

Beti Žerovc

On Desires, Contradictions and Exhibiting Art – Introduction

On the Research Project

The book *Desires and Contradictions: Exhibiting Art and Architecture in Slovenia 1947–1979* explores and interprets art and architecture through the prism of how it was exhibited and institutionalised in the selected period. The period is framed by two exhibitions which, through their organisation, content orientation, the selection of works and the responses they elicited, reflect the historical situation of their time. The first is the 1947 *Exhibition of Soviet Painters (Razstava sovjetskih slikarjev)*, presented in the still officially unopened premises of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. The exhibition toured the Yugoslav republics and the countries of the Eastern Bloc and represents an important event for the understanding of the brief period of the Yugoslav rapprochement to the Soviet Union in the field of art, which was interrupted as early as June 1948 with Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform. Intended as an example of the art of Socialist Realism, the exhibition failed to convince at least part of the Slovenian expert public. The second exhibition, the large retrospective *Slovenian Fine Arts 1945–1978 (Slovenska likovna umetnost 1945–1978)*, was prepared in 1979 by the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and the Architectural Museum Ljubljana. It presented a broad spectrum of architecture, design and art – from figurative memorial sculptures and book illustrations to the projects by The OHO Group – yet through its specific mode of presentation and interpretation, it also importantly reinforced the evaluation of achievements according to the criteria of the Western canon and confirmed modernism as the most important current of Slovenian artistic production during the period under consideration.¹ By opening up towards postmodernism favourable to regionalism – which, in contrast to modernist internationalism, once again popularised the search for the *genius loci* – and by consolidating the perception of the Slovenian cultural space as a distinct entity within the Yugoslav context, it symbolically opened a new chapter of the 1980s.

This book was created within the project research group Exhibiting of Art and Architecture Between Artistic and Ideological Concepts: Case Study of Slovenia, 1947–1979 (J6-3137). It is closely connected with the group's other activities, particularly the research on the development of Slovenian exhibiting infrastructure in the same period, presented on the website *Exhibiting in Slovenia 1947–1979 (Razstavljanje v Sloveniji 1947–1979)*. It is also linked to the research on interwar exhibiting in Ljubljana, carried out concurrently within another project at the Department of Art History of the Faculty of Arts, University of

1 The resonant exhibition was accompanied by an ambitious three volume catalogue: Stane Bernik et al. (eds.), *Slovenska likovna umetnost 1945–1978* (exhibition catalogue), Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1979.

Ljubljana.² In the course of these studies, the emerging structure of Slovenian exhibition venues gradually became clear, at least in its basic outlines – who established a particular type of venue, when and why. At the same time, the remarkable progress, indeed a leap, that this field experienced during the researched period also came to the fore. After the war, the modest pre-war situation – the only two regular Ljubljana venues in the interwar years were the Jakopič Pavilion and the National Gallery – was supplemented by cooperative initiatives and occasional events, usually held in non-purpose-built spaces. Yet within only a few decades, by the end of the 1970s, a wide-spread, polycentric and largely professionalised network of exhibition venues had been established, comprising numerous specialised institutions and well-developed inter-institutional connections at home and abroad (guest and exchange exhibitions, recurring exhibitions, painting colonies, sculpture symposia and so on).³

While researching exhibiting practices, the accelerated development and expansion of the entire field under consideration also became evident. Alongside the existing study programmes in art history and architecture, the Academy of Fine Arts was founded in Ljubljana in 1945. Conditions and benefits for artists improved, and they rapidly organised themselves into an increasing number of professional and amateur associations throughout the republic.⁴ The media coverage and professional writing on art also intensified, supported by specialised journals; and, with the 1964 merger of *Arhitekt* and *Likovna revija*, the still unsurpassed journal *Sinteza* was founded.⁵ Because development-oriented cultural policies were common in Europe at the time, the intensity of development in Slovenia is not exceptional, but the local art-friendly socialist doctrine did lend these processes a specific hue,⁶ among other things through increased

2 *Exhibiting in Slovenia 1947–1979*, razstavljanjevsloveniji.si, 2025, URL: <https://razstavljanjevsloveniji.si> (accessed 21.11.2025); Miha Valant and Beti Žerovc (eds.), *Razstave v Jakopičevem paviljonu med letoma 1919 in 1945*, Društvo Igor Zabel za kulturo in teorijo, Ljubljana, 2023.

3 The aforementioned professionalisation is also evidenced by the project of surveying and exploring all the venues, undertaken by the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana from 1974 on, both by its findings and by the project per se. One of the surveyors published her findings in a concise article: Eva Gspan, “Oris stanja slovenskih galerij in razstavišč”, *Argo*, no. 22, 1983, pp. 47–66.

4 Vesna Čopič and Gregor Tomc, *Kulturna politika v Sloveniji*, Ljubljana, 1997, pp. 46, 50–53, 60–64, 78–80; Petja Grafenauer, Nataša Ivanović and Urška Barut, “Kako je Mala galerija prenehala biti društvena in postala moderna”, *Likovne besede*, no. 113, 2019, p. 35 and throughout.

5 The website *Exhibiting in Slovenia 1947–1979* (see no. 2) provides full access to the journals *Likovni svet*, *Arhitekt*, *Likovna revija* and *Sinteza*, which were digitised as part of this project.

