

# **Croatian Spring: Art in the Social Sphere**

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In an overview of the activities of the Zagreb Student Centre Gallery, published in the mid-1970s, the entry for the exhibition Hit Parade starts with the following bold statement: ‘On the day of the opening, this exhibition was destroyed by the public.’ The chaotic opening of the Hit Parade took place in October 1967 and the show is noteworthy for a number of reasons. In the catalogue, the curator declared that a new generation had ‘finally managed to break through the ‘hard front of lyric abstraction, informel, art-brut and surrealism’ that had over the years become ‘conservative forces that prevent the gushing of new and fresh ideas.’<sup>1</sup> The novel approach of Hit Parade was the creation of first ‘environment’ in Croatian art, the characteristics of which were the total transformation of the gallery space into an art work, the active participation of the viewer in the work, and a changed understanding of the function of the art work in society.

The exhibition marked a clear break from painting and sculpture in a traditional sense, and was perceived as a provocation by what one contemporary critic described as ‘backward forces’, although the initiators of the destruction, who came in helmets and uniforms, were also the protagonists of the first and only Happening in Zagreb a few months earlier.<sup>2</sup> Against the wishes of the organisers, the opening turned into a spontaneous ‘happening’, a collective release of pent up tensions. The public dismantled and destroyed or took home parts of the installation, and the press seized on the exhibition as ‘a strong, shameless provocation; a fad; an intellectual adventure; exhibitionism; even a decadent import.’<sup>3</sup> The Hit Parade marked the turning point in the activity of the SC Gallery, which became a magnet for a new generation of artists experimenting in the social sphere.

The gallery leader, Želimir Košćević, stretched the conventional understanding of the role of the curator, setting no limits to the creativity of the discipline. As an impassioned opponent of the dominance of sculpture and painting,

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<sup>1</sup> Želimir Košćević, *Galerija SC* (Galerija SC: Zagreb, 1975), 45. The artists of Hit Parade were M.Galić, A.Kuduz, Lj.Šibenik and M.Šutej.

<sup>2</sup> The first Happening in Zagreb was known as ‘Happ Naš’ (Our Hap) and the protagonists were Tomislav Gotovac, Hrvoje Šercar and Ivo Lukas. It involved the artists drinking milk, eating bread and smashing a kitchen cupboard on stage, as well as playing instruments they did not know, and throwing paper balls and live chickens into the audience.

<sup>3</sup> Željko Košćević, *Galerija SC* (Galerija SC: Zagreb, 1975), 12.

he was committed to questioning traditional categories and the function of art in society. One characteristic action was TOTAL in 1970, which involved putting up graphically-designed posters containing no information on to billboards and info columns around town. The action was a background for the spreading of flyers entitled 'An Outline of the Decree on Democratisation of Art', which called for the abolition of painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied art, galleries and art critics, in the interests of bringing art and life closer together.<sup>4</sup>

A mixture of idealism and provocation lay behind the exhibition Women and Men in 1969. Visitors to the private view gradually realised that there was no art on display, and that they were themselves the subject of the exhibition, at which point they 'slowly started moving from the centre towards the wall ... in order to avoid or minimise their exposure, but at that moment it was already too late.'<sup>5</sup> The catalogue declared that at this exhibition 'you are the work, you are the figuration, you are the socialist realism' and proclaimed 'live here intimately with your ideas, even if you don't have any. Feel according to your own sense for social system.'<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the non-conformist curator set a trap for gallery visitors, openly destabilising and disrupting the conventions of the perception of artworks.<sup>7</sup>

In 1969 the gallery announced an open competition for artists working in new materials to exhibit. One of the requirements was that the 'work and programme can be conceptualised in two, three, four or more dimensions, whereas the physical possibilities of the gallery's interior and the open space in front of it should be taken into account.'<sup>8</sup> The artists that responded to this suggestive invitation included Dalibor Martinis, Braco Dimitrijević, Jagoda Kaloper, Gorki Žuvela and Sanja Iveković, all of whom created 'environments' in the gallery space, using 'poor materials' such as cans and pipes, and all involving an element of public

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<sup>4</sup> The declaration was a creative protest against an oppressive artistic and social system: 'The monstrous construct of Yugoslav art is made up of thousands and thousands of paintings, sculptures, graphics, innumerable pieces of applied art, luxury design, stupid architectonic and urban ideas and realisations, and still stupider 'critical' interpretations, globally, everything more and more openly reminds us of clearly reactionary activities in a society which more than ever needs the creative power of art.' ('Akcija total,' *Novine galerije SC* no.22, 1970, p.81).

