Igor Zabel

“Contemporary Art”

Slovenian art experienced profound shifts in the ten years that extended from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and in this process an idea of "contemporary art" was gradually formed. The main change this transformation produced was, perhaps, the elimination of the prevailing idea that the work of art was necessarily an object with particular formal features. The artwork expanded into space and then into situations and relationships that were not necessarily spatial. It became processual, mutable, sometimes essentially time-based and focused on active interaction with its environment and with the audience.

Taking my own subjective experience as a point of departure, I would say that 1995 was the year when various artistic tendencies combined and culminated in a perception of Slovenian "contemporary art" as a collective phenomenon, as a field with its own specific dynamics. This is when we were installing an exhibition of Slovenian art of the 1990s at the Budapest Műcsarnok entitled *The Collection of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum*.[1] By chance, another exhibition of contemporary Slovenian art (*Time as Structure, Method as Meaning*)[2] was being held at exactly the same time in Budapest at the Studio Gallery (Stúdió Galéria). Together the two exhibitions provided a view into an active and very vibrant art scene with a diverse range of languages and artists of various generations, in which you could sense extraordinary energy, openness, willingness to take risks, and experimentation. The washing machine in the Studio Gallery, where Maja Licul was washing paintings, suggested an almost ritual act of purification from traditional forms and their limitations, an opening of the space for new modes and practices.

Here, however, we will consider more closely a different exhibition project: *U3: The 2nd Triennial of Contemporary Slovene Art*, organized in 1997 by the Austrian theorist, curator, and media artist Peter Weibel.[3] The new tendencies in art in Slovenia were shown particularly clearly in this exhibition, as was the new important role of these practices in Slovenian art as a whole. It could perhaps be said that this exhibition was essentially the culmination of artistic developments that had been taking place since

1 The idea of the exhibition was to present the work of the participating artists as the collection of Tadej Pogačar's P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum; Pogačar's work at the exhibition, meanwhile, was the installation of the show itself. The exhibition was installed at the Műcsarnok from 19 October to 19 November 1995, and the following year at the Kunstmuseum Bochum. [The exhibition *The Collection of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum: Slovene Art of the 1990s* was put together by Zdenka Badovinac and Igor Zabel and organized by the Moderna galerija/Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. – *Editor*]

2 The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between two similar galleries: the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana and the Studio Gallery in Budapest. The idea was for the Hungarian curator (Barnabás Bencsik) to organize an exhibition of Slovenian artists at the Budapest gallery, and vice versa – the Slovenian curator (Tadej Pogačar) exhibited Hungarian artists in Ljubljana (*Through the Glass*). The exhibitions were then exchanged.

3 *U3: The 2nd Triennial of Contemporary Slovene Art*, November 14, 1997–January 11, 1998, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, curated by Peter Weibel with the assistance of Igor Zabel and Christa Steinle. – *Editor*

the mid-1980s, and also that the contemporary art that was here given validation provided a foundation for the subsequent development of these practices and in many ways defined a framework for them. Of course, the 2nd U3 Triennial did not introduce these key aspects in the contemporary art of the 1990s; rather, we could say that in a way it synthesized and clearly formulated them, and that, more importantly, with this exhibition contemporary art stepped out of its own relatively closed world into public attention and debate (regardless of what that was) and at the same time demanded a much more prominent position within the national culture.

Some of the key shifts in the art of the 1990s, as shown by Weibel's U3 exhibition, can be summarized as follows:

1. With Weibel's exhibition, *contemporary art was established as a specific, comprehensive field and as the central part of current Slovenian art*. The first U3 triennial, organized by Tomaž Brejc in 1994, understood contemporaneity as the simultaneous presence of diverse artistic positions and practices. The artists who continued the modernist tradition and the so-called "autopoetics" of the 1980s still played a central role in Brejc's exhibition. Weibel, conversely, saw the criterion of contemporaneity in the specific characteristics of the artist's approach and language, in their correspondence with the current issues and the characteristics that separated them from traditional and, in particular, modernist, approaches. Although Weibel emphasized that his selection was necessarily subjective, his thesis was clear enough: the practices presented in the exhibition were what was relevant at that moment in Slovenian art. This was not merely an individual move by a particular curator. On the contrary, the exhibition in fact showed how the development of art required the reorganization of established notions and value criteria in the field of national art as well as in the understanding of tradition.

   Weibel defined the art he presented in the exhibition as "art beyond the white cube", i.e. art that was no longer trapped in the traditional art field and its stipulations. In interpreting the works that he brought together in the show, he created five thematic units, which were at the same time an attempt to synthetically sum up the main issues in Slovenian contemporary art in the mid-1990s. These thematic areas he called: *Spaces beyond Geopolitics I: Parallel Institutional Spaces, Virtual and Telematic Spaces; Spaces beyond Geopolitics II: New Mapping between Instability and Dislocation; Media, Machines, Paintings; Sculptures in Social Spaces*; and *Media Spaces, Reality, and Fiction.*

