's "feeling of inadequacy of the old means of expression", which is "so strong that the painter had to adapt it to the new experience of reality. [...] But as soon as the painter opened the doors to his world, our time forced itself into his hard to maintain cultivated inner peace. Stupica tackled everything, newspapers and advertisements, the screaming titles at sport matches, souvenirs and dried flowers, financial and city planning issues. He was spared of nothing and his painting dealt with the modern period" (Čopič, 1966).

The art historian Tomaž Brejc published his contribution in *Naši razgledi* in time for the painter's seventieth birthday. Following the unpublished art history graduation thesis of the poet Tomaž Šalamun, which dealt with the work of Stupica, this text was the first to indicate his possible connections with pop art: "Stupica is of course also a master of high modernism skills. We can sense Picasso's drawing, Schwitters' collage, Wolsey's hesitations, even the redundancy of Fautrier's stylisations, the crumbled informel material, and the influences of Rauschenberg and Johns. However, especially present is the underground wave of pop art as a source of unheard inspiration (especially for Dine and Oldenburg); not to be mistaken, this is not copying, but some sort of discreet broadening of the presentation field, a sign of freedom and joy that the painting has directly encountered things that the artist was also thrilled to encounter. Of course, it is not our intent to write such an analysis, as this was performed in greater detail by others, but behind historic knowledge and the concomitant sensitivity one can see the truth that Stupica is – just like a hundred years before him Gustave Moreau – 'a loner who knows the times of the trains'" (Brejc, 1983).

Even though in Stupica's time Slovene art had not truly lived through and ended high modernism, it was emerging and simultaneously disintegrating in his works and this led to a period in which the signifier let itself go into the air, it became arbitrary, similar as was the case with the works of the great proto pop painters Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. In certain works that Stupica created (similar to the American artists), the signifiers (letters, numbers, images...) became free of their meaning and it would be wrong to forcefully apply a meaning with the aid of psychoanalytical symbolism or metaphors (Orton, 1994).

By introducing a real object into the painting, their useful value is annulated, and replaced by a new, artistic value. If the real object in American pop art hints towards the relation between consumption and the value of art, this is not the case with Stupica, who believes in Art and lives amidst a totally different, socialist reality. This is not about realism nor illusionism, for the illusion in Stupica's painting is so genuine that it becomes reality, or it cannot be separated from it. Contrary to pop art, Stupica's painting wishes to hold on to the meaning of what is encoded into it, even if the meaning is open and never totally comprehensible to the viewer. The painter repeats the same image, but regardless of this, maybe through the endless repetitions, the meaning eludes us and the subject can no longer be realised.

### 3.2.2 *Marij Pregelj*

Similar to Gabrijel Stupica the painter, and at the time also a professor at the Ljubljana Academy of fine Arts, Marij Pregelj also studied at the Zagreb Academy under Ljubo Babić, who passed on to his students his love for the Spanish monumental painting of Velázquez, El Greco and Goya. In Ljubljana Pregelj presented his work for the first time in 1937 at the *1<sup>st</sup> exhibition of*

*the Club of Independent Slovene Artists*, and joined the Neodvisni (Independent), who created works under the influence of the Paris school.

He became a prisoner of war soon after the war started, first under the Germans and then under the Italians. In the 1950s he turned a new leaf in his opus with the illustrations for the books *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1950 and 1951) and with his two month study trip to Paris, where he also exhibited. The large, schematised figures gained in importance, and the space within the painting changed and became two dimensional and fragmented, almost screen like, which the artist explained in the following way: “Everything around us is destroying the vision of a clear space, in which a man can move safely and to which we have become so accustomed in painting that we consider it to be reality. We move with speeds unknown until now, we fly through the air, we have seen states of weightlessness on canvass, we research the unbelievably large and small and we need to react swiftly to a series of mysterious signs that the children in primary school are learning. Life brings new impressions of space, speed, noise, danger and colours and painters seek for new ways of expressing this, which is far from the static and organised Renaissance world” (Čopič, 1964).

After World War II Pregelj became a prominent representative of Slovene “mainstream” art, a lecturer at the Academy and a state representative at numerous Venetian Biennials. He created in the given conditions of victorious socialist modernism permeated with existentialist philosophy, but he was always interested in the contemporary in the world as well as in art. Especially in his final years he started experimenting with his painting, which surpassed the expectations of the local public. “In the years before his death his thoughts almost reached the 'edge', he was even willing to throw away the painting convention and grab hold of anything so that the expression of a certain realisation would be as convincing as possible and that the means would be immediately to hand, at the source of the thoughts. This is the topic of Vasko's (artist's son Vasko Pregelj, note by author) film *Marginalije (Marginalities)*. The film includes a series of shots of artworks, which are hard to define, for we wonder whether they are paintings, sculptures, sculptures painted over or all of the above; however, whatever they were they are extremely convincing” (Krečič, 1975).

In 1966 Marij Pregelj created the collage *Woman's head – helmet*, in which he cut out an image of a woman's face from a magazine, cut in into fragments and pasted them onto paper in a different order. From the original en face image he created a collage of a profile, which is reminiscent of a profile of a soldier with an antique helmet (Zgonik, 1994). As ascertained by the art historian Nadja Zgonik he started creating preparatory studies on pieces of paper torn from magazines in 1966, and already in the 1950s he occasionally used newspaper cuttings as a template. Collages and drawings included the previous image in new frames and by blurring or switching elements he changed the form, the direction from which we view it and of course this distortion also changed the meaning.