6 For the increase in funding that Yugoslavia and Slovenia allocated to culture, see: Branka Doknić, *Kulturna politika Jugoslavije: 1946–1963*, Glasnik, Beograd, 2013, p. 140; Čopič and Tomc, 1997 (see no. 4), pp. 67, 113–126.

commissions and employment opportunities. The country's ambitions in education, for example, required a large and diverse segment of art professionals, from art teachers to illustrators.⁷ Public, particularly monumental, sculpture flourished, as did the use of art in furnishing a truly broad range of spaces, from shops, public canteens, factories and schools to banks and hotels.⁸ Given today's prevalent perception about a weak socialist art market, the vitality of commissioning and marketing works of art at the time is striking, although the situation, of course, differed from that in the West: the state did not want to – and without truly wealthy individuals also couldn't – establish a market characterised by unreasonably high prices of artworks. Despite scant research of this field, it is evident that the opportunities for artists to make a living improved significantly compared with the pre-war period.⁹

On Parallel Worlds

In this book, the factual approach is enhanced by an in-depth focus on selected aspects of exhibiting, observing them particularly through the prism of the Yugoslav political order, its doctrine and its geopolitical perspectives. We must also take into account that the Yugoslav socio-political and economic circumstances in the just over three decades under consideration were far from monolithic; the chapters that address the entire period particularly seek to patiently unveil the shifting temporal contexts necessary for understanding and situating the issues discussed. These contexts almost invariably require

- 7 On the accelerated development of illustration after 1945, see: Špelca Čopić, "Knjižna ilustracija", in: Stane Bernik et al. (eds.), *Slovenska likovna umetnost 1945–1978* (exhibition catalogue), Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1979, pp. 81–88.
- 8 See *Likovne umetnine za javne ustanove v Sloveniji: 1945–1991*, umetnostzaskupnost.si, 2025, URL: <https://umetnostzaskupnost.si> (accessed 18.10.2025). For a systematic analysis of the phenomenon in Croatia, see: Patricia Počanić, "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela za interijere javnih institucija u Hrvatskoj 1950-ih i 1960-ih.", *Peristil*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2019, pp. 179–201.
- 9 Only partial research has been done, primarily of individual institutions that (also) engaged in sales. Commercial galleries, similar to those in the West, began appearing sporadically, and not before the 1970s. For most of the time, there existed more modest shops where art supplies and books, as well as artworks, were available for purchase (e.g. as a part of the Mladinska knjiga retail network). A large portion of the commissions and sales, at least in the first post-war decades, took place through professional associations, and sales also occurred through galleries, since exhibitions were most often commercial. Eva Jamnik, "Prodajne galerije v Sloveniji 1945–1979: Delovno gradivo", *razstavljanjevsloveniji.si*, 2025, URL: <https://razstavljanjevsloveniji.si> (accessed 28.1.2026); Grafenauer, Ivanović and Barut, 2019 (see no. 4), pp. 33–38; Ana Kutleša, "Culture on the Market – The Gallery of Contemporary Art in the Early 1960s", in: Aleksandra Sekulić and Dušan Grlja (eds.), *Performing the Museum: The Reader*, Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, Novi Sad, 2016, pp. 154–167. See also no. 16, 30 and 33.

explanation on several levels. The specific focus of this book – largely studies of travelling exhibitions – alone makes us move between the local, Slovenian, Yugoslav and international contexts, and when it comes to the latter, we encounter the intricate complexity of Yugoslav foreign policy in the global arena.

The exhibitions are traceable through archival documents, accompanying publications and media reporting and discourse (art critiques, newspaper polemics, etc.) which can be followed – to a lesser or greater extent – in connection with each of them. Throughout the research process, the exhibitions – considered the basic units of our research – emerged as tangible, realised products with definable traits and coordinates, as well as with objectives and political charge. They are inextricably linked to those who enable and finance them¹⁰ and, rather than the artists, they bring forward other professionals in the field: curators and other exhibition organisers, art critics and other reporters on cultural life, intermediaries and art dealers, etc. Tracing the media reporting and behind-the-scenes discussions that accompanied the currents of exhibition activity and the emergence of new exhibition venues – much of which involved a more or less covert struggle for resources – allowed us to discern the basic contours of the field under study somewhat differently from how art history typically records it, along with its internal controversies, which seem to define it crucially. Along with the usual intergenerational “jostling” that is characteristic of the Western art canon – where younger protagonists, in their continual struggle for primacy, surpass their predecessors and which we historicise as formative moments in the field of art¹¹ – there is another polarity, perhaps an even more enduring one. The state, unable to establish a cultural model particular to socialism – although it clearly deemed such a model as absolutely essential for the desired transformation of social relations¹² – allowed two parallel, mostly antagonistic segments to emerge. For the most part, these

10 For an overview of the Slovenian and Yugoslav cultural policy and its implementation in the studied period, see: Čopič and Tomc, 1997 (see no. 4); Doknić, 2013 (see no. 6); Ljiljana Kolečnik, “Cultural Models and Cultural Policies in Socialist Yugoslavia”, in: Sanja Horvatinčić and Beti Žerovc (eds.), *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Monuments in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory and Archive Books, Ljubljana and Berlin, 2023, pp. 59–90.

11 For the methodology and comparative inquiry into the functioning of the art fields, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, pp. 55–121, 132 and throughout; Heike Munder and Ulf Wuggenig (eds.), *Das Kunstfeld: Eine Studie über Akteure und Institutionen der zeitgenössischen Kunst am Beispiel von Zürich, Wien, Hamburg und Paris*, JRP Ringier, Zürich, 2012. See also no. 18.

12 The origin of this view is Marxist thought on the key role of cultural emancipation within the general emancipation of the working class. Ivan Jakopović, *Radnici, kultura, revolucija*, Zavod za kulturu Hrvatske, Zagreb, 1976, p. 21 and throughout.

segments coexisted peacefully and even overlapped, but at times – or, regarding certain aspects permanently and, as time passed, increasingly – they would openly have a negative reaction to each other.¹³

The first of these segments is the sphere of high art: a highly active and hierarchised art scene, composed almost exclusively of formally trained professionals, art historians and artists, with ties predominantly to urban environments and the most professionalised institutions. Instead of undertaking persistent efforts to articulate and implement a model of cultural production particular to socialism, it mostly followed the trends, norms and evaluative criteria of the Western art system; in other words, it represented the concepts and value systems of bourgeois art and followed the capitalist cultural model whenever circumstances allowed. Although this regularly put it at odds with the socialist doctrine, its key agents guided the policy of the Slovene art field and controlled both its essential exhibition infrastructure and its international art exchange.

