

I CREATE – “ICHBILD” – SENSE AND EXPRESSION

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Prologue

Even before graduating from art history at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, I landed a job at the Regional Museum in Ptuj in late 1986 due to a combination of circumstances. Until then, I only knew the town from school trips, and when I thought of it, I only pictured the well-known and overused view as seen across the Drava River – an attractive but “soulless” scenery empty of real life. For the seven months that I spent in the old-world environment of the oldest Slovenian town cloaked in the noble fabric of heritage that cannot be found anywhere else in Slovenia, and before I returned to my native Slovenj Gradec due to new circumstances, I, in addition to the one hundred and one room in the castle and monastery, was discovering all the nooks and crannies of old Ptuj, which seemed to me like an unusual mixture of hearing the (small-town) middle class, the echoes of the glorious past frozen in time, and the simple, rural mark of Haloze's primordiality, which I also recognized in the shop assistant behind the counter always greeting anyone who entered the small shop from the street, even if she was already tending to other customers. Without my family, who stayed in Koroška, I had enough time in the afternoons after work (if Capi and I didn't end up in one of the pubs) to explore alleys and courtyards and to stroll between the picturesque and impressive details on the old houses with Curk's guidebook in hand (or just following the heart). Half a year of getting to know the old town center and the surrounding promenades was perhaps just enough for my impressions to form into an idea of the town, which after so many years I can now keep re-examining with just the right amount of nostalgia to keep it untarnished, while at the same time, with each new visit, staying focused on Ptuj as it is today.

Inventura

“Genius loci” remains an important criterion for evaluating the power of the expression of each individual work of art, series or opus, even in the modern cosmopolitan flow of ideas in the globally interconnected world (or precisely because of it). The essence of artistic creation always lies in the journey – in the metaphorical sense of crossing (local) frontiers – but it is also exciting when it shows the intermediate (especially spiritual) spaces of life in the local environment beyond the perspective of an easy-to-please tourist or in a way that remains hidden even to the locals, who, due to familiarity, are no longer able to see the precious peculiarities. The aim of comprehensive retrospective exhibitions such as this one is nevertheless primarily pragmatic: to find and show the scope of creative potential in an environment institutionally connected in one way or another, which in Ptuj, as far as contemporary visual art is concerned, flourished with astonishing energy with the Art Stays festival, the Fo.Vi Gallery in Strnišče and, five years ago, with the opening of the Ptuj City Gallery, which soon became one of the most successful and ambitious art exhibition venues in Slovenia (in the last two years, the Prešeren Fund award for visual art was both times awarded for retrospective exhibitions in this gallery!).

Although the exhibition, like its predecessor five years ago, is entitled *Inventura*, we in no way wanted it to be mere stocktaking or an inventory of the works of artists who either come from Ptuj or its surroundings, or live and work here. Artists submitted their works to the gallery's tender or call,

and merely by responding to it expressed their attachment to this environment, to which they are connected in one way or another – or not at all; in the end, this was not crucial for evaluating their works, the more important (subjective, of course) selection criteria were the innovative approach and the passion of the artistic expression, which also prevailed over the criteria of technical adequacy and the linear refinement focused on traditional canons.

In the turbulent artistic chaos of the reign of the so called new media and expanded spaces for visual practices, the painter's studio, drenched in the smell of oil paints and dammar, the graphic artist's studio with a manual press for intaglio printing, and the sculptor's studio, with floor covered in carved shards, seem like peculiar, time-frozen manufactories from bygone times, when we still believed, without any irony, that art begins in the heart, and less in the mind, and translates through the eye and hand. Groups of “traditionalist” artists in our country and in the world, even at this moment, reveal the inexhaustible power of the direct painting or sculptural invention and creative joy, when they return again and again to the fundamental elements of artistic expression, the contour and color, the active dialogue between the line drawing and color field that gives birth to the noble glow of art and underlines the lyrical power. However, the undreamt-of development of technology and sophisticated (multi)media tools has radically changed the way we perceive the world, and the aesthetics of shock and the intrusive aggressiveness of visual messages have turned reality into a chaotic succession of images, when the sense of the boundary between the real and imaginary is getting lost even in simple everyday life. But the exciting, clearly visible desire and distinct stroke of the creator, with which the existential personal (author's) experience is emblematically imprinted in the work of art, have, even in the age of virtual, elusive, disappearing and intangible electronic images, which surround us everywhere and all the time on ever-larger and ever more intrusive screens, have remained the conveyers of the meaning that most convincingly reveals the deepest layers of human understanding of the world. Only that the contour and color surface, which once produced the noble glow of art and its lyrical power, are now more than ever being replaced by an unconventional and engaged idea, the kind that, in terms of the modern vision of the world, emerges with the help of the subtle nature of digital tools.

