

Miško Šuvaković\*

## Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia

In this study, I will approach the avant-gardes as interdisciplinary, internationally oriented artistic and cultural practices.<sup>1</sup> I will present and advocate the thesis that the Yugoslav avant-gardes were a special geopolitical and geo-aesthetic set of artistic and cultural phenomena defined by the internal dynamics and interrelations of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and by the external dynamics, cosmopolitan relations, and internationalisations of local artistic excess and experimentation with international avant-garde practices. I will devote special attention to the local and international networking of cities as the political and cultural environments where the avant-gardes took place. Above all, the avant-gardes thereby acquired the character of extremely urban artistic and cultural phenomena.

### Introductory Interpretation of the Concept of the Avant-garde

Discussing the status, functions, and effects of any *avant-garde* does not boil down to asking what phenomenal or conceptual, i.e. formalist, qualities are characteristic of an avant-garde work of art, the behaviour of an avant-garde artist, or her private or public life. On the contrary, equally important are directional questions regarding the instrumental potentialities or realisations of the avant-garde as an interventional material artistic practice in between or against dominant and marginal domains, practices, or paradigms within historical or present cultures. Avant-garde artistic practices are historically viewed as transformations of artistic, cultural, and social resistances, limitations, and ruptures within dominant, homogeneous or hegemonic artistic, cultural, and social environments. The avant-garde emerged at that historical juncture when the vertical class bourgeois society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformed into a horizontal,

201

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Miško Šuvaković and Dubravka Đurić (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 12–13. Miško Šuvaković (ed.), *Radikalne umetničke prakse: istorija umetnosti XX veka u Srbiji. Tom 1* (Belgrade: Orion Art, 2010), p. 59.

\* Faculty of Music, Belgrade, Serbia

consumer, and increasingly media society—the society in the age of mass “mechanic-electric” reproduction and communication on the eve and in the wake of World War I.

The avant-garde emerged by transcending the hierarchical lines of the class society of advanced modernism. That is why many have written about the mutual proximity, if not overlapping, of artistic, cultural, and political avant-gardes. For instance, Aleš Erjavec explicitly stresses the link between political and artistic avant-gardism:

The avant-garde (i.e. the revolutionary and the radical) agendas of artists sometimes not only met but also collided with similar agendas of the political avant-garde. The most vivid case of a conflict is the one that emerged in the Soviet Union in the decade after the October revolution, while the Italian futurism vis-à-vis the nascent and at that time still revolutionary fascism could offer an example of political cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

In paradigmatic terms, one could say that the avant-gardes typically emerged in one of the following three ways:

1. Due to the crisis of high modernism, stable and traditionally elaborate. There is an obvious analogy with the *workings* of capitalism,<sup>3</sup> which produces its own crises by itself or, by means of its radical and often uncontrollable forms of production, exchange, and consumption, provokes social crises only to emerge from them strengthened with new means of producing, exchanging, and consuming the regulated and deregulated everyday, which also means with new conditions for creating and receiving art.
2. By way of the experimental development of modernism, which includes an obvious paradox: modernism has always been posited by canonising high aesthetic values that thwarted or only suspended progress, whereas the avant-gardes, in relation to the dominant modernist climate of canonical (timeless, universal, i.e. trans-historical, trans-subjective, and trans-geographical) determinations, assumed the role of an experimental or innovative

202

<sup>2</sup> Aleš Erjavec, “The Avant-Gardes: From Modernism to Postmodernism”, in *Postmodernism, Postsocialism and Beyond* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), p. 3.

space on behalf of and in favour of modernism, i.e. modernism engendered in its productive *body* a space of otherness that enabled its simultaneous development and canonisation.

3. By critiquing, provoking, subverting, or destroying modernist canons, i.e. as a reaction to the totalising and canonical vision/version of modernism as a dominant and hegemonic rational and instrumental culture, which points to the key problem of the similarities, competitiveness, and differences between the avant-garde *qua* anti-mimetism and critical realism (i.e. mimetism) *qua* political subversion of the modernist non-functionality of art.

Modernisms and material practices within 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernisms may be presented and interpreted using different interpretative models of historicisation.<sup>4</sup> Those models range from indexing historicist and essentialist modernism, via the catastrophic and revolutionary model of paradigm shifts in art, to rather dispersive and anarchic postmodernist conceptions of the domination of the synchronic over the diachronic, of post-history and a metastasising eclecticism, etc. On the other hand, one might also construct interpretative models/maps of indexed confrontations within the large and diverse mega-modernist paradigm from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on. For example, one could speak of the role of bohemia and the avant-garde as an autonomous territory of non-functional work,<sup>5</sup> therefore also life, in the instrumental and productive bourgeois society of European cultures before World War I. The historical avant-gardes<sup>6</sup> may be interpreted as the vanguard of new stages in the development of bourgeois modernist society around 1900. But the historical avant-gardes also constituted a provocation as well as resistance to the dominant ruling bourgeois society and its hegemonic universalism in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historical avant-gardes were realised both as a project and optimal projection<sup>7</sup> of an apocalyptic, ideal, or new art, culture, or society. Also, the historical

