

1. Avgust Černigoj's sketch for the scenography of Tone Čufer's *Tovarna* (Factory), 1927. Photo: Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Linking the historical and retro-avant-gardes by questioning the periphery-center relationship

The case of Trieste, Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade

Tomaž Toporišič

University of Ljubljana

Introduction

The map of Western art of the 20th c. with Western centres is largely present in the minds of every scholar of modernism and avant-garde in its basic outlines. However, nothing similar to this exists in Eastern Europe, where the transparent structure of an overarching art history does not exist. No referential system is in place that is accepted beyond the borders of a given country. In my essay, I justify this statement by questioning the periphery-center relationship based on the theories and practices of selected avant-garde groups in Central and Eastern Europe: in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. Firstly, I focus on the period of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s and secondly on to the retro-avant-gardes at the turn of the centuries. While trying to articulate common features among these diverse cases I will show how the widespread notion of an international, universalist avant-garde relates to the diverse Central European movements in the region from Trieste through Ljubljana and Zagreb to Belgrade. I will outline to what extent did the artists discussed combine avant-garde techniques with regional traditions or concerns.

My initial assumption will be that one can no longer regard the hybrid avant-garde idioms discussed as impure versions of movements that had their authentic expression in the common centres like Paris or Berlin. My aim is to discuss to what extent the Central European avant-gardes¹ developed thoughts that are close to specific horizontal perspective of art history as defined by Piotr Piotrowski². To what extent the representatives of historical avant-gardes: Ljubomir Micić, Ferdo Delak, Avgust Černigoj, Srečko Kosovel, Serbian surrealists, Dada Tank sounded up a specific redefinition of the



* This essay is the result of my research into the theatrical avant-gardes as a part of the project *Odzyskana awangarda. Polska i środkowoeuropejska awangarda teatralna* founded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and programme No. P6-0376 founded by the Slovene Research Agency (ARRS).

¹ According to M. Šuvakovič (*Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia*, "Filozofski vestnik" 2016, No. 1, p. 207), the term "Central European avant-gardes" denotes "avant-garde practices that emerged in between the spheres of influence of Moscow and Paris, including the Polish (Poznań, Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow), German (Berlin, Dessau, Weimar), Czech (Prague), Austrian (Vienna), Hungarian (Budapest), Romanian (Bucharest), Slovenian (Ljubljana), Croatian (Zagreb), and Serbian (Belgrade) avant-gardes. The Middle and Central European avant-gardes are so-called minor or 'non-paradigmatic' avant-gardes, which means that they are characterized by left- or right-leaning intellectual artistic practices typically linked with either private actions or the publication of small-circulation avant-garde magazines".

² See P. Piotrowski, *Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde*, [in:] *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, Ed. S. Bru [et al.], Berlin 2009.



³ S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*, Cambridge 1999, p. 1.

⁴ D. Mishkova, *Spatial Asymmetries: Regionalist Intellectual Projects in East Central Europe in the Interwar Period*, [in:] *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, Ed. M. Jalava, S. Nygård, J. Strang, Leiden–Boston 2018, p. 144.

centrality and marginality and undermined the tools of cultural appropriation. Furthermore, to what extent the retro-avant-gardes like Neue Slowenische Kunst continued these critical thoughts at the margins of European cultural space.

The examples I concentrate on come from the territory of the avant-garde phenomena in Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia such as zentism, Slovenian constructivism, dada “Tank” and Serbian surrealism, the early and radical avant-gardes on the territory of the newly formed kingdom of South Slavs. All the above historical avant-garde movements took the ideas developed by various avant-garde movements, ranging from Italian to Russian futurism and from expressionism and dadaism to constructivism. They eclectically assimilated some “foreign” ideas into their own cultural frameworks and added specific features. Similar procedures were at work during the period of the 1980s and 1990s with the eclectic retro-avant-garde artistic characteristics of the postmodern politicised art like Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and its collectives Irwin, Laibach and Sisters Scipion Nasice. While interpreting some cases I will focus on the issues related to centre versus periphery, universal versus particular, and international versus local or traditional. I intend to show that these questions go to the heart of both historical and retro-avant-gardes. Steven A. Mansbach raised them in the opening pages of the book *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*. He wrote:

Why is it that today these avant-garde figures and movements, which earlier in the century overcame their peripheral location to assume a critical and formative role in the genesis of advanced art, are almost totally forgotten and overlooked?³

According to my beliefs, Mansbach touches the raw nerves of the problematics that seem to be central to today’s discussions about the unbalance of the regards in history of modern art. The topic was widely discussed by both artists (Irwin) and theoreticians (Piotr Piotrowski, Miško Šuvaković, Aleš Erjavec, Igor Zabel) during the last couple of decades. It focuses on how to undo a persistent domination of Western narratives, a procedure, in which Western cultural framework of museums and other institutions selects items from Central and Eastern European art in order to repackage and reinterpret them in order to include them in the vertical history of Western art.

