

The archive of the Slovenian Fine Arts Society in the 1950s and early 1960s and the desire for an art market

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1. FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY 1934–1952

The Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies (ZDSLJU) got its present-day name in 1982. In its prior history, this professional organisation for visual artists had been referred to by many different names: Slovensko umetniško društvo (Slovenian Artists' Society, 1899–1919), *Društvo slovenskih upodablajočih umetnosti*, DSUU (Slovene Society of Fine Arts, 1919–1928, 1945–1953) and then later *Društvo slovenskih likovnih umetnikov*, DSLU (Slovenian Fine Arts Society, 1936–1945, 1953–1982). In fact, the latter name first appeared on 10 March 1934, but in the form *Društvo likovnih umetnikov Dravske banovine* (The Fine Arts Society of Drava Banovina, 1934–1936), which was short-lived. At that time, the society consisted of 26 Slovenian painters and sculptors.

Nineteen years of activity had gone by; the Second World War came and went, followed by a change in the social system. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, on 31 August 1945, the General Assembly of the Slovenian Fine Arts Society proposed several innovations and changes based on a review of the Society's past activities following the liquidation of the former DSLU and the establishment of the new Slovene Society of Fine Artists (DSUU) in Ljubljana. In the early morning in the Small Hall of the Slovenian Philharmonic in Ljubljana, the participants of the General Assembly attended a speech by the Minister of Education Dr. Ferdo Kozak, a presentation by the representative of the President of the Slovenian National Government Boris Kidrič, a speech on the Slovenian Academy of Art by Dr. Stane Mikuž, a discussion about the School of Arts and Crafts in Ljubljana by Miro Šubic and a speech on the founding of the Artists' Cooperative by Dore Klemenčič. The latter also made some proposals regarding social insurance for artists, and Božidar Jakac addressed the question of the establishment of a Slovenian art magazine. The most important function of the meeting was the election of a new president, nine committee members, the inspectorate, the artistic council, two representatives of the monument commission and a four-member preparatory committee for the establishment of the Slovenian Academy of Arts in Ljubljana.¹ Very quickly, on 8 September 1945, the National Liberation Committee of Ljubljana, acting on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior, approved the decision for the society to continue its activities. (Kornelj, Zlokarnik, 2019, 31) As mentioned previously, the re-organisation of the society took place in response to the change of the social system, the unenviable situation of some members who had survived the horrors of the camps, and last but not least the dire economic conditions during the war and for some time afterwards. The economic difficulties, personal and collective, are reported in the numerous surviving communications the Society had addressed to its members and other institutions between 1940 and 1945. Reading the materials from the archives of the ZDSLJU, which were handed over to the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia in 2015, thus reveals how the society's committee would invite the members to come to collect art supplies—new paints, brushes and Dammar gum—that the society had made available, as well as to make use of the society's premises, where members could “take the opportunity to peruse art magazines and books.”² We also read how the members sought the society's help in buying rubber boots³ and about the necessity of organising

1 AS 1286, folder 14, Invitation to the General Assembly, 31 August 1945

2 AS 1286, folder 16, Circular VI, št. 60/42, 25 October 1942.

3 AS 1286, folder 16, Letter from the academic sculptor and painter A. Kogovšek, No 55/44, Nov 1944.

exhibitions in order to raise funds for the artists' basic necessities,⁴ how help was sought for sick and feeble colleagues⁵ or the families of artists who had been conscripted into the army and had been living solely from the sale of their artwork.⁶

Evident are the many challenges that the Society faced after the war. The programmes were planned in accordance with the political-ideological themes, which were prioritised, and the Society's activities depended on the economic situation in the new country. The Society's 1949 programme could be argued to be the most ideological; several tasks were emphasised by the planners, namely that the Society ought to: unite all Slovenian fine artists for artistic activities and participate productively and broadly in the building of the socialist homeland, the FPRY; work to popularise the development and support of fine arts that would be national in form but socialist in content, so that it would represent an actual artistic expression of the life of the nations of Yugoslavia; assist the development of folk fine arts centres within the People's Republic of Slovenia and the FPRY as a whole; work to develop awareness among its members of the need for strong ideological value and quality of their work in order to culturally educate the people in the spirit of new national and social cohesion, resilience and determination in overcoming any difficulties encountered in the building of socialism; take care of the ideological and political education of its members in the form of lectures and discussions; coordinate with the Artists' Cooperative in the production of painting and sculpture materials and tools of adequate quality; and give initiative to the domestic industry, especially with regard to the setting-up of workshops and cooperatives, etc. (Komelj, Zlokarnik, 2019, 30)