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project", in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina, "Bohemia and the avant-garde", in "Modern Practices of Art and Modernity", in Francis Frascina, Nigel Blake, Briony Fer, Tamar Garb and Charles Harrison, *Modernity and Modernism / French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 50–53.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Aleksandar Flaker, "Optimalna projekcija", in *Poetika osporavanja. Avangarda i književna ljevica* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1984), pp. 66 and 68.

avant-gardes have been viewed as an extremely productive way of transforming high bourgeois modernism into the emerging mass-media and consumer culture of the 1920s. Paradoxically, as an idealist project of modern liberal bourgeois society, the historical avant-gardes were sometimes also socially realised in totalitarian regimes of the 1920s and '30s.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, as an excess project within the crisis-ridden modern bourgeois society, the avant-gardes became victims of totalitarian regimes and their hyper-modernist reductions of the idea of modernity itself.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, my starting definition of the avant-gardes is the following: in the broadest sense, the avant-garde denotes supra-stylistic or extra-stylistic radical, excessive, transgressive, critical, experimental, projective, programmatic, and interdisciplinary practices in art and culture. Avant-garde artistic and cultural practices emerged around 1900.

The radicalism of an avant-garde artist, group, or movement was reflected in their rejection or subversion of traditional or academic modern art, bourgeois culture and society within various paradigms of modernity and modernisms. Excessive, subversive, and transgressive<sup>10</sup> are those works in art, forms of public and private behaviour and activity whose phenomenality, appearance, import, and meanings are provocative and shocking to the values of bourgeois modern society. Excesses and transgressions may be aesthetic, cultural, moral, or political. An excess has become the avant-gardist act of provoking and destroying the autonomy of modernist art and bourgeois culture and society by means of a critical, projective, and manifestly political conceptualisation of artistic activity. That is why the avant-garde emerges as the vanguard or guide that transgresses the limits of established postmodernity, while decadence occurs as *neurotic resistance* that obsessively affirms the borders between the normal and the exotic,

204

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Boris Grojs [Groys, Boris], "Ruska avangarda: skok preko progresu", in *Stil Staljin* (Beograd: Službeni Glasnik, 2009), pp. 23–49.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Stephanie Barron, (ed.), *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany (Entartete Kunst. Das Schicksal Der Avantgarde im Nazi Deutschland)*, (Los Angeles: LACMA, Munich: Deutsch Historisches Museum, Hirmer Verlag, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Denis Hollier, *Against: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 134–138. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 72–87.

or obsessively leads towards an utterly individual enjoyment and/or depression that uncovers the dark side of every modernity.<sup>11</sup>

An experimental status of art suggests that the aim of action in art is not the inspired creativity of a craftsman production of a work of art, but rather a desire to examine and change the ontologically assumed and socially recognised character of art. Experimentation is pursued by means of exploring the media, materials, methods, and ideologies of acting in art. For example, radical experimentation turned the artists of constructivism into technicians and researchers. In avant-garde art, the work as a made object becomes less important, while experimentation and research<sup>12</sup> attain central importance. Avant-garde art stands for a total transformation of art, culture, and society, which is why it has a projective character. The notion of project defines the meaning of avant-garde acting in terms of ideology, values, and significance.

The avant-garde is interdisciplinary because avant-garde *artistic works* are not made within the defined and autonomous artistic professions, disciplines, and their media. Avant-garde products emerge by overstepping, critiquing, and destroying the limits of the usage and conceptual or sensuous phenomenality of media, disciplines, and genres of art. An avant-garde *artistic work* either points to the limits of a medium—the limits of mimetic painting were developed and problematized from impressionism to abstract art—or oversteps them, producing citational, collage, assemblage, and readymade objects, situations, events, and textual structures (Dada, constructivism, surrealism). The notion of an avant-garde *work of art* expands to cover hybrid artistic methods, materials, modes of behaviour, inter-generic determinations, and relations between different disciplines of art. Classification terms such as “literary avant-garde”, “avant-garde painting”, “avant-garde sculpture”, “musical avant-garde”, or “film avant-garde” are only approximate labels, not accurate identifications, because avant-garde art is an inter-media, inter-generic, and interdisciplinary formation that connects and erases the borders of artistic disciplines and, indeed, professions.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Milorad Belančić, “Poreklo dekadencije”, in Dražen Katunarić (ed.), “Dekadencija” (special issue), *Delo*, nos. 3–4, Belgrade, 1988, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Đulio Karlo Argan [Argan, Giulio Carlo], “Umetnost kao istraživanje”, in *Studije o modernoj umetnosti* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1982), pp. 154–155.