I will try to open up the frame of this specific situation in today’s globalised landscape, but also to find a narrative process reflecting the past within a new historical perspective. I will apply the assumptions of Diana Mishkova, who highlights that the “centrality and marginality, furthermore, are co-constitutive and relational in character so that margins do not merely exist as extensions of the core”⁴ to the relations between the avant-gardes in the West and East.

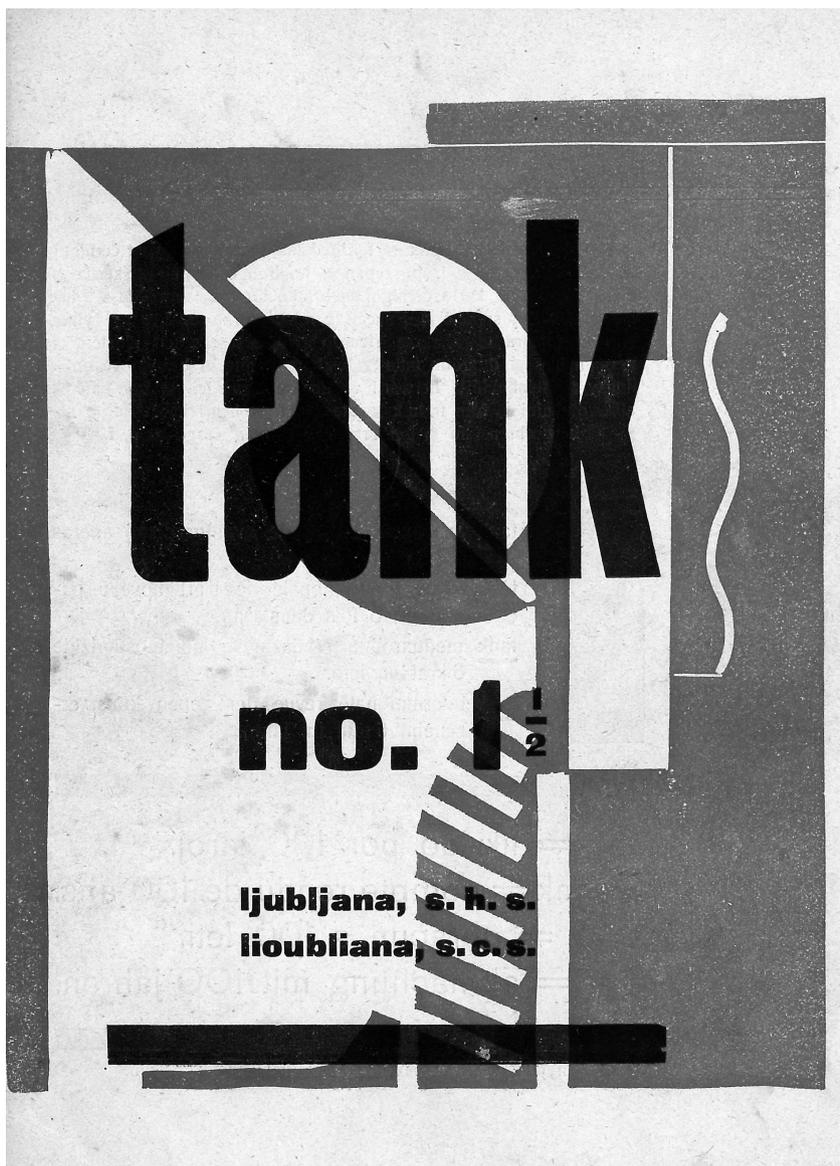


2. Mihailo Petrov, poster for the first “Zenit” international exhibition, collage, 1924; iconothèque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photo: https://monoskop.org/Zenit#/media/File:Mihailo_Petrov_Poster_for_the_first_Zenit_international_exhibition_collage_1924.jpg (access date: 3.01.2023)

Using her argumentation, I will try to show, to what extent the margins developed an autonomy of their own and produced alternative regional categories. The interactions between the margins and the centre within the history of the avant-gardes in Eastern and Western Europe thus produce specific dynamics using the potentials of marginality to impact on the centre or even reshape it.

