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Gorgona is one of the most elusive art groups associated with Conceptual art in Croatia. It existed for only a short time, from 1959 to 1966, and produced little materially. The loose-knit group functioned as a forum for radical Conceptual ideas and proposals, many of which were not executed; others materialized into mailings, the publication Gorgona, and installations at the self-funded Studio G. In general, production of artwork per se or the publicizing of the group's activities was of no interest to the members, all of whom were individually recognized artists and curators in Zagreb. It was not until the 1970s when an understanding of and interest in Conceptual art had been forged by other Croatian artists, that the ideas surrounding Gorgona found a receptive audience, and that the art historian and curator Nena Dimitrijević started reconstructing the history of the group and its multiple forms of existence. Her research resulted in the Gorgona retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1977. The following text, written for the exhibition's catalogue, asserts the group's importance and places it firmly within the international avant-garde of its time.

Gorgona: Art as a Way of Existence

From 1959 to 1966, there was a group of artists in Zagreb about which little has remained in the written art history of this area. Gorgona was not an art group in the usual sense of those whose goal was to promote a certain ideological-aesthetic concept and recruit protagonists among the elite of the local art scene. It was a group of artists who shared common affinities in a much broader sense than that implied by the framework of any stylistic program. The fact that Gorgona's activities were of a very discrete and unspectacular nature is one of the reasons why it went unregistered in the written tradition, and was rarely mentioned in the oral, cultural tradition of these places. The members of Gorgona were painters Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, Đuro Seder, and Josip Vaništa, sculptor Ivan Kožarić, architect Miljenko Horvat, and art historians Dimitrije Bašičević (see Mangelos, p. 80), Matko Meštrović, and Radoslav Putar. In its professional structure and, even more, in the absence of a program that acted as a cohesive force and stimulated group activities, Gorgona was not an art group in the usual sense of the word. The fact that five of the group's members were artists does not fully explain the principles on which the group was founded. The "gorgonic spirit" only indirectly determined their individual works, and all of them retained and continued to develop their own creative autonomy. Furthermore, Gorgona was made up of those few rare artistic personalities who, by their own creative contributions, anticipated events on the international art scene, not content like the majority of others with the eclecticism of long-since-expended art concepts. If Gorgona wasn't an art group in the usual sense of the word, based on a common art ideology, and had no strategic reasons for introducing and promoting an ideology in the current art scene, what then was it? In 1961 Vaništa wrote, "Gorgona seeks neither work nor result in art," and a few years later, when asked, "What is Gorgona for you?" he replied, "Result." These two statements suggest one possible definition: Gorgona was a process of searching for artistic and intellectual freedom, the achievement of which was in itself the aim and pur-

pose. Freed from the professional responsibilities of promoting itself in the hierarchy of the local art scene, the group met and exchanged ideas, motivated solely by spiritual and creative affinities. Despite differences in their individual artistic concepts, the members of Gorgona all had one thing in common: the spirit of modernism to which they belonged, i.e., recognition of the absurd, of emptiness, and monotonous aesthetic categories, a tendency toward nihilism and metaphysical irony. Since such affinities are no longer uncommon, it may seem from today's point of view [1977] that this definition does not indicate precisely enough the spiritual coordinates of an art group. However, at the time Gorgona was being formed, quite different ideas dominated the scene in Yugoslav art.

What was happening on the international and local art scene at the time of Gorgona? In Zagreb, at the end of the 1950s, an entire pleiad of young painters was accepting the aesthetic concepts of Art Informel, and owing to this fact, the period of the early 1960s in Croatian art is characterized by various manifestations of Abstract Expressionism, Action painting, Tachism, and lyric abstraction. However, art production at that time lacked the qualities to raise it above the level of provincial, manneristic replicas of [Jackson] Pollock, [Mark] Tobey, [Alberto] Burri. It lacked force, rawness, spontaneity, the uncontrolled explosiveness of color that made Action painting the first American movement that succeeded in threatening the domination of the Paris school. On the other hand, at the same time as the beginning and rise of Art Informel, the early 1960s saw in Croatian art the still-active and notable presence of the one-time founders of Exat 51.¹ The creative interest of Ivan Picelj and Aleksandar Srncic evolves from the geometric abstraction inherited from Russian Constructivism and Suprematism to contemporary optical and kinetic art. The year 1961 is also the time of the first *Nove Tendencije (New Tendencies)*, an exhibition which, together with subsequent ones, was to have long-range effects on the art climate of this milieu. It is significant that the first *Tendencies* was not conceived as a puristic manifestation of a strictly stipulated stylistic orientation, but as an attempt to review the international art situation, including discoveries being made in the new fields of art expression. Hence, at the first *Tendencies*, which later grew into a review of canonized optical-kinetic art, we find artists like Piero Manzoni, whose work and behavior were a reincarnation of the principles of Dadaism. And because of the inclusion of Piero Manzoni and Otto Piene, the exhibition in Zagreb registered certain vital and extremely significant (though, at that time, still undiscerned) tendencies in contemporary art. At the turn of the decade, a few solitary individuals re-echo the Dadaist view of the world and art, and accept Duchamp's implicit definition of art as tautology. The achievement of the Dadaists in equalizing the sphere of art and everyday life also marks the end of the imperative to produce a final work of art, which confers artistic status on all procedural, ephemeral, and non-materialized manifestations and works.