   The establishment of the notion of "contemporary art" has been very important over the past fifteen years for the development of art and its conceptual context. While artistic and aesthetic innovations in 20th-century art were always considered "modern", a different sort of thinking has more recently established itself. This can perhaps

be most clearly discerned in art institutions, where the museum of modern art and the museum of contemporary art have been evolving into two types of institutions, each with its own approaches, methods, and orientations. The theory of post-modernism was the first to establish the idea that modernity, modern art, and modernism are historical phenomena, categories that already belong to history. At the same time the close bond between the development of modernism and the institution of the museum of modern art (an institution that played a vital role in the construction of notions about modernism and its tradition) influenced the way the term "modernity" became inseparably linked with the tradition of modernism in the general consciousness. This is why the term has been replaced by the notion of contemporaneity, which highlights both the immediate currency of such art as well as its conscious separation from the modernist tradition. If one tried to define such a vague (if, of course, very useful) notion as "contemporary art", one would certainly have to link it with deconstruction and the critique of the most fundamental theses of mainstream modernism, such as the concept of autonomous form and the autonomous art object, the idea of the purity of the medium, and notions such as "flatness", "presence", "the sublime", and so on. In this way we can also explain the apparent paradox that the criterion of contemporaneity in the work of art does not refer merely to the work being produced in the immediate contemporary period – indeed, the work can be relatively old. The notion of contemporary art may, after all, be placed within a specific tradition that dates to the 1950s and 1960s, and even further back to Duchamp and the so-called historical avant-gardes.

The contrast between "modern" and "contemporary" art is significant on two levels. On a more pragmatic social level it represents a somewhat uneasy relationship between two ill-defined and heterogeneous groups within the so-called national culture, groups that may sometimes even be in direct conflict in their quest for prestige in this area. On a more conceptual level, it relates to (sometimes very deep) differences in the conception of the practice, procedures, and principles of art. And these differences appeared not because "contemporary" artists became bored with the approaches and norms of "modern" art, but because they believed that these approaches and norms were unable to respond suitably to the issues, questions, and opportunities proposed by the contemporary world or to contemporary notions of reality.

The basis of the concept of contemporary art is, therefore, broader than simply a formal or aesthetic idea of contemporaneity; this is also reflected in the fact that such art consciously extends to areas that go far beyond merely formal and aesthetic aspects. Among the main aspects of contemporaneity, so understood, we might mention the expansion of new technologies, especially digital and virtual technologies; the social and economic shifts linked to economic globalization,

new methods of production and management, and the altered relationships between centres and peripheries; the expansion of the mass consumer and media society; migrations and conflicts; the search for alternative social, political, and economic models and possible new uses for existing structures and technologies; radical changes in the concept of the human being and life (which are also related to biotechnology, the combining of biological and mechanical elements, and the possibility of heterogeneous and hybrid identities); and so on. All these aspects define a world in which art, too, is an integral part of these long-lasting and very deep transformations. Art exploits whatever new fields and technologies are available to it; it reflects on the contemporary world; it seeks to shed light on this world and devises a network of (at least provisional) concepts for understanding it; it intervenes in individual segments of the world and tries to change them; it seeks models of oppositional, alternative, or parallel practices; it employs the effect of defamiliarization and restores its poetry and mystery; etc.

2. Contemporary art affirmed its *inclusion in the international art arena*. In other words, Weibel's exhibition affirmed that contemporary art practices develop predominantly in an international context in which local and national scenes connect with each other. Since the mid-1980s, the development of contemporary art has occurred as an initially gradual and then increasingly intensive and deliberate process of internationalizing Slovenian art: this has meant more and more frequent exhibitions by international artists in Slovenia, international curators working in Slovenia, etc., as well as, of course, the increasingly intensive presence of Slovenian artists, curators, critics, and institutions in the international arena. It goes without saying that this was not an innocent process; rather, it implied significant changes in the hierarchy of Slovenia's national culture.[4]

We could say that, in terms of internationalization, the concept of contemporary art is based on two requirements. On the one hand, it emphasizes dealing with the particular, concrete, and partial – a connection with a specific situation and location, reflection on specific historical, cultural, social, and geographical contexts, etc.; on the other hand, it requires compatibility with the international system of contemporary art. For this reason, the curator and critic Robert Fleck

4 Quite simply, the problem was that artists who were already relatively successful internationally often still found themselves in a marginal position within the national context. In the mid-1990s, however, there appeared the implicit but very insistent demand that the criteria and requirements of the international art world be taken into account even when evaluating art in national frameworks. The attacks on Weibel at the time of the 2nd U3 Triennial had to do not only with the idea that a foreigner was evaluating Slovenian art, but mainly with opposition to the demand that national rankings be adapted to suit international criteria.

even talked about a "new international style" in the art of the 1990s, although he clearly underscored the differences between the universalism of the modernist "international style" and contemporary tendencies, where there is primarily a shift towards specificity.[5] Weibel was very explicit regarding the question of artistic internationalism. On the one hand, he emphasized that the works and projects he presented were compatible with contemporary tendencies in the international arena. Yet at the same time he warned: "Historical experience prevents the works from falling into an ideology of false neutralist internationalism which is, in fact, the worst expression of colonialism and hegemony; rather, the works represent a specific contribution (from the point of view of artists based in Slovenia or with some relation to it) to aesthetic questions of international relevance."[6]

3. Weibel's U3 exhibition was not only an attempt at making a synthetic outline of contemporary practices, but it also pointed to *a different way of thinking about the tradition of art* compared to what had predominated up to that time. It was certainly no coincidence that Weibel invited Marko Pogačnik, Srečo Dragan, and the Irwin group to take part. Their works not only represented important elements on the skyline of contemporary Slovenian art in the mid-1990s, but also indicated the relationship between contemporary art and the neo- and retro-avant-garde tendencies of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Earlier we mentioned that contemporary art is not defined by its emergence in what is understood literally as the contemporary period and that it also implies its own unique tradition. The artists of the 1990s, for example, found many inspiring ideas – and sometimes concrete models – in the innovative and experimental practices and thought of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the very specific characteristics of the contemporary social, cultural, technological, and economic context, clear parallels can be found between contemporary art and the (self-)critical, perversive, analytical, iconoclastic, and openly political strategies of the historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes. The art of the 1990s, therefore, actualized a specific segment of the artistic tradition and constructed a tradition that was very different from the established modernist tradition.