The last three works in Pregelj's opus, i.e. *Dptychon*, *Portrait of Vasko* and *Polyphemus* are characteristic for their brutality and violence in their form and contents, however, these works differ slightly from the rest of his opus. Material contemporaneity invaded his paintings; images looking as printed papers appear on canvass and in *Polyphemus* the lower left part of the painting reminds us of a single comic frame, which depicts an explosion in sound and picture. The use of colours in *Dptychon* is especially interesting: “Pregelj was trendy in the use of colours when decorating his home as well as when painting. The sixties were marked by ecstatic bubbling of saturated colours and patterns, psychedelia moved from pop-culture to art, and painting was the most open for music and poetry, it accepted these pop impulses” (Zgonik, 2007).

He was also interested in film, which his son Vasko was dedicated to. His graphic prints often depicted a film strip with images. The painting *Polyphemus* is also divided into a series of frames, but rather than a strip of film, the division reminds us of the comic logic. An appearance

of a collage technique appears in Vasko's portrait, the artist's penultimate painting – he had already previously portrayed Vasko with his camera in the painting *Holiday in the studio* (1965). Vasko's eye, the one that is not substituted by a camera lens, is looking like a collaged media image, as is Vasko's camera (to a certain degree). Both elements that record visual impressions from the surroundings are substituted by the appearance of media images which are also created by a camera.

Mass media entered Pregelj's creations in the mid sixties, merely a few years before his death. The works that were created during these two years show that he successfully integrated images from magazines as well as other contemporary images into his previously developed self-poetics. Of course, it is impossible to determine where would the artist go with his research, but it is obvious that new figural art and the development of the consumer society in Yugoslavia influenced the most successful and best artists of Slovenian socialist modernism, who were prepared to reflect what art historians and critics failed to notice for a long time to come.

### 3.2.3 *The art critics*

In the *Telegram* magazine from January 1969 Aleksander Bassin stated that the work by painters Stane Kregar, Štefan Planinc, Marko Šuštaršič, Andrej Jemec and Tone Lapajne tried to follow the current trends in the Western art world. Kregar and Planinc supposedly came close to what the Italian curator Enrico Crispolti called engaged figural art, however they preserved their own subjectivity (Bassin, 1969).

The art critic Marijan Tršar wrote that it seemed that at the end of the 60s Slovene art opened up to “global avant-garde movements” and the work of Stane Kregar showed the presence of “visually informative inserts into the new figural art which was being introduced by American pop art”<sup>10</sup>. When he finished describing the current trends in Slovene art he added: “The generation that has just graduated from the academy is surprisingly oriented towards ‘figural art’. Kalaš as well as Pengov, Gvardjančič, Gatnik, Logar and Krašovec represent a refreshment to the former figural solutions, a relaxation in the direction of clean, hermeneutic colour surfaces and an expressively addressed outline of the object. Recently the group OHO has also appeared and they exhibit ‘goods’<sup>11</sup> and stage ‘happenings’, similar to certain extremist groups in Europe and America” (Tršar, 1969).

Tomaž Brejc described 1969 as a year of retrospectives, in which the official mainstream of Slovene art became a “mixture of ‘impressionism and expressionism’, the only true heritage of Jakopič's art, covered by modern lyricism, a subdued tonality, a precise, somewhat intimate formal treatment, the structure of which is best seen in the creative path of Stane Kregar” (Brejc, 1970). He also drew attention to the ever more prominent painters that Aleksander Bassin called “expressive figural artists” and emphasised their ever greater distance from the traditional mainstream. However, he understood 1969 as a period in which visual art remained half way, and was contemporary only at first glance. Brejc thought that it was clearly visible that the Academy of Fine Arts was lagging far behind the needs of the world of art.

In the same year he wrote for *Sodobnost* that the introduction of figural art was characteristic for the Slovene production in 1968 and he drew attention to the insufficiency of critical writing when encountering this phenomenon. With this he attacked the inappropriate use of “engaged” (Bassin) and “magical figural art”, for this manner divided figural production merely by iconographic elements – i.e. by the rather simplified way of reading its “contents”. He suggested

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<sup>10</sup> Tršar failed to notice these “inserts” in the opus of Gabrijel Stupica, who he also discussed in the same article (Tršar, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Artikel.

that paintings should be read as an institution in the broader visual context and should lead to thoughts on the question of transferring “text concepts into the language of painting. The revival of figural art once again emphasised the relations between the experience world of the average viewer and the analogue possibilities that contemporary figural art generates, [and is] already in advance doomed to remain illustrative” (Brejc, 1969). He also drew attention to the fact that some sort of basic criteria with which artworks will be judged needs to be established and that this should not be based on the reading of figural art as a collection of transparent meanings which are merely juxtaposed in the painting. Brejc stated that because the visual is expressed through language, it is necessary to think about the language with which we express, explain and name the image. The problem of language when naming and explaining figural art can be found in its over simplified reading. Spoken language is not parallel to visual language, a work of art cannot be judged by an existing model. The naming of an artwork, continues Brejc, is not a set of basic elements of the art language. The artwork is constructed on the basis of the reality outside of it and can be viewed in a way, in which we check the principles of visualisations, pass on their “image” and thus achieve knowledge of the current, direct principles of visualisation (Brejc, 1969). Brejc’s warnings were a reaction to the simplified critical readings, which appeared in a period in which figural painting was abundant. These readings remained on the level of descriptive description of works and conclusions that could be reached through such analysis.