Exploring the art market 1952–1959

The archival material of the ZDSLU offers the first detailed description of what was happening with the Society in the 1950s, their desire to establish a stable art market through pedagogical and economic support for the artists and whether the Society's exhibition space allowed them to achieve this in the time before it was transferred from the Society's premises to the Museum of Modern Art. How did the Society run Mala galerija (Small Gallery) and how did the transfer of management, and especially the change in the gallery's concept, come about? With the change of management, what used to be a trade union

4 AS 1286, folder 16, Letter to the Society, 1944.

5 AS 1286, folder 16, Circular, 1 November 1939.

6 AS 1286, folder 16, Udruženje likovnih umetnika v Beogradu, 1 June 1940.

exhibition space, which could be rented for 500 or 1000 dinars a day,⁷ provided that the Society certified the quality of the exhibition, and was mainly used for exhibitions by young, not yet established artists, as well as for presenting non-fine art related projects, turned into Likovni salon (Fine Arts Salon), where artists such as Antoni Clavé, Petar Lubarda, Zoran Mušič, Edo Murtić exhibited, along with other big names in the Slovenian, Yugoslav and international space.

Among its other activities, the Society worked towards the establishment of an art market. This was their aspiration when on 1 May 1952, when “they held a members’ exhibition inaugurating the ‘exhibition café’ on Tito Street named the *Mala galerija*, the Small Gallery, by the artists.” (Naši razgledi, 1 May 1952, 25) As reported by *Naši razgledi* (Our Perspectives) or *Ljubljanski dnevnik* (Ljubljana Daily), which mentioned the opening of the exhibition on the last day of April, solo and group exhibitions were to be held there at two to three-week intervals (*Ljubljanski dnevnik*, 30 April 1952, 12): “we will also be inviting guests from other republics. ‘MG’ will also exhibit arts and crafts and art photography, with the DSU ensuring careful selection and good quality of the exhibition material.» (Naši razgledi, 1 May 1952, 25) The DSUU already announced its intent to open new premises in March in *Ljudska pravica* (The People’s Right): “In addition to the premises in the Museum of Modern Art, which are only suitable for larger exhibitions, the Society will open a smaller gallery, intended for more intimate exhibitions, in the building of *Kreditna banka*, making sure that it will regularly host quality exhibitions that passers-by will be able to view. Exhibitions held in a busy place like this are particularly important because they can be visited incidentally by people who may not yet be a regular audience in the Museum of Modern Art.” (*Ljudska Pravica*, 29 March 1952, 7)

After internal rearrangement,⁸ carried out in 1958 and 1959 according to the plans by the architects Oton Jugovec and Svetozar Križaj, the Small Gallery became a complementary exhibition space of the Museum of Modern Art. (Rogina, 2007, 133).

In order to qualify for joining the Society, artists needed to be graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts, later Academy of Fine Arts and Design (ALUO UL) and had to receive a positive assessment by the Artists’ Council, which was chaired at the time by Marij Pregelj. In the late 1950s, the Slovenian art world was represented mainly by Ljubljana,

7 In 1955, a worker’s monthly wage was 8,500 dinars, while the wage of a public prosecutor was 18,600 dinars (Yearbook 1955 2019).

8 “The Small Gallery is being renovated with the help of funds from the Executive Council of the PC PRS; the Headmaster has mentioned that help was also promised by the OLO Ljubljana. The cost of the renovation will be around 2,000,000 dinars.” (Museum of Modern Art 1959, s.p.)

with Maribor on the rise and starting to compete for more equal funding within the DSLU. Trieste was politically problematic but nevertheless home to several Slovenian artists who ended up being used by the state during the political campaign for Trieste. The DSLU, however, instead of immediately responding to Avgust Černigoj's petition to become a member, refused his membership after seeking advice from Belgrade,⁹ and in 1958, Lojze Spacal, due to his foreign nationality, was accepted only as an associate member. A comment was made at a DSLU meeting that he would be accepted as a full member if he changed his nationality.¹⁰