<sup>5</sup> 'Izložba žena i muškaraca,' *Novine galerije SC* no.9 (1969/1970), reprinted in *Galerija SC* (1975), 86.

<sup>6</sup> *Novine galerije SC* no.8 (1969), reprinted in *Galerija SC* (1975), 86-87.

<sup>7</sup> Another exhibition on these lines was 'Postal Delivery', where the Koščević exhibited a section of the Paris Biennale of Youth of 1971 without unpacking the works from the boxes they had arrived in.

<sup>8</sup> Competition announcement for SC Gallery 1969, reprinted in *Galerija SC* (1975), 85.

participation.<sup>9</sup> This series of exhibitions in SC Gallery were the first solo shows of a new generation of artists associated with the ‘new art practice’, who went on to become the leading figures of the Croatian art scene until the present moment.

Dalibor Martinis’s *Module N&Z* was a futuristic and utopian tunnel installation that aimed to define the space within the gallery and was also conceived as having an existence in public space. Braco Dimitrijević exhibited *Sum 680*, a collection of tin cans in different colours that can be kicked around the gallery by visitors in different combinations, while creating a playful environment. Sanja Iveković’s work *Untitled Environment* aimed to show the existence of the organised networks of threads in various manifestations of the contemporary world, from illustrations of underground tube plans, to the musical notation of John Cage, and enlarged drawings of viruses. Her plastic threads intertwined through the gallery space in red, blue and yellow, making a ‘spatial drawing’, which viewers could participate in by changing the curves of the threads. Gorki Žuvela’s work *Row* involved a large plastic pipe being carried through the streets of Zagreb, while inside the gallery he showed a series of concrete rings in different colours on the floor that could be rearranged by the viewer. Jagoda Kaloper’s *Untitled Environment* had concrete slabs and a pond in the centre of the gallery, and a red line showing the way from the street.

Many chapters of Croatian art history refer to the early ‘70s as a time in which ethics prevailed over aesthetics. It is important to note that this was a highly politicised period, which culminated in the Croatian Spring in 1971. Consequently, Marijan Susovski, curator of the comprehensive survey exhibition ‘Innovations in Croatian Art of the ‘70s’, which was held in Zagreb and Belgrade in 1982, notes that: ‘The seventies started with the raised political consciousness of artists, who felt open or hidden social and political tensions.’<sup>10</sup> This is also a time in which events in the international art world are reflected in developments in the Croatian art scene, which was so vital and vibrant that it brought its own contribution to the history of art of that time. Artists were problematising authorship and the role of the artist in society, questioning the art system, and setting up alternative exhibition spaces. Contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> The complete list of artists was: Dalibor Martinis, Braco Dimitrijević, Jagoda Kaloper, Gorki Žuvela, Sanja Iveković, Janez Segolin and Dejan Jokanović.

<sup>10</sup> Marijan Susovski ed, *Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdestih godina* [Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb March 1982; Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, April 1982] (Gallery of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1982), 17.

art works were entering the public sphere and encroaching on spaces that were until then reserved for monuments as the only recognised form of public art. There was a clear shift from the 1960s, when the most innovative artistic activity, such as the Gorgona Group, showed ‘a complete lack of interest in the social life of their community.’<sup>11</sup>

The work of two artists from the new generation stands out in accounts of the period for their early interest in conceptualism. Goran Trbuljak and Braco Dimitrijević studied together at the Academy in Zagreb, and the first years of their careers were marked by a creative partnership and common interests in urban situations, the response to art of ordinary people and a shared scepticism towards the conservative Academy.<sup>12</sup> One of the earliest works, ‘The Dusty Imprint of the Picture of F.K.’, attributed variously to both artists,<sup>13</sup> involved signing the dusty space left where a painting by their professor had been hanging. This minor intervention on the wall of the gallery, significant in terms of a rejection of the canon, the questioning of authorship and the absence of a material object, marked a radically different approach to the works of the other students at the exhibition. Another work by Trbuljak at the same exhibition was a box containing drawings on sheets of toilet paper – the public were free to decide whether to throw them into the rubbish bin positioned underneath, or to keep it as art.