### 3.2.4 *Stane Kregar*

In the 1960s the works by Stane Kregar were believed to represent “a sturdy and valuable element in Slovenian contemporary painting” and the fact that “this painter stirred up the Slovenian cultural public and elicited strong arguments for and against his work” (Tršar, 1968), was almost forgotten. Kregar was always open to foreign influences. Following his surrealist period he, after the war, turned to abstraction with visible objects (Mikuž, 1995) and upset the political and a part of the art critic public with his exhibition in the Ljubljana Modern Gallery in 1953. In the sixties some of his works started to include elements of new figural art, predominantly influenced by the French manner. Even though he liked to attach himself to Western influences Kregar created paintings, which were at least partially adjusted to the public’s expectations. He combined impressionist and expressionist expressions, symbolically merged the subject with the non-subject (almost in conjunction with the poetic), and he covered everything with his beloved lyricism “with subdued tonality, and precise, somewhat intimate formal treatment” (Brejc, 1969).

During this period the mass media addressed Kregar on two levels. On one hand we were dealing with the artist’s revived interest in the current social and political events and the creation of historic paintings. He was also interested in telling moralist stories about concurrent social groups and the world as seen in the images on television and in newspapers. In some works he established a connection between an actual event and the added warning that is allegorically provided by the painter. In an interview dating to 1971 he stated: “I observe the world, I see how the youth is searching for a better world, and this appears in my latest paintings. I often depict hippies. Hippies are some sort of an answer to this question. They are searching for a better, happier world. In my paintings I criticise their wrong paths, I criticise their desires. They want to create a better world with sexual freedom, drugs, etc.” (Rode, 1971).

Some paintings reach across the moral narrative frames and try to pass on the sensory impressions of a certain moment (e.g. *Hot Summer*). The mass media provides Kregar with information on social and political reality. He uses the images he finds in magazines and newspapers as motives for his works, but he does not pay attention to the characteristics of transferring them from one medium to another.

He only partially took over the form from the artists who worked within the frames of the French new figural art, and he adjusted their form to fit his own expression. However, he did

not attempt to come closer to the idea which in the better French works surpassed fascination or endangerment with contemporaneity. As regards contents he did not attempt to work in Warhol's manner in which he saw the painter as a machine, he did not come close to the impersonal expression characteristic for pop art, he was not interested in repeatability, he did not glorify or criticise the consumerism of the contemporary society, and the form stayed far from the hard edges, perfect flatness, denial of the illusion of atmosphere, equalising the figure and the background and large surfaces covered in one pure, unmixed colour. In opposition to pop art, new figural art and all of their variants, which are usually created with acrylic paints, he remained true to the oil on canvass technique until his death.

### 3.2.5 *Avugust Černigoj*

In the same period as Stane Kregar and Marij Pregelj, the former constructivist Avugust Černigoj also started re-introducing images from the mass media into his works. In 1946 the artist found employment in Trieste as an arts teacher at the Slovene classical primary school, and later he taught at the classical secondary school and the Slovene State School, where he remained until his retirement in 1970. After the war Černigoj was therefore more or less financially secure and could once again focus on his personal interests in art. The artist was also encouraged by the appearance of the new neo-avant-gardes in the sixties.

In 1963 he replaced the gold colour in his abstract paintings with gold foil, with which he opened the doors to collages and assemblages for the second time (he had already abandoned these techniques in the 1920s). He soon started using other techniques, from double printing in graphic prints, to rip collages in the early seventies. He reworked some of his older paintings by adding image fragments from magazines. Milko Bambič compared this novelty to the invasion of pop art elements into the informel base<sup>12</sup>, which was supposedly announced by Černigoj in a radio interview even before pop art was presented at the Venetian Biennial in 1964 (Bambič, 1964). With this act Černigoj opened the door leading from informel to the concreteness of the included 'ready-made' photographs, newspaper clippings, clothes and strings: "Černigoj's objects, which were created at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s, emerged in a similar way as those he created forty years before: he gathered bits of wood, plastic caps, rubber and plastic parts and similar objects. He glued them onto a hard surface in a certain order and then covered it all with white paint, sometimes in a combination of black and white, sometimes in a combination with pink. He would surround the central motif with gold and blue stripes. He liked to place the object onto the surface symmetrically and at the same time he started introducing this approach also into his graphic prints. This is when lined up, symmetrical female figures started to appear, sometimes divided into parts and reassembled along the geometrically divided surface. This last approach was linked to the rather numerous and undoubtedly high quality group of objects of some sort of compartmentalised compositions, most of which he created in 1968. He found some wooden drawers for storing printing letters that were discarded by a printer, and he used each one individually to create a shiny work of art. At his seventieth birthday he exhibited most of them in the Trieste Municipality Gallery" (Krečič, 1999).

Černigoj, who lived in Trieste, was acquainted with the concurrent movements in the international world of art and he regularly visited the Venetian Biennial, which was in 1964 flooded by the strongly criticised American pop art, which came as a storm. At the fiftieth

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<sup>12</sup> Informel can be defined as the painter's sensuous manuscript. He no longer delivers his message with a direct address, but through a gesture, texture, material. Regardless of the non-figural art and absence of representation we can see a close connection with the concurrent existentialist atmosphere and phenomenology. Special importance for informel can be found in its tie with physical automatism, as developed by pre-war surrealism.

anniversary of constructivism the art critic Janez Mesesnel was the first to attempt to link Černigoj's first constructivist phase with the new creative phase of the late sixties and seventies (Mesesnel, 1969). Černigoj's former pupils, the architect Boris Podreka (Podreka, 1968) and painter and computer art pioneer Edvard Zajec encouraged a new evaluation of the almost forgotten avant-garde opus created by Černigoj (Zajec, 1978). Boris Podreka drew attention to the inappropriate evaluation of Černigoj's opus as early as 1968. At the time his work was negatively evaluated because the measurement for quality in Slovene art was "beauty, captured in the sense of warm harmony". At the same time he stated that art critics favoured artists with a "patented self", and of course, this type of expression could not be found in Černigoj's eclectic creativity (Podreka, 1968). In 1970, the art historian Peter Krečič, who later on became one of the key experts on Černigoj's opus in Ljubljana, still believed that Černigoj's contribution was of no great importance (Krečič, 1972), but he soon decided to re-evaluate Černigoj's first avant-garde period and became the greatest expert on the artist's opus.