Furthermore I will explore to what extent the retro-avant-gardes re-enacted some basic ideas of the constructivist and futurist concepts and were therefore the heirs of the artistic generation that wanted to promote Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade and Trieste as the centres of the new art, to establish a new bridge between the East and West.

3. The cover of "Tank Magazine", 1927.
Photo: Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian
Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia



The historical avant-gardes

The stormy period of the historical avant-gardes in the geographical basin of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia during the period 1910–1930 witnessed several waves of artistic, cultural and political movements with typical Central-European avant-garde features. The avant-garde revolutionary and radical agendas of artists sometimes not only met but also collided with similar agendas of the political parties and movements. Thus, the historical avant-gardes were marked by a provocation as well as resistance to the dominant ruling bourgeois society and its universalism in the opening decades of the 20th century.

They tried to invent new media, introduce new standards and establish new centers of the avant-garde that could decentralize the artistic maps of Europe and the world and add to the existing centers like Paris, Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Moscow those of Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, but also Zadar, Trieste, Gorizia... Their aim was to persuade the German and Italian West that an unknown Slavic territory of avant-gardes exists. The historical avant-gardes thus revolted against asymmetry of international artistic lines of force.

Slovene and Serbian avant-gardists were criticising a bourgeois “West of Europe”, the “Occident”. They shared the thoughts that the seemingly universal European value-systems was not looked upon favourably by the avant-gardes. According to them the new, avant-garde world order could introduce a specific asymmetry described by the zenitist Ljubomir Micić⁵ in his 1921 manifesto:

do close the gate
 East – North – and Central Europe
 Barbarians are coming
 do close do close
 but we are going to enter anyway⁶

Avugst Černigoj, the founder of “Tank” magazine⁷, agreed with his close collaborator Micić that the old Europe should make room for the new. In his 1927 *Tank Manifesto* Černigoj criticised the European canons and argued that:

europa must fall due to overbearing egoism
 ===subconscious individualism
 ===free terrorism.
 our striving begins where european decadence stops forever⁸.

Let me start with some basic assumptions about the specificity of historical avant-gardes in the region:

Avant-garde artists from Ljubljana, Trieste, and Zagreb and to some extent also Belgrade have promoted through their networking and the idea of necessity of cultural interchanges and transformations that often appeared to challenge the boundaries of national identities and their accompanying official histories and institutions. If the historical avant-gardes in themselves always presented themselves as transgressive, they nevertheless tended to be located within a European history, as well as within the territorial or National identities.

The main early avant-garde movement in Slovenia was constructivism that included works and actions by painters, poets, musicians, and performing artists, highly influenced by futurism, Bauhaus and the Russian artistic experiment. The central figure of this movement was Avugst Černigoj, who he had amicable relations with futurist



⁵ Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971) was the founder of the avant-garde movement zenitism and its magazine “Zenit”. In Zagreb, he founded the review “Zenit”, set up a “Zenit” Gallery and published his own writings as well as books by other authors under the “Zenit” imprint. Both he and his brother, Branko Ve Poljanski became prominent avant-garde artists collaborating with the Slovene and other avant-gardes.

⁶ See his manifesto *Delo Zenitizma* (The Work of Zenitism) from October 1921 (issue 8) of “Zenit”, p. 2.

⁷ The magazine “Tank” was published by the avant-garde filmmaker, journalist and activist Ferdo Delak and the avant-garde painter Avugst Černigoj from Trieste in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1927. Only two issues were published. The journal was founded under the influence of Micić’s “Zenit” and leftist experimental international art practices.

⁸ S. Bru, *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–1935: A Portable Guide*, Edinburgh 2018, p. 122.



⁹ S. Bru. *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–1935. A Portable Guide*, Edinburg 2018, p. 220.

