Histories of live meetings - case study: five conferences on computer-generated art and related theories in Zagreb, 1968 – 1978

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Abstract:

Five international meetings of more than hundred artist and theoreticians of computer-based arts were held within the exhibition projects Tendencies 4 (1968 - 1969), Tendencies 5 (1973) and Tendencies 6 (1978) in Zagreb. The participants came from all sides of the world in peak of the Cold war. First two meetings in 1968 and 1969 hold the same title "Computers and visual research", where most of the papers were published in Bit International magazine (9 issues, 1968 – 1973). Audio archive (restored in 2007) shows different presentations and statements than one in later published papers. The social dynamics of the discussions is only readable within the audio archives.

The symposium 'The Rational and Irrational in Contemporary Art' (1973) was a unique place where participants from three artistic groups and accompanying theoreticians of concrete art and computer-generated art and conceptual art were engaged in an open dialogue that was, however, characterized by mutual misunderstanding. The reader published several papers and most of the abstracts but show little of the symposium's real content. The social dynamics of the past meetings and discussions are partly reconstructable by comining research of written documents (if they exist) but always in comparation with video or audio archives or oral histories of witness of the autherntic experience. The text format shows as not sufficent for the re-crating the whole picture or at least its majority. Audio archive is found and restored in 2007, and same as previous three presented at the "bit international. [New] tendencies - Computers and Visual research" exhibition in Neue galerie, Graz, 2007 and ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2008 – 2009, curated by Darko Fritz.

Keywords:
human networks, live meeting, histories of media art, New tendencies, Zagreb

In this multimedia presentation / paper I would like to stress the importance of the research on histories of face-to-face communication and live meetings of practicioners of art-and-science human networks. This is the critique of academic fethisization of text format, as often only source of research of histories of media art. The importance of the networks and not only artefacts and events is altready established in media art histories. Live face-to-face communication within the network provide social dynamics that is not comparable to any technologically mediated communication, even over last few years when real-time multimedia telecommunications reached certain standards, that are still in stage of the constant update with plenty of room for imporving. Such a social dynamics was necessary to create and improve social networks at both local and global level.

The case study will be inernational New Tendencies movement and network. Series of exhibitions, colloguys and symposiums and publications which were held under the terms of the New Tendencies, the New Tendency and the Tendencies (hereinafter jointly referred to as NT), in Zagreb and in other centres and locations for presentations, from 1961 to 1973, taking NT as a dynamic international network and a stage for different but unarguably advanced artistic theories and practices of the 1960s in the Gallery of Contemporary Art (which is today the Museum of Contemporary Art , Zagreb), within the Zagreb City Galleries, which organized five NT exhibitions in Zagreb from 1961 to 1973, while major exhibitions were also held in Paris, Venice and Leverkusen. NT presented different forms of (new) media arts of its time and constantly creating presentational and theoretical context within art histories of their days in dynamic flux.

German-Brazilian artist Almir Mavigner privatelly visited Zagreb in 1960 and via artist Ivan Picelj meet freelance art historian Matko Mestrovic. While having dinner in the Neboder restaurant they discussed recent Venece Biennale, both expressing disinterest for majority of the artworks presenteted. An exception were artworks by Piero Dorazio, where they recognized the rational approach in the visual program of his

hand-made paintings, unlike then dominant, abstract expresionism and informel. (1) Whitin this informal conversation out of any frame of institution the idea of organizing the international exhbition was born. We can know about such spontaneous and non-institutional historic event only by help of the oral history and interviews with participants, if the resarcher is lucky enough to contact the person or witness, if they are available and live. At non-western countries as then Yugoslavia was, mostly there are no written or recorded documents of the main body of the most interesting historic events, even if they have been presented ofcicially at institutionalized spaces. NT was an exception as they have recorded by photo, audio and text majority of their acitvities and archivized mostly all correspondence and related printed and audiovisual materials, safely stored in the archive of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb and several private archives.