The conditions of modernist art practices, which now, at the beginning of the second decade of the new era after the turn of the millennium, seem to have been definitively exceeded, provided the individual stance of the artist with the potential of institutional exclusivity, which was, and to some extent still is, lucratively and successfully exploited as “hortus conclusus” of creative autonomy and inward-looking autopoetics. The conceptual orientation of contemporary intermedia art practices has brought the artist, whether we like it or not, to the point of reflection on their mission: either to stay in the rigid and closed system of modernist formalism, or use the expanded space of interactive and interdisciplinary communication to open up a space for all fundamental, and artistically transposed, of course, reflections on the omnipresent, emphatically hybrid, reproductive nature of the visual perception of the world. Regardless, it seems that there is still enough space for all options, which is, after all, also suggestively implied by this exhibition's heterogeneous nature.

The exhibition features works of thirty-two creators, which is perhaps also the spatial limit of the splendid exhibition space of the Ptuj City Gallery. If we were taking an inventory of the authors of the exhibited works, we would, regardless of some borderline practices, list eleven painters, six intermedia artists, five graphic artists, nine photographers and only one sculptor.

I.

Nature, even if it is only mental landscapes, sooner or later remains one of the central themes of the artistic observation of life, whether in monumental depictions of its power through the changes of perpetual decay and renewal, or simply in trivial fragments, exploring the fine line between the real and the metaphysical and trying to tackle the essential question of perception: how to convincingly interpret both, our perceptions and the mystery of the material as presented by the physical world surrounding us, through the senses.

JERNEJ FORBICI's (1980) nearly endless landscapes are imbued with a noble artistic structure and follow touch with a view that is broader than the recognition of the identity of the place and a descriptive depiction of the selected location. The romantic inspiration goes side-by-side with the awakened environmental conscience of humanity, insofar as it is already aware of the dangers threatening the planet, but the image is not a loud cry, but a subtly muted criticism of mankind's arrogant belief in its own greatness, while the role of the winner is reserved for the elusive and mysterious nature.

ANDREJ LAMUT's (1991) photo series with the title Mnemosis captures the idea of the world as an indivisible whole; in the cross-section of archetypal approach to civilizational traumas of passing and cessation, he tries to forge a bond with the mystical rituals of ancient shamans; the phantasmagorical images of the "life beyond", which is at the same time the life within, suggest a claustrophobic meta-reality, only a step away from a nightmare.

The viewfinder of STOJAN KERBLER's (1938) camera in his "portraits" of trees was chiefly focused on the dynamic of growth, as it is etched on the "emptiness" of the sky, and the expressive contours of solitary mountains ultimately also echo in my Carinthian ears through the phrase And what are people but wood from the title of the short story collection by our famous humanistic scholar dr. Franc Sušnik, where wood is a synonym for forest.

Images of a forest in an open, airy play of light and translucent shadows of organic budding, light as a breeze, also circulate in the works of MARICA VICARI (1979). Their allegorical dimension is emphasized by their monochromaticity, reminiscent of the phantasmatic flash behind closed eyes, when the negative of a momentary visual impression of the surroundings briefly remains on the retina deep in the eye.

The delicate images and forms, with which TAMARA RIMELE (1977) addresses us with coy secrecy, have been ruthlessly pushed to the edge of our consciousness by the modern age of pompous and shocking electronic images that perpetually slide across the screens and past our transfixed eyes. However, there are also sensitive listeners to the pulse of tiny hints of creation, who are still able to get lost in the primordial miracle of nature.

BLAŽ ROJS's (1995) collaged, seemingly unpretentious images spill over the pictorial plane as intuitive pictograms with fragmented details that are in some manner sensitively stalking art, acting as an intimate travel journal through the sensory labyrinths of the subconscious and the primal paths of initiation from the profane everyday life to the initially obscured and, pursuing goals beyond desire, ultimately radiant transcendental worlds, in which images are blurred and sounds die away.

The microcosm of ALJA KOŠAR's (1990) prints comes to life in the countless details of her depiction of grass blades and the carriers of nature's vitalistic buoyancy scattered in the wind, delicately etched and extracted from metal plate's smooth surface with countless tiny incisions, but always rounded into a convincing whole, which is subject to the effects of the refined, minimalist tuned artistry.

II.