Similar shifts can be noted in Slovenian culture in the 1990s. We could say that the predominant conception in the 1980s still saw the fundamental tradition of Slovenian art as proceeding linearly: from impressionism and expressionism through the art of the group

5 Robert Fleck, "Art after Communism?", in *Manifesta 2: European Biennial for Contemporary Art, Luxembourg*, exh. cat., Agence luxembourgeoise d'action culturelle, Luxembourg, 1998, pp. 193–197.

6 Peter Weibel, "Art beyond the White Cube", in *U3: 2. trienale sodobne slovenske umetnosti / 2nd Triennale of Contemporary Slovene Art*, exh. cat., Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1997.

Neodvisni (The Independents) to the modernism of the 1950s and 1960s, Informel, the new abstraction of the 1970s, and the "New Image" and "autopoetics" of the 1980s. The processes that led to contemporary art in the 1990s, however, increasingly actualized a second line of development, starting with the historical avant-gardes and continuing with the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s and the retro-avant-garde of the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) movement.[7] This line had previously been more or less undervalued, even deliberately neglected, whereas in the 1990s, in keeping with the increasing acceptance of contemporary tendencies in art, it was established as one of the key segments of the national tradition.

4. One of the aspects affirmed by the 2nd U3 Triennial was the essential *heterogeneity* of contemporary art. Although it may sometimes seem that we are talking about a compact and closed group, the phenomenon known as contemporary art is in fact a unified yet inwardly very differentiated field that connects members of different generations, orientations, and groups. (The exhibition included artists who had been active from the early 1980s, the1970s, and even the 1960s, as well as those who were only then finishing their studies at the Academy of Fine Arts.) If we take a closer look at the structure of the art of the 1990s, we can see the heterogeneous range of backgrounds its representatives come from and the diverse lines of development that converge within it. Some artists come from the visual arts field in the strictest sense – the transformations in painting and sculpture, especially in the second half of the 1980s, had made possible a transition to different practices and concepts. Also important is the line that goes back to the so-called alternative scene of the 1980s, particularly through ideas about multimedia, critical, and political art. The development of the NSK movement, which in its starting points is also linked to the alternative scene, for a time followed a quite specific and isolated, although very distinct, path in Slovenian art, while in the 1990s it, too, became an element within the newly formed field of contemporary art. The development of contemporary art,

7 In this connection we could mention the retrospective exhibition of the OHO group (in 1994) and the presentation of the Slovenian historical avant-garde *Tank!* (1998), both at the Moderna galerija [*OHO: A Retrospective*, curated by Zabel himself, and *Tank! Slovene Historical Avant-Garde,* curated jointly by Breda Ilich Klančnik and Zabel. – *Editor*]. It was hardly a coincidence that these exhibitions were produced precisely at this time; both pointed, implicitly or even explicitly, to the fact that there were parallels between historical and contemporary practices. This of course does not mean that the avant-garde line was not recognized or even discovered until the 1990s; on the contrary, this had already happened in the 1970s and 1980s, at which time significant reflections on these phenomena also appeared. Nevertheless, the avant-garde gained new meaning in the 1990s in the context of contemporary practices and was ascribed a central position in the national tradition.

especially in the second half of the 1990s, was significantly impacted by groups of activists and experts in new media and digital technologies – for example, the group around the Ljudmila digital-media laboratory in Ljubljana. Here we should also mention the artists who came to contemporary art from other disciplines, particularly architecture and theatre. Such a differentiated field, then, made it possible for the younger generation of artists just then appearing on the scene to quickly define themselves and have their work accepted.

5. An important aspect of these transformations, particularly in Slovenia, was *the development of the art system* in its richer segmentation and intensified relations with the international system. The development of contemporary art is, after all, closely linked to a specific kind of development in the art system. Especially in Europe, we can say that both developments occurred in close parallel (the situation is somewhat different in the United States, where public and non-profit spaces have had fewer opportunities and played a lesser important role than in Europe). While, for example, the "New Image" phenomenon in the 1980s was closely linked to the expansion of the art market and the role of galleries, the development of art in the 1990s depended heavily on the activities of museums, art centres and biennials, as well as other exhibition projects – in other words, on non-profit spaces and events that relied mainly on public funding. (This is important because public funding enabled such institutions to host exhibitions and projects that were sometimes complex and expensive even though it was clear that there would be no financial profit either from the sale of the artwork or ticket sales.) On the other hand, over the course of this development, the system became more defined and consolidated. The institutions encouraged and even enabled (e.g. as producers) the making of new art, all the while modifying and transforming themselves in order to adapt to the new tendencies. This led to the characteristic division between the museum of modern art and the museum of contemporary art. A typical institution in the 1990s combined certain functions of the museum and the exhibition space; it operated as a producer; it was open to a variety of media (including architecture, film, theatre, etc.) as well as to theoretical and critical reflection; it performed educational tasks, and so on. Significantly, the institutional system in Slovenia that provides the infrastructure for contemporary art tendencies was strengthened and developed in the 1990s. To mention only exhibition spaces, we can say that during this period there was already a functioning and relatively comprehensive (if more or less basic) network of institutions – from national to regional and local, and from museums to consciously alternative spaces. Other aspects of the system, meanwhile, were also developing, although some remained modest or only rudimentary: critical and theoretical writing, education, the contemporary art market, etc.

