

## **Title Page**

*Freedom to Engage: Participatory Art in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s*

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I explore two case-studies, from Central and Eastern Europe, of artists using participatory art practices in the 1960s and 1970s to open up a free space for interaction to gain greater contact with their viewers, as a mode of survival in an otherwise heavily policed and

surveilled environment. In this context that type of contact and interaction would have otherwise been impossible, outside of the realm of art. In Czechoslovakia, participatory art enabled contact with the passerby that would have been challenging in the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, while in Yugoslavia, these activities rehearsed the policy of self-management promoted by Tito's government, to counteract the hegemony of art institutions in relation to experimental art. I provide a comparative study of artists in both contexts, and the methods they used to interact with a wider public, in order to highlight the different socio-political contexts across the region, usually viewed as uniform in its implementation of state-sponsored socialism. I also use this approach to underscore the different strategies of participatory art and its varied meanings. As a result of the different socio-historical and socio-political circumstances that artists in Eastern Europe encountered, they developed their own forms of participatory art, in a region where participation had a very real power in offering individuals an albeit fleeting agency and release from the surveillance and restrictions that were part of everyday existence under communist rule.

### **Keywords**

Participatory art, socially engaged art, Central and Eastern Europe performance art

### ***Freedom to Engage: Participatory Art in Central and Eastern Europe***

On September 3, 1979, Czech artist Jiří Kovanda walked down Spalena and Vidockova Streets in the center of Prague, casually bumping into individuals as they passed by. A photographer captured these brief interactions from across the street, and the entire action was part of a performance entitled *Contact*. The 1970s was the period of Normalization in Czechoslovakia, when, after the failed Prague Spring and the subsequent invasion by Warsaw Pact troops, the government was forced to bring the country more in line with Soviet rule. Throughout the decade, dissidents were arrested and imprisoned, and artists suffered more severe restrictions in their practice. Individuals were highly suspicious of one another, and only one's close circle of friends could be trusted – and sometimes not even. Consequently, the casual, lighthearted contact between individuals on a daily

basis that one takes for granted in a democratic society – the spontaneous remark to a fellow passenger on the train, a comment about the weather while waiting in line at the grocery store, or even an innocent greeting to a fellow passerby on the street – was almost non-existent. Anyone, including your neighbor or your own relative, could be an informant, so the survival mechanism employed by many was to keep one's head down, speak to no one, and lock oneself in inner exile, in one's own interior world. Kovanda's *Contact*, in involving passersby completely unwittingly in an art event, provided the artist a fleeting reprieve from the alienation of everyday life in this environment, by creating a context for interaction with the artist's fellow countryman that was so desired at the time, yet so risky as to make such encounters usually impossible. It was made possible, however, within the liminal space of art, and within the free zone of experimental art in Eastern Europe.

There are only limited studies of participatory art that consider examples from Central and Eastern Europe – two notable exceptions are Claire Bishop's book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), which discusses examples from Czechoslovakia, Russia, and Poland, and Izabel Galliera's *Socially Engaged Art after Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (2017), which addresses case-studies of examples from Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania after the end of the Cold War. This article aims to fill a gap in that scholarship and expands from my previous research on performance art practices in Eastern Europe to explore this particular strand of the performative-participatory art. In order to highlight the different manifestations and meanings of participation in different areas of the region, I will focus on two case studies: examples from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since much of the theory that has developed around participatory art takes into account exclusively Western examples (Kester, Sholette), they do not sufficiently account for the nuances of experimental art practices in Central and Eastern Europe. As I argued in *Performance Art in Eastern*

*Europe since 1960*, in order to comprehend the significance of experimental art practices in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War period it is necessary to understand the very specific socio-political circumstances in which artists were operating. Unlike in the rest of Europe and North America, where the civic sphere not only existed, but blossomed in the 1950s and 1960s – what with the 1968 student protests, anti-War protests, and the Civil Rights movements – in Central and Eastern Europe, the public sphere was under strict control and scrutiny by the government. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the 1970s in particular were undergoing a backlash following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of the former and the student protests of the same year in the latter. In both places, at this time, grassroots movements such as dissident and opposition groups existed in what is referred to as a 'second public sphere',<sup>1</sup> as opposed to the public sphere. In Czechoslovakia, this second public sphere was covert, and consisted of close friends and trusted colleagues. This second public rarely entered into the public sphere, because if and when it did, there could be consequences for the individuals in question. In Yugoslavia, however, art historian Ješa Denegri referred to this as the other, or second, line [*druga linija*], which existed in opposition to the official institutions and practitioners of art, who controlled access to those institutions, commissions, and exhibitions, often at the expense of younger, experimental artists. Artists engaged in this second public employed the strategies of self-management, an economic policy promoted in Yugoslavia by Edvard Kardelj, whereby workers controlled the operations of their respective enterprises.