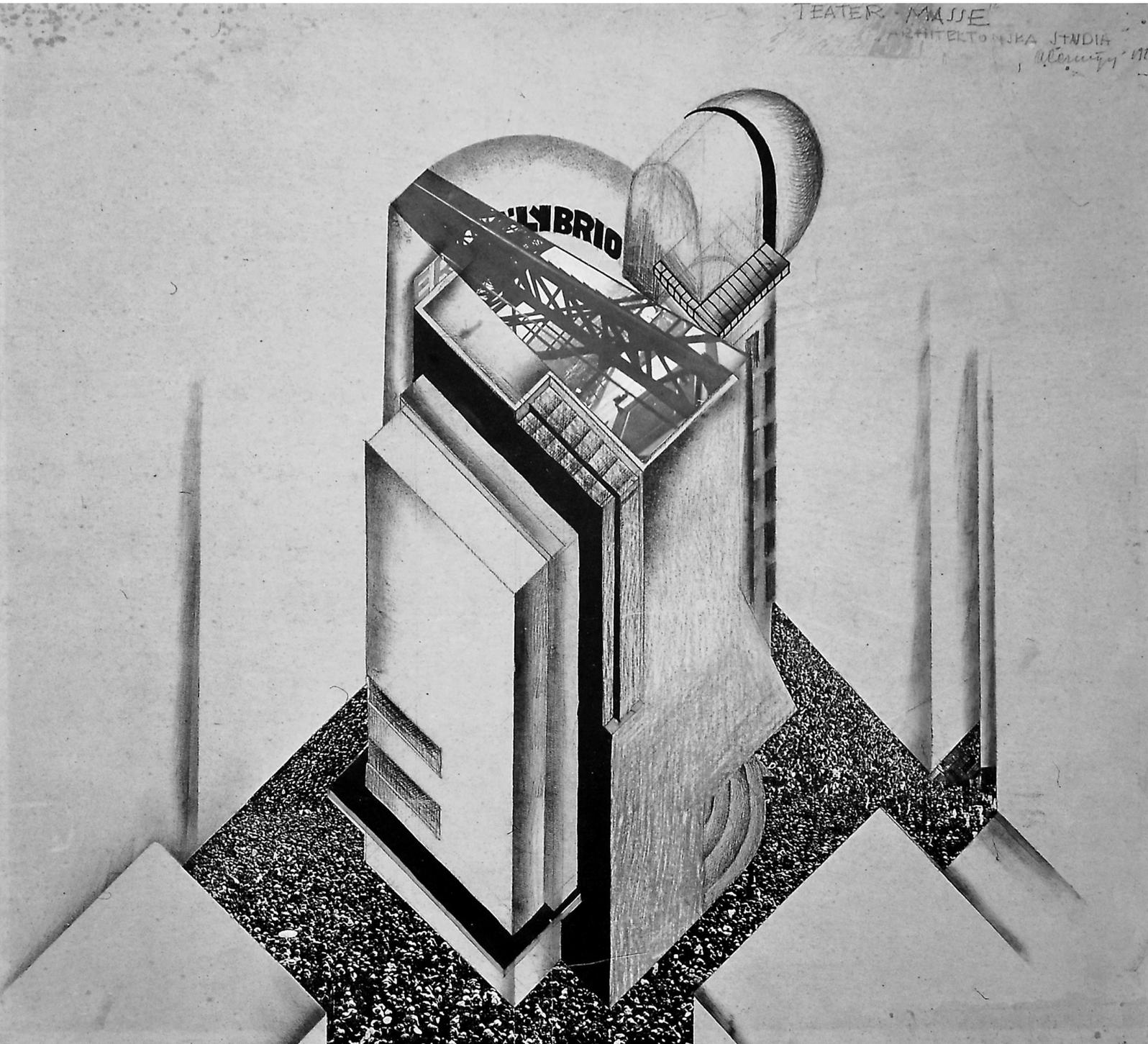
artists from Italy. However, later he followed his decisive path, determined also by his nationality (Slovene) and a precise political left wing connotation. During his study years in Germany, he met with László Moholy-Nagy and Wassily Kandinsky. When he returned to Ljubljana, he fashioned a very personal fusion of futurism and constructivism and propagated it first in Ljubljana (1924–1925), and afterwards in Trieste (1925–1929). He founded the Constructivist Group / Gruppo costruttivista and an artistic school based on principles derived from the Bauhaus.

Ferdo Delak began his avant-garde activities with Avgust Černigoj in 1920's in Ljubljana, Trieste and Gorizia. As a part of Der Sturm activities Delak was active in Berlin league for social rights. In Vienna, he worked in Theater der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe. In 1924, Černigoj and Ferdo Delak founded in Ljubljana Novi oder (New Stage), a movement for theatre, new art and other media, which followed a predominantly constructivist, or as Delak named it, “constructive” path.