The First Exhibition of NT in 1961 presented, as the very title suggests, the plurality of the avant-garde of the time, with a whole array of themes and subjects: neo-constructivist and concrete art, tautological and monochromatic painting and visual research through algorithm works. Movement and light were introduced as themes and materials, which would subsequently be focused on as the guideline of the following NT exhibition through the promotion of unstable media and (inter)active participation of the audience with the work of art, i.e. the result of the research. In exhibition catalogue, as well other NT exhibition catalogues that will follow, alongside reproductions of the artworks, theoretical texts and artists statements were published. Artist statements were short, as the following one by Francois Morellet:

> We are on the eve of a revolution in art which will be just as large as the one in the field of science. Therefore, common sense and the spirit of systematic research need to replace intuition and individualistic expression. (2)

During the days exhibition opening, participants, instigated by the unique meeting of like artists and theoreticians, spontaneously organized themselves into an international network, with the idea of continuing to organize biannual exhibitions. The crutial point in making decision to transgress the frame of the exhibition(s) and to act as international movement was crated in lively informal discussion that was held during the dinner at the restaurant Puntjarka (3). We suppose to recall the political importance of such face-to-face meeting meeting of Eastern and Western European artists as well Suthamerican emigrants in 1961, the peak of Cold War. Organizers noticed the importance of live meetings and each exhibition that will took place in next 17 years will be accompanied by live meetings in the form of round table, colloquy or symposium.

A larger group of artists met again in November 1962 in the Parisian studio of the GRAV group, while the next year of 1963 saw the 'NT2' exhibition taking place in Zagreb, now as an international movement, a podium for a profiled type of art of the new (industrial and focused on the future) era, which experiences itself as a social and artistic avant-garde that, through critical questioning of the visual, strives for social change, and which, through visual experiment and a positive stance towards science and the operation of machines, abolishes the notion of the complete – unique – work of art, thereby, just like earlier avant-garde movements, participating in abolishing art. The exhibition presents numerous works of programmed and kinetic art, while NT is profiled as the largest international exhibition and the most comprehensive network of this type of art. The catalogue of the second NT exhibition (1963) features a text by Matko Mestrovic, which was later revealingly dubbed the 'Ideology of New Tendencies', which it surely is according to its programmatic and theoretical structure. Demythologization of art and demystification of the creative process are also proclaimed through a positive approach to the industrial production of works of art (the possibilities of multiplication so essential), team work and a rational approach. Mestrovic calls for speeding up the evolution and synthesis of science and art, within the framework of rendering humanities and art more scientific, as part of the long-term (utopian) process of the overall rendering of all human activity into science. Mestrovic considers that this process can be actively started within the framework of art immediately, ditto for the display of a global model, striving to act in the sphere of culture using a smaller scale, e.g. through the appropriation of scientific methods such as the experiment. The problems of scheduling all material and spiritual goods in equal measure and the return of scientific results into the public domain emerge. He does not see NT works as unique goods for the artistic market, but as *'plastic-visual research that strives to determine objective psycho-physical bases of the plastic phenomenon and visual*

perception, thereby excluding any possibility of involving subjectivism, individualism and Romanticism...'(4) Further, the thesis on the final surpassing of art as we know it was developed, through developing the conscience of the world using a metamorphosis of the social into the artistic act, which actively transforms the whole world.

The 'NT2' exhibition held in Venice had a different title than the 'NT2' in Zagreb a year earlier. The New Tendencies changed their name to the New Tendency (singular), as was explained only two years later, since the singular was also accepted for the following, Zagreb exhibition in 1965*, 'because of the striving for the conceptual concentration of intentions and joint ideas'*. (4) The clash between different factions within the NT movement also created the labelling of 'correct' and 'non-correct' artworks, according to ever stricter formal criteria. The democratic characteristics of the first NT exhibition were replaced by a dogmatic (focused, single view) approach, presented and enforced on behalf of progress and the consistency of artistic ideas. It was a time of circular letters that one group sent to all participants of the network, sometimes resulting in strong conflists of interest. Maybe situation will be better if some face-to-face meetings of all participants took place. What with inflexibility, the lack of compromise as far as ideas are concerned, but surely on account of the lack of a democratic model of communication within the undetermined hierarchy of the movement, which understands itself as democratic and expands at the same time to increasing numbers of participants, NT faced an internal crisis and numerous squabbles in the mid- 1960s. From the outside, the ideas of NT entered the mainstream and were reshaped using simplifications, while their social engagement, once at the forefront, was being neglected. The symptoms stated can also be discerned in case of the 'Responsive Eye' exhibition, held in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1965, in which numerous NT artists participated as well; however, but their work was immersed in the commercial context focussed more on retinal effects that the social dimension of artistic work (after this exhibition, the term 'op art' appeared). Many artists, as they gained international recognition,rendered their own style in commercial directions and blended into the commercial system of the culture industry, which they had often severely criticized earlier.

