

WE ARE LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES

Slovenian Art in the European Parliament

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The rapid political and social changes that radically altered relations between the individual countries and nations of Europe in the last decade of the previous century have changed the way in which the traditions of individual peripheral cultural environments and the expressions of their contemporary artistic productions are received. The East of the continent at the time found itself facing a paradoxical situation, as the imposed ideological framework, which for decades after the second world war had not only limited the radicalism of avant-garde aspirations in art but also paralysed any exclusivity of national self-confidence, sought to free itself by stressing its own cultural identity with which it could enter the democratic space of an avowed European dialogue of diversity. On the other hand, to keep up with current events in art it had to join the dominant stream of all-encompassing globalisation, which consciously rejected narrow national frameworks since, by default, it denied the importance of the geographic provenance of artistic practice.

Throughout the period following the second world war, and particularly since the end of the sixties, the situation in Slovenia was somewhat different from

that in the other so-called 'real socialist' countries. The more avant-garde practices were not forced underground, made illicit; open borders allowed for a normal flow of information and people, and the somewhat lower standard of living than in the West was not an obstacle to artists travelling to the arts centres of Europe and the United States, where they experienced new initiatives first hand. Nevertheless, the organisation of institutional culture on a formal level established such stringent, generally applicable rules that at least those established artists who could count on financial support from the state were, like it or not, subordinated, and over the years they developed a kind of self-censorship of which they themselves were not even aware. Socialist egalitarianism – the concept of *uravnilovka* – meant that the importance of individual artists was reduced to a level at which the mass creations of hobby artists were supported in the same way as ground-breaking works by the most talented. At the same time, the lack of scope for private initiative prevented any attempt to develop a market for artworks, meaning that creators were kept dependent on crumbs from the state cake. In such unstimulating conditions the great majority of artists drowned in mediocrity and a manufactured pose of 'auto-reflective' fine-art poetics, mostly camouflaged in modernist painterly and sculptural works, in which they took pleasure in the self-sustaining 'internal fine art' of their products, and any

extended context of artistic activity, for instance in a dialogue with the state of affairs in society that was characteristic of Slovenian writers and authors, simply did not exist. Slovenian modernist art, particularly painting in the second half of the 20th century, was therefore characterised by a formalism in which learning about (and analysing) the issues involved in the arts took place as a process, from one painting to the next, wherein continuity of presentation was more prominent than conflict. Such images were more additive collections of elegant solutions than expressions of existential experience.

In parallel with the stubborn modernism that, at the turn of the millennium, was still at the forefront in works exhibited right across the region, the Slovenian fine-arts scene since the turn of the century, as elsewhere in the world, has been marked by the breakthrough of new technologies. Artists of the younger generation saw potential in new media for a transnational and global means of communication through which they could elegantly reach beyond the borders of the actual and imagined smallness of their own environment at the edge of events taking place in the major centres. At the same time, there no longer seemed to be a close link between art and history. The logic of an extensive time category that emerged from the chronology of history ceded place to an intensive, accelerated world of images. The rushing fortissimo of the temporal ordering of pictorial

impressions led to a reorganisation of day-to-day life at every level: perhaps in reality we entered another revolutionary epoch of re-evaluating the basic conceptual models in the development of civilisation, as happened in the history of culture, for example, with the radical shifts in our understanding of the world that occurred during the Renaissance.

Suddenly the real world and our perceptions of it no longer fully coincided. Virtual worlds with three-dimensional complexities were inserted between them. The dynamic contemporaneity of a picture on screen and a rapid series of images interactively stimulates all the senses and transcends the ability of human perception and human reflexes, controlled in relationships of safe, rational distance. To plunge interactively into parallel electronic worlds is to highlight the experience of an 'aesthetic' hallucination of (some kind of) reality. The phantasmatic content of images has become redundant, as the confrontation between reality and fiction simply no longer exists. The cool universe of digitality has absorbed the world of metaphor and metonymy. The principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle just as over the principle of pleasure, wrote the great guru of postmodernism Jean Baudrillard in the late 1980s, and modern painting and art expression have in general had to adapt to that.

If we recognise the time at the end of the second decade of the 21st century in the field of culture and art as 'metamodernism', then in painting we inevitably encounter the emergence of a new figural art characterised not only by the social and political context of contemporary art but also by a sensitivity in terms of the precious facture of the painted image, which sublimely explores the path to new utopias of the (uncertain) future. The works of the authors we have chosen for the presentation of Slovenian art in the European Parliament's gallery certainly fall within this framework, as they clearly show the way in which painting today is seeking its modern form in conflict between the visual codes of the mass media and the subjectivity of painterly expression. The stroke of the paintbrush and its trace are the factors that return the digital, virtual status of the image in the modern information age to the haptic area of the physical presence of both the creator's and the viewer's body. Suggestive images on canvas therefore convincingly answer the question of the death or survival of painting, the relationship between the original and its copy, and the position of the creator in today's world when faced with the relentless dictates of the mass media and its tools of petty, insipid mass culture and the dominance of digitally generated images in everyday life.

At the same time it is about something more: with the arts and culture regaining their social and wider societal context,

now is the time for the reopening of a space for critical reflection on the state of affairs. Again it is the role of the artist to reveal the twisted, shocking phenomena of the modern world and to be an exposed sensor for the awakened collective consciousness of humanity. This selection of specific works emphasising 'living in interesting times' (the title is an intentional paraphrase of the last Venice Art Biennale in 2019, by Ralph Rugoff) features painters of the younger and middle generation of Slovenian artists, sculptor Lujo Vodopivec and photographers Uroš Abram and Herman Pivk, as well as the works of six Slovenian artists which are already part of the European Parliament's contemporary art collection.