The other of these two segments was the broad spectrum of visual art production which received targeted support from the state, in line with its political principles. These principles were grounded in the desire for culture and art to cease being elitist commodities of the detached upper echelons of society and instead realise their potential for fostering a more just society, improving the quality of life for individuals and also supporting the state's doctrine. The latter was most clearly manifested as the so-called art of the revolution, while with the former culture was socialised most intensively through amateur artistic activities across all levels of society, from students to workers. With the early Yugoslav notion of establishing a cultural model specific to socialism – considered necessary for a profound transformation of social relations – the reconfiguration of the relationship between the amateur and the professional was of central importance: it required abandoning bourgeois notions of the role of expertise and canonical evaluation in favour of greater inclusivity. However, when we look at the actual development of Slovene visual art, it appears that despite the rapidly expanding network and widespreadness of amateur artistic activity, this aspect increasingly remained little more than a promise on paper, bringing no meaningful change to the position or authority of high art. Politically, the project unfolded for most of the researched

13 For the topics and particular issues that appear on this and the next five pages, see: Beti Žerovc, "The Development of Public Monuments and Monuments to the Fallen on the Territory of Yugoslavia from the Late 19th Century to 1941" and "Can the High Modernism of Yugoslav Monuments Be Viewed as a Trojan Horse of Capitalism in Socialism?", in: Sanja Horvatinčić and Beti Žerovc (eds.), *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Monuments in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory and Archive Books, Ljubljana and Berlin, 2023, pp. 52–57, 375–397.

period in a mitigated form, aimed primarily at overcoming the workers' alienation in the production process and grounded in the assumption that only a cultured, or culturally active, individual would be capable of realising socialism in a meaningful way.¹⁴ For us, art historians, this diverse segment of visual art production already presents difficulties at the level of identifying and understanding its basic characteristics and activities, because we ourselves were also educated within the parameters of high art and were primarily taught to see and evaluate it – a task made easier because high art, unlike the rest of visual art production, is systematically archived and historicised.¹⁵ Having internalised the view that everything else is more or less unworthy of our attention or essentially none of our business, we often fail to realise that we overlook and fail to account for a broader whole, or that this inevitably renders us biased.

The high-art segment was, as a rule, not in favour of the under-scoring and extensive financing of this second segment, particularly as they often competed for resources, and some ambitious amateurs were also remarkably successful in the art market.¹⁶ It also responded rather poorly when the state demanded more connectivity with it, or when non-academic artists expressed more explicit ambitions to exhibit their work. It did not shy away from subjecting such artistic productions to sharply worded public criticism whenever they appeared, either as standalone exhibitions or as presentations by individual artists within general exhibitions, collections or representative displays abroad, in venues that it perceived as exclusively its own, such as major, highest-ranking exhibition spaces.¹⁷ It is precisely in this

14 On art amateurism as a means of humanisation and softening the unfavourable consequences of industrialisation, with instructions to organise activities, see: Milan Butina, "Amatersko likovno delovanje in družbeni centri", *Likovna revija*, vol. 1, no. 6, June 1963, pp. i, xxxiv–xxxv. For more on the earliest notions, established already during the People's Liberation Struggle, see: Ana Hofman, "'Revolution is Learned Faster than Culture': On the Amateur-Professional Relationship in the Artistic Legacies of the People's Liberation Struggle", *Anthropos*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2024, pp. 81–98.

15 Let us note that the visual art field is historicised differently and far more intensively than other fields of art, and that the veneration of artworks, for example through exhaustive and very expensive catalogues, is directly linked to their market prices and their placement within the canon.

16 In 1967, the well-known amateur painter Jože Horvat-Jaki even opened a private art gallery. He was also internationally represented by a foreign gallerist. Juro Kislinger, "Nazarje št. 58: Jakijeva domačija", *Večer*, vol. 23, no. 263, 11.11.1967, p. 3; T. B., "Naivno slikarstvo za naivne gledalce", *Sodobnost*, vol. 18, no. 6, 1970, pp. 675–676; Aleksander Bassin, "Naivni 70", *Sodobnost*, vol. 18, no. 12, 1970, pp. 1279–1281.

17 See last part of Ivan Smiljanić's chapter "Revolution Within Frames: Artistic Creation and Exhibiting in the Yugoslav People's Army", in this book. On the pointlessness of sending amateurs, albeit well-known, to exhibitions abroad, see, for example, Stane Bernik, "Trigon 67", *Sinteza*, vol. 2, no. 8, 1967, p. 68; Tanja Zimmermann,

discourse that we can tangibly discern what the art scene proclaimed to be “right” and “wrong”, and that, above all, it openly denounced anything that did not conform to the dictates of the Western art system. When this system presented itself as universal, unbiased and devoted only to “pure” art – in which a very specific form of autonomy and freedom is required in order for the genius individual to produce artworks of outstanding quality – the art scene enthroned this mythology and dogma as proper, literal truths. Based on that – dogmas turned axioms – it then proceeded to judge both the socialist cultural-political practices that refused to yield to it and the disempowerment of cultural elites, even though this was one of the first socialist postulates.¹⁸

The antagonism intensified and became more visible after the mid-1960s, when the state initiated more pronounced decentralisation processes, while its economic reforms turned it into an increasingly more contradictory amalgam of declarative socialism and market-oriented economy. With all that, social stratification and the strengthening of the elites, including cultural elites, increased. In this context, the Slovenian art scene typically aligned itself with local liberal politics, increasingly antagonistic towards Belgrade.¹⁹ Within such a constellation, it could further accentuate its national dimensions and its autonomy, and, together with politics, it advocated and enacted the process of Westernisation as a kind of natural turning of Slovenian society towards the values of humanism, development, modernity, democracy and freedom, rather than (also) acknowledging its participation in a constructed, politically motivated process whose key objectives were the distancing from communism and the spread of a mindset compatible with capitalism.²⁰ By this period, it seems that any kind of deviation

“Oto Bihalji-Merin and the Concept of the ‘Naive’ in the 1950s”, *Acta historiae artis Slovenica*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2018, p. 197.