By 1965 the NT movement perceived itself in a state of crisis. The NT movement, which staged itself as "avant-garde", suffered in feeling immersed in the "visual art culture of the establishment of the bourgeois world"4. It had been caught by surprise by its international success as 'Op Art'. Therefore its members decided, after a colloquy at Brezovica with Abraham Moles during "NT3" (6), to make a *"new effort of organized penetration into the unknown"*, to dare the *"leap into a new, lively, fruitful stage of symbiosis with the machines"* (7), the computers. One of the curators, Radoslav Putar, writes that the approach to the machines is marked by principles, which *"have characterized the NT since the beginning"*. He highlights the concept of "programming" as well as the "exclusion of subjectivity". *"Even before the sixties K[arl] Gerstner spoke about the programming of procedures of encoding of picture elements; U[li] Pohl spoke about the anonymity and the exclusion of subjectivity during the NT-2"* (8).

Within the two-year 'Tendencies 4' event, during 1968 and 1969, a series of exhibitions and symposiums were held under the title of 'Computers and Visual Research'(9). The peak of complexity of the organization of NT was reached during the 'Tendencies 4', which, following detailed preparations, was realized in the form of 14 circular mails – newsletters (PI – Programme of Information), a panelled competition, six international exhibitions, realization of the computer-generated light installation in public space, two symposiums, the initiation and publication of the initial three issues of the bilingual magazine Bit International and finally by publishing the exhibition catalogue. Both colloguy from 1968 and symposium from 1969 that hold the same title "Computers and visual research", were simoultaneously translated to four languages (Croatian, English, French, Italian and German were in use). Most of the readed papers were published in two dedicated issues of Bit International magazine (total of 9 issues, 1968 – 1973). as well as selected parts of the discussion. The leading discourse on computers and visual research was the information aesthetics developed by Max Bense and Abraham Moles (10). Probably most interesting parts of reproduced tekst from the 1968 colloguy is transcripted discussion, an answer of computer artist Frrieder Nake on the paper by concrete artist Alberto Biasi concerning statements on political angagement and computers in the light of 1968 political and artistic context (11). Audio recordings of the symposium shows some different

presentations and statements than one in later published papers, but such a detailed comparation requires dedicated space that exceed space of this paper.

In 1973, 'Tendencies 5' exhibition cosnist of three parts: "constructive visual research", "computer visual research" and "conceptual art". Unlike the exhibition that presented artworks only, the symposium was a podium that included presentation of art historians and theoreticians and other scientists alongside artists talks. The proceedings of the accompanying symposium, on the topic "The Rational and the Irrational in Visual Research Today", and in the catalogue are evidence of a disinterest and blindness between constructive and computer visual research on the one hand and conceptual art on the other. Such three groups of artists and related theoreticians never before and never after in world's (art) history had oportunity to exhibit together and confront their ideas in live meeting. It was the concept of NT organizers to stage such a meeting, trying to bridge the gap between competing art practices of their time. Radoslav Putar, the Director of the Zagreb City Gallery and President of the Organizing Committee of "Tendencies 5", used the term "data processing" to describe methods of conceptual art. (12) Computer artists Frieder Nake established a similarity between computer and conceptual art on the level of "separation of head and hand" (13), criticizing it for being a production structure following the logic of capitalism. Such examples of bridging the generation and aesthetic gap were rare by other participants in the symposium. Even, majority of artist from the "constructive visual research" part of the exhbition did not took part in discussion at all, some of them declaring that they boycot the event in general, but only participate in the exhbition for the sake of "good old times", reffering to the importance of the New Tendencies as international movement of neoconstructive and concrete artists form the beginning 1960s, a decade earlier. Artist of both art practices, Waldemar Cordeiro staged that computer art had replaced constructivist art (14). He was one of rare cosnstructive artist that participate in early NT network that made use of computers.. From historical distance we can see that that conceptual art replaced both constructive and computer art in domnant visual art disource, starting from particular time of 1973 several decades onward. Exhibition's curatos from Zagreb Radoslav Putar and Boris Kelemen were underlining the importance of constructive and computer visual research, while the introductions to the concept art sections by Nena Dimitrijevic and Marijan Susovski revealed the situation in Zagreb by 1973: it is the time of the "post-object", the "non-formal", the "non-visual" (15). NT was perceived as a far precursor that had separated the idea from its execution, but had been "still involved in the material and visual sphere". Conceptual art, in this sense, was beyond "the scope of the New Tendencies". (16) In symposium's reader several texts are missing and abstracts only are published. But, luckily we have today an audio archive of entire conference available that show us that the printed reader cant't represent the importance of such a meeting and don't show its real contents.