In the so called "post-modern" era, there are still many artists who maintain an interest in exploring the pictorial plane and the media of painting and sculpture as such. They understand a painting and a statue as a thought-out image with a relationship to composition and color effects or as an object, in a manner of speaking. However, it is not true that the image on canvas and plastic sculpture are turning into a nostalgic relic of looking back into a bygone "golden age" of artistic creation, they are in fact a vital haven for those contemporary artists who still trust their artistic skills and creative instinct.

ANDREJ BOŽIČ's (1944) paintings in the manner of geometric, optical art (op art), are seemingly only designed to test the effect of the image on the human retina, yet it seems that they are also trying to convey an enigmatic deeper message, for which no words are needed, it suffices to sense it in its sublime dimension.

The purely optical, spectral flickering of a suggestive color glow characterizes BORIS FARIČ's (1974) photographic view, which penetrates with technical precision through the surface of the external appearance, to the phenomenology of matter itself.

The flow of light in the contrasting interplay of whiteness (cut sheets of paper) and blackness (shadows in the slits between the bundles of paper) in Bridget Riley's "op art manner" got a new, distinctively haptic dimension that puts BLAŽKA KRIŽAN's (1990) works in an exciting intermediate space between a print, painting and a three-dimensional object.

The spread-out abstract paintings of ALEKSANDER BREZLAN (1981), which we have chosen for this display, merely follow, without engaged messages, the reflections on how color and shape, and the light caught therein, define space, time and form, or the search for ways to combine all three into a single sensation, a single expression that is as direct as possible reflection of the physical contact with matter ... at the tips of the fingers or the brush.

GREGOR SAMASTUR's (1960) images, filled with sensual, lyrical artistic fluid, seem as a defense of the continuous resurrection of forms, their circulation and palpitation in intense material painting action. The colors blossom into each other like a palimpsestic interlacement of a meditative painting surface, where the eternal battle to preserve an aesthetically rounded artistic structure takes place.

Distinctive Kurent's masks, imprinted in the luxurious texture of JOŽE FOLTIN's (1944) consistently color-balanced compositions, have, over the years, merged into a single original iconic (proto) image of the local environment, which is adequately supported by his refined painting technique and a sense of decorative wholeness in his seemingly completely open strokes, which applies not only to the contours of archetypal figures, but also to the depictions of the old-world Haloze landscape.

In a time when we are tired of images of glowing human faces without existential depth, which flicker before our eyes every day like a monotonous gallery of characters on an endless social network parade, the stylized head outlined in BOJAN LUBAJ's (1957) painting with an expressive stroke seems almost like deliverance for an exhausted soul.

TOMAŽ PLAVEC's (1972) monumental sculptures – not so much in terms of their size as in their design – challenge the organic growth suggested by wood as the chosen material, as the expressive, repetitively processed parts and artistically refined modules that the sculptures are made of are realized in a thought-out structure that gives them a completely new dynamic and an inner life of their own.

III.

All art, not only fine art, is primarily a confession, and, in the search for the original inner strength, it is always, and in today's time perhaps even more intensely than ever, turned towards one's own intimacy and inspection of one's living experience in relation to the environment, recent or distant past, uncertain future, or even challenges that are self-reflexively established by the artistic practice.

After decades of a successful artistic journey, on which he listened to both, great stories that transcend an individual's existence, as well as introspective confrontations with the abilities of his own creative potential in reflecting the pure or metaphorically transformed artistic vision, DUŠAN KIRBIŠ (1953) still contemplatively questions the scope of his and any artistic mission, which, in the work selected for this retrospective group exhibition, he sublimated into the equivocal title "ICHBILD", which is difficult to translate unambiguously from German, and which we also used in the title to underline the fundamental meaning of this group presentation of artists and their individual works.

At the core of AJDA PODGORELEC's (2000) exciting digital photo-collages is a self-directed and inward-looking view, even if perhaps only as a self-reflexive experiment, which is generally one of the dominant trends in the youngest generation's artistic practices, especially in terms of the currently prevailing self-representational "post-feminism".

TJAŠA ČUŠ (1987) imaginatively plays with clichéd phrases and paraphrases that are associated with the warmth of nostalgic childhood memories, but from a more distant perspective suddenly become expressions of a politically incorrect language.

MARTINA KOROŠEC's (1984) edition of photocopied images is even more self-reflective, although these photos were created without direct framing and in this sense can be compared to the print of a matrix, where the matrix is the body itself.