The system of contemporary art is in essence international and connected to an extensive network, or rather, a web of networks. This internationalism, however, does not mean the erasure of particularisms or the abandonment of particular interests. While the international arena certainly represented a new opportunity for artists, curators, critics, and institutions in the 1990s, it was also a field of constant conflict, a struggle for visibility, domination, and the recognition of one's own interests. The institutional network, especially – which is both national and international – played an essential role in integrating the national space into this network (as well as the active assertion of its interests within it).

6. Weibel's U3 exhibition, however, also drew attention to another characteristic phenomenon of the 1990s – *the increasingly prominent role of the curator*. The encounter with Weibel as, perhaps, the first prominent international curator who worked directly with Slovenian artists, and who placed artists in a context defined by his own vision, also represented the encounter with an art system in which the curator was playing an ever more powerful role both in selecting artists and in determining the conceptual frameworks in which they appeared. At least two works in the show addressed this relationship head on. In her work, Maja Licul documented the selection process, while Nika Špan, through the use of video screens, embroiled Weibel in communication and developed a complex structure determined by both artist and curator, as well as the systems of media presentation and representation – in all of this, however, it remained clear that the curator played the dominant role.

The concept of contemporary art that evolved in the mid-1990s and became the foundation for the development of art in the second half of the decade and the last few years can perhaps be defined, at least roughly, if we mention its most important tendencies and shifts, as well as the main issues and questions addressed by artists. These are, in particular:

1. *The transition of the work of art from object to space, situation, and relationship.* A fundamental process that can be traced from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s is, indeed, the deconstruction of the object, its expansion into the spatial installation and then into relational situations. Due to the deconstruction of the art object, art is, of course, no longer necessarily a physical object, but this does not mean that it is merely a "concept". The digital formats of videos and photographs, virtual worlds, works created as processes in groups or communities, etc., all open up new forms and spaces for creative practice.

   It is perhaps not irrelevant that in the course of this transition from object to situation, architecture became an increasingly important reference for the art practices of the 1990s, even as it was itself changing,

partly under the influence of these art practices. In this context, the artistic development of Marjetica Potrč is significant. After completing her studies in architecture, Potrč changed direction and went into sculpture – but through her deconstruction of the (modernist) sculptural object she shifted from making sculptures to building walls. Such a wall (which was always a copy of a selected façade in the city where it was installed) in a way retained certain basic features of her earlier work: the difference between the front and back of the sculpture, for example, was, of course, radically intensified in the walls. At the same time in these works, the relationship with the location – the territory – was emphasized (it is no coincidence that the series is entitled *Territories*[8]). The wall divides the space yet also shapes it. On the other hand, the territory is not purely physical; it is also determined by its historical, cultural, social, and political dimensions. Marjetica Potrč became more and more interested in the city. She understands urban structures as distinctly heterogeneous and frequently conflictual. One of the most fundamental conflicts is the opposition between the ideal, well-regulated city and the unregulated, often improvised urban fabric. In her works, the ideal city is often shown as violent or incapable of any real urban life, while seemingly chaotic urban areas, such as shanty towns, function in a vital and self-generative manner, continually coming up with solutions to their problems. The artist has worked with voids and gaps in the urban fabric, with walls and obstacles (e.g. gated communities), and with contradiction and diversity, which she sees as symptoms of the conflictual urban vitality. Apolonija Šušterič, too, is primarily interested in space, although not so much in its physical and formal characteristics as in the complex social, economic, historical and other forces that shape it, as well as in the chance for communication, new perspectives, and insights that a space offers to its users.

Installation is certainly the key genre in the process of deconstructing the autonomous art object. The term initially designated merely the way an exhibition was set up. Eventually, however, such a display could become something more than just the arrangement of artworks in a space; the arrangement of works and additional elements, for example, could contribute to the content and meaning, allowing the exhibition to be understood as a kind of independent entity of a higher order. Similarly, the installation as a special genre of art refers to a work which is based on the arrangement and installation of selected elements (whether artistic or non-artistic) in a certain environment. Such a work is based on the interrelationship of these elements as well as the relationship between the elements and the

8 The name of Marjetica Potrč's series (1994–1996) is, in fact, *Theatrum Mundi*, while the subtitles for the individual works refer to the "territories" of actual cities: *Ljubljana, Territory E; Budapest, Territory H*; etc. – *Editor*

environment or viewer. In the case of installations designed especially for a certain location (i.e. site-specific works), artists take into account the characteristics of the location (from directly object-related aspects to historical, social and cultural layers) and respond to these aspects through their interventions.