- 18 Among other things, the Western art system systematically enshrines, as one of its basic postulates, the idea that the most successful individual is entitled to more than others, and that this entitlement is natural and just, or at least acceptable. Its impact on society is exerted above all through its own behaviour, as it projects – brutally clearly and incessantly to the broadest public – the (dis)proportions in artists’ incomes and in the veneration they receive. For the role of the myth of artistic freedom needed for the battle of the greats for primacy to continue undisturbed, see the chapter “Beautiful Freedom” in Beti Žerovc, *When Attitudes Become the Norm: The Contemporary Curator and Institutional Art*, Društvo Igor Zabel za kulturo in teorijo and Archive Books, Ljubljana and Berlin, 2015, pp. 166–174. The constant self-mythification of Western art, that conceals its ideological nature and structurally conditioned success, also required that Yugoslav protagonists adapt their own biographies to it, in which their paths developed as a constant struggle, without support and amid resistance from all sides, although facts often tell a different story. Žerovc, 2023 (see no. 13), pp. 54, 385.

- 19 Kolečnik, 2023 (see no. 10), pp. 79–81, 84. Čopič and Tomc, 1997 (see no. 4), pp. 57.

- 20 For Westernisation as a process of transfer of values, ideas and culture from the USA to (Western) European societies between 1945 and 1970 or the transatlantic

in Yugoslav cultural practices from Western cultural models and the Western art system was no longer seen, by any criterion, as understandable or as good and proper, since those models were themselves, by virtue of privileging elites, exclusivist and regressive. For the Yugoslav art professionals infatuated with the smooth operation of the Western art system in which they, owing to their socialist background, could never be truly competitive and successful, such deviations became, above all, sources of unease, frustration and even shame.²¹

The antagonism between the two segments intensified further during the so-called years of lead. The increasingly unpopular Yugoslav federal politics, that was losing authority and support in Slovenia, used the reforms in the mid-1970s to organise the cultural sector according to the principles of self-management as well, which turned

circular exchange, aimed at shaping opinions among the intellectual elites in order to fight communism in the ideational reorientation of society after fascism, see: Veronika Floch, "Reflecting the American Cultural Canon: Vienna's Museum of the Twentieth Century", in: Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Siegfried Beer (eds.), *The Context of Westernization Discourses, Cultural Politics, Transfer & Propaganda: Mediated Narratives and Images in Austrian-American Relations*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2021, pp. 347–372. Floch explores the presence of these processes in Austrian art, where the USA employed a number of strategies similar to those used in Yugoslavia. Many public and parapolitical institutions participated in this process, foremost among them the MoMA, which worked closely with the US State Department. Among other things, it influenced the directors of the two major museums of contemporary art in Austria and Yugoslavia at the time of their almost simultaneous conception and construction: Werner Hofmann with the Museum of the 20th Century (today mumok) that opened in 1962, and Miodrag Protić of the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art that opened in 1965. Like Hofmann, Protić developed the museum's basic concept partly through conversations with the MoMA's director, René d'Harnoncourt, when he spent several months in the US during its preparations. Žerovc, 2023 (see no. 13), p. 54; Floch, 2021 (see beginning of this footnote), pp. 363–370.

- 21 The protagonists who were as fully committed to Westernisation, as we read in the previous footnote, either didn't see or didn't want to see that both the failure and success of Yugoslav art in the West were largely conditioned by the interests of Western Cold War cultural policies. In the 1970s, the Western foreign cultural policy cooled its previously intensive collaboration with them and their institutions as their natural allies, while simultaneously increasing direct, personal invitations to younger artists who were often critical of the state. Some of them rather quickly achieved the highly desired international success that Yugoslav artists had previously been unable to attain, despite the extraordinary international fluidity of the Yugoslav art scene. Because this success now unfolded largely outside the framework of domestic institutions, it was increasingly seen within the art scene as evidence of their incompetence and, more broadly, the incompetence of the Yugoslav cultural policy. On how the Western art system dictated Yugoslavs' evaluation of their own art, and why art that wasn't declaratively critical towards Yugoslavia could not be successful abroad, see the introduction to Vladimir Vidmar's chapter "Almost America: Travelling Visual Art Exhibitions from the USA at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana Between 1953 and 1979", in this book, particularly footnote 7.

out to be extremely stressful and difficult to implement.²² At the same time, after suppressing the liberal tendencies in political life throughout Yugoslavia, it once again, and for the last time, launched a wave of pronounced attempts at the socialisation of culture under Marxist slogans such as “art for all” and “culture to the workers”.²³ Although many Yugoslavs were aware of the growing divide between high art and the socialist collectivist doctrine and repeatedly pointed to it, it is precisely the clumsy implementation of the socialisation of culture during this last wave that shows, over time, the complete status-based dominance of the high-art segment, whose position had already been consolidated through inter-segmental altercations in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁴ While the practices of the other segment were gradually excluded from key art institutions, the classlessness and universality of high art became sufficiently established “truths” to justify the literal imposition of high art even on industrial workers, for example, by installing artworks into industrial plants or organising art exhibitions in factory canteens. Such gestures led not only to absurdity, as they obviously made no real sense, but also to a genuinely harmful situation. This revealed, in the most literal way, that something was deeply wrong with a state that turned the very people who were supposed to be at the centre of its attention – the workers – into a problem, because they were either unable or unwilling to consume high art, and which actually made a turnabout from demands to eliminate art that was alienated from the masses on the grounds that it was harmful to socialism, only to end up prescribing that very art to everyone.²⁵

Very little is written about this phenomenon in Slovenia nowadays, but Vlatko Čakširan explores it thoroughly in the exhibition catalogue *Kolonija likovnih umjetnika Željezare Sisak 1971–1990*, using the Sisak Iron Works in Croatia as a case study. The plant supported the cultural-artistic activities of its workers abundantly and employed scores of cultural promoters for this purpose. These promoters, among other tasks, were wrestling with the actual task of developing an appreciation of high art among the workers.²⁶ Their experiences, recorded in

22 Čopič and Tomc, 1997 (see no. 4), pp. 64–80 and throughout.