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<sup>11</sup> Branka Stipančić, ‘Some Aspects of Croatian Contemporary Art 1949-1999,’ in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949-1999* [curator, Lóránd Hegyi] (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien: Vienna, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> ‘As students of the first year, dissatisfaction with the old fashioned and oppressive educational canons of the Academy, and a common interest for experimental and polemical types of art, brought them closer together.’ (Nena Baljković, ‘Braco Dimitrijević, Goran Trbuljak i Grupa šatorice autora,’ *Nova umjetnička praksa*, Gallery of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1978, p.29).

<sup>13</sup> Nena Baljković, writing in 1978, attributes the work to both artists: ‘The Back of the Painting of F.K. ... was signed by Trbuljak and Dimitrijević together’ in ‘Braco Dimitrijević, Goran Trbuljak i Grupa šatorice autora,’ *Nova umjetnička praksa* (Gallery of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1978), p.29. Marijan Susovski, attributes the work to Goran Trbuljak: ‘Trbuljak exhibits the dusty imprint of a picture by F.K.’ (*Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdesetih godina* [exhibition catalogue], Gallery of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1982, p.21). Branka Stipančić starts the text of Trbuljak’s major catalogue on the occasion of his solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1996 with the words: ‘Two works by Goran Trbuljak from 1969 deserve particular note: Imprint of a Painting by F.K and the action pushing a finger through a hole in the door of the Modern Gallery in Zagreb.’ (Branka Stipančić, *G.Trbuljak*, Museum of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1996, p.5). Nena [Baljković] Dimitrijević, writing in Braco Dimitrijević’s catalogue of 2004, states ‘His [Dimitrijević’s] participation at the first student exhibition was made up of the signing of the dusty imprint on the wall... This work he called ‘Dusty Imprint of the Picture by F.K. and exhibited as his work’ in Nena Dimitrijević, ‘Braco Dimitrijević: Posthistorijaka dimenzija,’ *Braco Dimitrijević*, Antun Maračić et al., (Galerija Umjetnička Dubrovnik: Dubrovnik, 2004), 10.

Many of their early actions were focused on the street, where they could experiment with real time situations in which random people unwittingly participated in actions or had their attention drawn to their environment. Braco Dimitrijević, for example, placed a carton of milk on the road and when a car ran over it, the artist stopped the car and asked the driver if he or she would like to sign it as an art work. He explained the role of the artist as ‘arranger’ of the starting situation, while the development of the work depends on chance, understanding and acceptance of other people.<sup>14</sup> In a work that showed affinities to analytical conceptualism, Trbuljak placed photocopies of a pothole in the road next to the hole in question. ‘He wanted to share with others the visual quality he had noticed, drawing their attention to the fact that this might be art.’<sup>15</sup>

The high point of their joint activity was the moment when they founded the Pensioner Tihomir Simčić Group in November 1969. Here they took the role of the random participant one step further, while previously they had given their agreement and name to a work of art, here the unknown man by giving his name to a group takes on the full mantle of authorship. In one of their actions, they held a plate of clay behind a courtyard door. The first person who opened the door and left an imprint of the handle on the clay was the pensioner Tihomir Simčić, who signed it. Later, they went to look for him again to ask permission to call the group after him.

There is a current controversy over the authorship of this work, which ironically originally functioned as a critique of the notion of authorship. Both artists’ recent major catalogues claim the work as belonging to either one or the other, although a careful reading of contemporary sources and earlier secondary literature suggests that the work, at the moment it was first realised, was a collaborative work.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Braco Dimitrijević, ‘Grupa pensioner Tihomir Simčić,’ *Novine SC* no.12 (1969).

<sup>15</sup> Branka Stipančić, *G. Trbuljak* (Museum of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1996), 7.

<sup>16</sup> In Dimitrijević’s catalogue (2004), we read: ‘Dimitrijević was waiting with a plate of fresh clay behind the courtyard door.’ (*Braco Dimitrijević*, 11) In Trbuljak’s catalogue (1996), an earlier article from 1970 by Nena Baljković is quoted, according to which Trbuljak was the one holding the clay, on the basis of which Branka Stipančić attributes the whole work to Trbuljak: ‘The theory of the possibility for ‘an accidental emergence of an art work’ was explicit in Trbuljak’s work that consisted of an imprint in clay made by a casual passerby.’ (*G.Trbuljak*, 1996, p.9). Susovski (1982) writes that ‘Goran Trbuljak was holding a piece of clay...’, adding a footnote that refers to an alternative view in the 1978 text of Nena Baljković, according to which the ‘clay was held by Braco Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak.’ (*Inovacije*, p.40). However, a closer examination of Baljković’s 1978 text reveals that she does not in fact specify who was holding the clay: ‘the ‘arranger’ was holding the clay at the height of the handle... Trbuljak and Dimitrijević asked him to sign the resulting sculpture.’ (*Nova umjetnička praksa*, p.29).