“The historical avant-gardes” is a trans-stylistic term that denotes radical, excessive, transgressive, critical, experimental, projective, and inter-media movements from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-1930s. “The avant-garde” is a trans-stylistic term because it is not defined as an epochal hegemonic model of shaping art, a specific singular instance of artistic expression, a coherent movement, defined school, or “great vogue”, but rather as a set of heterogeneous and hybrid singular cases, movements, schools, or vogues with their own radical, critical, experimental, projective, and inter-media features. As a collective term, “the avant-garde” is historically determined, because it pertains to the inconsistency and contradictions of industrial bourgeois society and its modernist culture, turning into the mass consumer and media society. The emergence of the avant-gardes began in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century French culture, when the modernist ideals of the autonomy of art turned out to be a hindrance to an unbroken radical development and transformation of art and culture in a society based on the market and production. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, avant-garde art emerged in various national cultures: France (symbolism, post- and neo-impressionism, fauvism, cubism, Dada, surrealism), Italy (futurism), Germany (expressionism, Dada, constructivism, New Objectivity), Russia (symbolism, neo-primitivism, cubo-futurism, constructivism, suprematism), Switzerland (Dada), the Netherlands (the neo-plasticism of *De Stijl*, constructivism, Dada), England (vorticism, surrealism), the United States (expressionism, cubism, Dada, surrealism), Japan (Dada), Poland (expressionism, constructivism, unism), Czechoslovakia (symbolism, cubism, Dada, constructivism, surrealism), Serbia (expressionism, cubism, Zenitism, Dada, actionism, surrealism), Croatia (expressionism, cubism, Zenitism, Dada, surrealism), Slovenia (expressionism, Dada, constructivism), etc. Among those, the French, Italian, German, and Russian avant-gardes of the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are regarded as paradigmatic. The term “paradigmatic avant-gardes” denotes the typical, great, or hegemonic avant-gardes that define a certain horizon of the historicisation of the international concept of the avant-garde. In histories of art, the following terms are also used in relation to the historical avant-gardes: “Eastern European”, “Middle European”, and “Central European avant-gardes”. “Middle European avant-gardes” denotes avant-garde practices in cultures that were under the influence of Austria-Hungary, typically the Austrian, Czech, Slovakian, Hungarian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Vojvodina

avant-gardes. “Central European avant-gardes”<sup>13</sup> denotes avant-garde practices that emerged in between the spheres of influence of Moscow and Paris, including the Polish (Poznań, Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow), German (Berlin, Dessau, Weimar), Czech (Prague), Austrian (Vienna), Hungarian (Budapest), Romanian (Bucharest), Slovenian (Ljubljana), Croatian (Zagreb), and Serbian (Belgrade) avant-gardes. The Middle and Central European avant-gardes are so-called minor or “non-paradigmatic” avant-gardes, which means that they are characterised by left- or right-leaning intellectual artistic practices typically linked with either private actions or the publication of small-circulation avant-garde magazines. According to Lev Kreft,

Speaking of the regional and cosmopolitan, as well as the relationship between (avant-garde) art and society in the context of Central European avant-gardes, we must begin by asserting that the avant-gardes were certainly not mainstream. They could be cosmopolitan, sometimes with a radical component of proletarian internationalism, and they could be nationalist, sometimes involving militant primitivism, but they were not central. Especially not in Central Europe: there, they were marginal and eccentric movements removed from mainstream ideologies of national arts and cultures, which were themselves typical of this region of belated modernisation. To call this part of Europe “Central” sounds ironic and the avant-gardes expressed that irony by attacking nation-building cultural ideologies inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as by examining the central positioning of Western culture from the perspective of its decadence, especially following World War I. They were marginal both on account of being avant-gardes and Central European.<sup>14</sup>

Immediately following World War I and during the 1920s, the national avant-gardes confronted or linked with one another, giving rise to the notion of international art. The avant-garde was then redefined as the complex relationship between international artistic practices, while national avant-gardes were viewed in relation to international tendencies. The demise of the historical avant-gardes

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Timothy O. Benson, “Central European Avant-Gardes”, in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2002), p. 15. Cf. Krisztina Passuth, *Treffpunkte der Avantgarden Ostmitteleuropa* (Budapest: Balassi, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Lev Kreft, “Politike avangardi u Centralnoj Evropi”, *TkH*, no. 8, Belgrade, 2004, p. 9.

is dated to the early 1930s, when the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy saw the solidification of totalitarian bolshevist, national-socialist, and fascist regimes.

### **A Case Study: The Avant-garde in Yugoslavia**

The “Yugoslav avant-gardes” denotes a multitude of transgressive, experimental, inter-media, and interdisciplinary phenomena in the interstices between literature and the fine arts in the Slavic south (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) between 1918 and 1935. During the 1910s, '20s, and early 1930s, the South Slavic cultural space saw the formation of specific avant-garde cultures such as the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian avant-gardes. These avant-gardes were not mutually isolated, but defined by their inter-textual and inter-subjective exchanges and influences. Authors and artists such as Miroslav Krleža, Dimitrije Mitrović, Antun Gustav Matoš, Stanislav Vinaver, Tin Ujević, Mihailo Petrov, Branko Ve Poljanski, Ljubomir Micić, Jo Klek (Josip Seissel), Marijan Mikac, Dragan Aleksić, Marko Ristić, Avgust Černigoj, Edvard Stepančić, Josip Slavenski, Miloje Milojević, Vlado Habunek, Josip Kulundžić and others acted within the domains of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Slovenian culture by generating a flow of ideas, polemical situations, and actions that produced an open, unstable, and inconsistent *avant-garde world* in Yugoslavia, i.e. the Balkans, Middle and Central Europe.