Members of the Society were on the boards of the Jakopič Pavilion, the Museum of Modern Art, the Council for Culture and Education of the People's Republic of Slovenia and the Council for Culture of OLO Ljubljana (District Ljubljana okolica, meaning the vicinity of Ljubljana); they were therefore involved in decision-making on the material and professional issues relating to fine arts in all the existing institutions and financiers in the exhibition field, both at city and republic level. Minutes of various meetings show that for the artists in the Society, material conditions were a very important issue and that the Society was putting a lot of effort into the sale of artworks, commissions, royalties and obtaining various benefits from the city, the republic and the state. The members were guaranteed social insurance, and the Society also provided them with studios from the "studio fund", which e.g. in 1958 expanded to include "several more studios". (Ljudska pravica, 2 October 1958, 6) Some of the studios even had free electricity and rubbish removal, when possible, thanks to agreements with companies. A programme was also introduced—yet to be re-established now, in 21st-century Slovenia, despite long efforts—called *Odstotek za umetnost* (A Percent for Art, "a certain percentage of funds for new constructions going to art equipment." (DSLU 1955, 2)) Moreover, the DSLU secured a deal wherein the media and publishers would pay the artists between 500 and 1800 dinars for reproductions of their work; they also wished to make it so that the Society would be the recipient of fees for the reproduction of works by dead artists.¹¹ In 1958, they requested the establishment of a managerial organisation that would be tasked with purchasing exhibited works, since that was an area in which "the galleries were quite inflexible."¹²

9 AS 1286, Minutes of the Board of Directors and Artistic Council, 16 September 1957; Letter from Avgust Černigoj to comrade Zoran Kržišnik, Secretary of the DSLU, 23 September 1958.

10 AS 1286, Minutes of the Board of Directors and Artistic Council of the DSLU meeting, 26 Feb 1958.

11 AS 1286, Minutes of the Board of Directors of the DSLU meeting, 14 June 1955.

12 Ibid.

In the otherwise difficult conditions of the post-war years, the DSLU had considerable resources and influence in the national art world, which by the end of the 1950s it had begun to lose. In the 1950s, working alongside and together with the Society, there was also the Artists' Cooperative, a production space and an "economic institution of the DSUU", as stated in the—still hand-written—minutes,¹³ which was led by the sculptor Stane Keržič. Boasting a foundry and a graphic workshop, it stood on the site of today's Konzorcij at 29 Slovenian Street in the centre of Ljubljana. It was not long before it began operating with a loss, so it was later eliminated.

At the same time, the Society was renting from the National Bank the gallery space known to this day as the Small Gallery of the Bank of Slovenia, where meetings of the Society were held alongside exhibition activities:

"At the General Assembly of the Slovene Society of Fine Artists (DSUU) of February 1952, those present approved a decision to work towards providing the artists with a more appropriate exhibition space in the city centre for smaller exhibitions, one which would replace the exhibition/sales café of the Artists' Cooperative."¹⁴

The main considerations in the choice of location were the possibilities it provided for expanding the reach of art and improving its accessibility; the Society was therefore cognizant of the added value of locating the exhibition space in the city's centre, in a high-traffic location, would bring. (Gerlovič, 2018) After competing unsuccessfully for the premises of Putnik's bar, they managed to get a space in the building of the Credit Bank at 11 Tito Street, which they named Mala galerija, the Small Gallery. "Although it was not until October 1952 that the renovation work was complete,¹⁵ the Small Gallery was already opened to the public as an exhibition space on 1 May 1952." (Ljubljanski dnevnik, 30 April 1952, 12; Mejač, 2019, 8)

Operating under the auspices of the DSLU, the Small Gallery was available to any member of the Society, provided that they applied for an exhibition. Exhibitions of external applicants were subject to decisions taken at Society meetings. In 1958, the last year in which the Small

13 AS 1286, An unsigned and undated handwritten document with the contents of the minutes from the meeting of DSLU members.

14 AS 1286, Minutes of the General Assembly of the DSLU, 1 February 1952.

15 AS 1286, Minutes of the VIII. Ordinary General Assembly of the DSUU, Report by the Board of Directors, 4 September 1953.

Gallery was managed by the DSLU, the fine arts programme was especially meagre: the only exhibitions were by two marginal authors—France Godec and France Kunaver—with the rest of the exhibitions held by the Society of Decorative Arts. At the end of 1958, the Small Gallery was already closed for renovation and “reorientation”.