Černigoj was still interested in technology: "Today machines, technology, movement and brutality are the motifs. Yes, even brutality, when machines become dangerous. The conveyor belt can represent a motif. Space and atomic exploration. With new motifs, the old ones fade away" (SaS, early 1970s [note by author]). His enthusiasm for film could be noticed in the documentaries that were recorded about him and his work by the video makers Rado Štrukelj and Aleš Žerjal. In both films Černigoj participated with ideas on sound, costumes and adding images from television screens in the montage. In one of his articles Janez Mikuž wrote that Černigoj even dabbled in programming a "computer [sic!] for art production" and he marked the time in which the artist worked as the "plastic era", something which was emphasised by another expert on Černigoj's art: "If plastic entered our everyday lives, it also has to find its place in art" (*Razstava ...*, 1972).

Sometime in the early seventies, during school holidays, Černigoj could be found in Škofja Loka and Idrija, where Jurij Badavž, the director of the Idrija Municipal Museum, allowed him to paint the museum mine machine in the castle courtyard. With this he created a public artwork and museum exhibits painted with lively colours gained positive reactions from the locals while being criticised by museologists (Krečič, 1985). In 1972 he also created collages, coloured tailoring sheets and created artworks from found objects (metal and wood pieces and plastic beer cases) in Idrija. Following his return from hospital after an illness in 1975, he never again touched objects and collages right up to his death in 1985. Avgust Černigoj spent the last five years of his life in Lipica, where his works are presented in a permanent exhibition in the Avgust Černigoj Gallery. Today, these works are in desperate need of restoration.

### 3.2.6 *The neo-avant-gardes*

The neo-avant-gardes, at which we today usually think of the representatives of the group and movement OHO, searched for contacts with their predecessors. Due to practical and conceptual reasons they wished to confirm their existence with their own history, which had to be formed from the official mainstream Slovene art. As the art system failed to provide this, the neo-avant-garde was the first movement in the national environment that conquered and kidnapped its own history. It found its predecessors in historical avant-gardes: "Thus we can ascertain that there is at least one possible art world in which the works of historical avant-gardes are accepted as artworks. Who is now the curator that accepts all responsibility? In reality it was the neo-avant-garde of the sixties and seventies, which consciously produced artworks and needed to be legitimised through tradition in order to continue doing so" (Kreft, 1998).

In 1967 Srečko Kosovel's poetry collection *Integrals* with neo-avant-garde collages was published. The selection was made by literary theorist Anton Ocvirk who also wrote the introduction. Ocvirk, who was Kosovel's friend and the editor of his *Collected works*, kept the box with *Conses* for years, and decided to publish them only in 1967. This was the period in which the

group and movement OHO appeared, famous literary theorist Dušan Pirjevec was a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts, neo-avant-garde typographic poetry was emerging and Tomaž Šalamun had his first poems published, and it seemed that the time was right to publish *Integrals*: “OHO discovered neo-avant-gardism through Šalamun, Ocvirk published Kosovel’s poems, which are categorised as historical avant-gardism, in America Michael Kirby started researching Italian literary and art futurism, the Soviet ban on researching avant-gardism was abolished and in Belgrade the International Comparative Literature Association called the first congress on literary avant-gardism. The spirit of the times could be heard in numerous places at the same time. This is how real things usually happen. I doubt Ocvirk’s earlier publication would have a greater effect than it did now, when it seemed orchestrated” (Kralj, 2004).

The inclusion of historical avant-gardes into the art system represented the beginning of changes in the Slovene world of art. Over the following decades these changes will allow for an ever greater plurality of art systems. However, in the late sixties the key national and municipal institutions were still sticking to tradition. “It seems that art is closed within this environment even though we have a very open contact with the world. However, it seems that this does not provide artists with varied inspirational contents characteristic for the reality of today’s technological civilisation. On the other hand it seems that we can, when looking at Slovene artists, see strongly expressed individualistic, one could say almost intimate emotions. They also seem to be less involved with the broader social, ideological or even political implication that a work of art has to include” (Denegri, 1968). To a great extent this was about local actors on important positions – in the 1960s the Slovenian art world was much smaller and organised in a rather centralistic way. It did not support current activities, nor were they encouraged or presented in the broader Yugoslav or international environment, for instance at the Venetian Biennial.

However, changes took place in Slovene art and painting. During informel “the national landscape signifier was replaced by an international location with neutral motifs, for instance a wall with no meaning, a bare wall and materiality cleaned of earth’s structure” (Zgonik, 2002) however, during the late 1960s, certain paintings under the influence of Western Europe and USA started including the fields of culture, consumption, new and mass media as well as urban settlements.

### 3.2.7 *Expressive figurals of Aleksander Bassin*

In 1968 the art critic Aleksander Bassin (in 1966 he found employment as the secretary at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, which gave him an insight into the work of the new generations) prepared an exhibition of young artists, painters from the Ljubljana Academy. The exhibition entitled *Expressive Figural Art of the Young Ljubljana Circle* was set on display in the Belgrade Gallery at the Cultural Centre. The following young painters exhibited: Srečo Dragan, Kostja Gatnik, Herman Gvardjančič, Zmago Jeraj, Boris Jesih, Bogoslav Kalaš, Metka Krašovec, Lojze Logar and Lado Pengov. All of them were reaching the end or have just completed their studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana. Bassin presented the artists as a more or less homogenous group and predominantly used the term “expressive figural art” when discussing their painting.