Another joint activity was the organisation of an alternative exhibition space in an entranceway or 'haustor' in the centre of Zagreb. They exhibited conceptual art works that had not yet found their way into the city galleries, while at the same time, they aimed to attract a wider and accidental public. One of the exhibitions from 1970 was the Show with Water, where Dimitrijević exhibited sea water, fresh water and warm water, while Trbuljak showed a live fish and boot in a bucket, among other things. As so many times in contemporary art, the artist have taken the presentation of their work into their own hands, avoiding the structured art system and offering the work to a wider public. As a result, openings in the Haustor were attended by both the most advanced art public and people from a completely different milieu. In April 1971, in the same venue, Nena and Braco Dimitrijević organised one of the first international exhibitions of conceptual art called At the Moment. The exhibition was open for only three hours and included works by Anselmo, Beuys, Buren, Burgin, Flanagan, Kounellis and Sol leWitt, as well as Trbuljak and Dimitrijević.<sup>17</sup>

It seems important to acknowledge that while the Croatian art scene was experiencing new and innovative practices, the country as a whole was in the grip of an increasingly intense social and political crisis that culminated in 1971. The Croatian Spring was a movement of national revival that aimed to address the economic and cultural grievances of Croatia within the Yugoslav Federation. The most pressing economic issues included the fact that although Croatia brought in half the foreign capital into the country, it controlled only 15% of it.<sup>18</sup> Centralisation of decision making in Belgrade worked to the disadvantage of Croatia, and led to the widespread perception that Croatia was being economically exploited within the Federation. In addition to economic grievances, many intellectuals were worried about the perceived threat to the integrity of the Croatian language and culture. A clear example of this was the first volume of a new unified dictionary that was published in 1967, and appeared to relegate Croatian to a regional variant of

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<sup>17</sup> The full list of artists: Giovanni Anselmo, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Stanley Brown, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Jan Dibbets, Braco Dimitrijević, Barry Flanagan, Group E-KOD, Group OHO, Douglas Huebler, Alain Kirili, Jannis Kounellis, David Lamelas, John Latham, Sol le Witt, Goran Trbuljak, Lawrence Werner, and Ian Wilson.

<sup>18</sup> Pedro Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1963-1983* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984), 104.

Serbian.<sup>19</sup> Other important issues included the demographic threat to the Croatian nation posed by a declining birth rate and high levels of emigration.

As a result of the resonance of these questions in Croatian society, a coalition was forged between liberals in the Croatian communist party and nationalists in the cultural organisation Matica Hrvatska. In the course of 1971, the Croatian Spring grew into a mass movement, involving public demonstrations, and by the end of the year strikes and protests by students. Issues of public space and identity came to the fore in the campaign for the rehabilitation of the Croatian national heroes Stjepan Radić and Ban Jelačić. The Croatian student organisation erected a memorial plaque to Radić, and there was much talk of erecting another statue of Ban Jelačić on Republic Square, his original statue having been removed by Tito in 1947.

By the autumn of 1971, the complaints and demands of Croatian nationalists became increasingly radical, threatening to undermine the federal structure of Yugoslavia by demanding a separate Croatian currency, and meddling with the plight of Croats in Bosnia. Pedro Ramet refers the turn of events as a ‘Napoleonic syndrome’: ‘Croatia’s actions in 1971 mirrored Napoleon’s actions as he moved from defending France to his new project of conquering Europe.’<sup>20</sup> In December 1971 therefore, Tito moved to crush the Croatian Spring by forcing the reformist leadership of the Croatian party to resign, outlawing the nationalist cultural organisation Matica Hrvatska, imprisoning the ringleaders, and organising a purge of party members and the intelligentsia. At the same time, he tried to take the wind from the nationalist sail by granting many of their economic demands, such as tripling the proportion of foreign currency earnings Croatian firms were allowed to retain.