In addition, the end of the 1960s is the time when the Western spirit begins to discover oriental philosophical thought, and the experiences of Zen Buddhism which [John] Cage, [Yves] Klein, and La Monte Young introduced into the art of the Western hemisphere provide a vital new stimulus to all fields of creativity. One of the first to introduce the products of the Eastern intellect into European art was the French painter Yves Klein. In 1950 he created the first monochrome, a canvas uniformly painted with a color he called International Klein Blue (IKB).

The monochromes were an attempt to present in painting transcendental and metaphysical categories such as "emptiness," "immateriality," and "eternity." The comment that Klein "was more important for what he did—the symbolic value of his actions—than for what he made,"² can be applied equally to Piero Manzoni, as well as to the protagonists of the Happenings and Fluxus movements.

The protagonists of the American European group Fluxus—[George] Brecht, [Robert] Watts, [Wolf] Vostell, [Dieter] Roth, [Robert] Filliou—radically abolished the traditional character of the art act and object. The Fluxus event—a simple occurrence without dramatic tension and metaphorical implications—paved the way to the aesthetics of silence and monotony characteristic of the art in the next period.

In Macunias's manifest, a new aesthetic-ethical stand is formulated: the imperative to produce art objects-goods is replaced by gesture, process, irony, the expression of free will and personal opinion as art forms in their own right. Awareness of the social responsibility of the art act is once again established and turns against the demands of the commercial system, the market which treats the art object as goods. In 1958 Klein sells his exhibition *Void* in the Iris Clert Gallery literally for pure gold, which he subsequently ritually throws into the Seine. *Merde d'artista*, by Piero Manzoni, is a similar protest against the syndrome of "painting as investment." (Manzoni was an extraordinary anticipator whose influence on the art of the next period can be compared with that of Duchamp, and it is not an exaggeration to say that entire art concepts later arose as a result of certain of Manzoni's works and gestures.) Artists of a similar mentality were also members of the Group Zero, founded in 1957 in Düsseldorf—[Otto] Piene, [Heinz] Mack, [Günther] Uecker—whose actions on the streets of the city and along the banks of the Rhine manifest similar attitudes.

Yet, however different these individual manifestations may have been, all the art phenomena we have discussed share a common origin with Gorgona in the interaction of the Dadaistic tradition and newly discovered Eastern philosophical thought. This attempt to define the spirit of avant-garde art at the end of the 1950s should serve to place and objectively evaluate Gorgona in the international art situation of that period. Although in 1959, when Gorgona was being formed, the phenomena and individuals who were to characterize the international art scene in the years to come were not a part of some underground cultural scene, they were still very far from the historically recognized prophetic position attributed to them today. At that time, Gorgona was one of the sources of this new artistic sensibility and outlook on the world, which, as a continuity of the Dadaistic spirit, would achieve full affirmation only at the end of the next decade. Together with Fluxus and Zero, Manzoni, Klein, Fontana, and Reinhardt, Gorgona anticipated and announced the torrent of phenomena which under different names (Conceptual art, Art as Idea, Post-Object art) still dominate the current art scene. Exploring all the discrete, yet nevertheless significant forms in which the "gorgonic spirit" was expressed is both an archaeological and a detective job, since it must reconstruct on the basis of fragmentary recollections, correspondence, and documents, the activities of a group of artists who, from the very beginning, rejected as its goal the materialization of aesthetic-ideological principles in durable art products. On the other hand, this was a discrete and introverted group that was not interested in forcing itself through militant-manifest

forms on the cultural scene, and, consequently, it left little influence on its environment. This aposterior classification of the group's various activities is accomplished, in part, with the aid of a vocabulary of recent art history, and is an attempt at subsequent systematization of the works, ideas, and propositions that arose spontaneously as the result of a unique ethical and spiritual relationship toward the entity of art. Gorgona's activities can be classified into three groups:

1. Exhibition in Studio G
2. Publication of *Gorgona*
3. Concepts, projects, various forms of art communication

Exhibitions Organized by Gorgona

The most public, and by its character, least "gorgonic" form of activity was the exhibitions that the members of the group organized in Studio G, also known as Salon Šira. The space, which was and still is a picture-framing shop on Preradovićeve ulica, was rented by the group so that it could function independently of the policies of the exhibition institutions. All the costs of organizing the exhibitions (fixing up the space, posters, a catalogue) were covered by the joint funds of the group, from membership dues that were collected in a rather bizarre way: Gorgona's treasury was managed by a sales woman in the Naprijed bookstore, to whom each member paid a certain amount depending on his [or her] current financial situation, and at the same time could withdraw from the treasury whatever sum he [or she] needed. In addition to exhibition costs, the fund covered the printing of a publication and all other eventual expenses. Because of the financial instability of most of the members, the fund was often in crisis, and the constant lack of resources seriously jeopardized the activity and very existence of Gorgona. This is witnessed by many letters written in the archaic language used by the group's members in their personal correspondence, urging the members to fulfill their financial responsibilities to the society.

A recapitulation of the exhibitions held from 1961 to 1963 in Studio G shows that many important artists of that period were concentrated in and around Gorgona. Seen from the time distance of fifteen years, in the light of later experience—hard edge, Minimal art, and Primary painting—the works of Jevšovar, Knifer, Kožarić, Seder, and Vaništa appear to be the most relevant products of postwar Yugoslav art. This means that besides looking for alternative forms and means of artistic expression, the artists in Gorgona also made valuable contributions within the framework of traditional art mediums.