The arts, like the public sphere, were under strict governmental control. It is important to emphasize that the level and method of control varied greatly across Central and Eastern Europe, and Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are two distinct examples. A neoconservative turn by the

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<sup>1</sup> This notion of the 'second public sphere', or alternative/unofficial public sphere, is explored in depth in Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czihak, eds. *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018). The reference is to Habermas's notion of the "public sphere," and the different manner in which it manifests itself in the region, within a "second public sphere" of alternative, underground, or dissident activity.

Yugoslav government after 1968 manifested itself in a crack-down against progressive thinkers and artists, epitomized by the arrest, in 1972, and conviction, in 1973, of Lazar Stojanović for the subversive activity in his film *Plastic Jesus* (1971).<sup>2</sup> The peak of a similar crackdown in Czechoslovakia included a purge of the Association of Slovak Artists, and Július Koller – a prominent conceptual and performance artist – was among those artists expelled. Under these conditions, unable to publicly pursue experiments in conceptual and ephemeral art, artists created such work mainly for their friends, for themselves, or for exhibition abroad, if it was possible to travel or send the work away. In Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, such work was only exhibited in private, whereas in Yugoslavia there were certain venues, student galleries in particular, where this type of work could be and was exhibited. However, artists often faced greater criticism from established academics who endorsed the status quo – the traditional work, by which they had made their careers – and rejected the more experimental types of art such as performance or conceptual art.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, artists in both environments were forced to find other ways to engage with different publics and interact with their viewers.

The fact that performance art was not accepted as an official genre or category of art-making, and thus not institutionalized, opened up a considerable realm of possibilities for artists working in it. With no rules or restrictions in the *unofficial* sphere of art, in contrast to the strict rules imposed by official artistic institutions, artists were free to experiment, create, break through boundaries, and develop new types of art as well as creating new possibilities for interacting with the artworks. From my extensive research into the development of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe, I have outlined how the genre offered its practitioners a rare and unique zone of

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<sup>2</sup> One can point to other examples from across the region: in 1978, Polish artists KwieKulik were denied passports to go abroad for work that was considered by the authorities to be anti-government; and Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóby was forced into exile in Switzerland in 1975, simply for owning a copy of a *samizdat* publication.

<sup>3</sup> See Dunja Blazević, "SKC and New Cultural Practices," in *SKC and Political Practices of Art*, (Prelom Kolektiv and Škuc Gallery) (exhibition catalogue) <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/catalogue.pdf>, 83 (accessed September 18, 2015).

freedom in an otherwise heavily restricted environment, which includes both the artistic environment and the greater society at large.<sup>4</sup> It was from within this 'zone of freedom' of performance art that artists also engaged in participatory strategies, in which the viewer or audience was directly involved in the creation of the artwork.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I demonstrate how artists in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia utilized participatory forms of performance art in order to open up a free space for interaction with the viewer and gain greater contact with their viewers, as a mode of survival in an otherwise heavily policed and surveilled environment, where this type of contact and interaction would have otherwise been impossible, outside of the realm of art.

My methods include comparative analysis, socio-political and socio-historical contextualization, and the gathering of primary source material through interviews with the artists and local arts practitioners. Comparative analysis is just one of the methods widely employed by art historians in the region to compensate for the lack of archival and primary source materials. Insofar as experimental art practices in Eastern Europe developed largely outside of institutions, the archiving thereof has been haphazard rather than systematic, and much of the archives are privately owned and managed by the artists themselves. Comparative analysis and social contextualization have been used by key scholars in the field, including myself (Piotrowski, 2009, 2012; Bryzgel, 2013, 2017; Kemp-Welch, 2014; Preda, 2017), in order to tease out the nuances of the experiences of artists and production of art in the different countries, regions, and cities under the sphere of Soviet influence in the post-War period, and to avoid a monolithic treatment of the region which was, despite perceptions to the contrary, quite diverse in its implementation of state-

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<sup>4</sup> This is also an argument that Pavlína Morganová makes in her book, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain* (Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2014), with regard to performance art in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>5</sup> While there are a range of terms that could be used, such as socially engaged art, collaborative art, relational aesthetics, I insist on this term because of the fact that what all of the projects discussed have in common is the participation of the viewer, rather than an attempt to address a particular social issue, which is better characterized by the term "socially engaged art".

sponsored socialism. I used interviews with the artists to procure information and fill gaps in knowledge, and to gather the oral histories that only they possess. I employ all of these methods to arrive at a richer and more accurate picture of the manner in which experimental art practices developed, were used, and the varying significance of these practices across the region.