On the whole, artists did not participate in the political struggle and debates of the era directly.<sup>21</sup> It could be argued that they were able to make an indirect contribution by raising complex questions about identity, space, meaning, territory and community. Artists, just like members of the wider community, experienced the Croatian Spring differently depending on whether they identified with the liberals, the nationalists, the conservatives, or the socialist humanists. As we shall see, the politics

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<sup>19</sup> The dictionary, for example, pointedly had no entry for ‘Hrvat’ or Croat, but did have one for ‘Serb’ and related words. See, Pedro Ramet, *Nationalism in Yugoslavia*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Želimir Košćević points out that in the ‘structures of orthodox ideology, visual art was viewed as a marginal activity.’ (Interview with Želimir Košćević on 27 July 2005 on Zlarin)

of 1971 did impinge on the art world in various ways, but at no point did innovative contemporary art become a vehicle for a political campaign.

There were several events of major importance that took place in 1971 in Croatian contemporary art. The Zagreb Salon of that year for the first time had a section entitled 'Suggestion', which dealt with art in the public sphere and provoked a lot of response. The Gallery of Contemporary Art organised the exhibition 'Possibilities for '71', that took place outside the gallery. In the Haustor, there was an exhibition of international conceptual art, Goran Trbuljak had a solo show in the SC Gallery, and Tomislav Gotovac streaked in Belgrade. All these events seemed to be related to public space, the critique of the system, and showed convergence with international art trends from conceptualism to performance.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Zagreb Salon was conceived in three parts: 'Situation 70/71' dealt with traditional art categories, there was a critical retrospective of the interwar group 'Zemlja', and the newly established section 'Suggestions'. The critical response to the more conventional part of that year's Zagreb Salon is another illustration of the widespread sense in the early 1970s that traditional artistic approaches and media, such as painting and sculpture, had reached a dead end and were in crisis. For one critic: 'Situation 70/71 almost leads to extinction. Really, we're impressed with the greyness of the painting and all encompassing withering of sculpture.'<sup>22</sup> This was in marked contrast to the reception of the 'Suggestions' section of the Salon, which was co-organised by the SC Gallery and explored 'the city as a space for plastic happenings.' The exhibition addressed the notion that 'art practice needs to have a wider social dimension'. The underlying assumption was that 'a wider circle of consumers should be able to use the art work, which is only possible in the street, square, or park, in the living body of the urban environment.'<sup>23</sup>

This was the setting for the first big portraits from Braco Dimitrijević's celebrated Casual Passer By series. As Nena Dimitrijević recalls, 'At dawn, three portraits appeared on the façade of a building on Republic Square, where usually portraits of political leaders hang on state holidays.'<sup>24</sup> An interesting indication of the precise political context of Dimitrijević's intervention is the fact that the day before the opening, on 7 May 1971, Republic Square was the scene of a massive political

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<sup>22</sup> Zdenko Rus, 'Situation 70/71,' *Život umjetnosti* no.17 (1972).

<sup>23</sup> Zvonko Maković, 'sekcija prijedlog,' *Život umjetnosti* no.17 (1972), p.96.

<sup>24</sup> Nena Dimitrijević, 'Braco Dimitrijević: Posthistorijaka dimenzija', p.12.

meeting that was addressed by Savka Dabčević-Kučar, the main protagonist of the Croatian Spring. A contemporary photograph shows her standing in front of the same façade.<sup>25</sup> So if ‘passers by, waiting for the tram, wondered whether there had been a change of government’<sup>26</sup>, they did so with good reason, as in fact, seven months later the Croatian political leadership was forced to resign.

The most controversial work of the 6<sup>th</sup> Zagreb Salon was Ivan Kožarić’s *Grounded Sun*. A two metre high, gold painted, fibreglass sphere was placed on the ground in a busy spot in front of the National Theatre. The sphere, like the cube, can be considered a ‘paradigmatic object’<sup>27</sup>. In Kožarić’s treatment, this pure geometric form represents a grounded sun and is allowed to provoke countless associations. Critics recognised its qualities as a work of non-traditional, non-monumental public sculpture. Some factions within the art world experienced it as a deep provocation, questioning the ability of non-figurative art to deal with the human dimension.