The first time the works by this group of artists were collectively shown in Ljubljana was only after 1970. However, over the following two years they were exhibited on numerous occasions throughout Slovenia and Yugoslavia, in various selections as well as independently, for the last time as an almost complete group in 1972 at the exhibition *Young Slovene artists '72* at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. In 1975 Aleksander Bassin stated that the paintings by the representatives of “expressive figural art” started moving in various directions. In this year some artists, who we today consider to be interesting, merely stepped on their independent creative paths, but these were not artists Bassin exhibited. What he recognised as a tie between

the works of selected artists, were derivatives of the various figural movements in Western Europe and USA. These were works that were formally and with their contents inspired by American and British pop art, French new realism, narrative figural art, hyperrealism and similar movements. These derivatives were transformed within the frames of the socialist tradition, which the painters received and accepted from their education and society, and which had a unique spin on consumer ideology.

### 3.3 Interpretation

Due to the different frame within which they developed, the Slovene derivatives of new figural art represent a local version of the original movement. This is interesting because of the ways in which it differs from the West, where pop art and other new figural art movements emerged in the late fifties and reached its peak at the beginning of the sixties. In this period the younger generation of Slovene artists was open to contemporary practices, they were aware of them, and occasionally they were even allowed into central institutions through the back doors, even though the older generation remained on leading positions and most of them had a more conservative view on art. None of the new researches could push out *Grupa 69* and the *Ljubljana Graphic School* from the key art venues. Similar as was the case in the period of the avant-gardes, those critics, gallery owners, financial backers, as well as artists who advocated, supported or lived with contemporary practices, could not implement the contemporary period with new figural directions, conceptual art, arte povera, photorealism, software art and minimalism. It seems that the Slovene world of art was open to the representations of certain new movements from the West, while remaining rather indifferent to its own practices, which were developing within the frames of the same movements. This is why some of the “lost” opuses are being discovered only today.

#### 3.3.1 Politics

Social and political circumstances had a great influence on the world of art and exhibition policies. In the beginning of the seventies, during an unstoppable reform that took place throughout Yugoslavia, the conservative part of the Communist Party dealt with the liberals, and the liberal politician Stane Kavčič<sup>13</sup> was politically convicted and excluded from public life. Yugoslavia once again experienced a period of ideological pressure, and this could clearly be seen in its cultural policy. Official policies clearly supported cultural activities of all citizens and (partial) resistance to high culture was exercised - which meant that amateur cultural activities, self-taught artists and similar were supported, while the funds intended for other production were reduced. We witnessed an increase in naive art exhibitions, and for a while local self-governing cultural communities were in control of “the acquisition policy for central modern art institutions” (Zabel, 2003).

Slovenia did not accept the Western influences in the sequence they appeared, for conceptual art was present already with the group and movement OHO before the influx of new figural art – that is if we ignore the short visit of pop art combined with reism and the original philosophy of the same group and the early influences on Gabrijel Stupica. Certain frictions emerged amongst these contemporary movements which found themselves in tough production and exhibition conditions during the seventies. The various movements used different strategies

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13 Following the economic reform in 1965, Stane Kavčič became an advocate of the liberal economic direction, which was based on polycentrism, and believed in the connectivity of the spatial, economic and social development, the use of the geographical position of Slovenia, developing industries which bring fast capital, encouraging private initiatives and investing private means, strong export orientation, inclusion into the European economic markets and regional connections with neighbouring countries.

to enter the main institutions and they varied in their success. It seems that conceptual art, fundamental abstraction and their representatives found it much easier to enter the official mainstream of Slovene art history as defined by the exhibition *Slovene fine art 1945-1978*, which was placed on display in the Modern Gallery, than new figural art or certain aspects of minimalism (Zabel, 1990). The polemics that were triggered by the overview exhibition revealed that a battle between abstract and figural art was going on in the local environment even in the late 70s. In the collective memory this battle was connected to the currently unwanted socialist realism of the first post-war years. Because of this a part of the expert public understood figural art as a thing of the past and this made it – similar to photorealism and pop art – undesirable. European movements were somewhat more desirable, and critics used the article on the death of photorealism, written by the Italian art critic Giulio Carlo Argan (which was published in the Slovene translation at the time in the only relevant art magazine *Sinteza*), as their theoretical screen.

### 3.3.2 *World of art*

The young generation of art critics and exhibition selectors – representatives of the various movements to which the artists of their generations belonged to – often found themselves in opposition. For instance, in 1969 Aleksander Bassin criticised the conceptual practice of the group OHO, when he said “that if these young ones wish to preserve the buzz that was created around them, they will have to invest greater passion and more polemics into their work” (Bassin, 1969). At first he supported and promoted “expressive figural art”, however, in the seventies he tried to establish a group of 'new constructivists'.

Art historian Tomaž Brejc and the theoretician Braco Rotar were both closely linked to the group OHO. The poet Tomaž Šalamun (who at the time worked as a curator in the Modern Gallery) was a member of the group OHO, which was also supported by Taja Brejc (who later became the first commercial gallery owner in Slovenia). Following the disbandment of OHO Tomaž Brejc became an advocate of fundamental painting, while Jure Mikuž, the third in the generation of young critics, did not actively support any of the movements. However, his critiques, notes and selection of paintings for the overview exhibition of art between 1945 and 1978 shows that he was not in favour of new figural art.

The critics who opposed pop art and “expressive figural art” believed that these movements merely repeated the patterns that originated in the international environment and that they did not have a lot in common with the true new figural art. “The Slovene versions of new figural art and pop art bring to mind a paraphrase of Ragon’s evaluation of the French situation: ‘Anglo-Saxon collages are pop, because they express the civilisation of posters, Coca-Cola, comics in all of their originality, while French painters create pop. Their work is an intellectual message and not a spontaneous expression’” (Mikuž, 1995).