Grant Kester has identified the 'social turn' that took place in art around the 1990s, a shift away from the production of objects in favor of a focus on the 'processes of intersubjective exchange'.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this shift had been a long time in forming, and as early as early as 1967, Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International, had identified the alienating effects of capitalism in the West, and the bureaucracy of 'utopian socialism' that manifested itself in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He saw as his role the creator of *situations*, in which the public could participate, in order to break out of the spectacle of mass culture, consumer capitalism, and ideology. Twenty years later, French curator Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term 'relational aesthetics' to define a new approach in art, which focuses on 'the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'. Private space in Eastern Europe, however, was rare, and the systems of monitoring and surveillance there produced a different sense of alienation among individuals in the region. The consequences of participation were dramatically different than in the West, insofar as any public activity was usually monitored, and partaking in activities not sanctioned by the government could have repercussions for the individual, such as detainment, interrogation, or arrest, as well as for that individual's family members. After surveying the performance practices that emerged in Eastern Europe after World War II, I have identified two places where participatory practices seem to have emerged in abundance: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.<sup>7</sup> While in Czechoslovakia, artists used participatory art to push the boundaries of what was tolerated and

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<sup>6</sup> Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>7</sup> While that is not to say that there were no instances of participatory art practices outside of these two countries during the Cold War period, I found very few examples, some notable exceptions being in Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, and Poland.

allowed, in Yugoslavia, these practices rehearse the policy of self-management promoted by the Yugoslav government.

## Contact

The artistic environment changed drastically in Czechoslovakia after 1968, ushering in the period of Normalization, during which surveillance and monitoring was increased, as the government attempted to bring its citizens more in line with the dictates of Moscow. In the 1970s, Jiří Kovanda, whose action *Contact* was discussed at the beginning of this article, created minimal interventions, actions, and artistic gestures in public spaces on the streets of Prague, actions that were barely perceptible, and certainly not noticeable as works of art. For example, his 1977 action *Untitled* involved the artist standing backwards on the subway escalator, embodying – like in *Contact* – perhaps the only type of interaction that was possible with a non-art audience in the public space in Normalization-era Czechoslovakia, by standing unconventionally on the stairs and staring directly into a stranger's eyes. In fact, when I asked the artist how he was able to get away with creating such public performances in the 1970s in Prague, he responded that they 'only lasted a few seconds',<sup>8</sup> not enough time for any observer to become suspicious of his activity.

Czech art historian Pavlína Morganová has noted that the reaction of those passing by or implicated in Kovanda's actions is representative of the social reality at that time. In her words, 'the mixture of their indifferent, baffled and aggravated looks is the essence of the public space's totalitarian reality'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, one strategy of survival during that period was, in fact, to avoid eye contact, thus to avoid association with any activity other than merely walking down the street. Kovanda managed to connect with his compatriots and implicate them as little as possible, using such subtle gestures that they were hardly detectable as anything unusual in the everyday public

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<sup>8</sup> Jiří Kovanda, in an interview with the author in Prague, June 27, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Morganová, 186.

sphere. His actions suggest that the only way one could have contact with the anonymous passerby was through an everyday activity that bore no resemblance to art whatsoever.

Furthermore, writing about the documentation of such events at the time, Tomáš Pospiszyl reminds us that even being in close enough proximity to such unconventional events to be captured on film, whether part of the action or not, could potentially implicate culpability in the eyes of the secret police, who also took such photos of individuals in the public sphere. Commenting on the position of the passersby, he stated, 'even if they remain passive during the whole event, they are participants, accomplices',<sup>10</sup> insofar as the photograph meant that they could end up in a file somewhere. This underscores the challenge, for artists, of establishing contact with potential audiences in the public space at the time, not to mention the opportunity these events presented, if they were successful in engaging participants, to reconnect individuals with one another in a heavily controlled space. In this context, participatory art made possible a connection between individuals in the public sphere, no matter how minimal, fleeting, or inconsequential.

Kovanda, a self-taught artist who was active in performance art mainly in the 1970s, has affirmed that many of his actions are focused on connecting with other individuals, yet cites a different explanation for these gestures, one that is more autobiographical than political: his innate shyness. In fact, one of his actions is entitled *An Attempt at Meeting a Girl* (October 19, 1977), wherein he invited his friends to be present in a public space in Prague as he attempted to make friends with a girl, which ultimately failed, as the artist's shyness took over. While the personal explanation behind these performances is certainly valid, one cannot ignore the tense atmosphere of 1970s Prague in which they took place. Making contact with a stranger on the streets is risky anywhere, at any time, but in Prague in the 1970s, the two parties in question ran the risk of the other being a member of the secret police, a spy, or informant. The culture of suspicion was

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<sup>10</sup> Tomáš Pospiszyl, "Look Who's Watching: Photographic Documentation of Happenings and Performances in Czechoslovakia", in Claire Bishop and Marta Dziewanska, eds., *1968-1989 Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 85.

elevated, and the consequences of engaging with a stranger were very real. Kovanda combines his own personal struggle with meeting and interacting with others with the everyday struggle to find trust in Czech society of that time.