Nevertheless, the art of the 1990s went beyond mere installations to works that could perhaps be better described as situations.[9] The sense of liberation from the traditional definitions of art, and in particular from the object as traditionally understood, became apparent in the middle and later years of the decade in the variety of situations created or mediated by artists. The Škuc Gallery, for example, became the setting for many types of unusual events. In this vein, Janja Žvegelj organized the promotion of a new brand of mayonnaise [1996] and a squash tournament, in which she took on the artistic director of the gallery [1998]. Maja Licul put together a trade fair [1998]. Apolonija Šušterič, meanwhile, installed a bar at Manifesta 2 in Luxembourg [1998], a video club at the Mala galerija in Ljubljana [1999], and a room for light therapy at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm [1999]. In Marko Peljhan's *UCOG-144* project [1996], participants explored parts of Ljubljana and used telecommunication devices to transmit the results of their exploration over the internet. Rene Rusjan set up several thematic reading rooms where she presented materials collected by her and her colleagues and friends, while the interested public was able to supplement and modify these collections. Nika Špan took part in one exhibition by serving as an exhibition guard [1995]. Alenka Pirman published a glossary she had compiled of German loanwords in Slovenian [1997]. These and similar projects can be seen as a search for more direct and therefore more effective forms of communication, reflection, criticism, and creativity.

2. *The transition to the social space.* The expansion of the work into space, relationships, and situations meant that possibilities for locating such work also expanded greatly. We could say that, more than the physical location, the work was now defined by the context in which it was placed. Weibel coined the term "sculpture in the social space", which, of course, directly alludes to Beuys's *soziale Plastik*. Physical, material forms are not essential for such social sculpture; rather, it is created by "modelling" social forms and relationships. A typical example of this is the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum, Tadej Pogačar's para-institution, which enters institutions (museums as well as other social institutions) as a parasite and uses their capabilities and resources to organize installations that explicitly reveal the often suppressed and forgotten foundations on which the host institutions stand.

9 References to situationism would, perhaps, not be entirely irrelevant in this regard. Marko Peljhan, for example, referred specifically to Debord and the situationists.

All the previously mentioned situations are also such social sculptures; indeed, it is only as social sculptures that they are understandable and meaningful. These are generally concerned with establishing intense interpersonal relationships and situations that clearly demonstrate and problematize the social (cultural, institutional, gender, or class) determinacy of personal identities. In this sense it can be said that the art of the 1990s is linked to the positions of the so-called alternative scene of the 1980s and the political and critical forms of the artistic practices that developed within it. A key strategy of the alternative scene was, for example, playing with social roles as a way of undermining and exposing social ideological power systems and their more or less covert repressive nature. A fundamental reference for the entire Neue Slowenische Kunst movement was the thesis formulated by the Laibach group that every artistic practice is subject to political manipulation except those that themselves use the language of such manipulation.[10]

What distinguishes the works of the 1990s from the alternative scene of the 1980s is perhaps the way that "big" discourses were replaced by "small" ones. A work of art or art action could, for example, be extremely intimate and subtle yet at the same time highly poetic and – implicitly or explicitly – political. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of such a "small" and "inconspicuous" work was carried out by Janja Žvegelj. Instead of installing an exhibition in a certain town, she went there as a visitor or "tourist". She took a number of photographs, which, however, she did not exhibit; instead, she left them in books in the local public library, where they could be found by random readers.[11]

The art of the 1980s talked about big issues, such as the body and its relationship to space and to other bodies, the state and its repressive mechanisms of power, etc. The artists of the 1990s, however, dealt with individual, partial, and concrete relationships, with microsituations, but in a way that revealed the complex social and ideological context that defined such a microsituation and made clear the conflicts present within it. Let us take as an example Nika Špan's project *Sold Works* [1998]. The artist, who had spent a year supporting herself as a house painter, documented and exhibited as her artwork the spaces she had renovated. The colours of these spaces were transformed into an abstract geometric composition of coloured bands on the gallery walls. The project was a kind of sublimation of physical labour, a transformation of a personal story into visual form; at the same time, it posed a number of questions about the relationships between art and life, art and non-art, art and work, etc., and how the

10 See Laibach, "10 Items of the Covenant", 1982, http://www.laibach.org/data/10-items-of-the-covenant/. – *Editor*

11 Janja Žvegelj, *Tourist,* public library in Tolmin, Slovenia, 1996. – *Editor*

determinants of these relationships defined the artist herself and her social role and identity.

The idea of the work of art as a social situation had a strong impact on the concept of public sculpture and public art in general. While the process of erecting, for instance, the equestrian statue of General Maister[12] was an example of a literally retrograde concept of public sculpture, Jože Barši pursued a completely different concept with his public toilet in the Metelkova district,[13] which was installed at approximately the same time as the Maister monument. More importantly, Barši was not interested in a representative or ideological relationship to the community ("national communion" as it is sometimes called) but in the concrete relationship with Metelkova and its residents and visitors who needed such a facility. The toilet was primarily functional, as it was designed to be; Barši did not want it to seem aestheticized, as a work of architecture or sculpture. It becomes sculpture, however, the moment it is withdrawn from public use and becomes a museum object. The development of art in the public space, therefore, drew attention to the fact that this notion can, indeed, still be applied to works that are physically installed in the public space (e.g. in an urban setting) if their functional relationship with the public is a conscious component of the concept of the work, although this is no longer the sole or decisive criterion. Works in the public space can also be works that are installed and develop in public or in a segment of the public sphere, for example, a debate in the local community, a service that is available to the public, a process that takes place in the media, and so on.