In 1959 Julije Knifer integrated geometric elements arranged in a zigzag fashion to form a meander. Since then, meander has remained constant in his painting system, a synonym of his artistic identity. By this, Knifer gained two historical advantages: one comes from the nonrepresentational, illusion-free character of his paintings, which makes him a forerunner of the cool primary painting of recent years. With regard to the aesthetics of hard edge, which appeared at the same time as his discovery of meander, and with which he is associated very strongly, Knifer's painting is characterized by consistent and more complete reduction of the choice of motifs to one exclusive symbol. While [Frank] Stella or [Kenneth] Noland maintains a greater freedom in varying colors and motifs, Knifer conceptualizes his method by limiting himself to black-white meander, and his painting is reduced to the infinite repetition of a symbol, to

the sublimation of the "radical will." This method of semantically identifying painting with a chosen symbol, that is, not painting as a single pictorial solution but as a part of an a priori adopted system, foreshadowed many later decisions.³ The consequences and dimensions of such a decision can only be seen today after the experience of Conceptual art, which does away with the importance of the art object in favor of emphasizing the artist's motivations.

Another member of Gorgona whose painting, viewed in retrospect, achieves real significance is Marijan Jevšovar. Like the majority of art phenomena that are ahead of their time, Jevšovar's painting was considered in the early 1960s marginal to the main art current of the period, in this case, Informel. During an epoch of color explosion, he chose dirty colors, lifeless pigments that he spread across the canvas several times until he achieved the desired dirty gray surface. These gray paintings, deliberately marred by blobs of oozing paint, are proof of a very contemporary antiaesthetic attitude: the characteristics, which at the same time rendered them anonymous and unrecognizable, are today exceptionally rare and valued qualities. It is a conscious and deliberate degradation of the painting, a negative composition, with the intention that the painting not be "beautiful" by the traditional criteria of order, balance, and harmony of color. Jevšovar painstakingly selects the place on which to squeeze color and, in so doing, destroys, "disfigures the painting." The sentence, "You would never believe how hard it is not to make a painting beautiful" expresses the basic generic principle of his work. "My painting is a negation of form, dirtying the white surface of the canvas." We are confronted with artwork as destruction, not with the ironic, spectacular destruction of the Dadaists, but a quiet, yet no less effective, process of destroying the surface, a programmed attack on the problem of pictorial structure.

Jevšovar's approach to the problem of a painting's negative organization is best defined by some of Vaništa's statements formulated amazingly early (1961): "The basis of all European painting lies in balance. The factor of balance is not important. Avoid the effects of composition which reflect traditional values in European art. In European art, from [Nicolas] Poussin to [Victor] Vasarely, the details are more important than the whole. Preserve the whole." The painting of Đuro Seder from this period is the product, in certain measure, of a kindred sensibility alike in his intention to question the traditional conventions of composition, and in his seemingly casual, deliberately clumsy, and unsightly manner of execution. The paintings he did after 1959 were, in the words of the author, an attempt "to depict subjectless meditation": a circular or semicircular form of irregular contours is centrally composed on a gray background.

In the fall of 1961, Vaništa began his series of monochrome works. A uniform surface painted in gray, white, or silver is cut in the center by a single horizontal line, which the author describes as "the only remnant of content, of theme in this kind of painting without illusion." In a previously quoted tractate from 1961, which coincides with Reinhardt's maxim "less is more," Vaništa not only summarized the principles of his own painting, but he also anticipated painting trends in the period to come:

Aim for simplicity in painting.

Aim for sparseness.

Avoid illusion.

A very finished look: the negation of the painting approach. School not necessary. Drawing or drawing experience included. The ways and means of traditional painting are insufficient. Do not change the paint in the can while painting. A signature is not necessary.

Several years later, having become fully aware of the conceptual principle of his paintings, Vaništa exchanges factual execution for the verbal equivalent, that is, substitutes the process of painting for precise verbal description.

However different the creative concepts of Jevšovar, Knifer, Seder, and Vaništa were, certain common characteristics tie them with New York post-painterly abstraction: the question is of two-dimensional painting which does away with all illusion of space and reduces all planes to one impenetrable surface, and "tries to clarify the surface of the painting as a 'field,' and not as a composition."⁴ However, despite possible analogies with Reinhardt, Stella, Newman, and Noland, the painting of each of the members of Gorgona clearly shows its European origin. Contrary to the preoccupation of Americans with formal and technical problems which is reflected in their exact execution and imposing formats, the members of Gorgona emphasize the spiritual character of their painting. The definitions of "degrading the surface," "subjectless meditation," and "interest in sparseness," which they associate with their work, demonstrate the European intellectual heritage: choice of unpretentious materials and small formats are the expression of a certain nihilism, of an ironic distance with regard to the piety of the painting act.

Especially worthy of attention is the painting of Dimitrije Bašičević.⁵ Its spirit and character are very close to contemporary art. For example, as early as 1959, he makes the painting *Hommage à Pythagore*, a black square on a black background under which a dedication is written in red calligraphy. This is also the time when he started using blackboards, writing words or verse on them with chalk. The same pattern will later be translated into the medium of painting. Based on the idea of imitating the blackboards during the period between 1950 and 1960 are several series of paintings: *Tabula rasa*, *Paysages*, and *Abeceda*. For the series *Nonstories*, Bašičević used old publications and catalogues as material. He painted the pages black, leaving only a word visible here and there, thereby creating a certain kind of illogical narration, a nonstory.