The fact that Kovanda did not overcome his shyness through these performances is not indicative of his failure within the context of this social experiment presented as artwork. Rather, it can be attributed to the tightly controlled atmosphere of public spaces in Normalization-era Czechoslovakia, when any of the freedoms enjoyed by artists prior to the 1968 invasion had effectively disappeared. Because Kovanda had to disguise his actions as everyday activities, they effectively succumbed to the same fate that all art practices subsumed into the praxis of life do: they completely disappeared within the fabric of everyday, contemporary life, and thus were overlooked and remained largely unnoticed.

That said, Kovanda very carefully preserved the documentation of these actions in a series of notebooks, titling each page according to the action, and including either a photograph, brief description of the action, or both. The fact that he painstakingly recorded these actions indicates that these were not simply social experiments, but artworks, and artworks that would have otherwise disappeared among the crowds of anonymous passersby if they had not be highlighted as art through their documentation and archivization. While as participatory practice, they were aimed at the passersby in question, as artworks, they were intended for a secondary or “delayed” audience,<sup>11</sup> a term Ivana Bago and Antonia Majaca use to describe many artworks created in the region that were intended to be seen by a future audience, one which could better tolerate, appreciate, and understand them. In this sense, while the *contact* that was sought after by Kovanda, and perhaps by his fellow citizens, was not, in fact, achieved, it remains trapped in potential on the pages of his well-worn albums from the 1970s.

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<sup>11</sup> See Ivana Bago, “A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at *La Galerie Des Locataires* and *Podroom—The Working Community of Artists*” *ARTMargins* 1/2–3 (June–October 2012): 116–146.

In 2007, Kovanda enacted a series of performances at Tate Modern in London, one of which was *Kissing Through Glass*, in which the artist stood behind a transparent glass panel with a sign next to him inviting passersby to kiss him through the glass wall. In what is perhaps his most intimate participatory performance, he finally achieves contact with his fellow human beings, with only a thin piece of transparent material separating his lips from the other physically, but not visually. The performance could not be more diametrically opposed to Kovanda's pieces from the 1970s: instead of a street, the setting is one of the leading art institutions in the world; instead of Normalization-era Prague, the setting is neoliberal London; and instead of the context of the everyday, the context is clearly within the realm of art. Rather than seeing the differences between these performances merely in the changed political context, what is perhaps more significant is the frame around the 2007 work that clearly demarcates it as art, which perhaps – more than the everyday setting of the street – provides a certain safety in which Kovanda can begin to break free from his timid shell, and thus also explains the supposed failure of the earlier actions to enable the artist to connect with others.

Claire Bishop has addressed the phenomenon of participatory art in Czechoslovakia in her book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). Her contention is that instead of creating situations and participatory events in opposition to the spectacle of capitalism, artists in Eastern Europe used this strategy to create individualized and particularized experiences, to contrast to the conformist environments in which they found themselves. In her words, the participatory art of Eastern Europe and Russia from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s 'is frequently marked by the desire for an increasingly subjective and privatized aesthetic experience'.<sup>12</sup> She also cautions against viewing this type of work by these artists as 'implicitly political', and argues that

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<sup>12</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 129.

'work produced under state socialism during these decades should rather be viewed in more complex terms'.<sup>13</sup>

While I agree with Bishop's analysis to a certain extent, there are substantial examples of artists utilizing various genres of experimental art, including performance, to create unique, individualized experiences for themselves, whether or not an audience or public was involved. Thus the creation of particularized experiences was not the primary aim of artists emerging from their studios and private circles to engage with other viewers in participatory activities. With the stakes being so high, this alone could not compel an artist to engage with the wider public. Perhaps in some cases this participatory move was the result of this benevolent gesture that Bishop describes, extending the privacy and capability of their studio to the rest of society. But a more logical explanation is because the sphere of unofficial, unsanctioned, and thus unrecognized and not-paid-attention-to experimental art was the only realm that offered such individualized experience (as opposed to the intended communal experience of official art), artists were able to use participatory strategies to gain contact with a wider public that would otherwise not have been possible in everyday life.