The condition of culture and the arts in the Slavic South before World War I was complex: the Kingdom of Serbia was a state where the national moderate-modernist cultures and initial values of bourgeois society were only just being established. There were significant influences from French culture. Slovenia, Croatia, Vojvodina, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were under Austro-Hungarian rule—their cultural milieu was determined, on the one hand, by the awakening of their national cultures and quest for their national identities and, on the other hand, by the mega-cultural framework of Central European modernity (cosmopolitanism and eclecticism, which emerged under the influence of cities such as Vienna, Budapest, Munich, Berlin, and Prague). It was a period when the political and cultural idea of Yugoslavdom was formed and realised as the project for a future communion of the South Slavic nations. The phenomena that anticipated the modernist and avant-garde positions that were current at the time were post-impressionism, symbolism, Secession, futurism, and expressionism.

For the most part, avant-garde tendencies may be observed in South Slavic lands that were under Austro-Hungarian rule between 1910 and 1917. In the journal *Ljubljanski zvon* (1909), Friderik Juvančič published informative pieces on futurist manifestoes and Marinetti's school. Parts of Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* were also published in No. 3 of the Zagreb-based periodical *Savremenik*.

In *Bosanska vila* (Sarajevo, 1913), the poet, anarchist, and member of *Mlada Bosna* Dimitrije Mitrinović published his "Estetičke kontemplacije" (Aesthetic Contemplations), where he expounded ideas close to German expressionism and Italian futurism, constructing his own aesthetic-ethical vision of a new art and culture.<sup>15</sup>

In 1914, Joe (Joso) Matošić prepared the publication of a futurist magazine, *Zvrk*, in Zadar.<sup>16</sup> The magazine did not come out, and only sketches remain. Anton Aralica, Ulderiko Donadini, and, for sure, Anton Gustav Matoš are also mentioned as members of this futurist group of artists. Expressionist and futurist modes of expression are revealed in the poetry of Janko Polić Kamov and the poetry and dramatic writings of A. G. Matoš. Antun Branko Šimić was one of the leading activists of new art in Croatia, as well as a critic who wrote about Dadaism, expressionism, and neoclassical, i.e. constructive and geometric, painting.<sup>17</sup> In 1917, Miroslav Krleža published his "Croatian Rhapsody" ("Hrvatska rapsodija"), where he challenged the national mythology and poetics of Croatian Secession, and constructed an optimal projection of *cosmopolitanism*, hinting at avant-garde strivings towards the totality of the artistic. The magazines *Vijavica* (1917–1918) and *Juriš* (1919), published by Antun B. Šimić, were close to the expressionist tendencies and activities of the German journal *Der Sturm*. Krleža and Cesarec edited the expressionist journal *Plamen* (1919). In the Kingdom of Serbia, anticipations of expressionism, futurism, and cubism may be found in the poetry of Stanislav Vinaver (*Telegrafski soneti* [Telegraphic Sonnets], 1911; and "Manifest

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dimitrije Mitrinović, "Estetičke kontemplacije", *Bosanska vila* XXVIII nos. 4, 5, 6, 10, 11–12, 13–14, 15–16, 17–18, 19, and 20, Mostar, 1913, pp. 49–52, 65–67, 91–92, 154–156, 173–174, 200–202, 223–225, 247–248, 268–269, 285.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Boro Pavlović, "Futurizam Zvrk", in *Ugodna pripovjest – Neobuhvatljivi eseji* (Zagreb: Disput, 2003), pp. 123–183.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Antun Branko Šimić, "Dada", "Ekspresionizam i svečovječanstvo", "Konstruktivno slikarstvo", "Slikarstvo i geometrija", in *Djela II* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost and Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1988).

ekspresionističke škole” [Manifesto of the Expressionist School], 1920), and the notion of bohemia and the myth of the cursed poet/artist in the works of Sima Pandurović and Vladislav Petković Dis.

The Yugoslav avant-garde—the Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Hungarian avant-garde in Vojvodina—belonged among the *minor or non-paradigmatic avant-gardes* in the space of Middle or Central Europe. It was close to the Czech, Hungarian, and Romanian avant-garde. It is characterised by expressing an *atmosphere* of modernity, urbanisation, and growing popular culture and mechanical media. It is also characterised by nomadic moving in the domain of *realised artistic freedoms*. Most of the artists associated with it came from intellectual and literary experimental practices, not from the production of fine arts. One might say that the “fine arts” practices and avant-gardist practices indeed remained in their own separate *worlds*, except for rare and brief collaborations between painters and avant-gardist activists, most notably Vilko Gecan with *Zenit* in Croatia, Mihailo S. Petrov with *Zenit* and Aleksić’s Dadaism in Serbia, Jo Klek with *Zenit* and, later, surrealism, in Croatia and Serbia, and Radojica Živanović-No in Serbia. One of the paradoxes of “Yugoslav art” is that all at the same time there were practices of a rather belated radical modernism appearing as “new” (expressionism, cubism, fauvism), emerging interdisciplinary avant-gardes (Dada, Zenitism, and constructivism), and a tendency to revert to order (neoclassicism, constructive painting, pan-realism, intimism) between 1920 and 1924.

