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Artistic Freedom under the Auspices of the Institution - the example of the Student Centre Gallery in the period between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s



Abstract

The author discusses the political and social context that made progressive and critical art practices possible in the communist Yugoslavia at the turbulent end of the 1960s.

Concentrating on the example of Student Center and SC Gallery in Zagreb, one of the most important venues for the beginnings of conceptual art in Croatia, Kiš gives an overview of the conditions that influenced the development of critical art thought during the years when criticism was not welcome in most countries with communist regime. These conditions include political decisions that lead to open cultural policies and the institutional financing of cultural projects which enabled a number of individuals to make use of these opportunities and create the "space" for new art practices in Croatia. A special emphasis is given to cultural connections with Italy as a showcase for intercultural collaboration with Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s.



The wind of politics

The period of the second half of the Sixties was marked in the world by a string of political and social events that were also reflected in the artistic practice of the time. The student agitations in Europe in 1968 marked both political and cultural trends. At the end of the Sixties, national awareness was aroused in Croatia, on the whole prompted by the manifest inequalities of the republics in Yugoslavia. Cultural and political centralisation, insufficient independence in self-management and a number of other grievances defined events in Yugoslavia at the end of the '60s. The

happenings of 1971, the leading figures in which were students and young Croatian intellectuals, are often cited as the culmination of it all.

But looking at the events in a context in which Yugoslavia was a country that was often put forward as an example of a communist state that nevertheless had open borders and a developed market, a kind of bridge linking West and East, a country that was also one of the main voices in the Non-Aligned Movement, not everything was so black. It was this openness and these influences that opened up the way for a kind of art that was unknown in the countries of the Soviet bloc. As Tvrtko Jakovina says in his article giving a survey of the basic political events from the end of the forties to the Seventies and their influence on the arts:

The triple orientation was not always to the liking of either the eastern or the western partners. It led to misunderstanding but also opened this poor and marginal country to distant worlds and pushed its citizens and artists - if they wanted to and were deemed unexceptionable by the regime - to get to know the world, to gain something from it and have their voice heard (Jakovina 2012, p. 39).

Can we determine in any more detail how the arts policies of the time were managed? The attitudes that created it made up a network of complex economic and social relationships, but in the case of Zagreb and Croatia it is certainly necessary to bring out the unique position of Croatia within Yugoslavia and Yugoslavia as against other communist countries. It is very important to bear this context in mind exploring the relations of Croatia with other countries, in this case with Italy, for the situation was delicate, and the guidelines of foreign policy and the recommended cultural policies were very often determined by the nuances by which the leadership wanted to draw attention to differences from or similarities with certain undesirable elements.

Yugoslavia had defined its own way in 1948 when it deliberately refused any subservience to the rigorous policy of the USSR and, in order to show its difference, or otherness, turned westwards, while still retaining its basically communist orientation. Introduction of the ideas of self-managing socialism, social ownership and the market economy, which were meant, among other things, to show the departure from Stalinist politics, resulted in a series of reforms that attempted to rectify the errors produced by putting theory into practice. But liberal socialism and orientation to the west created a particular climate that influenced the direction and development of both official cultural policy and the less official artistic production that at the end of the 60s and in the early 70s were significant in European terms. It is essential to make not only an European but also an Eastern bloc comparison, for

there they had far fewer freedoms and many more and greater oppressions and control, making the art of Yugoslavia and Croatia in many ways distinct from the art of all the countries that were more tightly connected with the Society Union. This emphasis is made because of the frequent equalizing of Croatian art with that of the then Eastern bloc. When superficial and simplified divisions into East and West are made, quite often necessary for confirming and emphasising certain differences and theses of events and accompanying publications, no accurate complete or truthful image of the particular - artistic - domain of Croatia within the former Yugoslavia is obtained. For more about this problem see (Kolešnik 2010). Freedom of movement enabled cultural and friendly links to be kept up, trends in society and politics to be monitored, and the unhindered import of professional and/or popular books and magazines, music and films, which gave those citizens who were interested a good insight into the production and events of the West. At the same time, cultural policy that derived from the specific situation of the Yugoslavia of that time emphasised the desirability of working with individual countries and in its funding actually encouraged international activity. It was this kind of situation that differentiated Yugoslavia from the countries of the Eastern bloc and facilitated a number of international events that made an impact on the artistic production of the time.