As Maria Lind has written, when discussing the phenomenon of social practice in art: 'some would even claim that it is about making another world possible'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in his thesis on *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud has highlighted Karl Marx's term *interstice*: 'a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail in the system'. He goes on to suggest that contemporary art exhibitions function as precisely this interstice, insofar as they

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<sup>13</sup> Bishop, 129. Indeed, Klara Kemp-Welch has rightfully argued that a better mechanism would be to view post-World War II experimental art practices in Central and Eastern Europe as *antipolitical*, utilizing a term coined by György Konrád to indicate the manner in which one could be political simply by *not* playing politics.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Lind, "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice", in Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Time Book, 2012), 49.

create free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the 'zones of communication' that are forced upon us. The contemporary social context restricts opportunities for inter-human relations in that it creates spaces designed for that purpose.<sup>15</sup>

The social context in Central and Eastern Europe had similar restrictions for inter-human relations as described by Bourriaud, and it was precisely this 'other world', the liminal world of art, and the free zone of experimental art, that made possible the creation of small worlds that individuals could inhabit – albeit for a period of limited duration – spaces enabling 'inter-human intercourse' that was otherwise impossible in Normalization era Czechoslovakia.

### **New Art Practice, New Audiences**

While the situation in 1970s Yugoslavia was markedly different from that of Normalization-era Czechoslovakia, there are some similarities. Following the 1968 student protests at the University of Belgrade, students were granted some form of autonomy, through the establishment of Student Cultural Centres across the country. While these were officially government institutions, they were largely student-run, with little influence from the authorities. The fact that student activity was contained within these Centres satisfied the authorities that student rebelliousness would not seep out into the public sphere. Tito's break from the Soviet Union in 1948 meant that the country

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: les presses du reel, 1998), 16; I have chosen here to use the translation in Claire Bishop's Documents of Contemporary Art edited volume *Participation* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), p. 161, which employs the term 'possibilities for exchanges' instead of 'other trading possibilities', which relates more to the context of participatory art as opposed the market, to which Marx's *interstices* referred.

forged its own path, practicing self-management socialism, a bottom-up form of governance, in which workers were able to self-direct. Yugoslavia maintained close ties with Western Europe and North America, travel in and out of the country was not restricted, and the country had access to Western products and goods within their market economy. In this environment, contact with the casual and unexpected passersby was not only desired by artists, but possible, and artists utilized the genre of performance art in its participatory mode to engage a wider audience, which they could not do utilizing local galleries and standard exhibition mechanisms. The reason this was necessary was not, in contrast to the examples from Czechoslovakia, that these types of art would not have been tolerated in official spaces by governmental authorities, but rather because there was resistance on the part of the *art establishment*. Consequently, the use of participatory strategies demonstrates artists' own engagement with and employment of self-management to advance their artistic practice outside of official art institutions.

Dunja Blazević, director of the Student Culture Centre Art Gallery in Belgrade from 1971-76, and later head of programming (1976-80) commented that those in the arts sector 'didn't feel that the party or state politics presented an obstacle to do what we were doing, but we clashed, in the domain of culture and art, with the dominant tendency of modernism or socialist modernism which was in power'.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, artists were forced to seek alternative methods to not only engage with, but *create* audiences for their art, given the fact that, in many cases, they did not have the institutional support required to promote what they were doing as legitimate artistic activity. Many of the artists working in genres such as conceptual and performance art, in opposition to the dominant approach of the academy, were grouped under the term 'New Art Practice', after the title of the catalogue published about these artists in 1978. This so-called 'New Art Practice' needed new audiences, and they sought to create them using strategies of participation in art.

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<sup>16</sup> Dunja Blazević, "SKC and New Cultural Practices," in *SKC and Political Practices of Art*, (Prelom Kolektiv and Škuc Gallery) (exhibition catalogue) <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/catalogue.pdf>, 83 (accessed September 18, 2015).

In the Yugoslav Republic of Croatia, photographer Goran Trbuljak and painter Braco Dimitrijević collaborated briefly, from around 1969-71. They created a number of different actions together in the streets of Zagreb that involved the implication of the casual passerby in the creation of the artwork. They began their collaboration under the auspices of the group 'Pensioner Tihomir Simčić' by arranging a chance encounter: they placed a piece of clay on the wall, at the level of the doorknob, in the hallway entrance to a building on Ilica Street, so that the first person to open the door would press the door into the clay and leave an imprint of the doorknob. That person ended up being Tihomir Simčić, and he became the author of the work of art. Dimitrijević had created a similar action using a carton of milk placed in the street. The first person to drive over the carton and break it, smashing the carton and spraying the milk in the street, became the author of that work of art. Dimitrijević stopped the driver, asked him if he considered the splatter a work of art, and, if so, had him sign it.