23 Kolečnik, 2023 (see no. 10), pp. 60–62, 84–86 and throughout. For the large-scale Slovenian campaign *Man, Work, Culture* whose key objective was specifically to make culture accessible to the working class, see: Franček Brglez (ed.), *Človek, delo, kultura: Ocene, analize, razmišljanja in zapiski*, Komunist, Ljubljana, 1977.

24 See no. 16, 17.

25 The nature of this hard and, over time, increasingly more frustrating relationship is clearly charted through the in-depth interviews on culture with the representatives of the large working collectives all over Yugoslavia in: Jakopović, 1976 (see no. 12).

26 Vlatko Čakširan, *Kolonija likovnih umjetnika Željezare Sisak 1971–1990: Povijesni pregled* (exhibition catalogue), Gradski muzej, Sisak, 2012, pp. 53–58.

surveys about this topic, testify that their mission did not go as planned. They repeatedly stated that workers were not interested in classical music, that the exhibitions went unvisited etc., down to harsh reproaches that workers had no culture or no need for it. Some promoters did question the expectations of the task they were entrusted with, but they didn't blame themselves for the problems, and even less so the artists; instead, they shifted more blame on the workers. Čakširan concludes:

Such thinking, indeed, reveals the actual situation, which clashes with the proclaimed ideas about bringing art to the workers. The fact is that the workers were not educated well enough to be able to grasp all that was expected of them. A worker was supposed to become a kind of "superworker", who needed to be an expert in their own workplace while at the same time possessing the ability to think creatively in matters of art and, if possible, also have their own artistic inclinations, which would be reflected in literature, visual art, music, theatre, etc. Such a worker was supposed to be the bearer of the high-quality socialist transformation of society. Unfortunately, this idea was never realised. The idealism of the intellectual elite was never fully transferred to the level of the working classes.²⁷

On the Studies in This Book

Nine very different studies each have one chapter in this book. They are loosely grouped into three sections, partly according to their subject matter and partly according to the chronology. The first chapter, "Exchange of Fine Art Exhibitions Between the Socialist Republic of Slovenia and the Soviet Union", offers an in-depth analysis of the period of a few years when Yugoslavia followed the Soviet cultural model and artistic principles, as well as the intense contacts between the two countries. This was followed by a complete break in relations, during which the official cultural exchange between Yugoslavia and the members of the Cominform was entirely suspended from 1948 until Stalin's death in 1953. After contact resumed, the exchange remained weak and highly doctrinaire; visiting exhibitions were received with a significant level of reservation on both sides. The Soviet side openly objected to Yugoslavs using the exchange to bring modernism into the USSR, which they regarded as ideologically problematic. In Slovenia, meanwhile, visiting Soviet exhibitions were often used by critics as evidence of the quality and modernity of Slovene art, compared to the outdated and inadequate Soviet art. The exchange of exhibitions with Eastern Bloc countries was further weakened by

27 Ibid., p. 57.

the decentralisation and reorganisation of cultural exchange that Yugoslavia gradually implemented from the mid-1960s onwards. At the state level, only the major representative exhibitions of federal interest continued to be coordinated, while the rest of the organisation and financing of bilateral exchanges was transferred to the republics. The Slovenian art scene showed no serious interest in exchanging exhibitions with the USSR throughout the entire period under consideration. The chapter clearly traces the trajectory of a socialist state that was, in the bipolar Cold War world, at least in the field of fine arts, completely detached from the Eastern Bloc countries, even at times when Yugoslavia and those countries were experiencing political rapprochement. The Slovenian art scene, for its part, adopted – wherever possible and quite visibly – the same attitude towards Soviet art as that promulgated by the Western art system.

The chapter “The Construction of the ‘Yugoslav Architecture’ Idea Through the Prism of Two Post-War Exhibitions” first lays out the exceptionally complex domestic and international background of the exhibitions *Architecture of the Nations of the FPRY* (*Arhitektura narodov FLRJ*; 1949, Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana) and *Architecture of Yugoslavia* (*Arhitektura Jugoslavije*; 1951, Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana), paying particular attention to the organisers of both Ljubljana exhibitions: the Society of Engineers and Technicians of Slovenia and the Slovenian Architects’ Society. It then explores and compares how the exhibitions functioned as mechanisms to promote the ideas of progress meant to support, through architecture, the transformation of the Yugoslav society from a rural one with a low level of industrialisation into a modern 20th-century socialist society. The first exhibition, conceived during what were still our “Soviet” years, focused on development by emphasising technical and construction solutions and largely presented projects concerned with the post-war rebuilding of the country, while the second one – originally prepared for the 1951 congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA) in Rabat under the title *How Does the Architect Perform His New Tasks?* – was already shaped by reflections on how and why the role of architecture should differ from engineering and construction, as well as by architects’ demands for the recognition of architecture as an autonomous profession. At the same time, another key challenge emerged: how the country should present itself abroad, or construct itself as a recognisable subject in the field of architecture, and what “Yugoslav architecture” even was, or should be. The discussions focused on identifying their own version of Socialist Realism, on rejecting Western formalism and on considering the role of the country’s established building traditions. The debates regularly included rational technical and economic criteria, along with conclusions that Yugoslav architecture, based on new social processes, still had to be discovered.