In spite of certain good features and the outstanding economic growth of the country, decentralisation and democratisation in Yugoslavia unfolded without any plan or knowledge, and imports, one of the products of market socialism, outstripped the mentioned growth (Estrin 1991).

The ideal picture was vitiated by the constant discrepancy between the advocates of centralisation and those of a more liberal approach to politics and the political system, by a shortage of jobs that resulted in numerous people going off to do temporary work abroad, and within the republics there was a constant and smouldering series of national discontents started off by the inequalities within the country. In 1971, the students tried to disentangle the web of discontents. This kind of bipolar situation affected the development of new artistic practices, too; although they were not in direct conflict with politics, they did draw some of their critical viewpoints from the tense historical situation in which they were generated.

The Student Centre in Zagreb - an unplanned alternative cultural platform

An introduction setting out the broader context is necessary to define the framework of artistic practices of the turn of the Sixties and Seventies, characterised by the critical examination of the value categories of modernism. The Student Centre Gallery - also known as SC Gallery - which was part of the Student Centre - a fact

that was not irrelevant to the development of these phenomena in the arts-, was a platform for the experimentations of the younger generation of artists connected to the development of conceptual and video art in Croatia. At the same time, the programmatic openness can be seen in the collaboration with many institutions in Yugoslavia at that time and with the essential art centres in Western Europe, the emphasis being mainly placed on young artists.

Student centres were founded in most of the principal cities of the Yugoslav republics, as Belgrade, Ljubljana, Zagreb and Sarajevo, and were various in their organisations and functions. The Zagreb centre was founded to improve the standard of living of students, including lodging and food, as well as concern for the quality of the social and cultural aspects of student life, as well as of young people in general.

The student centre would be not only the exclusive centre of university youth of Zagreb but a social centre for the young of the city of Zagreb and its surroundings. Premises are required for a vigorous political, social, cultural and sporting life for students (Ćorić 2007, p. 71).

From this quotation one can read off the basic postulates and aspirations of the society of the time, in which there was concern for *mens sana in corpore sano*, this concern not being limited to the student - i.e. bourgeois - population, but extending to the wider youthful - or socialist - population, which could look after the totality of its needs in such a centre. Or as Miško Šuvaković says: «in which the youth could be looked after, and accordingly kept isolated» (Prelom kolektiv n.d.).

In Zagreb the Student Centre was founded as part of the University in 1957 in the area of the eastern part of what used to be the Zagrebački zbor or Zagreb Fair, with considerable construction in pavilions of the 1930s, some of them which had outstanding architectural value. Some of them had deteriorated in the course of time, or been knocked down, but the pavilion backbone was left, only changing some of its characteristics because of the changes of purpose. Thus for example the Italian pavilion by the architect Dante Petroni later became a small theatre, and later the Teatar &TD, which is still here today. In the Sixties there was the cinema, and in 1961 the exhibition venue called Galerija SC - i.e. SC Gallery - was opened. A little later came the MM multimedia centre, in the space of the previous ABK room, for civil defence education. For years this had been home to the well-known (student) discussion programme *5 past 8*. And in addition to everything there had been the Music Salon. For several reasons it is crucial that all these premises were working within the same institution: organisational tasks and labour were thus divided and

arts production was thus logistically and financially facilitated. They also linked and shared their audiences.

One more specific feature of the arts programme of the SC was the way in which it was funded, which enabled it a privileged position and to some extent independence. The student employment agency was set up to help students find part-time jobs and provided them a constant source of income. The state took a smaller tax share, and employers found it in their interest to employ the students. After the agency was annexed to the SC, a certain amount of the commission went off to the SC, and was partially used for the funding of arts programmes.

From smashed environment to institutional criticism

The SC Gallery was founded in 1961, but really took off in the second part of the 60s when Želimir Koščević took over the leadership. From the very beginnings, the core of the programme consisted of exhibitions by young artists. But a mere glance at a list of the exhibitions from the beginning of the SC Gallery, makes clear a distinction that is very crucial to this article. Up to 1966 there was no foreign component at all; but with the new manager, there was a new kind of collaborative venture, and almost every year at least one show by foreign artists was put on (Koščević 1975). The gallery was a platform for experiments and yet the programme was not exclusive, and collaboration with artists who embodied the modernist poetics still went on.