### 3.3.3 *The exhibition Slovene fine art 1945-1978*

The conflict kindled at the exhibition *Slovene Fine Art 1945-1978* which was initiated by the Modern Gallery<sup>14</sup> and prepared in cooperation with other institutions. Architecture, design and photography were all exhibited in the Rihard Jakopič Gallery in Ljubljana, which was officially opened with this exhibition, and for the first time ever design was displayed side by side with paintings at the same exhibition. The part of the exhibition that presented paintings, sculptures, graphic prints, conceptual art and illustrations was under the patronage of the Modern Gallery and a group of experts, who were specially gathered for this occasion – including a few experts

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<sup>14</sup> Stane Bernik and Jure Mikuž explained that the exhibition had been discussed at least since 1973.

who were not employed by this institution<sup>15</sup>. The exhibition represented the basis for the until recently valid official mainstream of Slovene post-war art, however, it triggered a wave of criticism, which caused the institution to come under political pressure.

The Gallery “Emonska vrata” held an exhibition of the “rejected” entitled *In honour of the exhibition Slovene art 1945-1978*. In the catalogue Lev Menaše wrote that the overview exhibition *Slovene fine art 1945-1978* rejected figural art (Zabel, 2003). Once the exhibition was opened articles appeared in the media with titles such as “exhibition that changes facts”, and one of the posed questions read as follows: “how is it possible for such privatisation to take place during a jubilee like this and in an institution such as the Modern Gallery?” (Premšak, 1979).

A look at the catalogue confirms the conclusions that the exhibition did a poor job of evaluating the importance of figural art. In the introduction Zoran Kržišnik, the director of the Modern Gallery, failed to even mention new figural art when discussing novelties – conceptualism, neo-constructivism, minimalist art, environment and fundamental painting – in Slovene art (Kržišnik, 1979). A single paragraph within the analysis of painting is dedicated to “expressive figural art”, and even this does not use the term “expressive figural art”, nor does it deal with a collective approach to the artists. The text includes Metka Krašovec, Zmago Jeraj, Boris Jesih, Kostja Gatnik and Herman Gvardjančič as representatives of the new figural art tendencies, however, it fails to mention the work of Lojze Logar. On the other hand, this very catalogue includes Tomaž Brejc's seven page spread on the group OHO. Logar is mentioned in this text, but only for his conceptual actions, which belong to the thematic frame of the text. Alongside this he is merely mentioned as “a visible representative of the so-called ‘expressive figural art’ of the young Ljubljana circle, which was formed in 1968 or thereabouts” (Brejc, 1979). The catalogue includes reproductions by Jeraj, Jesih and Gvardjančič who are represented by a single, usually uncharacteristic artwork, Krašovec and Gatnik are represented by two artworks, while Franc Novinc, Lojze Logar, the photorealists, Kalaš and some other representatives of the younger generation were not even included in the exhibition. Only the works by Metka Krašovec and Zmago Jeraj were created during the period in which the group of “expressive figural artists” operated, and even these were selected in a way that did not offer the visitor any information as regards the influence of new figural art movements in Slovenia.

The experts working on the exhibition recognised quality mainly in the abstracts and their re-actualisation. Once the exhibition had been opened the Modern Gallery ensured that it would soon set up an additional exhibition that will focus on figural art movements amongst the generations born post 1945 (Bassin, 1979). This draws attention to the power of criticism in the world of art and politics. In our case criticism was not applied at the Modern Gallery merely through newspaper articles, as shown by Aleksander Bassin's example, for the Gallery was also placed under pressure through political levers that were at their disposal: “We continue with the current situation in the field of painting, which was evaluated by Jure Mikuž and Tomaž Brejc in the exhibition and its catalogue. [...] Mikuž and Brejc share almost entirely identical views (this is confirmed by their practice as critics), which does not speak in favour of objective criteria when dealing with an art movement that spans over such a short period of time. The consequences of this unity were felt in their refusal to evaluate any socially engaged figural art (socialist realism, new realism, pop art, forms of radical realism), which had or has a place in today's Slovene art. This could also be felt in the selection of works for the joint Yugoslav exhibition at the Museum of

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<sup>15</sup> The following experts prepared the exhibition and decided upon the works to be exhibited: art historians Tomaž Brejc, Jure Mikuž and Nace Šumi were in charge of paintings, Tomaž Brejc was also in charge of conceptual art, Špelca Čopič, Breda Misja and Marijan Tršar were in charge of sculptures, Zoran Kržišnik and Melita Stele-Možina were in charge of graphic prints, Špelca Čopič, Helena Pogačnik Grobelšek and Marijan Tršar were in charge of illustrations and Stane Bernik was in charge of architecture, urbanism, industrial design, graphic design and photography.

Contemporary Art in Belgrade (*5<sup>th</sup> Decade – War Art and Socialist Realism*), for the *4<sup>th</sup> Belgrade triennial of Yugoslav fine art 1977*, as well as for the overview exhibition *Art 1970-78*, which was prepared by the Yugoslav section of the AICA in Sarajevo 1978, and in the presentations of our painting tendencies within the frame of representative exhibitions abroad (within the frame of cultural exchange, in which the Ljubljana Modern Gallery is an active participant). As much as Mikuš and Brejc identified with the beliefs of G. C. Argan, I believe that this identification was present merely on a general level, for these beliefs do not consider the situation in Slovenia today, and I also do not know, for example, what is Argan's view on so-called fundamental painting and our group OHO, which hold important positions in the current overview exhibition" (Bassin, 1979).