Art in the public or social space, as it took shape in the mid-1990s, and art that deals with a complex reciprocal relationship between personal intimacy and social determinants created a strong line within Slovenian art. This orientation is today being developed by a number of women artists of the younger generation, including, among others, Vesna Bukovec (whose project *Local Issues* [2003], for example, provided a chance for self-reflection by a local community on what was bothering people and what could be changed), Lada Cerar (e.g. the project *Art as Therapy* [2003], in which she sought a different context for the reception of art), and Metka Zupanič (e.g. in her project *SMS Brothel* [2005]).

12 The equestrian monument to the Slovenian national hero General Rudolf Maister (1874–1934), created by the sculptor Jakov Brdar, was erected in 1999 opposite the Central Railway Station in Ljubljana. Maister was a military officer and poet who in the aftermath of the First World War secured the city of Maribor and the surrounding territory for the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later renamed Yugoslavia). –*Editor*

13 Zabel is referring to Metelkova City, an alternative cultural and social district in Ljubljana that developed from a squat in the former Yugoslav army barracks. At the time, Barši had his studio here. – *Editor*

3. *The new role of technology.* The spaces that became the context and location of art projects in the 1990s, however, were not only physical, nor were they just social. In this period it became crystal clear just how profoundly technological developments had transformed and expanded the concepts of space, time, identity, and reality. For example, the rapid development of telematic and cyber technologies, the increasing availability of new technologies for the production and reproduction of images and other information, and, in particular, the broad acceptance of digital technologies and their parallel, virtual, and cyber spaces and worlds, played a decisive role in these processes. In the new technologies, and in spaces based on them, artists saw new possibilities and media for their work, but at the same time they in no way accepted these things naively, as something neutral. In most of the artworks that deal with parallel technological worlds, there is a clear and visible awareness that these technologies are functionally incorporated in the means by which political, economic, and military power regulates and controls society.

The characteristic connecting and mixing of technologies and media that we find in so-called multimedia and intermedia art also springs from the very nature of these technologies and their social role, where, indeed, practices and tools are constantly connected and combined. The modernist concepts of the purity and fundamentality of the medium were replaced in the 1980s and 1990s by concepts based on the notion of impurity and hybridity – from multiculturalism to multimedia and intermedia practices, from the internet to the mutant and the cyborg.

The work of Marko Kovačič, it seems, took concepts of hybridity to the absurd. His projects, which examine in detail the Plastos civilization (in archaeological, anthropological, and technological-historical terms) as a subject of archaeological research in the distant future, seem to carnivalize interlacements between art and science and an obsession with images of cyborgs, mutants, and post-catastrophic reality.

In their involvement with technology, the artists of the 1990s relied on a variety of sources. One was certainly the innovative use of video and other media in the alternative scene of the 1980s. A particularly important role in this respect was played by Marko Košnik and his Egon March Institute. Košnik came from the field of experimental music, but he expanded music events into spatial, audio, material, and visual installations, which very often were interactive. Technology played a crucial role in his work early on. Unlike artists who, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were fascinated by the spectacular effects of such technologies, Košnik was more interested in their implicit premises and paradoxes. In this sense, his reference was more the "structuralist", critical engagement with media technologies in the 1960s and 1970s than the contemporary fascination with spectacle. (In fact, the involvement with new technologies in art extends without

interruption back to the 1960s and 1970s. The technological works of Srečo Dragan, for example, are directly related to his use of film, video, and other technologies in the 1960s and 1970s. Miha Vipotnik's early projects with video and the medium of television may also be mentioned in this connection.)

Another important source for these artists were the newly established centres for new, particularly digital, technologies; they provided the technical infrastructure around which emerged a digital-technology community, closely allied to similar communities and groups across Europe and the world. These communities developed not only the knowledge and skills for mastering such technologies but also precise thinking about their characteristics, reflection on their social role, and a good dose of inventiveness in the various forms of their use. Marko Peljhan and Vuk Ćosić were both very active in the development of this community, and their work is very closely associated with it. Finally, the growing role of the new technologies in the arts also stemmed from the ideas of visual artists themselves, who not only saw in these technologies new creative possibilities but, most importantly, understood that they had become such an essential part of the contemporary reality that they could no longer be overlooked.

The work of Darij Kreuh offers a typical example of the development of art in the parallel worlds of technology. At the 1997 U3 Triennial he "exhibited" a geometric body (a pyramid, a kind of Tower of Babel) defined solely by coordinates in a three-dimensional coordinate system. The coordinates were transmitted by three radio stations on radio displays, with each of the stations transmitting the coordinates for one of the three axes of the coordinate system. The viewer in the gallery, however, saw only the projected coordinate grid and the frequencies of the three radio stations on the wall. In the piece *Virtual Dreams* from the same year, the viewer put on a virtual reality helmet and strolled around the gallery with a computer on a trolley. The viewer was moving visually through a virtual world, but physically through the real world. One of the most consistent realizations of the idea of a parallel technological world was created by Kreuh and Davide Grassi in the project *Brainscore* (2000). The two men communicated with each another in a virtual space through virtual doubles (avatars), which they guided by means of eye movements and the intensity of their brain waves.