Even though the painting of the members of Gorgona coincides in some of its premises with the current avant-garde trends in monochrome and monotony as a compositional formula, in each individual case it is the product of a complete autochthonous creative concept. The painting of Bašičević, Jevšovar, Knifer, Seder, and Vaništa foils every attempt to classify them within a school or movement; whereas today some of the qualities of their work can be more easily recognized owing to the evolution of taste and sensibility. Each of them, seen as a whole, remains unique, beyond all known stylistic categories.

In addition to the members of Gorgona, other artists exhibited in Studio G. Their work, according to Gorgona, reached a certain level of quality and contemporaneity. Among them was Eugen Feller, certainly one of the most interesting protagonists of Informel in this country [Croatia], the creator of *Malampije*—paintings with cement deposits, tar applications, sand, and other similar found materials. Besides Ivo Gattin's *Zasjenčene površine* (*Cutup Surfaces*), Feller's *Malampije* are the only successful exceptions from the Informelist

production. They possess a robustness, an aggressiveness, and a tactile provocativeness of substances which, in general, were missing in the rationalized Croatian Informel. Another guest at Studio G was the young Belgrade painter Radomir Damnjanović, who exhibited several of his paintings from the series Pješčane obale (Sandy Beaches). At the beginning of the early 1960s, Damnjanović won the sympathy of both the art public and critics in Belgrade owing to the fact that he introduced condensed rudiments of organic forms into a flat, uniform background, which resulted in a free field for association and metaphors. In this way he successfully integrated the Surrealist tradition of the area with the tendencies toward nonillusional, depthless articulation of surface.

Several guests from outside of Yugoslavia also exhibited in Studio G. In 1962, thanks to Matko Meštrović, François Morellet, who first came to Zagreb the year before to participate in the *New Tendencies*, was among them. In the introduction in the catalogue, Meštrović wrote about Morellet: "He was able to see that each of the sixteen squares was an equally important element of the whole, of a given structure. Each square, by clearly showing its place and position, its loyalty, candid and free subordination to pure order, also demonstrates the permanence of the law according to which it is organized." The Museum of Arts and Crafts purchased one painting from the show, and Morellet gave the money to Gorgona to support further activity of the group.

The watercolors of Piero Dorazio, protagonist of Italian Op art, were also shown in Studio G. It is worth noting that the one-man shows of Dorazio, Morellet, and Vasarely in Studio G were more the result of certain circumstances (the participation of these artists in the *New Tendencies* exhibition, private contacts made by Meštrović with them, and the current trends in kinetic and optical art) than any shared ideas or sensibilities, as was the case with certain other personalities of the international art scene with whom Gorgona was associated. The retinal doctrine of optical art and the positivism of the Constructivists that completely dominated the second and later exhibitions of *New Tendencies* was foreign to the ironical, nihilistic spirit of Gorgona.

At first glance, one modestly important exhibition in Studio G illustrates the sensitivity of Putar and Vaništa to the oscillation of tastes and aesthetic judgments, that is, their surprising capability for anticipating the coming style. I am referring here to *Modern Style*, an exhibition of Art Nouveau objects, partially collected from various apartments in Zagreb and partially borrowed from the Museum of Arts and Crafts. This exhibition of the choicest examples from the Secession group of artists anticipated the renaissance of style at the end of the decade, the rage for sinuous form, which will culminate in popular graphic design, fashion, and interior design by the end of the 1960s.

That contemporary taste had still not demonstrated any affinity for the style that characterized architecture and art at the turn of the century is best illustrated by the tone of Putar's introduction in the catalogue: "This is a heritage that for decades we have spit upon, laughed at, hidden as a disgrace, and explained as delusion. Yet, time shows us that in the ground in which we have buried an entire flora of forms, even against our will a similar cluster of forms can sprout again. He who listens carefully and condescends to lower his head will see that in these modest works not all poetry of form has perished. He will see that its truth still lives and resists kitsch."

Exhibition activities terminated in Studio G in 1963. The reasons were mostly of a financial nature, and it left several exhibitions unrealized, among them exhibitions by Antonio Calderara, Marko Šuštarčić, Ivo Gattin, Bruno Mascarelli, Dimitrije Bašičević, and Slobodan Vuličević. By leasing the shop on Preradovićeve ulica, Gorgona was able to make its exhibition program independent of cultural institutions. By inviting colleagues whose work reflected recent tendencies to exhibit in Studio G, the group acted as a kind of corrective of the policies of other galleries. Of this Igor Zidić writes: "It is in no way subjective to say that Studio G was one of the most joyful discoveries of the cultural scene. In a situation in which generations, trends, and ideas are bought and sold, it is a real experience to meet a group of people who, in an intimate, modest way, live their lives without any ulterior motives, base feelings, or spiteful vindictiveness, and with refined sensibilities foster their independence."⁶

Still, the most significant manifestations of Gorgona took place outside of the galleries, and the forms they took were very different from the traditional way of presenting art via exhibitions and catalogues.