ALEKSANDRA FARAZIN's (1981) hypertrophied "pop art" images seem to hybridize the experience and knowledge of the representational models of two worlds, the realistically rigid western and the idealistically ornamented eastern, bringing to mind the well-known sentence of the famous New York art critic Clement Greenberg about the fall of figurative painting: "The alternative to abstraction is not Michelangelo but kitsch" however Greenberg was a man of the past century.

Until recently, comic book art was considered trashy, if not kitschy. The publishing of excellently designed graphic novels, as well as traditional comics has taken a giant step forward in recent years, also in Slovenia ... partly due to DORA BENČEVIČ (2000) and her first bestseller *Dekle, ki se ni bala medvedov*/*The Girl Who Was Not Afraid of Bears*, and all her subsequent works, including *Podnajemniki*/*Subtenants*.

SANDRA POŽUN's (1972) disappearing images of female nudes in dystopian post-industrial environments are not just a classic photographic motif, repeated countless times, as it seems that the images were captured with an inner, distinctly subjective eye.

GABRIJEL BERLIČ's (1946) spatial installation is an intimate, albeit suggestive protest against war and a rare directly socially engaged work in this exhibition, which however does not contemplate the political aspects of the war (in Ukraine), but, in the sense of a universal message, focuses on its traumatic echo reflected in the destinies of individuals and the collective consciousness of people.

IV.

The consumerist logic of late capitalism, which so fully controls our lives, poses a very special challenge to artistic reflection, which does not necessarily contain a critical stance. The relationship between art and consumerism is therefore always complicated, not only in terms of the contradictions postulated by evaluating the so-called popular culture, but also within the framework of that "higher", critically acclaimed art. We have found ourselves in a situation where the real world and our ideas about it suddenly no longer match completely, as the elusive and indeterminable virtual worlds have come between them. The learned media images are firmly rooted in the contemporary social context, although they often playfully resist any interpretation of dominant

cultural values, as they neither celebrate nor condemn them. They just pass before our eyes and sooner or later compact into an iconic metaphor of our time.

METKA ZUPANIČ's (1997) collages unequivocally reflect how media images are stored in our subconscious, from where they regulate our everyday life. War is a universal evil that we are aware of all the time, but seem to not be taking seriously enough, since after all the experience of the devastating great wars of the past century, at the beginning of the second decade of the new century, we are still absurdly wondering whether war is just a regression or a new form of the 21st-century mass culture.

Images of war are a constant in the media landscape, as are images of poverty and loneliness, which in urban centers can usually be found only a step away from the glamour and splendor. TANJA VERLAK's (1979) photo and its formulation do not need a commentary.

Media images are often terrifying even when their purpose is to evoke positive emotions, so the artist usually has no choice but to wittily ironize them and explore (expose) the difference between the private and public through special details. MITO GEGIČ (1982) halts these images, adds ambiguous captions and reflectively offers contemplation on their nature and meaning.

The detailed photo portraits of strangers, faceless people, go even a step further, as DAVORIN CIGLAR MILOSAVLJEVIĆ (1982) created them using a computer algorithm, shaking the faith in the status of an image, which is supposed to reflect reality ... either tangible reality in the physical world or even the one that arises in our imagination.

Looking through the prism of "fake images" (that go side-by-side with "fake" news), even KLARISA SIPOŠ's (1991) hyper-realistic portraits of cats are suddenly suspended in an empty space, because after being daily bombarded with "reshaped" pictures of pets on Facebook, we almost no longer believe the images "at the touch" (of the brush).

A major part of ideas about the spaces where we live our lives is convincingly becoming more and more reliant on constructed digital models, from which, as in ALEKSANDER ŠTUMBERGER's (2001) prints, life is draining.

Perhaps it is a paradox that today the analogue life is more convincing on theatre stages, which once represented a dream, and where costume and visual designers, such as master STANKA VAUDA BENČEVIČ (1970) have the power in their hands.

The portraits of the giants of world photography: Helmut Newton, Lee Miller, Les Krims, etc., captured by one of Ptuj's long-time and greatest cultural ambassadors abroad, BRANKO LENART

(1948), can also be a metaphor for Ptuj's openness to the international ... after all, this is about the tradition of artistic life, which, with the Kasimirs, Oeltjen and others from their circle, was vibrant even before WWII.

With ROK GOLOB's (1980) sound walks at the end of this text, I return to its beginning ... the wonderful sounds of the atmosphere of the old town's streets and courtyards inspired me to recently take a walk through Ptuj while listening to them ... just as I wandered around the Portuguese capital many years ago with Wim Wenders' Lisbon Story, for example.