As a result, ‘*Grounded Sun*’, had black paint spilt over it on two occasions, and was then set alight.<sup>28</sup> Finally the work was ordered to be removed by the city council, on the grounds that the object ‘had become a target of molestation by unconscious citizens, who cover it with various paints, fire and texts, pouring all kinds of paint and writing various content, which altogether makes the environment of that ambient very ugly.’ The decision of the City Council also ordered for the ‘advertising boards with pictures’ (Dimitrijević’s portraits of casual passers by) ‘which had been put up in the centre of town without permission’ to be removed.<sup>29</sup> There are speculations as to who was behind the destruction of Kožarić’s sculpture, with the finger pointing towards members of the Biafra Group.<sup>30</sup>

The strength of reaction to the ‘*Suggestion*’ exhibition is reflected in the SC Gallery newspaper, which published open letters to the artist René Hollós, president of the Student Centre Cultural Committee, who had attacked the exhibition in the

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<sup>25</sup> Savka Dabčević-Kučar, *Hrvatski snovi i stvarnost, 1971*, volume II (Interpublic: Zagreb, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Nena Dimitrijević, ‘Braco Dimitrijević: Posthistorijaka dimenzija’, p.12.

<sup>27</sup> Donna De Salvo, ed, *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970* (Tate Publishing: London, 2005), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ivan Kožarić’s ‘*Grounded Sun*’ found its permanent place in lasting materials in the centre of Zagreb in 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Decision of City Council reprinted in *Novine galerije SC* (1971), p.110.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Biafra’s aggressive role towards interventionists quickly connected with the vandalistic act of burning the *Grounded Sun* by Ivan Kožarić, of course on the inspirational level.’ Vinko Srhoj, *Grupa BIAFRA 1970-1978* (Art Studio Azinović: Zagreb, no date), p.90. Želimir Koščević recounted how ‘Kožarić’s sphere was set alight by the nationalists...His work was a thorn in the eye of the Croatian national movement, and a thorn in the eye of the party city administration.’ (Interview with Želimir Koščević on 27 July 2005 on Zlarin)

press. Hollós had written: 'It is astonishing that some 'artists' take for themselves such a creative freedom that they attack citizens with their degenerate and hysterical acts and so-called works, for which it was important to be put up anywhere, just as it is important for a dog to find any tree or corner to lift up his leg...How long will we be terrorised by so called 'Croatian artists' with such irresponsible ideas?'<sup>31</sup>

Hollós's attack was countered in an almost theatrical response by the young critic Zvonko Maković, who had just been removed from the editorial board of the Student Paper where Hollós's vitriol was published. Maković regrets the use of the 'same words and arguments as fascist (and Stalinists, who were equally fascist) conducted art to negate the work of the true artists of our time.' In an indication of the strength of feeling about these issues in 1971, Maković threatened to 'readily and with full responsibility throw away the student index of this university and equally responsibly and consciously enter into a struggle for freedom of speech and socialist thinking.'<sup>32</sup>

The social role of art in public space also inspired the exhibition 'Possibilities for '71', that followed on shortly. The show was organised by the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art and involved the artists who had exhibited environments at the SC during the previous two years, with the addition of Boris Bućan and Goran Trbuljak. According to the catalogue introduction, the artists in Possibilities 'have turned to immediate reality and the needs of everyday life' producing work that 'ought to be the property of all citizens and the socialist society.'<sup>33</sup> The artists intervened in the space of the upper town in Zagreb through actions such as suspending silver foil from the roof of buildings (Dimitrijević), painting chimneys (Bućan), creating a passage of neon lights in a narrow street (Iveković), camouflaging street lights (Trbuljak), leaning a triangle of neon lights on the façade of a building (Martinis), and setting up anonymous black human contours in a square (Kaloper).

'Possibilities for '71' provoked a response from rivals and opponents, most notably the Biafra Group, which was active in Zagreb from 1970 to 1978, and had organised their 3<sup>rd</sup> exhibition in the abandoned wing of a student dormitory at the same time. In their flyer they called for 'humanistically-engaged art', for a revival of figurative art, and opposed 'contemporary formalistic art'. They also referred to

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<sup>31</sup> Hollós quotation from Zvonko Maković, 'Hollós II', *Novine galerije SC* (1971), p.107-8.

<sup>32</sup> Zvonko Maković, 'Hollós II', *Novine Galerija SC* 1971, p.107-8.