Antireview: Forerunner of "Book as Artwork" Phenomenon

From today's point of view, in light of recent events in art, the most significant manifestation of the group's activities was the publication entitled *Gorgona*. From 1961 to 1966, eleven issues were published and two more prepared, which unfortunately were never printed. *Gorgona* was not conceived as an art magazine. Every issue was an artwork in its own right. In other words, it belonged to that kind of art product that appeared as the result of the increasing use of everyday media in art, and which at the end of the 1960s was classified under the designation "book as artwork." The wave of Neo-Dadaism which appeared in early 1960 also brought with it an interest in new media: artists like Cage, La Monte Young, Manzoni, Klein, Rauschenberg, and Kaprow used biological and technological material equally. What Celant called "cool informal"⁷ is an art practice that implies the significance of media as media, with no attempt to feed them moral or allegorical content. However, the use of new media does not deny an individual and natural approach in favor of technology. On the contrary, it intensifies the awareness of the possibilities offered by media. The result is that less importance is put on the sensory aspect and more on the uniform, cool, analytical and philosophical aspect of an artwork.

In light of [Walter] Benjamin's distinction between the "cult value" and the "exhibition value" of art, the latter of which, in time, owing to new methods in technical reproduction, will completely predominate over the former, "book as artwork" is just one step further in the process of eliminating artwork as an original fetish object.

With the antireview *Gorgona*, the aesthetic principles of an entire generation are anticipated, and precisely through some of the ideas it presented the future issue of Conceptual art is predicted and defined. We can apply to *Gorgona* much later theoretical thinking in which the phenomenon of the Conceptual work alters the traditional relationship of original work/printed reproduction. In the opinion of Seth Sigelaub, in the case of painting/sculpture, printed reproduction is always secondary information about the work, a more or less successful illusion of the original which is impossible to reproduce faithfully. On

the contrary, in the case of Conceptual work, printed information is primary because it contains the same amount of information, as does the oeuvre itself.

A full decade before Sigelaub makes a distinction between primary and secondary information, and Celant places "book as artwork" under the category of "cool informer," the first issue of *Gorgona* is published and, in my opinion, foresees many recent ideas and definitions. Vaništa made the first issue of *Gorgona*. It consisted of the same cool, low-key photographic image of an empty display window in a shop for commissioned goods on Vlaška ulica reproduced on each of its nine pages. Two functions define the work: one is the choice of a neutral, in no way picturesque, motif, without emotional or associative charge; the other is repetition which, through the effect of monotony, destroys all possible metaphors.

Knifer conceived the second issue of *Gorgona* as an endless meander done in such a way that the pages are joined together to form an endless loop. It should be noted that what was accomplished was not the reproduction of a painting, but identification of the publication with Knifer's sign.

Kožarić's issue number 5 of *Gorgona* presents a portrait/sculpture: on one side of the page is a photograph of the face, and on the other side the same head but seen from the back. The work explores the possibilities of the reproductive media offering a sufficient amount of information about a three-dimensional piece.

Vaništa's issue number 6 of *Gorgona* also analyzes the relationship of original/reproduction in an "age of mechanical reproduction." The point in this case is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, surely the most frequently exploited myth in the history of art, which Vaništa selects by negative criteria: "I chose what I considered to be the most absurd thing to print in the magazine since reproducing the *Mona Lisa* is tantamount to leaving the page empty." Yet, contrary to the empty page, the *Mona Lisa* is a symbol, an element in the myth of genius and virtuosity: By his choice, Vaništa follows in the footsteps of all those artists who saw in the Gioconda the challenge for ironic intellectual intervention, but compared with Duchamp, for instance, he reduces intervention to the tautological act of reproducing.

In general, Vaništa was the first of the members of *Gorgona* to apply the tautology principle in art. Proof of this are issues 10 and 11 of *Gorgona*, as well as several of his ideas which were never realized. In issue number 10, the pages are completely blank—all information (title, publisher, issue no., year) is printed on a separate piece of paper the size of a calling card, inserted among the empty white sheets. The logical matrix $A = A$ is also applied in issue number 11 of *Gorgona*. The whole issue consists of a photograph of the front page inserted between the two covers.

Gorgona number 3 comes from the series called Perfect Drawings in which Jevšovar tries to draw freehand correct geometrical figures—a circle, parallel lines, a curved line. *Exercises-Perfect Drawings* are a demonstration of the individual creative relationship to geometric axioms: "The triangle is, for me, a terrible shape, primitive, and while the square and circle are definitive, perfect shapes, in their exact geometric form, they are too readable and inartistic."⁸ Jevšovar tries to overcome the impersonality of geometric facts and makes them individual by the imperfectness of free strokes. However, on the other hand, he tries to discipline the lines in an asymptomatic approach toward the ideal form. The shapes which result are "perfect"; their perfection is not of a geometric but



Miljenko Horvat. *Gorgona 7*, 1965. Photograph. Courtesy the artist

of an artistic nature, and it comes from the inevitable aberration of form drawn freehand from technically executed geometric figures.

Vasarely's *Gorgona* includes several drawings from that period and the author's text, while Dieter Roth's issue synthesizes reproduction and original technique. The basic comma pattern was printed, but the connecting line was hand-executed for each copy so that every copy of the magazine became an original drawing.