This second chapter thus already introduces one of the larger, general issues of Yugoslav culture: how a country without a shared artistic tradition and history could, while respecting its internal diversities, construct a coherent artistic past and present with a convincing front – one that would also align with the state’s doctrine. In the rare, more ambitious attempts of actually shaping a shared Yugoslav narrative – rather than merely assembling representative group exhibitions – Slovenians either did not achieve sufficient visibility, did not (sufficiently) recognise themselves or considered those attempts less important than establishing their own Slovenian narrative (as can be seen from, for example, the aforementioned historicisation and evaluation of Slovenian art production through the exhibition *Slovenian Fine Arts 1945–1978*).²⁸ The processes of forming not only a common Yugoslav art narrative but an actual Yugoslav field of art were further hampered by interethnic antagonisms and rivalries, by resentments and disputes among cultural workers throughout the country and, above all, by the fact that some South Slavic nations entered the new country with still unrealised programmes of national emancipation which, strongly supported by their national cultural elites, they were unwilling to abandon even in the second Yugoslavia.

The chapter “*Housing for Our Conditions and Family and Household: Exhibitions of Model Apartments and Their Role in Promoting New Concepts of Living*” examines a narrow group of exhibitions whose impact, however, unfolds across a broad spectrum. Primarily aimed at the broadest public, the consumers of the exhibited goods, as well as the economy and industry that were instrumental in the realisation of presented products and programmes, these exhibitions had a clear industrial-development and economic dimension. With their modernity grounded in functionality and their accessible, user-oriented approach – for example, informing visitors about innovations in residential construction and interior design through direct encounters with model apartments built on a 1:1 scale – they also contributed to educating citizens on new, urban living. They served as important promoters of progressive housing policy ideas and, for everyone involved in the housing issues, as a platform for exploring, addressing and demonstrating

28 About the very well-known attempt by Miroslav Krleža on the occasion of the first big Yugoslav art exhibition in the West after the Second World War, in Paris in 1950, and the inobtrusive participation of Slovenian artists, see the text that was also written as a part of this research project: Katarina Mohar, “Slovenian frescoes at Yugoslav medieval art exhibitions during the 1950s”, in: Mija Oter Gorenčič (ed.), *Medieval Murals: New Perspectives and Research Approaches*, Založba ZRC, Ljubljana, 2024, pp. 313–338. For the outstanding response of the Slovenian art scene to the exhibition *Slovenian Fine Arts 1945–1978*, see, particularly last seven minutes: Asta Vrečko, “Razstava Slovenska likovna umetnost 1945–1978 leta 1979”, igozabel.org, 2019, URL: <https://vimeo.com/401967594> (accessed 16.11.2025).

solutions to society's pertinent needs in providing quality living conditions for all. As seen with the introduction of the concept of housing communities, the exhibition medium proved highly effective for architects in presenting their visions and the potential of new approaches to interested policymakers, who had placed housing construction at the forefront of their social programme.

While the exhibitions, discussed in this chapter, took place in non-art venues – such as fairgrounds or residential buildings – most of the architectural exhibitions discussed in this book were nevertheless still held in art galleries, mostly at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana.²⁹ This revealed that architecture “lives” differently, and far less through exhibitions than the rest of the art production that was presented there. Not only must architectural objects and interior design be usable as well as aesthetic, and thus architectural exhibitions address visitors more directly, but architecture also isn't created with exhibitions in mind; it is merely presented in them, and, in the process, typically translated into another medium. Although Slovenian architects, much like artists, were not without aspirations to position their works within the Western architectural canon, the exhibition format did not serve as a key medium for a canonisation which likely also would not have produced the kinds of economic returns that were decisive for them.³⁰ Consequently, they were less compelled to conform to the dogmas of the Western art doctrine in their exhibitions and could more easily focus on actual problems, thereby successfully aligning themselves with socialist programme objectives.³¹

The next section brings together three chapters that focus predominantly on high art. Chapters four and five explore the relationship between the Slovenian art field and the international art world, with

29 The Museum of Architecture Ljubljana (now Museum of Architecture and Design) was founded in 1972 and opened to the public in 1974.

30 Although the market reality of the art field under socialism is poorly researched, a clear connection can nevertheless be discerned between exhibition activity and the economic success of artists. Indirectly, it is also shown in the chapters by Gregor Dražil, “The Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts and Exhibiting Slovenian Artists in the West: The Cases of West Germany and Italy”, and Meta Kordiš, “The Right Address to Settle Your Art Matters: The Development of the Ljubljanska banka Fine Art Collection”, in this book, particularly as related to Zoran Kržišnik and the group of artists connected with him. See also chapter: “Almost America: Travelling Visual Art Exhibitions from the USA at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana Between 1953 and 1979”, in this book, particularly pp. 180–181.

31 As a part of this research project, a forthcoming academic article by Martina Malešič will provide an overview of the development of architectural and design exhibiting in Slovenia throughout the researched period, also in conjunction with the parallel development of professional organisations and associations in the field.

a particular focus on contacts with West Germany, Italy and the United States of America.³² The chapter “Almost America: Travelling Visual Art Exhibitions from the USA at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana Between 1953 and 1979” exhaustively follows the remarkable steady stream of art – and, to a lesser extent, design – exhibitions that the US sent to Yugoslavia and the feeble response of the US, in terms of the Yugoslav exhibitions that it hosted in return. The chapter seeks to understand the thus far unexplored extraordinary situation in which the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana were suddenly graced by numerous large-scale works of outstanding “museum quality” by Pollock, Newman, Rothko and others. It argues that this outstanding corpus of Cold War exchange offers a privileged insight into the contradictions of the Yugoslav state and society and also reveals the paradoxical and often delicate role that its art scene played in the articulation of the common social interest. The US recognised its modern art as a potential Trojan horse for the conscious infiltration of ideological cargo via ostensibly completely innocent content, even into countries with a different ideological orientation. In Yugoslavia, such initiatives received a warm welcome: not only did the local art scene fail to reflect critically on the potential ideological issues behind such offerings, it also regarded Western influences as the only relevant and binding standard and persistently strove to shape the local art system in accordance with the Western model. Within such a constellation, and given that the US was, at the time, one of Yugoslavia’s key political and economic partners, the US with its exhibition programmes likely contributed significantly to the fact that Yugoslav art professionals, as early as the 1950s, confidently embraced the stance they inherited from the previous state formations, which looked up to Western ideals and the capitalist cultural model.