With the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and, later on, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, urbanised cultural spaces took shape in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade, and stronger cultural interrelations were established between larger and smaller cities and towns. In cultural and political terms, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and, later, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were characterised by the establishment of bourgeois society, the constitution of moderate national modernisms, interethnic tension and rivalry, as well as the forming of international relations and joining of international movements in politics, economy, and culture. In such circumstances, there emerged avant-garde movements with clear programmatic postulates, which stood out from the modernist matrix by way of excess. For instance, in Zagreb, Zenitism referred to the German expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*, Hungarian activist magazine *MA*, and the subversive and rhetorical provocations of Italian

futurism. In Belgrade, Zenitism referred to Soviet radical, critical, and manifesto constructivism and the international avant-garde. Zenit realised the construct of the paradigm of “Balkanism”, owing its mythical impetus to the rhetoric of *Der Sturm*. Aleksić’s Dada performed its initial identifications by way of the Czech avant-garde in Prague and then came across German, let us say Hanover, Dada before transmitting its accomplishments back to Zagreb and Belgrade. Aleksić promoted the notion of Yugo-Dada. The Hungarian avant-garde in Subotica (Szabadka) and Novi Sad (Újvidék) was connected to Hungarian activism in exile, striving to link up with Serbian and Croatian avant-gardists, all the way to Zenit and Dada. Belgrade surrealism<sup>18</sup> was essentially affiliated with Parisian surrealism.

In diagrammatic terms, one may present the relationship of Yugoslav avant-garde phenomena as one of different cities and their cultural networking:

**ZAGREB**

*Vihor*

*Plamen*

*Juriš*

*Dada*

*Zenitism*

*treveleri*

*surrealism*

**RIJEKA (FIUME)**

*futurism/fascism*

**OSIJEK**

*Aleksić matinée*

**VINKOVCI**

*Dadaist conference*

**SISAK TOPUSKO PETRINJA**

*Zenitist vespers*

**ZADAR**

*futurism: Zvrk*

**LJUBLJANA**

*Svetokret*

*Rdeči pilot*

*Ferdo Delak*

*Tank*

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Milanka Todić (ed.), *Nemoguće Umetnost nadrealizma* (Belgrade: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 2002); Jadranka Vinterhalter (ed.), *Prodori avangarde u hrvatskoj umjetnosti prve polovice 20. stoljeća* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2007).

**NOVO MESTO**

*Anton Podbevšek*

**TRIESTE**

*constructivism*

**BELGRADE**

*Zenitism*

*Post-Dada*

*Hipnos*

*surrealism*

**NOVI SAD/SUBOTICA**

*activism: Ūt and Hírlap*

**MOSTAR**

*Dimitrije Mitrinović*

The first interwar and entirely authorial and avant-garde periodical was *Svetokret: List za ekspediciju na severni pol čovekovog duha*, edited by Virgil Poljanski (Branko Micić, Branko Ve Poljanski) in Ljubljana in 1921. The magazine was entirely Poljanski's work. The rhetoric of its manifesto and contributions was mostly eclectic: expressionist-futurist. *Svetokret* had a prominently cosmopolitan and Yugoslav character; it was published by a Croatian Serb, as a pro-Dadaist, which means transgressive, intervention in Slovenian culture.

In Croatia, following its pre-WWI expressionist and futurist avant-garde, the early 1920s saw the emergence of a post-expressionist and pro- or post-Dadaist avant-garde. In 1921, the poet Ljubomir Micić founded in Zagreb the international magazine *Zenit*. In manifesto terms, he established a new “avant-garde Balkan movement”, which would, over the course of its six-year existence, come to embrace traits of post-Secession, expressionism, futurism, Dadaism, and constructivism. In the Yugoslav cultural space, Micić's work was characterised by paradoxical and polemical confrontation and clash between Croatian and Serbian culture; in other words, between two conflicting national ideologies following World War I. Zenitism emerged and was initially active in Zagreb between 1921 and 1923 before relocating to Belgrade between 1924 and 1926. In 1921–23,

Mićić and Poljanski formed an informal *Zagreb avant-garde circle* or *Zagreb avant-garde*.<sup>19</sup> However, Mićić was also in permanent conflict with Zagreb's official culture and therefore had to leave Zagreb in 1923 and move to Belgrade. On the other hand, the November–December 1921 issue of the Zagreb-based journal *Kritika* also marks a break between the avant-gardists and the modernists in Belgrade surrealism. The Belgrade-based literary group *Alfa* (Alek Braun, Miloš Crnjanski, Stanislav Krakov, Dušan Matić, Rastko Petrović, Boško Tokin, and Stanislav Vinaver) distanced themselves from Ljubomir Mićić's Zenitism.

Experimentation in the domain of theatre or, conditionally speaking, performance art was anticipated in the work of a group of *younger Zenitists* (Dragutin Herjanić, Josip Klek, Višnja Kranjčević, Zvonimir Megler, Vlado Pilar, Dušan Plavšić Jr., Čedo Plavšić, Miloš Somborski, and Miho Šen) called "Putnici" (Travellers) or "Treveleri" and active from 1922 to 1923 in Zagreb and partly in Belgrade. Two Dadaist international magazines were published: Dragan Aleksić's *Dada Tank* and *Dada Jazz* in Zagreb in 1922.<sup>20</sup> Branko Ve Poljanski published the anti-Dadaist magazine *Dada Jok*. *Dada Tank* and *Dada Jazz* collaborated with major European Dadaist artists, including Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, and Richard Huelsenbeck. In Vinkovci, Aleksić formed an informal Dadaist group. Aleksić also introduced the notion of *jugo-dada*, featuring Dadaist events (matinées) in several Yugoslav cities and towns: Zagreb, Belgrade, Osijek, Vinkovci, Novi Sad, and Split.