Despite its strong activity in the first half of the 1950s and in the context of admittedly difficult post-war circumstances, the DSLU appears to have lacked an overall vision and a focused idea of what direction its exhibition programme should take. It was more concerned with issues of survival, such as sales and other sources of income for its members, pedagogical issues and issues regarding the Cooperative and various commissions, as well as national and international selections. The Small Gallery, meanwhile, was “covered” by members’ exhibitions.

Even in the period between 1955 and 1958, when leadership of the DSLU passed to Stojan Batič, who teamed up with Zoran Kržišnik, giving the Small Gallery fresh impetus and a new administrator, it was not very clear what DSLU’s hopes were regarding the exhibition activity, and they had no stable concept of where and in what type of premises it was to be pursued. This led to a situation in 1955 where the Board of Directors of the Society, consisting of Tone Kralj, Jože Ciuha, Rajko Slapernik, Jakob Bazelj, Stane Keršič, Marko Šuštaršič, Cita Potokar and Dore Klemenčič, debated about the lack of exhibition spaces, with the president presenting a report on the possibility of acquiring a “building in Piran” that the Association would have to renovate; meanwhile, they lacked even the funds to send a representative to an exhibition in Paris or to run the programme of the Small Gallery. President of the DSLU, Tone Kralj, reported that the impression he got was that MLO (the City People’s Committee) would not provide the funds for the Small Gallery, which would “likely need to be given up” as a result.¹⁶ On 22 April, they nevertheless received 300,000 dinars to cover the expenses of the Small Gallery, but this was counterbalanced by the bank raising the rent for the premises. Right away, the Society asked the bank if paying only “effective expenses” was an option.¹⁷ In the same year, the Council for Education paid half a million dinars to the Society in order to buy the works of those young artists who had exhibited in the Small Gallery but “had not sold anything at the time of the exhibition”.¹⁸ The Small Gallery was rented out to the Association of Artists of Applied Arts for meetings and exhibitions, at a rate of 6,000 dinars per exhibition.¹⁹

16 See note 10.

17 AS 1286, Minutes of the Board of Directors of the DSLU meeting, 4 March 1955.

18 Ibid.

19 AS 1286, Minutes of the Board of Directors of the DSLU meeting, 14 June 1955.

It was the poor programme that ended up costing the Society the Small Gallery. They gave it the lowest position in the hierarchy of what was then the small art world in Ljubljana. It was a place for those who had not managed to get into the two “serious” exhibition venues. The exhibition programme of the Small Gallery thus featured artists who had not yet been established, for reasons ranging from youth to quality. At the same time, the programme also featured high-quality arts and crafts and even non-art projects. Any member of the Society could exhibit here, the only requirement being that they register. When the problem of the programme was noticed by the municipal authorities, the Society initially did not even discuss changing the conceptual direction of the gallery and instead merely lobbied for its preservation. What made the Small Gallery “small” in the local art world of 1957 was that it was the smallest of the three exhibition venues and the lowest on the quality scale. This lack of quality did not escape the Society, who attempted to improve it by various measures, such as the decision “to maintain a certain level of quality of the exhibitions, letting mainly its members exhibit, with the rest of the candidates subject to selection by a jury.”²⁰ As late as 1958, however, they were still considering granting a request by the Planika factory from Kranj, which wanted to exhibit its latest products in the gallery.²¹ When the Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia took place in Ljubljana, the members of the Association would exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art, with the Small Gallery hosting an exhibition by the Association of Artists of Applied Arts—a genre of lesser status.

The DSLU’s exhibitions in the Small Gallery continued until the summer of 1958; the daily usage fee was 500 dinars for the artists and 1000 dinars for the organisation The Council of the Association of Freedom and Education Societies. The programme ran until December, concluding with a photography exhibition by Peter Kocjančič. The money, however, was still nowhere to be seen. The Society thus lost both an exhibition space and office premises; a substitution was sought in the premises of the Writers’ Association. They were also promised space on Tomšič Street. On 4 December 1958, a grant of 500,000 dinars for the renovation of the gallery was approved with the consent of the Executive Council of the People’s Republic of Slovenia.²² On 2 June 1959, the Society’s offices re-opened, for a while, at the renovated Small Gallery. At the 1959 Plenary meeting of the Association, the Small Gallery was no longer discussed. It was transferred to the Museum of Modern Art under an agreement between the Society (Batič) and the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See note 13.

²² AS 1286, Minutes of the Artistic Council of the DSLU meeting, 2 September 1958.