Chapter five, “The Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts and Exhibiting Slovenian Artists in the West: The Cases of West Germany and Italy”, directs our attention to the protagonists and the international network of the art system, and to the exhibition as the key medium for integrating those protagonists into it. It examines the interrelation between the international networking that took place around the Slovenian flagship exhibition project, the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts (est. 1955), and the intensive exhibiting of Slovenian artists in West German and Italian art venues. Through the prism of the Ljubljana Biennale’s potential influence, it looks at the intermediaries involved in exhibition activities, the frequency and the dynamics of exhibiting by Slovenian artists, the type and status

32 See also: Rea Zupin, “Izmenjava likovnih razstav med Avstrijo in Slovenijo 1945–1990: Delovno gradivo”, razstavljanjevsloveniji.si, 2025, URL: <https://razstavljanjevsloveniji.si> (accessed 28.1.2026).

of the venues that hosted them, without overlooking the significant share of private, commercial galleries among them. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of Zoran Kržišnik, the long-time director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and the director of the Ljubljana Biennale, with its growing international reputation, who was one of the most influential figures in the Slovenian and Yugoslav art system. In this capacity, he was often invited to collaborate on graphic art and other exhibitions abroad. He selected the Yugoslav representatives for these exhibitions on many occasions and often served as a member of international juries that awarded prizes. All this enabled him to launch selected Slovenian and Yugoslav artists onto the international scene and, by “lobbying” for awards, provide them with additional promotion. At the same time, this strengthened his own position, and the chapter argues that it is in fact impossible to clearly separate his personal network and symbolic capital from those of the institutions he headed. Such concentration of power was, and still is, typical for the central protagonists in the Western art system – a system that is highly hierarchical and grounded in individualism and competitiveness – thus putting other protagonists in a position of considerable dependence on them.³³ For a number of Slovenian art professionals, we can discern a pronounced dependence on Kržišnik, on multiple levels: there were times when he was not only difficult to bypass when seeking entry into the international art system, but also, as we shall see, when it came to selling artworks.

The chapter largely confirms the findings from chapter one and chapter four through its analysis of the presence and activities of foreign art professionals within the Biennale, which shows where and with whom the top tier of the Slovenian art scene sought to align itself in the international art field. For example, while the presence of experts from the Eastern Bloc on Biennale juries was limited, and the participating members were – as much as the circumstances allowed – also inclined towards the Western modes of artistic evaluation, the Western jurors were more numerous, more respected and more visible in the media. There were no jury members from non-aligned countries.

The chapter “The Right Address to Settle Your Art Matters: The Development of the Ljubljanska banka Fine Art Collection” uses the case study of the creation and expansion of the aforementioned collection, as well as the interior design and art furnishing of the branches of Ljubljanska banka, particularly in the 1970s, to study the company’s support and investments in art. It finds – as noted in the first part of this introduction – that these developments unfolded

33 For the functioning of art professionals through the concentration of different forms of capital, see Bourdieu, 1996 (see no. 11), pp. 141–173 and throughout.

within the broader framework of the state's social and cultural policies, which, at that time, increasingly shifted responsibility for culture and art onto municipalities and companies. The companies enacted these responsibilities by promoting well-being for their employees and clients through art and by supporting local communities. Under the then-current concepts of socialisation of culture and humanisation of living, this policy brought about, among other things, the organisation of exhibitions by companies, even opening exhibition spaces on company premises, and the practice of regularly outfitting premises with artworks, which over time grew into proper collections. The process went hand in hand with the shift from the numerous art commissions for site-specific paintings and interior design to mostly decorating with purchased artworks, particularly by key Slovenian modernists. Such works even found their way into factory production halls, although the focus of these activities gradually shifted towards more prestigious settings, such as banks and hotels. Our research identified similar situations elsewhere: while modest, local environments could more easily shape artistic activities and assert their interests and aesthetic preferences, the most urban, prestigious or otherwise attractive locations were dominated by protagonists positioned at the very top of the Slovenian art system and at the centre of its network of connections – above all Zoran Kržišnik, together with his circle of collaborators and artists. As the art field expanded, particularly from the late 1960s onwards, younger art historians began joining him in similar constellations, among them Aleksander Bassin and Stane Bernik.³⁴

If art historians already struggle to accept the extent to which exhibiting high art is burdened with political and other non-artistic interests – since we are accustomed to studying art according to very different, far more idealistic parameters – we are even less prepared, as we have indicated in the beginning, for the task of analysing Yugoslavia's strong support for, and the flourishing of, artistic production outside the parameters of the Western art canon. In order to grasp some of the diversity and specifics of the Yugoslav cultural project, that indicated an attempt to establish some kind of "third way" also in the fields of art and culture, we conducted research in collaboration

34 Because the market reality differed from the one in the West, art professionals didn't have to share their power with the commercial sector: at the same time, they served simultaneously as curators or professors and intermediaries for large acquisitions of artworks, commissions and furnishing of new buildings. A special status within this system was held by the elusive Lojze Gostiša. See Tina Fortič Jakopič's chapter "The Fine Art Collection of the Museum of National Liberation of the People's Republic of Slovenia/Museum of the People's Revolution of Slovenia and Its Exhibiting" in this book, pp. 281–282.

with colleagues from other academic disciplines, and the findings are presented in the final third of this book.