Another extraordinary phenomenon in the political, cultural, and artistic "situation" of Croatia, Yugoslavia, and Italy was the case of Rijeka between 1919 and 1945.<sup>21</sup> The Italian poet, nationalist, and fascist paramilitary leader Gabriele D'Annunzio, along with his paramilitary troops, i.e. legionary units, captured the city of Rijeka (Fiume) and established a micro-state there in September 1919. It was a period of unbridled and brutal violence and terror, especially against the city's non-Italian population. Military rule was imposed between late 1920 and early 1921, and the city was annexed by Italy in 1924. Along with D'Annunzio's

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Vera Horvat Pintarić, "Zagrebačka avangarda", *Josip Seissel* (Zagreb: Galerija Nova, 1978), pp. 7–12.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gojko Tešić (ed.), *Dragan Aleksić Dada Tank* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Daina Glavočić, "Avangardne likovne pojave u Rijeci", in Jadranka Vinterhalter (ed.), *Prodori avangarde u hrvatskoj umjetnosti prve polovice 20. stoljeća* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2007), pp. 51–62.

troops, several Italian intellectuals close to Marinetti's futurist project also came to Rijeka. On that occasion, they also published a futurist manifesto, wherein they advocated resistance to every notion of control and military hierarchy, arguing for an active life, free love, and the *carnivalisation* of everyday life. A group of legionnaire-intellectuals advocated the founding of the society and movement called "Yoga – A Community of Free Spirit Striving for Perfection" (*Yoga – unione di spiriti liberi tendenti alla perfezione*). Rijeka's paramilitary, state, and futurist turmoil also involved the Danish musician and philosopher Léon Kochnitzky; American publicist Henry Furst; Ludovico Toeplitz; the writer Mario Carli; poet and futurist promoter Giovanni Comisso; and Swiss pilot, naturist, and vegetarian Guido Keller. In 1919, F. T. Marinetti was also briefly in Rijeka. The poet Mario Carli established his fascist-futurist platform of Rijeka (*fascio futurista fiumano*). At *Teatro Verdi*, he also staged a futurist play, announced as a new type of theatre. The legionnaire Umberto Gnata was active in painting, sculpture, architecture, and the construction of a contraption called the "syncromophone," which turned sounds into coloured lights. Rijeka's futurist movement was discontinued when regular units of the Italian army entered the city and imposed military rule during the "Bloody Christmas" of 1920. After Italy's annexation of Rijeka, the city's artistic scene was dominated by a group of artists who founded an artists' syndicate (*Sindacato di Belle Arti della Provincia del Carnaro – Fiume*), as well as apolitical artists whose individual development paths took them towards modernist painting, sculpture, and architecture, with Romolo Vennuci developing the most elaborate modernist oeuvre.

As a delegate of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the poet August Cesarec visited the USSR in late 1923 and early 1924. For the leftwing pro-avant-garde magazine *LEF*, he wrote an informative piece, "LEF u Jugoslaviji" (LEF in Yugoslavia), and for *Književna republika* (Zagreb, 1924) published a text titled "Savremeni ruski slikari. Umetnost u revoluciji i apstrakcija u umetnosti. Kandinski, Maljevič, Tatlin" (Russian Contemporary Painters. Art in Revolution and Abstraction in Art. Kandinsky, Malevich, Tatlin). In that text, Cesarec mounted a radical leftist critique of liberal modern and avant-garde art, pointing to problems in the reception of avant-garde works in mass socialist culture, i.e. by the working class. Cesarec highlighted the complexities and contradictions of the emerging "socialist" art in the USSR.

Croatian surrealism<sup>22</sup> emerged during the late 1930s. Unlike Belgrade surrealism, it did not form as a movement but instead exhibited features of individual poetics. It was realised in the activities of theatre director Vlado Habunek, who maintained close ties to Belgrade surrealists, the architect Josip Seissel or Jo Klek in his post-Zenitist phase, and two poets close to surrealism, Šimo Vučetić and Drago Ivanišević; somewhat later, the leading figure of Croatian surrealism became Radovan Ivšić, who after WWII established strong links with the French leader of the surrealist movement, André Breton.

In the 1920s the avant-garde in Serbia<sup>23</sup> was characterised by rival trends: the activities of the Micić brothers and the Dadaist Dragan Aleksić from 1923 (this tendency might be defined as a Belgrade avant-garde represented by Serbs from Croatia) and a Belgrade avant-garde that emerged from modernist reconsiderations leading from the magazine *Putevi* (1922–24) via the almanac *Crno na belo* (1924) and the magazines *Hipnos* (1922–23), *Svedočanstva* (1924–25), and *50 u Evropi* (1928) to the Belgrade surrealist movement (*Nemoguće*, 1930; *Nadrealizam danas i ovde*, 1931–32; and various other surrealist publications). The avant-garde in Belgrade was characterised by publishing activities, most of all programme-oriented magazines and almanacs: Moni de Buli's *Crno na belo*, 1923; Branko Kovačević's *Almanah Branka Radičevića*, 1924; Maksim Goranović and Boško Tokin's *Čaša vode*, 1925; *Novi istok*, 1927; Zvezdan Vujadinović's *50 u Evropi* and *Nemoguće*, 1930; etc.