The 'Tendencies 6' event was not fully held, just its part of the symposium Art and Society, in 1978. no verified and complete list of speakers were found, only very few papers and abstracts. From the symposium title we can be read as the idea of the organizers to question social issues still remaining present, but artistic practice and the contemporary new tendencies predominantly tended to the side of conceptual art, which would mark itself as the dominant discourse, and continuously set new canons of contemporary art for decades to come.

Audio recordings of four symposiums held 1968 – 1973 are found in 2005 as series of mostly non-signed magnetic tapes. At different corner of NT archive several list of speakers were found. The magnetic tapes are restored and digitalized and lineup of speakers recognized in Sherlok Holmes alike actions in 2007. "Art and Computers 71" conference took part in 1971, but no reader or papers were published. It almost completely skipped form the history as it is only mentioned in short report in Page magazine and mentioned in text by Boris Kelemen in Tendencies 5 exhibition catalogue. The photos from the archives were finally put into the right context and list of speakers reconstructed and aligned with audio recordings.

This audio archives are finally presented as part of the "bit international. [New] tendencies - Computers and Visual research" exhibition in Neue galerie, Graz, 2007 and ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2008 – 2009, curated by Darko Fritz. Presenting such material within the format of the exhbition helps a lot to phisically present the theoretical frame of NT and the idea of the international network of this time, not only the artworks,

as museums often tend to fetishize sole artworks. As well, the working process of particular artwork were presented next to the object, as flow diagrams, computer programs and alike providing another leyer of context.

During the organizing process and realization of NT activities different kind of written communication was in use: personal handwritten notes, typewritten letters with carbon copies, circular (news)letters that were distributed by post, call for works, application forms, and finally printed catalogues and Bit international magazine. Considering early digital art, Zagreb Museum is one of the ratre institution in the world that was organizing related acitvities on long-term base, and therefore an archivist's and researchers's pearl. Editors of NT publications were concusses of imprtance of live meetings, and apart of organizing it, they took care of dcumneting it in photo format and published in their publications, as well as pubishing the papers and making audio archives.

We can conclude only that the social dynamics of the past meetings and discussions are partly reconstructable by comining research of written documents (if they exist) but always in comparation with video or audio archives or oral histories of witness of the autherntic experience. The text format shows as not suffcent for the re-crating the whole picture or at least its majority. One step beyond this paper will be the the histtories of informal and private live meetings of media art practicioners. It is not rare that both informal communication during the breaks of the conferences in one hand and often too short oficial discussions at other, are more creative and productive than staged panels that reminds in text format. Even today, wth all easily accsesabe audiovisual aparratus, even (new) media conferences often leaving only text format into the heritage for the future researchers.