For these artists, the aim of these actions was the emancipation of art from institutions, bringing it out of the artist's studio and providing access to the creative process for everyday citizens. It was also about offering an expanded definition of art, to a population that was habituated to a traditional understanding of it, one that meant painting and sculpture, which was taught at the Art Academies at that time (and even to this day). The idea that an individual who was not classically trained could produce art or participate in the creation of art was anathema at the time, especially to the professors installed in the Fine Arts Academies, who sought to maintain their positions as leaders in the field. According to Dimitrijević, his actions would produce a situation in which 'the dividing line that formerly existed between the artist and the non-artist has been removed. When a person becomes interested in fragments of everyday life he or she will be in the

position of a creator'.<sup>17</sup> Art historian Nena Baljković has further commented that these actions involve 'a change in the conception of participation: instead of the physical participation of the spectator or of the activation of his perception (in optical art the participation ends with the oscillations on the retina), the work appeals to the imagination and the intellect',<sup>18</sup> a statement that echoes Bourriaud's concept of the emancipated spectator, whose participation with regard to an artwork is in fact a physical one, even if the activity is solely intellectual.

The art world in post-war Yugoslavia was hierarchical, as the older generation of artists, who were featured in major state exhibitions and served as faculty members at the Academies of Art, espoused what art historian Ješa Denegri has termed 'socialist modernism' – or abstract and non-objective painting tacitly supported by the authorities – and outlined the strict terms by which art was defined. Artists of the younger generation stood in opposition to these gatekeepers, embracing different forms of art, including performance and conceptual art, and thus sought avenues outside of the institution to engage with new viewers and expand both the concept of, and audiences for, art. They engaged in activity that precisely aligns with French philosopher Jacques Ranciere's conception of dissensus, attempting to disrupt not only the social order, but the systemic underpinnings of it, by completely shifting not only the location for the creation and reception of art, but creating a space in which artists and non-artists could make something and determine together what is or is not art.

According to Denegri, the art institutions in Yugoslavia consisted of 'an all too excessive number of teachers recruited from among artists holding conventional and often outmoded conceptions; their teaching career is only the background of the financial and, consequently, ideological backing of such artistic conceptions, and this in the concrete Yugoslav conditions

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<sup>17</sup> Braco Dimitrijević, qtd. in Nena Baljković, "Braco Dimitrijević—Goran Trbuljak," in Marijan Susovski, ed., *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Baljković, "Braco Dimitrijević—Goran Trbuljak," in *New Art Practice*, 31.

creates a status of social privilege associated not so much with individuals but rather with the attitudes on which the work and behaviors of such individuals is based'.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, artists in Yugoslavia sought to move their work out of the academy and art institutions, and into the streets, to access potential viewers (and creators) outside of those hegemonic institutions. Their use of participatory strategies moved the practice of self-management from the factories to the public sphere, and had an element of institutional critique to it, as well as social engagement.

Trbuljak's action *Referendum* (1972) continues his interaction with the public on the streets of Zagreb, as well as the interrogation of the institution, and a questioning of who decides what art is, and how. On the main shopping street of Zagreb, Ilica Street, the artist interacted with passersby, showing them a ballot and asking them to respond to the question: 'Is Goran Trbuljak an artist or not?' They could choose from the following answers: 1. Yes 2. No. The results showed that the majority of those who responded considered him to be an artist, therefore he concluded that an 'artist is the person who is given the opportunity to be one by the others'. Furthermore, by staging the work in this way, the piece demonstrated the fact that it is the general public, as opposed to the art institutions or even the art-going public, which could properly evaluate, and thus validate, the work.<sup>20</sup>

Trbuljak has commented on the fact that the street was a significant space for him, considering it his space, because he didn't have to ask for permission to use it. He often placed objects on the street, or attached texts to building facades, with the aim of having the casual passerby consider them. His work is often inflected with humor, which he uses as a tool to engage

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<sup>19</sup> Ješa Denegri, "Art in the Past Decade," in *The New Art Practice*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> By contrast, in 1972 the artist posed a similar question to several Paris art galleries: "Would you like this work to be shown at your gallery? 1) Yes 2) No 3) Maybe." One version of the letter was signed by an anonymous artist, and another version by Trbuljak. The artist received a range of responses, demonstrating their power to decide what art and which artist is worthy of display. Goran Trbuljak. 1972, *artiste anonyme: Goran Trbuljak, 1974*. See the documentation of the project here: [http://www.msu.hr/files/15681/ARTISTE%20ANONYME-1972\\_GORAN%20TRBULJAK-1974.pdf](http://www.msu.hr/files/15681/ARTISTE%20ANONYME-1972_GORAN%20TRBULJAK-1974.pdf) (accessed October 6, 2017).

the casual viewer, one who may not be necessarily a follower of art. In his words, 'if I do something funny and you laugh, then we have communication',<sup>21</sup> with laughter being, for him, a confirmation that communication has occurred. Above all, what the artist aims for is honesty and directness, rather than the 'mystification' that he says is present in much of contemporary art. And one way he arrives at that honesty is through direct communication with the viewer, to arrive at the truth together, rather than simply presenting it unequivocally.