The development of the internet created a space for entirely new types of artworks that were accessible at any point in the network, works that were essentially interactive, based on complex systems of links, and constructed from static and moving images, texts, and sounds. In the middle and later years of the 1990s, there emerged a relatively strong group of artists involved with such internet-based works: they included, notably, Vuk Ćosić, Teo Spiller, Igor Štromajer, and Jaka Železnikar.

4. *Images and the media.* An important aspect of the use of technology in art relates to the role of new media in the contemporary world. The fact that today reality is inextricably intertwined with media representations of it is owing to technologies for producing, reproducing, and disseminating a variety of visual, verbal, and auditory information. For artists, both of these closely related aspects are interesting – the systems of media representation and the technologies by which information can be created, altered, reproduced, and distributed. Artists' use of video and digital photography, for example, implicitly, and often also quite explicitly, contains clues to the social role and influence of these media in shaping contemporary reality.

Interest in the media image is, certainly, connected to an interest in the world in which we live, a world characterized precisely by the blurring of differences between reality and images or representations. But it is also connected to the realization that the media image is an example of just how strong a role images and image systems play.[14] Importantly, these images are able to function on both the personal and the social level at the same time, not only as direct address and dialogue but also as tools in the strategies and conflicts of social power.

These aspects are present particularly in works based on video and (digital) photography (which is often constructed), as well as in the use of other media that allow for both the exploitation of opportunities for spectacle and the critical undermining of such opportunities, and sometimes even a kind of uneasy interaction between the two. Franc Purg, for example, occasionally introduces elements of spectacle into his videos, but only to make the traumatic dimensions in his works all the sharper by contrast.

In photography, the impact of new processes and possibilities, especially digitization, has been profound. Photography, it seems, is losing that fundamental certainty which Barthes, for example, spoke in *Camera Lucida* (in particular, the "umbilical cord" that connects the image with the actuality of the recorded situation), but it has gained a fascinating spectacularity. The Barthesian *punctum* retreats before the onslaught of spectacle. Perhaps this is why, in the work of certain artists, we literally sense a struggle to retain the real in the photographic image. Despite the very great differences between their approaches, we see this striving in both Goran Bertok's images of sadomasochistic sessions and Aleksandra Vajd's very personal series of photographs.

Artists are, of course, interested in the nature of these shifts, but they are also interested in the new effects and how they function. Some works create truly spectacular visions, which, however, often

14 In a different context, a consistent analysis of the nature and social role of the image can be found in the activities of the NSK movement as early as the 1980s, which is why, for example, the work of the Irwin group could gain new meaning precisely in relation to works that involved media images.

retain certain incompatible elements of threat, distance, or alienation. In certain works by Tomaž Gregorič, for example, an apparently attractive, highly aestheticized scene may appear as vaguely threatening due to elements that are indiscernible at first sight. Tomo Brejc creates disturbing entities that suggest tensions and relations which are not entirely clear as well as elements of irony and grotesqueness, without, however, concealing the constructed nature of the images. Manja Zore, in her colourful and complex photographs, combines high and low elements – the visual language of glossy magazines, the art tradition, stereotypes and mythological references, direct seductiveness, and dimensions of discomfort.

5. *New relations between the work and the audience.* New technologies and new social practices often also require new forms of relationships between the work and its audience, for example, interactivity, collective reactivity, etc. This is obvious not only when it comes to "sculptures in social space", which may exist solely as a form of social interaction, but also in the relationship of the isolated individual travelling through a net-based artwork. Net technologies, in particular, enable entirely new forms of authorship, exchange, and participation, not only in creating and receiving art, but also in designing, supplementing, exchanging, and using diverse forms of knowledge, products, models, and solutions. The profound social potential of these possibilities becomes even more evident in the face of contradiction, when there are attempts to establish a system of prohibitions, restrictions, and protections on the internet, a system that completely contradicts the global, non-hierarchical and participatory nature of this medium.

The new relations between artist, work, and audience may be outlined with a few examples. Igor Štromajer's online work *b.ALT.ica* [1998], for example, establishes a parallelism between entering the virtual space and the transition from life to death. By doing so, the artist escalates the direct relationship of the isolated individual towards the structures in the virtual space, a relationship he described with the concept *intima* ("intimate experience"). The reading rooms set up by Rene Rusjan are always created in collaboration with others as information points relating to social spaces and times, which in itself makes them essentially collective works. But they gain their true meaning only through use, with the active participation of the audience, who thus supplement or change the reading room. The *East Art Map* project by the Irwin group, meanwhile, is quite unique, as it legitimizes an interactive collective production in a field normally

considered to belong to specialists: in the construction of the history of 20th-century Eastern European art.[15]

6. *Transformations in painting.* Not long ago there was a lot of talk about "the death of painting". Painting is not dead, of course; just the opposite, in the past few years in particular, it seems to have again gained considerable strength. But the new technologies for producing and disseminating images have changed it profoundly. Most obvious in this respect are, perhaps, the new role of media imagery in painting and the new models that underlie the structure of the pictorial field (the photograph, the film screen, television and computer screens, etc.). These aspects became established in the second half of the 1990s with the younger generation of painters, such as Žiga Kariž, Miha Štrukelj, and Sašo Vrabič, among others.