Footnotes:

1 Interviews by Darko Fritz with Ivan Picelj and Matko Mestrovic, audio, 2004
2 Francois Morellet: without title, Cat. Nove tendencije 2, Zagreb: Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti 1961, n. p..
3 ibid as 1
4 Matko Meštrović, Untitled, *New Tendencies 2*, the catalogue, 1963. Published subsequently under the title of 'The Ideology of New Tendencies' in the book Matko Meštrović: *From the Particular to the General,* Mladost, Zagreb, 1967, and DAF,
Zagreb, 2005. Also cf. the essay by Matko Meštrović: 'Rendering Scientific as the Condition for Humanization', the text from 1963 published in *From the Particula to the General,* Mladost, Zagreb, 1967, and DAF, Zagreb, 2005.
5 Cat. Nove tendencije 2, Zagreb: Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti 1963, n. p.
6 "Moles spoke so persuasively of the need to apply the theory of information and the Neumann-Morgenstern theories, and of the need to use computers in further research", see Bozo Bek, without title, in: Cat. Tendencije 5, Zagreb: Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti 1973, n. p.
7 Radoslav Putar, without title, Cat. Tendencije 4, Zagreb: Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti 1970, n. p.
8 ibid.
9 Regarding computer visual research in NT, cf. Herbert W. Franke: *'New Tendencies in Zagreb'*, in Thobias Hoffman and Rasmus Kleine [eds.]: *Die NeuenTendenzen - Eine europäische Künsterbewegung 1961-1973,* Museum für Konkrete Kunst, Ingoldstadt, 2006. and Darko Fritz: 'Amnesia International' in *I am still Alive*, Mi2, Zagreb, 2000, and 'Amnesia International - Early Computer Art and the Tendencies Movement' in *Bitomatik - Art Practice in the Time of Information/Media Domination,* kuda.org, Novi Sad, 2004.
10 The first two issues of the magazine *Bit International* are almost completely dedicated to the same problems and authors. Also cf.: Cristoph Klütsch: 'Computer Graphic-Aesthetic Experiments between Two Cultures', *Leonardo*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 432 - 425, 2007.
11 Alberto Biasi, Situazione 1967 and Frieder Nake, Replik an A. Biasi, in: *bit international 3*, Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba 1968, p. 29-39.
12 Radoslav Putar, without title, in: Cat. Tendencije 5, Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1973, n. p.
13 Frieder Nake, "The Separation of Hand and Head in "Computer Art" (1973), 9 pages, in: "The Rational

and Irrational in Visual Research Today"paper read at "The Rational and Irrational in Visual Research Today / Match of Ideas," Symposium T–5, 2 June 1973, Zagreb, published in the symposium reader 9 pages, Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1973, n.p.

14 "Constructive art belongs to the past, its contents corresponding to the Paleocibernetic Period being those of the Computer Art." Waldemar Cordeiro, "Analogical and/or Digital Art," paper read at "The Rational and Irrational in Visual Research Today / Match of Ideas," Symposium T–5, 2 June 1973, Zagreb. Abstract published in the symposium reader (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1973) n.p.Cordeiro exhibited his works in NT exhibitions in Zagreb in 1965, 1969 and 1973, and participated in two related symposia in 1969 and 1973.

15 Nena Dimitrijevic, without title, in: Cat. Tendencije 5, Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1973, n. p.

16 Marijan Susovski, without title, in: Cat. Tendencije 5, Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1973, n. p.

Darko Fritz curated numerous exhibitions including *"I am Still Alive" (1960s computer-generated art and recent low-tech and internet art)*, Zagreb, 2000 and "*Bit International - Computers and Visual Research, [New] Tendencies, Zagreb 1961—1973"*, Neue Galerie, Graz, 2007 and ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2008. He has presented research on early digital art at various conferences, including *ISEA* 2000, Paris, 2000 and Helsinki, 2004; *End Repeat* ,Tallin, 2001; *Stuttgart 1960, Computer in Theorie und Kunst*, Stuttgart, 2004; *REFRESH!,* Banff, 2005*; RE:PLACE*, Berlin, 2007; *Programmation orienntee art 2*, Paris Sorbonne, 2007 and *Second Bremen Symposium on Early Digital Art*, Bremen, 2008. At Culturenet portal he published "*A Brief Overview of Media Art in Croatia (Since the 1960s)"* and **edited related database** in 2002. He published "*Amnesia International - Early computer art and [New] Tendencies movement*" at the Bitomatik by kuda.org, Novi Sad in 2004 and "*Vladimir Bonačić"* at the Leonardo magazine in 2008.