#### 3.3.4 *Pop art has many followers*

In 1987 the Modern Gallery prepared the exhibition *Expressive figural art*, which presented the works of the group represented by Aleksander Bassin. The curator Zdenka Badovinac included the following artists into the historic overview exhibition: Boris Jesih, Lojze Logar, Metka Krašovec, Zmago Jeraj and Franc Novinc – today these artists form the official mainstream core of the Slovene new figural art movements. The solid and high quality core should also include at least Kostja Gatnik, Janez Logar (who has until now been known merely for his works in the permanent exhibition in the Zagreb Museum of Contemporary Art), a part of the group OHO's opus, the paintings by Herman Gvardjančič, Bogoslav Kalaš, Milena Usenik, Tinca Stegovec, three statues by Duba Sambolec, as well as the works of both hyperrealists Berko and France Mesarič.

When compared to previous generations it is interesting that most of the solid core of the "expressive figural artists" spent at least a part of their time studying abroad. Following his MA in painting Boris Jesih expanded his knowledge in graphic prints at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Berlin, Lojze Logar graduated from the Ljubljana Academy and then continued with his studies in Western Germany, while Metka Krašovec, who graduated in 1964, continued with her studies in Ohio, Italy and at The Royal College of Art in London. During his studies Zmago Jeraj became acquainted with the Belgrade Academy and the art circles there, and once he completed his post-graduate studies in Ljubljana he continued with his education in the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union.

The student movements (1968-1972), in which the artists also played a role, left an important mark on Yugoslavia. Jeraj occasionally published articles in Maribor's newspaper *Večer*. In his articles he often drew attention to the rights of the artists to plurality, and his publications included contributions on repeatability in art and the work of Warhol. Once it was no longer in contact with pop art, the Group OHO decided to step out of the world of art with a radical move. Stane Jagodič was busy with assemblages, which directly reacted to the political and social conditions in the country as well as globally, the feminism and social engagement in the pedagogic practice of Duba Sambolec needs to be emphasised, and some artists of lesser importance have – with the motifs found in their works – reacted to the social reality or even tried to iconize it (e.g. Marjan Remec).

#### 3.3.5 *Pop art is global with strong local specifics*

Due to the different socialist reality and the specific circumstances in the localised Slovene art space, it was hard to establish new figural art, however with the expansion of consumerism it was somehow preserved and even managed to develop further. Slovene new figural art also included enlarged details (e.g. the nose in Jesih's works, the tin opener and labia in Logar's works, or the cloth in Milena Usenik's works), repetition and numerous images

(Podravka soup in Metka Krašovec's works or the acronym B.M.C. and the stripe pattern in Logar's works). Occasionally characteristic large colour surfaces, non-modelled paint surfaces and lively colours (these differed greatly from the colours used by the Ljubljana Graphic School) appeared, while large formats were rare. The fact that numerous new figural artists exchanged oil for acrylic paint (this took place at the turn of the decade, with Jeraj already after 1967) was important, for this enabled an over-layered, unified, poster type application of paint. It seems that the change of paints caused problems for a number of artists. In 1973 Lojze Logar started using the silk-screen printing technique when creating his graphic prints (Mastnak, 1998).

Slovene artists that belonged to the new figural art movement were not as daring as their American and European counterparts. The images in their works were not as exposed. The manifestation of the banal world was uncharacteristic, for paintings often functioned in a narrative manner and were closer to the French role models.

In the history of art the thesis prevails that American pop art did not harbour a distance towards the consumer society, but we could also consider that American pop art uncovered and revealed this consumer society, while European artists (of course this is not applicable to all artists) accepted it as a medium and non-problematically incorporated it into their paintings, which in reality addressed other topics, for instance landscapes and moods (if we are discussing "expressive figural artists"). By substituting Warhol's *Campbell soup* with *Podravka chicken soup* in her early paintings (from which she distanced herself later on), Metka Krašovec addressed consumerism through the prism of socialist reality. Logar, Novinc, Kalaš, Gatnik and many others were drawn to the consumerist pin-up eroticism, while Jesih was drawn to the cosmetic industry. Logar often depicted coca-cola bottles in his paintings, while Jeraj was not interested merely in landscapes, but also in cold metropolises that presented the hopeless emptiness of buildings, something that could be already seen in bigger Yugoslav towns in which large sleeping communities were emerging: New Belgrade, New Zagreb ... Metka Krašovec enjoyed depicting architecture and interior details, however her paintings mediate a much more personal impression when compared to the cold works created by painters in Western urban metropolises. However, these works are comparable to certain European artists – Jure Mikuž convincingly compared them to the works of the Portuguese artist Manuel Jorge, while he compared her later paintings of hospitals with the paintings created by the German painter Peter Klasen (Mikuž, 2001). Berko and Franc Mesarič depicted architecture in a totally different, photorealistic way, for they were attracted to reflections and new architectures characteristic of photorealism. Their most interesting works depicted contemporary socialist architecture in the photorealistic style, while Berko even addressed the theme of ecology in a series of photographs and drawings depicting the local Loka landfill.

Alongside the works that were created within the frame of "expressive figural art" Metka Krašovec also created art that was linked to metaphysical painting, and because of this she was considered inconsistent by critics (Sedej, 1971). Boris Jesih simultaneously worked on geometric reliefs of heads, software paintings and paintings that were very close to pop art. Jeraj's paintings come very close to pop art in his comic portraits and abandoned urban landscapes, while his depictions of empty spaces with traces of devastation, and paintings in which nature and the urban world fight for dominance tend to move away from it. Franc Novinc focused on landscape art, where his colour palette, the presence of rare consumer society elements and his research of the relation between nature and society (characteristic for both, Jeraj and Novinc) came closest to new figural art. However, if Slovene painters saw nature as a priori above the everyday world and an almost religious entity, it seems that Novinc and Jeraj tried to show that the town and landscape intertwine. Kostja Gatnik drew comics, while the artists from the Prekmurje region worked in graphic design.