<sup>33</sup> Davor Matičević, *Mogućnosti za 1971, Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb 9-20 June 1971* (Museum of Contemporary Art: Zagreb, 1971), 3.

current politics, declaring: 'Our exhibition follows the line of the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Meeting.'<sup>34</sup> They went on to clarify their wish for a 'national art that is not going to be folklore or ethno, but is going to speak about the life and problems of one nation.'<sup>35</sup> The Biafra group directly attacked the works in Possibilities, criticising what they regarded as the 'behaviourism' implicit in this kind of artistic intervention in the city.<sup>36</sup>

Many critics compared Possibilities and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Biafra show, trying to understand their differences. Ida Biard takes the side of the Possibilities artists, calling the pamphlet of Biafra 'imbecile' and 'unconvincing.' She tells the Biafra that they are 'unripe propagandists' and that 'humanism is not just figuration.' Another writer calls their work 'bunker figuration', and writes that it is 'pointless to play up the Croatian colours of their art, and thereby taking away that attribute from the other artists and groups, with the result of derailing into the dead end street of provincialism.'<sup>37</sup>

In the same summer, practically the same group of artists created an open air exhibition in a public park in the city of Karlovac entitled 'Gulliver in the Land of Miracles'. Sanja Iveković hung orange balls from trees, Dalibor Martinis made a pyramid of white railway sleepers on a path, Braco Dimitrijević scattered shiny metal plates on the grass, while Goran Trbuljak made a sign saying 'My sculpture is hidden in the park'. Ivan Kožarić exhibited his *Grounded Sun*. 'All this was not just about bringing an abandoned park to life and the experience of artificial plastic objects in the landscape, but also an invitation to play, for public participation and happenings in the open air.'<sup>38</sup>

In November 1971, Goran Trbuljak had a solo show in SC Gallery in which he exhibited a single poster that read 'I do not wish to show anything new and original.' With this work his critique of art institutions crystallised through the exploration of the ambiguity of his own position, as an artist who had up to then avoided exhibiting in galleries, preferring the more radical position of the street. This was continued in 1973 in a solo show at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, where he exhibited a

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<sup>34</sup> This was the meeting in January 1970 when the leadership of the Croatian communist party allied itself with the interests of Croatian nationalism.

<sup>35</sup> Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

<sup>37</sup> Tonko Maroević quoted by Srhoj, *Grupa Biafra*, 67.

<sup>38</sup> Susovski, *Inovacije*, 20.

poster that read ‘The fact that someone has a chance to make an exhibition is more important than what will be exhibited at that exhibition.’

His brand of conceptualism and anti-establishment irony did not win him a place in the Yugoslav pavilion at the 1976 Venice Biennale, at which his fellow artists Kožarić and Dimitrijević among others exhibited. He recounts how he was told at the time by the artist and art historian Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos that his failure to show in Venice meant he had ‘missed the boat.’<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, he decided to place an empty footnote next to his name at the back of the 1976 Biennale catalogue, which he designed, quietly denoting his absence from the show. In 2005, Trbuljak represents Croatia at the Venice Biennale with a work that was true to his style and motifs from the early 1970s. He exhibits a projection of the last page of the 1976 catalogue, with the symbol for a footnote next to his name, and alongside a projection of a new catalogue, with his name and a footnote entry below that reads: ‘The need to add a footnote to the text is more important than what might be written in the footnote thirty years later.’<sup>40</sup>

Tomislav Gotovac, one of three protagonists of the first Happening in Zagreb in 1967, who continuously uses his own body as means of expression, in 1971 streaked naked on the streets of central Belgrade. Marijan Susovski refers to it as first streaking in Europe.<sup>41</sup> In addition to being a provocation of the conformist bourgeois mentality, his action transgressed the rules of social behaviour in public space.

The unravelling of this creative and utopian period in Croatian art was marked by the artists from this generation going their separate ways. SC Gallery was no longer the main focus of experimental artistic events, with interest in the ‘new art practice’ shifting to the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, where all of them eventually had solo shows in the course of the decade. For Susovski, the ‘lack of the expected public response’ to the idealistic artistic interventions in public space of the early 1970s led the artists to move to other fields, such as video art and more purely conceptual work. He argues that the fact that at the beginning of the decade this generation of artists ‘had seen their place in society, but not realised it’ left a ‘measure

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Goran Trbuljak on 9 August 2005 in Split.

<sup>40</sup> *La biennale di Venezia: Hrvatska/Croatia 2005*, (Umjetnička Galerija Dubrovnik: Dubrovnik, 2005), 136-137.