Two issues of *Gorgona* are of a literary origin. Issue number 8 is a translation of Harold Pinter's play *The Tea Party*. Miljenko Horvat's idea for *Gorgona* is indirectly literary, as the idea came from a travelogue about Denmark written by Miloš Crnjanski. It is an interesting issue because instead of being printed, it contained two actual photographs. The origin of the photographs has to do with Vaništa's trip to Skagen, a place on the Danish coast, which Crnjanski mentions in his travelogue, where dead seagulls can be frequently seen. Vaništa wrote about it to Horvat, who went to Skagen, and, hence the photograph with a melancholy motif of a dead seagull on a sandy beach; repeated in two versions, a lighter and a darker print, which served in the realization of issue number 7.

The unreserved acclamation and interest that *Gorgona* encountered in the circle of the then international avant-garde confirms the timeliness of Vaništa's idea about starting such an edition. The magazine was well distributed and artists like Manzoni, Rauschenberg, Fontana, Roth, Piene, and others whose polemic intellect significantly characterized the art period that followed recognized in these issues the product of a kindred artistic mentality. In his letter of March 4, 1961, Fontana compliments *Gorgona* as one of the most lively contemporary reviews, and Rauschenberg expresses the wish to design an issue of *Gorgona* himself. In a letter to Matko Meštrović dated December 9, 1961, Manzoni says, "I think the idea behind *Gorgona* is fantastic, and I immediately put together three projects from which the best and simplest for realization can be chosen. All three projects carry the title *Tavole di accertamento*."

One of Manzoni's ideas was to draw a horizontal line in the middle of every page, and another proposed rows of letters of the alphabet. The third project, which was chosen for the magazine but because of financial reasons was never printed, proposed that on all ten pages of the publication one of the author's fingerprints be printed. Again, it is a variation of the theme of the mythology of the individual: the artist's identity is literally imprinted on the work. Signature and fingerprints are symbols and proof of identity, and it is precisely the authenticity of identity on which rests the entire commercial mechanism of art which Manzoni wishes to question. (In the meantime, through the example of *Merde d'artista*, the discouraging adaptability of the art market was shown, which successfully absorbs even those "attacks" which try to question it.) It is interesting that Daniela Palazzoli, at that time editor of the Milan art magazine *ARC/do*, wrote in 1966 to Vaništa with the intention of helping to publish Manzoni's *Gorgona*, but for some reason this cooperation never materialized. Another artist whose issue of *Gorgona* never came out was Enzo Mari, an Italian designer whose interests later turned in the direction of radical politicizing and ethical re-examination of the role of industrial design in contemporary society. Two other artists whose issues were never published are Ivo Gattin and Josip Meštrović.



Miljenko Horvat, *Gorgona 7*, 1965. Photograph. Courtesy the artist

In this country, Gorgona was known among a small group of people. One person who was in close contact with the group, although never became a member, was Mihovil Pansini, a physician and filmmaker and later the founder of GEEF, an avant-garde, experimental film festival organized partially under the influence of Gorgona. About this, Pansini says, "During these discussions,⁹ the idea of antifilm was born and was roughly defined for the first time at the end of the third discussion in May of 1962. Actually the texts of *New Tendencies* and *Gorgona* were paraphrased, and in that way their influence on antifilm was confirmed. When the discussions ended, we had an idea of the direction in which experimental film could go."¹⁰ In close contact with Gorgona were three painters—Josip Zanetti, Mišo Mikac, and Jakov Bratanić. From correspondence we can see that others who were familiar with the existence and activity of Gorgona included Gabrijel Stupica, Georgij Paro, Slobodan Mašić, and Boris Vižintin. However, aside from personal affinities, no one at that time was fully aware of or correctly appraised the real significance and seriousness of this art phenomenon, and Gorgona has remained practically anonymous, an esoteric phenomenon overlooked in the art history of its milieu.

Language as Art Material in Gorgona's Practice

From today's perspective, the most interesting of Gorgona's activities is that which remains outside the category of visual art, and which inaugurates new ways and means of art communication. This includes all the forms of "gorgonic" activity that never "materialized" in any of the productive or reproductive art media, and the traces of which exist only in the memory and correspondence of its members.

The following classification of this "dematerialized" art is done with the aid of a vocabulary based on art practice and theory developed over the course of the past decade. Classifying these activities under the terminological designation of recent art is merely an attempt at a posteriori orientation in the phenomena that announced, and in many cases directly anticipated, current art practice. The projects, walks as artwork, realization of artwork via mail, were various manifestations of the same creative outlook, the character of which can be best seen in Vaništa's 1961–62 definition of Gorgona:

Gorgona is serious and simple.
Gorgona is for absolute transience in art.
Gorgona seeks neither work nor result in art.
It judges according to the situation.
Gorgona is contradictory.
It defines itself as the sum of all its possible definitions.
Gorgona is constantly in doubt. . . .
Valuing most that which is dead.
Gorgona speaks of nothing.
Undefined and undetermined.

Concepts and Projects

Gorgona's meetings were a kind of creative and spiritual outlet, motivated solely by intellectual and spiritual affinities, similar leanings and interests, without the obligation to create an art product of any type whatsoever. The meetings were

often held in the form of a walk somewhere around Zagreb, and the occasion for them might be to watch the sun set or what they called "an inspection of the beginning of spring (fall)." In the course of these meetings, ideas and proposals arose which we would characterize today as artworks, as a spontaneous intellectual game. These ideas ranged from very concrete ones which, because of technical and financial impossibilities, were never realized in the form of objects or exhibitions, to very analytical and critical works, which in their very conception never presumed to be realized materially. Ivan Kožarić's proposal to place a globe in Studio G that would fill up the gallery completely is one of the ideas that belongs to the first group. By showing an interest in primary geometric form and accentuated interaction between the space and object in it, Kožarić's idea approaches the sculptural premises of primary structures and environmental art. Another one of his projects within the "Collective Work" (1963) reads: "To make casts of the insides of automobiles, apartments, stables, of the interior of a park, in general, of all important hollows in town." The expression which implies an unlimited series—"all hollows in town"—gives the proposal a fantastic, poetic tone, yet if we take just a few examples—the inside of a stable, the inside of a car—we see that it is based on 1) perception of visual values in everyday environment and 2) transforming hollows (negative volume) into sculpture (positive volume). This is also the time when many of Kožarić's projects that aimed at natural and urban ambiances originated.