The avant-garde in Belgrade began with a multitude of competing, transgressive, innovative, and inter-media modernist, expressionist, futurist, pro-Dadaist, and surrealist events, realisations, and acts, and ended as a *post-avant-garde* by establishing and transcending surrealism in the direction of bourgeois liberal art or socialist realism.

In Zagreb, Ljubomir Micić initiated “Zenit – International Gallery of New Art” on the occasion of a “Zenitist vespers” held on 31 January 1923. Then, at the Stanković School of Music in Belgrade, he organised the *First Zenit International*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Igor Zidić, (ed.), *Nadrealizam i hrvatska likovna umjetnost* (Zagreb: Umjetnički paviljon, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Gojko Tešić, *Srpska avangarda u polemičkom kontekstu (dvadesete godine)* (Novi Sad: Svetovi, 1991).

*Exhibition of New Art* in 1924. As a member of the Zenitist movement, Jo Klek exhibited his works at the exhibition *Contimporanul* in Bucharest, Romania and an exhibition of the group *Der Wurf* in Bielefeld, in Germany in 1924. In 1926 Ljubomir Micić, Marijan Mikac, and Branko Ve Poljanski represented the Yugoslav avant-garde at the international *Exhibition of Western Revolutionary Art* in Moscow. These exhibitions constituted a step forward, from a “magazine-based avant-garde” or “avant-garde of almanacs” towards a *fine-arts avant-garde*. The exhibition as a “medium” was thereby posited as a problem in artistic expression, presentation, and then also archiving.<sup>24</sup>

In Vojvodina—in Novi Sad and Subotica—the 1920s saw the activities of a post-expressionist, activist, and pro-Dadaist circle of émigré artists who had fled Horthy’s rightwing military dictatorship in Hungary.<sup>25</sup> These artists gathered around the Hungarian-language avant-garde magazine *Út* (1922–25) and newspaper *Hírlap*. *Út* was close to the Hungarian activism of Lajos Kassák, while Subotica-based Dadaists, gathered around the city’s Dada club and action programme of its Dada matinées (Zoltán Csuka, Endre Arató, Árpád Láng, and Miklós Fischer), were closer to Sándor Barta’s Dadaism. These Subotica Dadaists were in direct contact with Ljubomir Micić’s Zenitism and the Dadaism of Dragan Aleksić.

In Slovenia, avant-garde<sup>26</sup> movements were associated with Poljanski’s magazine *Svetokret* (1921), Anton Podbevšek’s magazine *Rdeči pilot* (The Red Pilot, 1922), *Ljubljanski zvon*, Ferdo Delak’s *Novi oder* (1924) and *Tank* (1927–28), as well as Srečko Kosovel’s experiments in poetry (1926) and Černigoj’s experiment in constructivist fine arts in Ljubljana (1924) and Trieste (1925–29). In April 1925, Poljanski organised a Zenitist vespers in Ljubljana’s *Mestni dom*. Ljubomir Micić was the Paris correspondent for the magazine *Tank*, where he tried to renew the ideas of Zenitism. Černigoj spent a semester at the Bauhaus avant-garde constructivist school in Weimar, where he studied with Wassily Kandinsky and

216

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Irina Subotić and Vidosava Golubović, *Zenit 1921–1926* (Belgrade: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, Institut za književnost i umetnost and Zagreb: SKD Prosvjeta, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Marija Cindori, “Aktivistička dadaistička matineja u Subotici”, in Dragomir Ugren (ed.), *Centralno-evropski aspekti vođođanskih avangardi 1920–2000. Granični fenomeni, fenomen ni granica* (Novi Sad: Muzej savremene likovne umetnosti, 2002), pp. 31–49.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Igor Zabel and Breda Ilich Klančnik (eds.), *Tank! Slovenska zgodovinska avangarda* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 1998).

László Moholy-Nagy. In Trieste, Černigoj founded a constructivist group that included Giorgio Carmelich, Edvard Stepančič, Zorko Lah, Josip Vlah, Ivan/Giovanni Poljak, and Tea Černigoj. Černigoj's constructivist group accomplished a radical form of constructivist expression in the fine arts; his ideas may be compared with the results of Bauhaus constructivism and El Lissitzky's Soviet constructivism.<sup>27</sup> Trieste and Gorizia were home to the activities of the futurist group *The Futurist Movement of Venezia-Giulia*, led by Giorgio Carmelich, Emilio Dolfi, and Pocarini, who was close to the Slovenian avant-garde artist Milko Bambič. Following his constructivist phase and travels around Europe (Florence, Vienna, Brno, and Prague), Edvard Stepančič studied painting at the *Académie moderne* in Paris in 1930 and part of 1931. In 1931 he settled in Belgrade, where he remained until his death in 1991.