<sup>41</sup> Susovski, *Inovacije*, 29.

of bitterness that is evident in the analytical social-critical aspects of their later works.<sup>42</sup>

In November 1971, Braco Dimitrijević left Zagreb for London to study sculpture at St.Martins College of Art. While in Croatia at that time, controversial memorial plaques were being put up to national heroes at significant sites, one of the first actions of Dimitrijević in London was to put up commemorative plaques on Soho houses to random passers by, such as ‘Sarah Knipe stayed here in 1971’ or ‘John Foster lived here from October 1961 February 1968.’ In Dimitrijević’s own words: ‘Monuments and commemorative plaques are not innocent witnesses of cultural values of the past, but rather carefully constructed myth systems which hide the chaotic picture of the past.’<sup>43</sup>

In 1972, Dalibor Martinis made a series of posters involving the city plan on Zagreb tram tickets, posing mundane questions to the citizens such as ‘Why is Zagreb so dirty?’ or ‘Why doesn’t the cable car work?’ The tone of this work, like Trbuljak’s Referendum discussed below, is suggestive of a post-utopian, post-revolutionary atmosphere in Croatia. Subsequently, the focus of his artistic practice moved to pioneering video works and conceptual interventions in galleries.

Sanja Iveković also moved on from building environments to video works, performances and installations with more overt political content in the sense of feminist investigations of everyday life and gender roles in society. Her series *Double Life* from 1976 juxtaposes personal photos from her own album with advertising images that match up through content or formal similarities. In doing so she deconstructs the systems of representation and the role of the media in creation of social identity.

Goran Trbuljak spent much of 1972 in Paris, where he explored and problematised gallery operating systems by taking questionnaires to famous galleries and, as an ‘anonymous artist’, asking if they would exhibit his work. In Zagreb in the same year he organised a ‘Referendum’, asking people on the street to decide whether or not he is an artist. A photograph documents this lonely exercise in direct democracy showing the artist standing on the street with a ballot box. The result of the referendum was of 500 votes cast, 259 confirmed that he was an artist, even though the voters knew nothing about him or his work.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>43</sup> Maračić et al., *Braco Dimitrijević*, 148.

The recent work of the artists considered here indicates the enduring legacy of the innovative art of the early 1970s in Croatia. Dalibor Martinis, for example, went around the country stopping at bus shelters and putting up posters during the 2003 election campaign.<sup>44</sup> The title of the work was ‘I’m talking to you man to man: Stations on the Road to Democracy.’ In addition to a poster, he sometimes left a bowl of sweets for the next person to come to the bus stop. He chose these marginal, transitional public spaces, which become almost picturesque in his photographs, as places to raise the real issues in a democracy, such as corruption, the rule of law and the importance of active participation. One of the most recent works of Sanja Iveković is a graphic print entitled ‘Croatian Spring.’ It shows the leader of the movement, Savka Dapčević-Kučar, and refers to the artist’s years at the Academy and an incident when she was not allowed to carry out an exercise that was based on the picture of Savka.<sup>45</sup> Iveković’s work often deals with the politics of identity, and the processes of collective memory and collective forgetting. Tomislav Gotovac, together with Ivana Keser and Aleksander Battista Ilić, participated in ‘Weekend Art’, one of the best-known works of Croatian art of the 1990s. Their photographs of Sunday trips to the mountain behind Zagreb, a favourite weekend ‘getaway’ for the people of Zagreb, are often read as an attempt to get away from the war and traumatic political situation in Croatia in the mid-1990s.

Revisiting the early ‘70s in Croatia, points to several salient aspects of the art of that time. The ‘new art practice’ was forged in a combative environment: the first gallery ‘environment’ was destroyed on the evening of the opening, the first non-monumental public sculpture was damaged and set on fire, while the first exhibition of urban interventions was met by a protest campaign. This was also a time of innovative curatorial practices, where exhibitions were organised in alternative spaces to avoid the institutional structure, at the same time, major institutions prepared exhibitions in the urban environment. Here environments, interventions or ideas were exhibited, rather than classical art objects.

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<sup>44</sup> *I am addressing you man to man : stations on the road to democracy* [exhibition catalogue] (Galerija Rigo: Novigrad, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Sanja Iveković on 12 August 2005 in Zadar.

Politics was in the air, but contemporary art operated on a different level to everyday politics and at no point took on the character of political propaganda, even if political activists occasionally wished it would. Much of the art of the period has an almost utopian feel, corresponding to the desire to transform public space and thinking through art. For the first time, art was present in the social sphere, it came out onto the street to encounter an unsuspecting public. The generation of artists that trace their creative origins to that period or were active in it, such as Iveković, Martinis, Trbuljak, Gotovac and Kožarić, are today among the leading figures in contemporary Croatian art and have all carried over a social or critical dimension from that era into their later work. The enduring controversies and sensitivities about the art and politics of the period indicate that in some aspects the Croatian Spring is still blossoming.

**Maja and Reuben Fowkes**

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