We can pick out here a few examples that from this distance in time can demonstrate the importance of this venue for the development of contemporary work in art. Although it was, in the opinion of the then manager, insufficiently covered and accepted by the media and a certain part of the public (Koščević 1975), the programme was actually relatively well attended; parts of the critical and reviewing profession vigorously kept up with and supported it. One of the most vivid examples of “mass misunderstanding” was the exhibition called *Hit Parade*, at which environments were shown by Mladen Galić, Ante Kuduz, Ljerka Šibenik and Miroslav Šutej. In the preface to the catalogue, Koščević defined them as a «generation that had finally managed to break up the serried front line of Lyrical Abstraction, Informel, Art Brut and Surrealism, artistic paths and possibilities that at a certain moment in history had played a crucial role, but which over the course of time have not only undergone profanation but have also, here and now, become a conservative force preventing the influx of new fresh ideas» (Koščević 1967, p. 2). Also stated is that these are experiments that, although here shown in a gallery setting, are in fact intended to be produced within the urban structure (Koščević 1975). This is an

example of one of the first attempts to show «environments» (Denegri 1969) in Yugoslavia; however, it will remain in the memory as a show that was destroyed on the opening day. Because it was announced in the press as a happening, some of the audience considered this an open invitation and totally devastated the works shown. After a string of accusations against the organisers, who were accused of having organised this themselves, came a denial of any such intention. The gallery got publicity indeed [Fig. 1], but not the kind the manager had hoped for this exhibition, although it still involved artists of a more traditional idiom, seemed to have opened up the path for the environments of the new generation of artists that were to follow hard upon its heels.



Fig. 1: [There, look. In this country visual art fashions have got such an impetus that even the opening of an ordinary pub has to be accompanied by a happening.] (Reisinger 1970).

In October 1968, the SCG started to issue its *Novine* the first and foremost function of which was to replace the classical catalogue. But the contents were open and fluid, and changed according to need. Thus *Novine* presented on the Croatian art scene a unique phenomenon in the years it came out. At the SC level it unified various contents and told readers about theatrical or other performances, concerts and similar events. Sometimes it was a source of information about - mainly artistic - events inside and outside the country, sometimes it was itself an artistic artefact, an advertising site, a place for comic strips, for recent translations of theoretical texts, to disseminate new ideas outside just a select small group of people. *Novine* came out at regular intervals up to 1973, a bit more seldom in 1974 and 1975. Then it folded completely. The print order varied, from 400 to 1000. The paper can be seen as part of the outstanding project [Digitizing Ideas](#) in digital form.

It was actually in *Novine* in 1969 that a call for proposals was announced that in that year gathered together the younger generation of artists. The aim was to encourage all research into the visual, sculptural or any other areas and thus to enable the realisation of progressive ideas related to these domains and it was for artists under 27 (Koščević 1969). Although the artists mentioned were still students of the Academy of Fine Arts, their installations indicated critical concentration and the pronounced individual artistic idioms gathered around the SC Gallery. A kind of break with tradition was seen in the influences that were sought outside the traditional and the local, and the artistic too, which differentiated this group from the environments shown in the same venue two years before. Sanja Iveković, exhibiting densely arrayed bent tubes, was inspired by, among other things, the London underground railway, by the music of Cage and the microscopic appearance of viruses, and the spatial drawing was animated only by the movement of the observer through the work [Fig. 2]. The visitor was invited to action. In the installation of Slobodan Dimitrijević *Suma 680* [Fig. 3], the number of tin cans from the title was arranged around the floor of the gallery. The exhibitions of Dalibor Martinis, Jagoda Kaloper, Dejan Jokanović and Janez Sangolin included factory made materials as well. Gorki Žuvela showed polychrome concrete cylinders, the weight of which was emphasised by the light plastic tube that those attending walked in along the city streets and thus entered into a dialogue with open space. All these exhibitions were produced in the 1969/1970 season.