Kožarić's *Unusual Project* from 1960 seems, at first glance, to be a very ordinary piece of sculpture based on the problem of cutting off certain sections from the mass. However, it soon becomes clear that this is not an ordinary piece of sculpture when we learn that what he has made is a "model" for an undertaking of gigantic proportions which was never realized—cutting off a piece of Sljeme, a mountain near Zagreb. Similar sculptural problems are encountered in *A Piece of the River*, a sculpture done in stone which suggests a "piece of water" cut from the river's course. Ripples on the surface of the water are turned to stone, and the form achieved is a portrait of the flow itself. Both examples introduce us to a complex game of reality and illusion: in appearance the abstract sculpture is very realistic if we are aware of its unusual origin. The conceptual principle of these sculptures lies in the transformation of material: turning earth and water to bronze or stone, i.e., turning powdery or liquid natural substances into solid sculptural material is similar to the Pop art method of "translating into other materials." Johns's Ballantine Ale cans cast in bronze and Oldenburg's canvas cabinets cause similar confusion because of the discrepancy in the usual material makeup of an object and its artistic interpretation. However, the singularity of Kožarić's approach is that he is looking for motifs in natural, not cultural environments. Instead of glorifying or criticizing the consumer attitudes of contemporary civilization, inherent in the work of Johns and Oldenburg, Kožarić is primarily interested in sculptural problems. Before us is a work of Land art, but cast in bronze! The difference in iconography causes a difference in morphology. A piece of river, a cut hill, are not recognizable and we experience them as abstract forms. Awakened interest in the insignificant phenomena of the everyday is seen in Julije Knifer's proposal to make an exhibition of banality. Somewhat more complex is Seder's idea for making an exhibition in Jevšovar's studio: everyone would bring an object which he feels best expresses the

subject of the last meeting's conversation. Several of Vaništa's projects are structured on the juxtaposition of reality and illusion, objects and photography. He proposes photographing the contents of a suitcase and then sticking the snapshot on the top of the suitcase. Based on the same logical matrix is his proposal to take a photograph through the window of Studio G of part of the studio's interior, and then to blow it up and put the lifesize photograph in the studio window, so that seen from the proper angle outside, the real architecture overlaps with the photographic illusion.

Vaništa's *Exhibition without Exhibiting* is one of the most radical of Gorgona's work. Instead of an exhibition, a precise description of each painting was to be made—the dimensions, the chemical composition of paint, the width of the horizontal line—and the work completed with an introduction by Zvonimir Mrkonjić, who was supposed to make a formal analysis of the "paintings." Substitution of artwork with language equivalents as an equally indicative code shows that Vaništa had already understood that the logical structure of work is more important than the manually executed form. "I stopped painting paintings when I realized that it was sufficient to formulate them by means of language."

The proposal to make the color Gorgona's Black coincides with Klein's IKB: in both cases, painting as the combination of a finite number of colors is opposed by the individual act of creating a new color which is no longer a means of pictorial mimicry or metaphor, but becomes an absolute trademark of a particular artist or art group.

One more idea from this period announced later recognition of the fact that the aura surrounding the personality of an artist is an indistinguishable element in judging the quality of his [or her] work, which in recent art has resulted in the building of personality myths, as an exclusive art practice. Vaništa proposed that an exhibition be organized in the window of Salon Šira entitled *In Honor of Manet*, which would consist of object-symbols of the painter's personality: a top hat, white gloves, and a cane. (In order to acquire all these things, Gorgona advertised in the want-ad section of the daily newspaper and, surprisingly, received many replies.) The intention to present the classics of modern painting, not through the work the artist left but by means of objects/attributes of personality and fashion of the times, shows that even then thinking had begun about the function of personal mythology¹¹ in the mechanism of art history.

New Means of Art Communication

In addition to the proposals, projects, and ideas that resulted from or were reported at their meetings, an important source for discovering the spiritual coordinates of Gorgona is the *Gorgona's Post*. Namely, the group made use of institutionalized systems of communication, like the post and press, to communicate their art messages. It is particularly interesting that with several works intended solely for the postal media, Gorgona announced the much later phenomena of Mail art, as well as the trend to use official means of communication for art purposes. Thus in 1961 an invitation was sent to several addresses with the text "You are invited," the idea behind this incomplete invitation being the parody of comprehending cultural events only as an occasion for social gatherings.