One might also mention certain other links between artists and students at the Bauhaus with former Yugoslavia's cultural space. According to the Bauhaus's lists of students, the following students were also from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia or the South Slavic space: Maria Bárányai, Otti Berger, Avgust/Augusto Černigoj, August Bohutinski, Selman Selmanagić, Ivana Tomljenović, and Henrik Stefan.<sup>28</sup>

Even in its most radical aspects, the fine arts world was far from avant-gardist reflections, closed off in its modernist struggles for the autonomy of its media, whether in painting, sculpture, or graphic art. It produced no specific notion of a Yugoslav (Dragan Aleksić) or Balkan (Ljubomir Micić) avant-garde. Some specificities may be singled out and recognised in the domain of the inter-textual, inter-pictorial, and inter-media overlappings of the literary and media arts. A common feature of the Croatian, Serbian, Hungarian, and Slovenian avant-garde was the initial moment of literary experiments, which were transformed, by means of producing magazines as works of art, into an *avant-garde inter-textual and poly-generic model of expression*. The fundamental junctures in the history of the Yugoslav avant-garde from 1921 to 1932 were marked by the magazines *Svetokret*, *Zenit*, *Dada Tank*, *Dada Jazz*, *Dada Jok*, *Út*, *Hipnos*, *50 u Evropi*, *Rdeči*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Peter Krečič, *Slovenski Konstruktivizem in njegovi evropski okviri* (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Želimir Košćević (ed.), *Tendencije avangardi u hrvatskoj modernoj umetnosti 1919–1941* (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene likovne umetnosti, 1982–1983).

*pilot*, *Novi oder*, and *Tank*; and by the almanacs *Nemoguće* and *Nadrealizam danas i ovde*. These magazines were not only literary works or mediators (communicators) with a specific fine-art typography, but also inter-textual and inter-pictorial experimental creations that constituted a specific avant-garde model of textual-visual expression. The magazine was an avant-garde artistic product or *avant-garde work of art*. It was the main medium and space for the intervention of the Yugoslav avant-gardes during the interwar period. Yugoslav avant-gardists' creative and activist procedures underwent similar evolutionary paths, from an expressionist and revolutionary, heightened poetic and manifesto rhetoric, characteristic of the spiritual climate of the trauma and drama of WWI, to the collage-montage techniques of linking words and images into an inter-generic creation of visual text (visual poetry, collages, and montages) and the designing of magazines and artists' books (the Dadaists, Zenitists, surrealists, and constructivists).

In certain authors, one may note moving from literary-fine-arts experiments towards para-theatrical experiments (performance art): the Zenitist vespers in Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Petrinja, Topusko, and Sisak; the Dadaist matinées and actions in Prague, Zagreb, Belgrade, Osijek, Vinkovci, and Subotica; and Delak's futurist-constructivist theatre experiments in Ljubljana and Gorizia.

The International Theatre Exposition, a major international exhibition curated by Friedrich Kiesler and Jean Heap, held at the Steinway Building in New York between 27 February and 15 March 1926, offered a presentation of international avant-garde in theatre and stage design: Frederick Kiesler, Josef Čapek, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Marcel Brauer, Vera Idelson, Hans Richter, Oskar Schlemmer, Vilmos Huszár, László Moholy-Nagy, Farkas Molnár, Fortunato Depero, Enrico Prampolini, Luigi Russolo, Léon Bakst, Aleksandra Ekster, Meyerhold's theatre, Nijinski, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, *Revolutionary Theatre*, etc. Yugoslavia was represented by stage designers Ljubo Babić and Sergej Glumac.<sup>29</sup>

Movements and groups are typically led by strong individuals: Zenitism was led by Ljubomir Micić, Yugoslav Dadaism by Dragan Aleksić, hypnism by Rade

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ivan Berislav Vodopija (ed.), *Avangardni teatar Sergija Glumca* (Zagreb: Ex Libris, 2004).

Drainac, Yugoslav constructivism by Avgust Černigoj, and Yugoslav surrealism by Marko Ristić. It often happened that an entire movement came to be identified with the activity of a single figure: thus Dragan Aleksić was the “Dada-man” or carrier of the entire movement, while Ljubomir Micić was the leader and at certain times the only consistent adherent of Zenitism, who assembled *external* collaborators. Marko Ristić was the organiser and most active Belgrade surrealist, and, adhering to the tradition of surrealist movement, he was also its authoritarian leader (*traumatic father*), like André Breton.

The Yugoslav avant-garde was characterised by relations of rivalry and conflicted polemics between the avant-gardists and modernists, the Zenitists and Dadaists, the Zenitists and surrealists, the avant-garde artists and socially engaged artists, the Party’s intellectual left and the intellectual left that was not affiliated with the Communist Party. In terms of ideology, the Yugoslav avant-gardes were left-oriented avant-gardes, which means that they were either directly and politically (via the Party) or indirectly (via manifestoes) associated with Marxism and the activities of the communist party; in other words, they were critically subversive regarding the values, meanings, and models of expression of modern bourgeois society and its culture, and they were anti-authoritarian, anarchic, and excessive in terms of their specific and intra-avant-garde characteristics (ideals of freedom, difference, and otherness).