Over time, the state developed a distinct segment of the so-called art of the revolution, linked to the wartime past and the sacralisation of the socialist doctrine which was enacted, for example, in monuments dedicated to the National Liberation Struggle and the Revolution, the museums of the National Liberation Struggle and Revolution, specialised publications, the continuation of the so-called Partisan art, etc. This is presented in the chapter “The Fine Art Collection of the Museum of National Liberation of the People’s Republic of Slovenia/Museum of the People’s Revolution of Slovenia and Its Exhibiting”, which demonstrates the museum’s significant engagement with art including its remarkable production of art exhibitions. The museum’s 1962 name change reflects a shift in its mission: when, from the late 1950s – as the younger generations stopped clinging to the heroic narrative of combat and the victory of the National Liberation Struggle – the state tried, through various means, to keep the memory of it alive, to situate it meaningfully by connecting it to similar pre- and post-war events, and thus to also reinforce its current doctrine. The core of the narrative of this segment was the socialist revolution, presented as an ongoing struggle for a better and more just world. In line with this ideological shift, from then on, Yugoslav museums of the National Liberation Struggle and Revolution also focused on content linked to the pre-war workers’ movement and post-war socialist construction. In practice, this meant that the Ljubljana museum began collecting art from both before and after the Second World War, and it also started studying Partisan art in relation to these two periods. Post-war art, which the museum encouraged and collected, was understood in this context as its logical continuation. In this way, a kind of parallel art current emerged: while art institutions mostly shied away from this type of production, the Yugoslav museums of National Liberation Struggle and Revolution assumed the role of fostering, cultivating and promoting it, allowing for a broad spectrum of artistic expressions, including Socialist Realism. It is worth noting that this segment, too, reveals the presence of key protagonists of the art scene in its most prestigious projects, meaning that artistic production aligned with Western trends permeated even this field.³⁵

35 An example of this are commissions for monuments of the National Liberation Struggle and Revolution, where the most prestigious and lucrative projects in the country were controlled by the key representatives of high art. Sanja Horvatinčič, “Beyond the Modernist Paradigm: Critical Perspective on Authorship in Yugoslav Memorial Production”, in: Sanja Horvatinčič and Beti Žerovc (eds.), *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Monuments in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory and Archive Books, Ljubljana and Berlin, 2023, pp. 306–310; Žerovc, 2023 (see no. 13), pp. 387–392.

As described in the introduction, the state sought to ensure that culture and art would no longer be the exclusive privilege of the upper classes and, therefore, aimed to socialise them also by promoting amateur art. In its project of cultural dissemination, it was very successful, managing to involve a large segment of the population. Amateur art assumed an important position in the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) as well, even more so because culture was, just as it was in the Partisan movement, regarded as an inseparable part of the army's activities. It was meant to elevate the soldiers' level of cultural education, strengthen the bonds between Yugoslavs and promote the values of comradeship and solidarity.³⁶ The chapter "Revolution Within Frames: Artistic Creation and Exhibiting in the Yugoslav People's Army" first examines what kind of art activity even took place in the YPA, in what ways and to what extent. It finds, among other things, that amateurism was not the only type of artistic production in the army: it intersected with the work of trained artists, or those studying art, who were doing their military service, as well as with exhibitions of works by established civilian artists organised by the army. A variety of artistic registers thus overlapped within the art activities of the army, yet few observers recognised this diversity, engaged with it or reflected on it. When this diverse production was exhibited, particularly in renowned art venues, established art criticism, operating within the value system of high art, often treated it as a monolithic whole and evaluated it according to its own standards, which most of the works neither met nor aspired to meet. In such circumstances, contact with high art could result in decidedly poor publicity for the other participating parties; with increasing caustic and derisive commentary, whose effects probably also extended beyond the usual scope of art criticism when confined only to questions inherent to the discipline.³⁷ While this can only be inferred, such writing probably contributed to the devaluation of amateur creativity and served to prove the incompetence of the YPA, which was already losing its popularity in certain parts of the country.

The chapter "Non-European Collections in Goričane: An Intertwinement of Exhibition Discourses" examines the Museum of Non-European Cultures Goričane, established in 1964 as the first Yugoslav institution dedicated to collecting and exhibiting non-European ethnological heritage. It housed the non-European collections, assembled in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, previously kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, as well as new acquisitions that were mostly the result of Yugoslav contacts and exchanges within

36 Cf.: Tanja Petrović, *Utopia of the Uniform: Affective Afterlives of the Yugoslav People's Army*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2024.

37 See no. 19.

the Non-Aligned Movement. The chapter offers a concise overview of the very diverse exhibitions held at the museum during this period, including several devoted to contemporary art.³⁸ Owing to the large number of exhibitions connected with non-aligned countries, and the discourses they generated, we can discern the attitudes towards those countries and their cultures. If – given Yugoslavia's declarative politics of non-alignment – one would expect both the museum and the press coverage of its activities to adopt a clearly anticolonial, anti-racist, non-Eurocentric orientation, the discourse that accompanied the exhibitions instead often reflected an ambivalent attitude – on the one hand, towards the developing countries and cultures and the arts of their peoples, and, on the other hand, towards the West. Although curators and journalists routinely criticised Western colonial projects, they nevertheless often approached the exhibitions through a lens that exoticised the Other and styled themselves as more developed and modern in relation to the presented countries, thereby aligning themselves with attitudes that Western countries have held since colonial times. A similar effect – one emphasising the “civilisation” and “development” of the Slovenian milieu – was produced by the enthusiastic comparison between Slovenians who worked, researched and collected in non-European countries (whether missionaries or Yugoslav ambassadors) and Western researchers and collectors.

Researching and understanding the phenomena addressed in the third section are further complicated by the fact that the state projects and institutions, or the framework that once supported them, either no longer exist or have been radically transformed. The Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane was, after it had been closed for years, abolished in 2001. The National Museum of Contemporary History, as the Museum of the People's Revolution of Slovenia is now called, rarely takes a position on its socialist-era artistic legacy. As for the material related to the YPA, an institution that, for many former Yugoslavs, became the hated aggressor in the 1990s, there is simply no place where it could be naturally accommodated.

38 We could not make a definite conclusion as to why the exhibitions of contemporary art from non-aligned countries were often shown at the Museum of Non-European Cultures Goričane, rather than in Ljubljana art galleries.