Occasionally Logar came close to Wesselman and moved almost entirely within the frames of the new figural art movements. In 1972 Bassin wrote that he was one of those artists

whose style belonged to pop art and yet he achieved results also in the aesthetic field. One year later he described Logar's paintings as a result of an "indirect encounter between explicit pop culture, which was defined by a reporting, reproductive style, and the endeavours to achieve certain innovations in the purely aesthetic field" (Bassin, 1975). The advocate and establisher of the movement had to defend Logar's pop art with the desires of "high art" (Bassin, 1972).

What the critic understood as an "innovation in the aesthetic field" to a certain degree intended to place a greater emphasis on clear lines and geometry, but mainly it was a switch in the depicted subject. Post 1973, Logar, unlike others, started introducing images from the mass media into his paintings and graphic prints, and this led to expressive characteristics of the mediated image. After this we can no longer talk about pop art (Badovinac, 1987), but about the use of the media image in a similar way as it was used in photorealism.

Milena Usenik, who graduated in 1968, created non-political pop with a political social context, which can only be properly read if we are aware that Italian magazines, fashion and music offered more than the grey Yugoslav everyday. Milena Usenik's paintings reveal her love for patterns and the media image, they attempt to stylise the fashionable contemporary woman, and they show the joy for the contemporary form, which moves from the fabric to the lips of the person, who has been transformed into an object. Milena Usenik is not afraid to enjoy the urban contemporary femininity brought by the West. In socialism, in which everybody is supposed to be equal, a desire for a different socialist woman appears and in the mid 1970s this desire obtains a feministic commentary in the works of Duba Sambolec.

Milena Usenik started considering the edge of the painting already in her 1973 painting *Ribbon* (even though this truly evolved at a later stage), and a few years ago the curator Mojca Grmek drew attention to this. The painting: "spreads across a number of individual, yet connected canvasses". The exceptional *Figure* (1974) represents a special example of the painting possibilities, for in this painting "the image of the woman, spread across a number of individual canvasses with empty spaces in between" (Grmek, 2008) shares the visibility with the base, and this enables the division of canvasses which makes it just as pop as the abstracted image of the hat and the fashionable scene with waves and flowers typical for the European seventies.

In Slovenia the characteristic motifs (consumer objects, eroticism, images of towns, typographic signs) were joined by landscapes – this is especially visible in the works of France Novinc, Metka Krašovec and Zmago Jeraj. The non-typical motif was not a result of the Western, but of the national view. Some paintings reveal unusual themes: mysticism, farming life, darkness and moodiness. Great deviations can also be seen in the formal and painting manner.

Some paintings were influenced by geometric abstractions, while others were influenced by software art – during the 1960s and 70s the *new tendencies* occurred in the nearby city of Zagreb, while the new figural art at the end of the 70s was already transforming into the manieristic softness that some artists maintained to this very day and which was coming ever closer to the unique Slovene kitsch painting.

With the more or less successful depersonalisation, "the readymade" look, the two dimensionality of the poster and application of layers of paint and hard edges, the images of contemporaneity, urban settlements (even though landscapes are also characteristic of "expressive figural art"), consumerism, mass media and common interventions into the field of pre-mediated eroticism, it is hard to consider the expression in these paintings, and it is questionable, whether we can even use the term figural art when discussing them. Even though this style is not the same as the style which is in the Anglo-Saxon world called pop art, I assume we will use this term from now onwards. This will be done from a sole reason and this is the same reason as the world of art speaks English – so that we can understand each other to a certain extent.

In certain instances paintings turned away from the poster like application of colours and numerous details were added to them. The fusion of these elements gives the characteristic expression to Slovene “pop” and establishes it as a special form of new figural art developed within Yugoslav socialism. The invasion of pop art, new figural art and neo-realistic influences was so strong that we can talk about a style, not only because of the (partial) group approach to the scene – this was not unusual at the time, as artists were forced to appear in groups due to the unfavourable production conditions – but also because of the similarities in expression.

### 3.3.6 Pop art in Slovenia is not a forgotten episode

In the text *Slovene Young Artists post 1970* (1975) Aleksander Bassin wrote that a “line had been drawn’ under the works of a generation, which had – under the flag and paroles of expressive figural art – started off on a new, fresh path that will lead them away from the domestic concept of expressionist tradition” (Bassin, 1975). Pop art and other new figural art movements disappeared out of view of the local world of art and remained there for a long time.

It is interesting that certain Slovene artists renounce their paintings from this period even today. The characteristic Yugoslav *Podravka soups* by Metka Krašovec was not publically displayed until the exhibition *Revisions*. The work *Painting 70+90* was not on public display in the Centre and Gallery P74 in 2001 and it was not even mentioned in the monograph that was published in 1994. In 2005 Zmago Jeraj stated: “While my colleagues developed their figural art directly from their academic studies, I did not follow the same route, for I had some previous experiences in expressive creativity. In fact I started working in figural art because I always considered abstract painting included a trace of illusion. As it did not seem like a solid doctrine, I consequentially returned to simple figural art, which was not simplified due to the concurrent development of pop-art on the western front – where totally different circumstances prevailed” (Brumen-Čop, 2005). It is likely that new figural art would not be denied as easily if its presence was written into the consciousness of Slovene critics and art history and it is time that we set this shelf of art history straight.

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