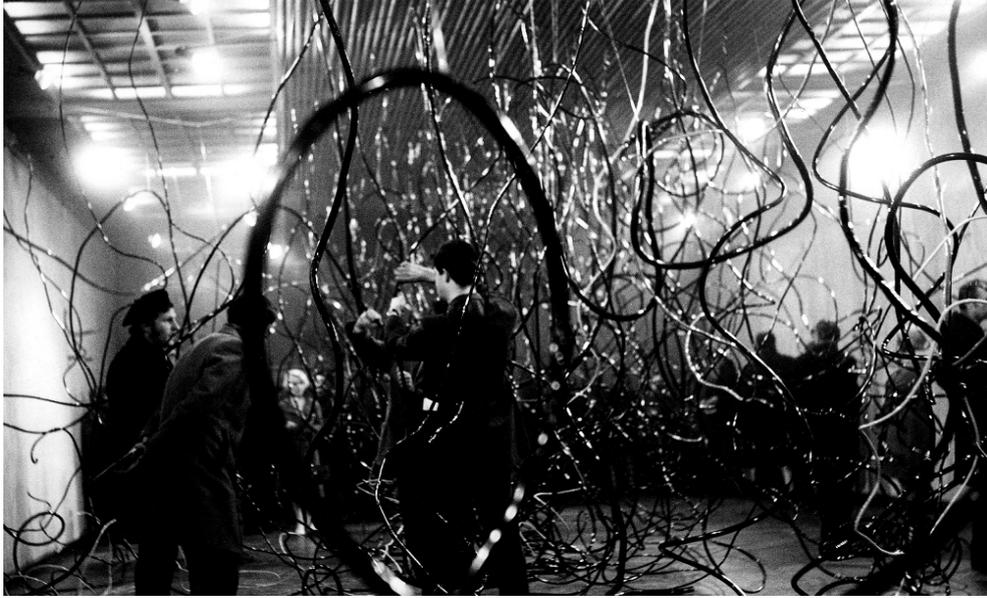


Fig. 2: Sanja Iveković. Photo by Vladimir Jakolić.

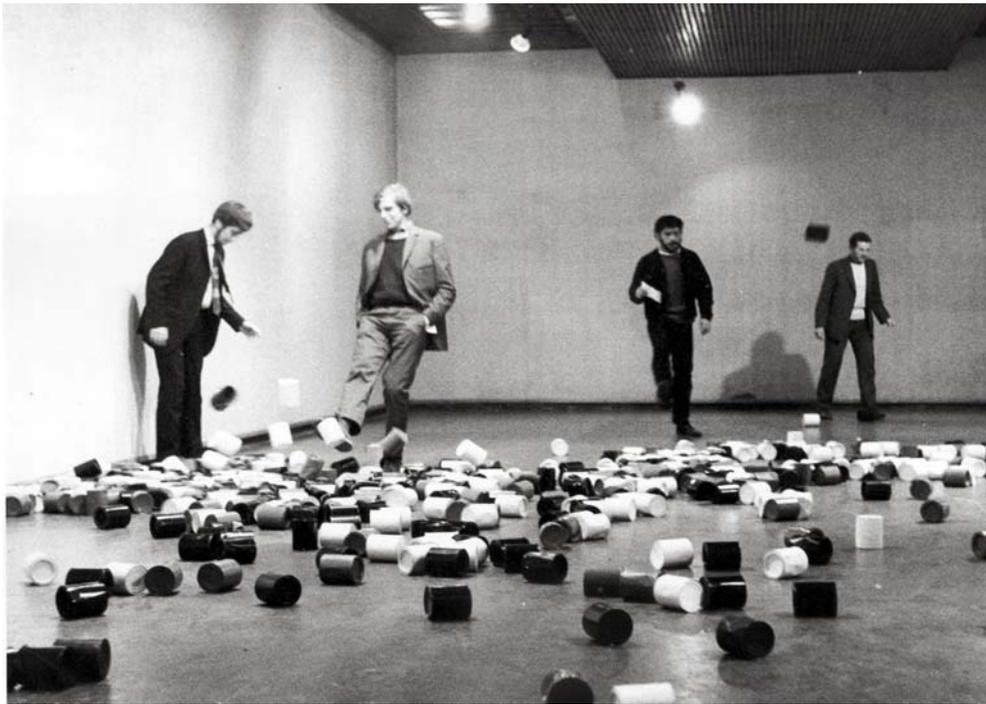


Fig. 3: Slobodan Dimitrijević. Photo by Vladimir Jakolić.



Fig. 4: Goran Trbuljak.

One more individual exhibition of 1971 marked the beginning of the action of one of the most essential artists of the critical conceptual current in Croatia. In the SC Gallery Goran Trbuljak exhibited just a poster [fig.4] on which was written the sentence «I do not wish to show anything new and original» (Trbuljak 1971).