Museum (Kržišnik). A new issue was now on the agenda: the demolition of the Jakopič Pavilion.²³

What was happening to the Small Gallery in the period before its new management, the Museum of Modern Art, following the example of similar institutions in France, began remodelling it as an exhibition space oriented primarily towards small-scale but carefully selected exhibitions by foreign and domestic modern visual artists, with the Italian sculptor, graphic artist and scenographer Marcello Mascherini being the first to exhibit in the renovated premises on 19 October 1959? While the opening of the renovated salon-style gallery was entirely informal, the gallery would later prove to represent much more than just a few extra square metres of exhibition space for the Museum of Modern Art, becoming instead an important space for “living art”.

The art market after the loss of the Small Gallery

After losing the exhibition space, the Society certainly strived to retain its market orientation, as it had no chance of survival without sales and additional republic and national funds. According to Ive Šubic, the president of the Society, the substandard programme of the Small Gallery was not the only culprit for the poor attendance, with poor weather conditions also to blame for the latter on some occasions. At the 1956 exhibition of the Union of Fine Artists of Yugoslavia (SLUJ), for example, which was held in the Museum of Modern Art, only 212 catalogues were sold at 20 dinars each, and of the exhibited works, the only ones to be sold were *Tihožitje* (Still-life) by Miodrag Protić (80,000 dinars), *Autoportret* by Vojin Bakić (100,000 dinars) and *Deklica z ogrlico* (Girl with a Necklace) in bronze by Angel Radovan Kosta (80,000 dinars).²⁴ The members (who were also the decision-makers) thus sought solutions that were often suboptimal, such as the introduction of makeshift exhibitions in the restaurant of the *Turist* Hotel in Ljubljana,²⁵ and on the occasion of the congress in the Lev Hotel, or in the sales department of the Slovenian store chain NAMA.

In the 1960s they sought other options; the minutes of various meetings frequently note a desire for well-organised exhibitions that would “actually benefit the wider strata of the public, or audience. A fee was envisioned that would be paid to an artist for an artistic manifestation regardless of whether any of their works were sold /.../ so that the purchase would lose its character as artist support.”²⁶ Deliberating

23 AS 1286, State Secretariat for Finance: Grant transfer, 4 December 1958.

24 AS 1286, Minutes of the Plenary Meeting of the Slovenian Fine Arts Society, 20 January 1958.

25 AS 1286, Letter to the Union of Fine Artists of Yugoslavia, No 81, 3 April 1956.

26 AS 1286, Letter by the *Turist* hotel, 9 November 1956.

the appropriate amount for the fee, most of those present agreed that it should depend on so-called social reputation, which, for "individual artists, is felt every day in a broader sense, which includes matters of staffing. How the social reputation of individual artists is stimulated is a public issue."²⁷ It was agreed by the majority that all exhibiting members should receive a fee of 5,000 dinars, whereas foreign artists wishing to exhibit, by contrast, would have to pay a fee. They also would not be eligible for remuneration, since "the money belongs to our society; accordingly, spending it on foreign artists would be inappropriate."²⁸ In any case, all of those present, including Karl Zelenko, were in agreement that in 1964, an art market like the one in Paris, which some of the artists had had an opportunity to experience, had not yet developed in our country. One of the ideas proposed by Zelenko, intended to stimulate the sale of artworks at exhibitions, was to establish a sales department operating under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art or the City Art Gallery, which would take care of organising commission sales. The galleries would thus be freed from risk and would even receive a percentage of commissions. There had already been small shifts in this area, as the Museum of Modern Art, together with Mladinska knjiga, had promised to begin selling prints. Zelenko, however, was constantly calling for the introduction of a sales service, as was available in large galleries not only abroad, but also in Belgrade. The Association's difficulties with exhibition space of its own continued, the problems most often arising when organising larger exhibitions, as in 1965, when the Association were looking for a space to hold a group exhibition by 200 DSLU members and ended up having to divide it awkwardly and without any concept between the City Art Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art.²⁹ The minutes and correspondence in the AS paint a picture of the DSLU's operation, the wishes of the members and the occasional insufficiently daring executions; while a strong will to succeed is often evident, it was outweighed by the rampant disagreement that precluded finding common solutions, not only in approaching the Western capitalist market model of the 1960s but also in the more daring ventures of other Yugoslav art societies.

27 AS 1286, Meeting minutes, 8 October 1964.

28 Ibid.

29 AS 1286, Special meeting of the members of DSLU, 2 December 1965.

SOURCE

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