It was the practice of the group that once a month one of the members collects and sends to the others a selection of quotations from philosophical, literary,

and aesthetic texts which he [or she] considered best expressed the state of mind and current mood of Gorgona.¹² Consequently, "Thoughts for the Month," as they referred to this selection, is the most important key to understanding the aesthetic-ideological principles and mentality of a group that created its place of spiritual freedom in almost complete anonymity and seclusion. "Thoughts for the Month" are a laconic and indirect form of self-definition. Gorgona defined itself by way of reflection, recognizing itself in distant mirrors of time and space. Still, these various corresponding planes crossed each other in a common line, which is the recognition of nihilism as an aesthetic category. For example, "Thoughts for February" (1961) consist of the following quotes:

"Abstract painting is the picturesque literature of psychological states. That's sad. I'm glad I'm not an abstract painter." — Yves Klein

"Only in emptiness does the essential abide." — Lao-tzu

"Earlier I liked prose for its richness of emotion, profound music, and hot colors; weaknesses which surely deserve to be punished; now after a quarter of a century, I am led to the kingdom of pure and esthetic line." — Tin Ujević

"Heidegger remains alone in his stand on a particular kind of nihilism, which, by reducing man's existence to an existence destined for death, sees man's greatest task in the acceptance of this fact and living without illusions in a conscious and apprehensive freedom doomed to death."

"For man, speech hides, rather than reveals singularity." — M. H.

"Thoughts for June, July, August: Buddhist priests live alone in the summer, and come together in the winter." — H. de M. Carnets, années 1930–44

At times "Thoughts for the Month" contained fragments of texts from art periodicals which recorded kindred phenomena. In one word, this selection reflected the essence of the group's theoretical and philosophical points of view, and was the recognition of kindred sensibilities — of the gorgonic *modus essere* in the art phenomena of other places. Another interesting form of the group's internal activities was the "Gorgona Choice." Compared to "Thoughts for the Month," which condensed their attitudes on literature, philosophy, and art, "Gorgonic Choice" was searching for material and nourishment in everyday life. From newspapers, magazines, and events from their own lives, they chose those phenomena and occurrences which distinguished themselves through certain qualities from the sphere of the ordinary, rational, logical, and predictable. The work functioned partly on the principle of a "readymade." The whole intervention consisted of discerning, choosing, and "appropriating" the phenomena and situations which satisfied the gorgonic criterium. Compared to Duchamp, who was looking for neutral, cool objects to add to art products, Gorgona used different criteria. They were searching for events which distinguished themselves through their absurd, grotesque, and bizarre qualities. This "choice" offers one more possibility of defining Gorgona, which Putar formulated as: "We are not Gorgona — we are only searching for Gorgona in the world around us."

After 1966 Gorgona's activities reached a crisis. However, its death was not literal; it refers more to the end of those few media by which Gorgona communicated with the external world than any real end of the group's existence. In 1966 the last issue of the antireview was published, while the last exhibition activities in Studio G had ceased three years earlier, mainly because of financial reasons. However, in its most essential form the group never ceased to exist. Through

their meetings, exchange of ideas, and intellectual and spiritual ties, it still lives today. Not acknowledging the significance and achievements of Gorgona during the time of its greatest activity was a lost opportunity to perceive and assess a progressive art phenomenon which brought with it the destruction of many myths of bourgeois aesthetics. Gorgona's practice implicitly criticized the traditional concept of art as class institutions which by attributing eternal, precious, monumental, decorative, and divine qualities to art, insures it the privileged status in bourgeois society. Gorgona's practice jeopardized the sacrosanct position of art in all these aspects because it used everyday, nonart materials and means of communication (press, mail, speech). It destroyed the notion of painting as decoration and pleasant illusion, and finally by emphasizing the conception of a work over its craftsmanship, it tended to destroy the Christian myth of the artist's hand being led by divine genius. The failure to acknowledge Gorgona signified a lost opportunity for the art history of this area to record one of the most significant phenomena to occur here, and to permit the continuity of progressive art ideas in the period to follow. This has been an attempt to correct that.

Notes

1. Exat 51 is a Croatian group of artists, designers, and architects who were active from 1950 to 1956. They worked in geometric abstraction, kinetic art, and Op art and were influential in promoting modernist art.
2. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969).
3. Buren's much later choice of striped fabric as his personal trademark is only a more radical form of the same concept.
4. Barbara Rose, *American Art since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).
5. Bašičević also suggested the name for the group, which comes from the title of one of his poems.
6. Igor Zidić, "A Few Lines about Gorgona," *Studentski list*, Zagreb, 1966.
7. Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960-72* (London: Nigel Greenwood, 1972).
8. From an interview with Nena Dimitrijević, catalogue of a solo show at Galerija Nova, Zagreb, 1976.
9. He is referring to the discussions held by filmmakers in the Kino-Club, Zagreb, in connection with founding a festival of avant-garde and experimental films.
10. "Book of GEEF, 1963," GEEF Organization Committee, Zagreb, 1967.
11. A phenomenon referred to by Johannes Cladders as "die individuelle Mythologie," catalogue of Documenta 5, Kassel, 1972.
12. The author of this choice was mainly Vaništa.

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BRACO DIMITRIJEVIĆ

Born in Sarajevo in 1948, Braco Dimitrijević studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb and at St. Martin's College of Art in London. His art comments on the arbitrary result of narrative history, its omissions, and the prejudicial conditions of fame versus anonymity. The Casual Passerby series, started in 1968 and realized internationally, represents images of randomly met people in large photo portraits, busts, and memorial plaques that are displayed prominently in places typically reserved for people of cultural significance. Often Dimitrijević's works legitimately dupe the public, as on the occasion when photos that were