This was the beginning of the composition of a series of short declarations that in 1981 culminated with a retrospective in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade; this work united the texts of three exhibitions: «I do not wish to show anything new and original, the fact that someone has been given the ability to have an exhibition is more important than what will be shown at this exhibition; with this exhibition I maintain continuity in my work» (Trbuljak 1981).

The ideas that inscribed this venue on the map of considerable European spaces in which the New Art Practice came into being are related to curatorial interventions that even then were getting into open debate with the principles of conceptual art. The invitation to the *Exhibition of Women and Men - a Didactic*

Exhibition [Fig. 5] contained the sentence «Hegelian scepticism and the phrase about the end of art will undergo, in this place, *hic et nunc*, a defeat» (Anon 1969). The exhibition played with the relations of the institution of power and tested out the proposition about the essence of art, totally dematerialising the exhibit and doing away with the borders between the look and what was looked at. With the act of displaying unopened consignments at the exhibition *Postal Consignments*, an exhibition of the mail-art section of the Paris Biennial, the intervention of the curator shifted from dialogue to criticism and indeed into an artistic intervention that negated the imagined essence of the actual concept of what was supposed to be displayed. In her article Ivana Bago, using precisely these examples, ascertains the roles of curators connected with the student cultural centres and says that «these examples represent the radical dematerialisation, subversion and politicisation of the exhibition format, led by a self-critical and self-reflexive awareness of the role of the curator (gallery manager) in the system of contemporary art and society» (Bago 2012, p. 238). Along with interventions, first of all in urban space, for example, in *Action Total* (with a draft decree about the democratisation of art) and later in outdoor space, for example *Gulliver in Wonderland in Korana Park*, the curatorial concept of the Gallery was determined, as we have already stated, by vigorous collaborative efforts.



Fig. 5: *Exhibition of Women and Men - a Didactic Exhibition*.
Photo by Petar Dabac.

Italy - Croatia, cultural exchange with a personal note

Apart from a social and political climate that permitted the import of foreign cultural products, these were actually produced with collaboration with similar institutions in Zagreb, Croatia and Yugoslavia. A number of exhibitions of foreign artists were actually touring shows, most often going from Ljubljana to Zagreb and Belgrade. But this kind of work does not say anything about the official cultural policy helping such exchanges, more about the good organisation by the individuals who ran certain institutions. The SC Gallery exchange programme did not unfold in only Yugoslav dimensions, but was put into practice with institutions in Klagenfurt, Graz, Vienna, Venice, Trieste and Berlin and so on.

One such travelling show was the exhibition of the 3rd International Painting Week. Exhibiting at and taking part in this show were Beppe Devalle, Wolfgang Ernst, Marcello Morandini, Štefan Planinc, Franz Ringel, Drago Kalajić, Nives Kavurić-Kurtović, Romano Perusini, Klaus Reisinger and Erwin Thorn. Although incommensurate in importance with other cultural events such as the *New Tendencies*, this exhibition is a wonderful example of international collaboration that took place without hindrance with other European centres and inside Yugoslavia. In the catalogue, Katarina Ambrozić said: «An exhibition that shows the works of these artists created in a colony, has apart from an artistic another specific characteristic: travelling it links the centre from which its participants came. Thus the show was presented at Graz and Vienna, then Ljubljana and Zagreb, and from Belgrade left for Venice and Rome» (Ambrozić 1969, p. 3). For the SC Gallery, however, more important example of collaboration was with the Venetian Galleria del Cavallino. In December 1969 an exhibition of Romano Perusini was held, at which Perusini - born in Udine in 1939 - was represented by gallery founder Carlo Cardazzo. At the time of the exhibition in Zagreb, Perusini was working in Venice, and belonged among those Venetian artists who, through their own research, were breaking with the tradition of *Informel* (*Art at the Crossroads: Venice in the Sixties*, 2008). Before Zagreb, it was shown in Ljubljana, in the Modern Gallery. Yet from the Croatian perspective, more important perhaps is what would follow as a continuation of the joint work. From letters related to the organisation of exhibitions between the SCG and other institutions it can be seen that Koščević always insisted on reciprocity and off his own bat proposed certain artists whose work was connected to the SC Gallery. One of the proposals of Želimir Koščević was accepted, and in 1970 the Gallery del Cavallino mounted an individual exhibition of Ljerka Šibenik. *Novine* came out on this occasion in Italian [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6: 3rd International Painting Week, works of Marcello Morandini.