Between 1975-79, an informal group of individuals based in Zagreb, who came to be known as the Group of Six Artists staged 'exhibition actions' on streets and in public spaces across Yugoslavia in order to reach a different type of viewer, one that might not regularly frequent art museums, or even the Student Culture Centre Gallery, or the Center for Contemporary Art, where their work might be exhibited. Mladen Stilinović (a self-taught artist), Sven Stilinović (photographer), Fedor Vučemilović (photographer), Boris Demur (painter), Vlado Martek (writer) and Željko Jerman (amateur photographer) comprised this informal group of arts practitioners, only some of whom had actual artistic training. Theirs was not a formally codified group, rather, their name was given to them by curator Marijan Susovski as the title to Nena Baljković's essay on their collaborative work for the *New Art Practice 1966-1978* catalogue, published in 1978.

In April 1975, the artists met and planned their first public exhibition-action, which took place on 11 May from 10am to 6pm at the Municipal Bathhouse on the Sava River in Zagreb. During the action, works of art were displayed on the sunning boards, on the embankment, and on the lawn. As an example of some of the actions that took place, Željko Jerman laid down on a large piece of photographic paper for one hour, leaving the imprint of his body on it, and thus demonstrating how photography works. Mladen Stilinović drew a red line on the grass; his partner, art historian Branka Stepančić, threw flowers into the Sava River, and Matko Štajcer played the

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<sup>21</sup> Goran Trbuljak, in an interview with the author in Zagreb, August 19, 2013.

cello. The artists were present for the entire time, with their artworks, to speak with and interact with the viewers – be they invited guests or random passersby who were there to sunbathe, as opposed to seeing art. The video documentation of the event, however, indicates that not many bystanders were there to witness it, although the audience size would vary according to the location of each exhibition-action. Nevertheless, this was the template for all of their subsequent exhibition-actions: an outdoor exhibition of artworks and actions with the artists present, and interaction with the audience.

The next exhibition-action took place on 29 May, from 2-6pm on Šenova Street at a housing estate named Sopot I in New Zagreb. This was the first time that the term 'exhibition-action' was used and which appeared in the invitation card. Much like the previous event, there were few bystanders in attendance. On 25 September, however, they held an exhibition-action on one of the main squares in Zagreb, Republic Square (now Ban Jelačić Square) from 10am-4pm. The video footage of this event shows a number of people walking by, engaging with the artists, and observing the artworks, most likely the result of its central location. The exhibition-action also attracted the attention of the press: after Branka Stipančić wrote about it in the magazine *Omladinski tejdnik* (no 207, Zagreb, 11.11.1975), the text was significantly edited so that her originally supportive tone was changed to ironic. On the same page, Nik Kalnić published a negative review entitled 'The Deception of Passersby'. In the next edition of the magazine, art historian Nena Baljković published a reaction to that review under the title 'The deception of passersby or the deception of readers'. What is significant here is not only the negative reaction to the suggestion that the exhibition-action is a work of art, but also the fact that the work sparked discussion in the popular press, which was ultimately the aim of the group: not only to expand the audience for art, but also to widen the discourse taking place on contemporary art, which was not taking place in the art academies.

In both their title and aim, the exhibition-actions bear resemblance to the action committees that emerged in the aftermath of the student demonstrations in 1968. These were collective decision-making committees set up by the students to make assessments during the strike, and were a vivid example of self-organisation.<sup>22</sup> Branislav Jakovljević has commented on the fact that it is precisely the context of self-management socialism that makes these practices distinct: 'Self-management as the main principle of performance in the broad sense in Yugoslavia becomes an irreplaceable methodological tool for discerning the distinctions between works in different social contexts'.<sup>23</sup> What is interesting is that, by the 1970s, workers' councils, unions, and political organizations had all been reduced 'from potentially autonomous workers' organizations to mere conduits of the Party's decisions',<sup>24</sup> which indicates that in the 1970s in Yugoslavia these exhibition-actions are perhaps one of the few examples of self-management still functioning in the country, putting art ahead of the political sphere. The exhibition-actions were a call by artists for self-management in the sphere of art; a call by artists to artists, not from those outside the institution, but by those within aiming for institutional reform.

In an interview given a few years before his untimely death in 2016, Stilinović confirmed that the aim of staging the exhibition-actions in public in this manner was to be able to meet and engage with a wider audience for art, such as individuals who did not usually frequent museums, and also have greater contact with them, which was not possible in a traditional gallery setting.<sup>25</sup> The artists expanded the notion of performance and action art to include the participation of others, literally creating 'free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life' – a free space for dialogue about contemporary art in an exhibition that took place

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<sup>22</sup> Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945-1991* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 132.