   But perhaps even more significantly, the status of the image has changed. What makes a painting "contemporary" is not only that it reproduces media images, but primarily because it introduces a highly open, internally contradictory, heteronymous and multilayered structure built in the mutual tension of visual, and sometimes even textual and conceptual, fragments.

   Here it is not insignificant that the possibilities for technically producing and manipulating images (digital photography, scanners, computer programs for image processing and animation, printers, etc.) have strongly influenced the structure of the painting. At the same time, however, technical (re)production has not excluded working by hand (many paintings are created in the traditional manual techniques of oil or acrylic on canvas), but the meaning and role of these processes have changed dramatically in the new context.

7. *Critical, oppositional, and political strategies in art.* Art in the contemporary world often returns to the ideas of the committed art of the 1960s, which demanded the self-critique of art as an ideological form and its transformation into a tool of social emancipation and uninhibited creativity. Of course, contemporary critical and political practices do not simply replicate those of the 1960s. They are produced in very different circumstances, work by different means, and are often less romantic and more cynical. What is more, they are partial and specific, whereas the earlier theory of emancipation was universal.

   Marko Peljhan once described his work by the term "the strategy

15 The *East Art Map* website invited the public to participate in writing the history of art in Eastern Europe from 1945 to the present; the proposals that were received, dealing with key artists, art events, and projects, were then posted on the website and reviewed by a committee of art professionals, who decided whether or not to include them in Irwin's *East Art Map* book (Afterall, 2006) alongside solicited texts from art historians, theorists, and curators. – *Editor*

of minimum resistance". This description may seem surprising when you consider how large and complex some of his projects are (for example, *Makrolab* [1997–2007]), but Peljhan was thinking of the fact that oppositional art, although ambitious, is only a small point of resistance compared to the overwhelming systems of economic, military, and political power. Resistance, therefore, cannot be universal, but only partial, local, and sometimes temporary.

The areas in which artistic "strategies of minimum resistance" can be developed include, for example, reflection on and the self-critique of identity and the social determinants and roles that define it. This aspect may also manifest itself in very particular, even intimate projects and actions – here the fundamental question is how systems of social control and power are established in the most direct and personal activities. Art, as it operates in the public or social space, is also able to point to hidden and overlooked power relations and control mechanisms for social domination and draw attention to possible alternatives to these relations and models. Similarly, activities in the field of technology can draw attention not only to the way social power exploits such technologies for its own preservation and reproduction but also to the existence of different, unusual, alternative, and oppositional uses for these technologies.

There are, then, a number of essential oppositional strategies made possible by art, including the disclosure of overlooked and hidden mechanisms used by power for social control and regulation, the discovery of alternative uses for existing mechanisms and technologies, the search and development of alternative models of economic, social, and political behaviour, and the search for possible parallel (sometimes merely temporary) communities and social groups. A typical process with far-reaching critical and political potential is the creation of new, parallel topographies. Alternative exploration and mapping can change the hierarchies of meanings in reading the environment, establish systems for explaining spatial complexes that are normally overlooked and ignored, and draw attention to gaps and details that may acquire the value of symptoms. Artists involved with such topographies include, among others, Marko Peljhan (for example, in his *UCOG-144* project, while his *Makrolab* deals with mapping intangible "signal territories"), Luka Frelih (who constructed *Frida V.* [2004], a bicycle equipped with all the necessary technology for exploring and mapping territories), Marija Mojca Pungerčar (who in her project *Outside My Door* [2001–2004] carefully recorded details and changes in her environment, thus forming a complex, personal, and social story of an urban area and its transformations), Dejan Habicht (who, in such photographic series as *Final Bus Stops* [2001], *The Path of Remebrance and Comradeship* [2001], *Ljubljana by Bus* [2003], etc., has systematically documented unspectacular urban and suburban peripheries), and Antonio Živkovič (who connects the

systematic documentation of the remnants of the industrial age with the subjective role of the snapshot, which gives the motif special sharpness and intensity precisely because it essentially immerses it in memory).

Two key, and closely entwined, concepts that appear in the oppositional strategies of contemporary art are autonomy and invention.[16] The first is about developing parallel spaces, mechanisms, or groups that can evade the prevailing social systems; the second is about art finding or inventing new tools and uses that make such autonomy possible. While these parallel autonomous spaces can be developed as actual communities (e.g. the activities of the Metelkova autonomous zone), they can also be found and presented as possible models of alternative approaches. Marjetica Potrč, for example, is interested in alternative urban, architectural, and design models, whether professional or non-professional, rationally developed or improvised; using these models, she builds a complex discourse about space, its heterogeneity, and the kind of invention that enables parallel, autonomous zones or units. Polonca Lovšin puts together high and low technologies, invents new concepts for objects (e.g. an umbrella that collects water), and looks for examples of creative inventiveness in the imaginative solutions and products of non-professionals. Art practice can also be conceived as the development and definition of such models (such as Peljhan's *Makrolab*, where the unit's crew develops socially useful solutions and strategies based on the collected data).

16 Here, of course, we need to consider the concept "temporary autonomous zones" that was developed by Hakim Bey. See Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, available online at several sites, including http://www.to.or.at/hakimbey/taz/taz.htm.

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