The 1972 season of the SC Gallery was opened by a group of artists from Trieste: Mario Baldan, Emanuela Marassi, Nino Perizzi, Ljuba Štolfa and Nane Zavagno [Fig. 7]. But more than the list of artists, not all of whom were from Trieste, or even in the same age group, or had any common characteristic in their idioms, what was really essential was that the exhibition was organised by L*Asterisco, [Fig. 8] «a group of young critics and artists whose work connected them with Trieste» (Koščević 1972, p. 1). This group, the activity of which was not limited to the visual arts but included theatrical, film and literary work, was vigorously engaged on the connections among artists in the region. Perhaps it was most important because of its publications, which made a great contribution to the documenting of artistic events from the beginnings of the work of the group in the Sixties, all the way up to the nineties. With this exhibition, Koščević pointed out that the programme of exchanges with foreign galleries was regularly subsidised by the Socialist Republic of Croatia's Commission for Foreign Relations. Commission consistently gave whatever was required for exchange exhibitions, which can be seen in the documents in The Fine Arts Archives, covering all the costs of production, including posters, invites, papers, transport, royalties and so on.



Fig. 7: *Novine*, n. 23.

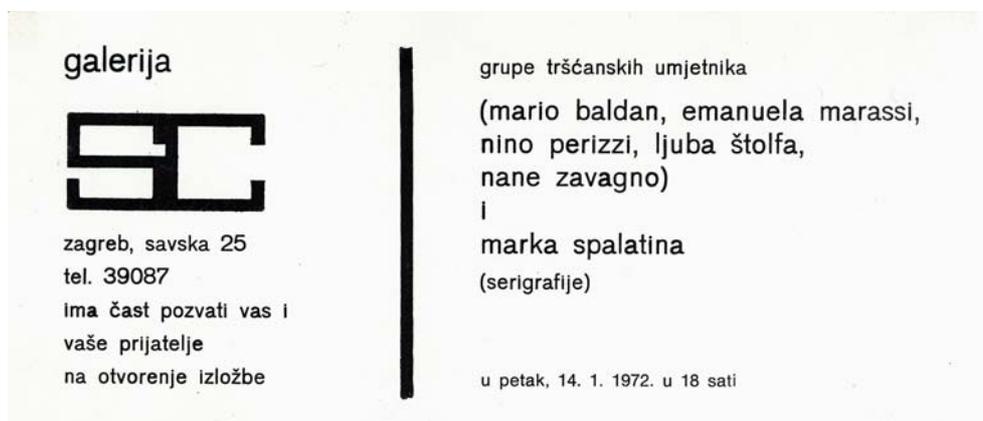


Fig. 8: Invitation to the exhibition of artists Mario Baldan, Emanuela Marassi, Nino Perizzi, Ljuba Štolfa and Nane Zavagno, SC Gallery, 1972.

Such examples tend to confirm the proposition about a cultural policy that emphasised and encouraged collaboration to show its own openness and to distinguish itself from other much more closed communist milieus. Along with the great international events, of which at that time the New Tendencies certainly has to be pointed out, some of the work went on more quietly and less obtrusively, most of all thanks to the personal commitment of individuals. In this case, the manager of the

SC Gallery took on an essential curatorial role of defining the programme with his own ideas and initiatives, making use of the opportunities afforded him by the state and other institutional mechanisms. And through these institutions, an art scene was being created the programme of which was to constitute a criticism of these very institutions and their power systems.



Fig. 9: L*Asterisco, photo by Petar Dabac.

The author

Marta Kiš is a curator and works as the Head of the Visual Arts Department in Zagreb Student Centre. As a curator she is interested in gaps between theory and the practice in which art and society function. She initiated numerous projects, such as: *BorderLess*, *The Upcoming... Artenative*. She has curated various solo and group international exhibitions, some of which are: *Surrogate of Reality – Half a Century of Croatian Animation* (w. Karla Pudar); *Old, Bald and Still Untalented* by Goran Trbuljak, *Exhibition Known as Boys & Their Toys* (w. Lala Raščić). She is currently doing doctoral research on the subject of conceptual art in Eastern European countries and its connection with the student culture from the 1970's to present day.

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