<sup>23</sup> Jakovljević, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Jakovljević, 253

<sup>25</sup> Mladen Stilinović, in an interview with the author, August 19, 2014.

outdoors, which would not have been possible in the art institutions at that time.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Stilinović would hold exhibitions in his home, inviting viewers into his private, personal space, primarily because of the fact that it was difficult to get exhibition space for his work in any official gallery. But in doing so, he transforms the personal and private space of his home into a space for art, subverting the traditional practice of framing an art exhibition in an official institution or museum. In one exhibition, the artist sat in the last room, alone in the gallery, with the sole aim of talking with visitors about the work, emphasizing the discursive nature that he believe should be integral to art practice.<sup>27</sup>

The extent to which these actions, by Trbuljak, Dimitrijević, and the Group of Six Artists, achieved their aims of democratizing the art-making process and usurping the power of the Art Academies to dictate the terms of engagement with art remains to be seen. In point of fact, the number of members of the general public that the artists engaged with was rather limited, and with the Group of Six artists, this often depended on the place in which they staged their exhibition-actions. Some, in secluded courtyards, were visited by only a handful of people, whereas others, on the main square in Zagreb, were witnessed by larger numbers. That said, the art world in the former Yugoslav countries remains, for the most part, traditional, with performance and other experimental practices rarely being taught, and classical training still the dominant mode of education. Most of the experimental artists in Eastern Europe did not become teachers in the Art Academies, and thus their traditions and methods were not passed on to subsequent generations.

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<sup>26</sup> Trbuljak and Dimitrijević also staged an exhibition of contemporary art in unconventional space, such as the entryway of an apartment building in Zagreb, at Frankopanska street 2a. The exhibition 'In Another Moment' took place in April 1971, from 5-8pm, when the apartment-dwellers would be coming home from work.

<sup>27</sup> One could also mention the exhibitions staged by Nena and Braco Dimitrijević in the entryway of 2a Frankopanska Street in Zagreb, an alternative exhibition space that Braco had founded in 1970, with the sole purpose of engaging with non-art-gallery goers in a non-art setting, about contemporary art.

Some of the artist groups practicing self-management in their art in fact disbanded due to ideological differences, as the approach has proven difficult to maintain, in art just as in the political sphere. For example, the artist-run gallery space Podroom in Zagreb, established by Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis, was open from 1978-80, before the group eventually dissolved over a disagreement as to what the space should be. Some of the artists preferred complete autonomy and independence from the state and market, while others felt that they should have more of a social role as artists. In this sense, the practice of self-management was ruined by self-management itself. The Group of Six Artists also ceased their actions around 1981, and Dimitrijević and Trbuljak's working relationship disintegrated. Despite their aim to democratize the art process and enable the casual passerby to author a work of art, it was a dispute over authorship that ended their working relationship, with Dimitrijević insisting that Trbuljak not be credited as a co-author of the works they did together, as he was 'merely' the photographer.<sup>28</sup> While this does not necessarily mean that these practices were unsustainable, these examples perhaps point to the challenge of maintaining them, especially in light of the substantial changes that took place in Yugoslavia starting in the 1980s: the death of Tito, the breakup of the federation, and the subsequent wars.

While performance art opened up a 'zone of freedom' for artists in Eastern Europe, participatory strategies within that genre offered the possibility of contact with others, which would have been otherwise impossible in the context of Normalization-era Czechoslovakia, and challenging in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, where the establishment held sway over artistic production. Whether the artists in question achieved their aims in establishing connections with others or expanding the

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<sup>28</sup> While I did not speak with the artist about this situation, Ana Peraica mentions the legal action she was faced with if she included Pensioner Tihomir Simčić in *East Art Map*, without crediting Dimitrijević as the sole author. Ana Peraica, 'Merely the Photographer: the Photographer's Name in Socialist and Post-socialist Narrative based on the Artist Name', in Suzana Miljevska, ed., *The Renaming Machine* (Ljubljana, Slovenia: P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Institute, 2010), p. 255-56.

discourse of art is difficult to assess, considering the rapidly changing socio-political context in which they were working. A future study might consider further examples, for a broader comparison. The artistic duo KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek) engaged in their own forms of participatory art in the 1970s in Poland, following their engagement with activities in the studio of architect Oskar Hansen and poet Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz; Raivo Kelomees created a number of participatory events in the Art Department of Tartu University in the 1980s. A juxtaposition of these practices from another People's Republic and Satellite of the Soviet Union, and a Republic of the USSR – Estonia – would prove instructive, and add to the growing body of literature on participatory strategies by artists in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1960s. It is only through such comparative studies that we will arrive at a nuanced understanding of experimental art practices across the region, one that is too often excluded from the discourse on performance and participatory art.

### **Word Count**

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