Avgust Černigoj and Ferdo Delak embraced zenitism because they believed that it could serve as a counterweight to the futurist-fascist declarations of Italian superiority over Balkan culture. When Delak published the two issues of his avant-garde review, “Tank: Revue internationale active” (1927–1928), he molded them on the “Zenit” magazine, which was also a publication with an international orientation, publishing articles in their original languages. Some of the texts he obtained from Micić, who after his imprisonment in Zagreb and release (with the help of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) was living in exile in Paris. At the same time, Delak persuaded Herwarth Walden in Berlin to devote a special issue of his journal “Der Sturm” to Junge Slowenische Kunst (Young Slovene Art; January 1928), which was (together with his lecture on the new Slovenian arts in the house of Der Sturm) probably the best artistic action of the Slovene historical avant-garde.

In his book, *The European Avant-Gardes* Sasha Bru highlights the Slovene constructivism as an interesting example of the Central and east European avant-gardes. His thesis is that the painter Avgust Černigoj (back from a brief stay at the Bauhaus) and theatre reformer Ferdo Delak (an admirer of the proletarian theatre of Erwin Piscator, among others) introduced their own distinct variant of constructivism. In his views this variant was “rather eclectic and hybrid, further borrowing elements from Expressionism and Dada, and thus fusing the need for destruction typical of these two movements, with the call for constructive clarity voiced by constructivism”⁹. Moreover, I must say I do agree completely with the point Bru makes about the specificities of the Slovene constructivism, the fact that it:

coupled to a distinct regional concern, because its combination of languages clearly suggested that work from “minor” cultures equalled that of “major”



4. Avgust Černigoj, Teater - Masse, architecture of Tank's Theatre, 1928, published in "Der Sturm". Photo: Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia



5. Ljubiša Ristič, *Missa in a Minor*, Slovensko mladinsko gledališče, Ljubljana, 1980. Photo: T. Stojko, Archive of Mladinsko Theatre



¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

¹¹ Srečko Kosovel was a poet, who for decades after his death was known only for his lyric poetry. His *Integrali* (Integrals) appeared in 1967, revealing the poet's hitherto unknown face: his constructivist poetry. This visual poetry influenced the Slovenian neo-avant-garde group OHO in the 1960s.

¹² I quote from his two constructivist poems:

Ljubljana is asleep ([in:] S. Kosovel, *Integrali*, Transl. N. Kocjančič Pokorn, K. Jerin, Ph. Burt, Ljubljana 1998, p. 99) – the whole poem reads as follows:

In red chaos a new humanity
is approaching! Ljubljana is asleep.
Europe is dying in a red light.
The phone lines are all dead.
Oh, but this one is cordless.
A blind horse.

(former) imperialist cultures like those of Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria or Spain¹⁰.

They developed a specific idealism, which placed art itself at the apex of an implicitly Eurocentric view of societal and technological progress. But at the same time the avant-garde circles in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in Austro-Italian-Slovenian multicultural Trieste and its Slavic background of Ljubljana and Zagreb, were constantly on the move. They had to work in very difficult circumstances and were quite often sceptical about European way of life. Let us remember two lines from the constructivist poet Srečko Kosovel¹¹ and his specific poems *Kons*: “Europe is dying in a red light” or “Europe is stepping into a grave”¹².

By the end of the 1920s, the political tensions in Europe were disturbing the development of the avant-gardes. When in January 1929 Yugoslavia became a dictatorship with the aim of accelerating national and cultural unification, Trieste was already deeply involved

in the Italian fascist ideologies. In such political circumstances, the artists were committed to socially engaged art and literature. In this respect, the situation in the territory of Slovenia and Yugoslavia was no different from that in Italy or Austria. The open situation, so typical for the first years following WWI with all options available, ended both in Yugoslavia and in Italy. The avant-garde dreams seemed to evaporate, and the new war was slowly approaching.

Slovenian constructivism's blossoms in Trieste faded in 1929. Nonetheless, the avant-garde did continue, for already in 1927, when a group of Serbian surrealists presented their works at the Fifth Yugoslav Exposition. Surrealism, a predominantly Serbian phenomenon in Yugoslavia, attained international recognition involving numerous poets and artists. However, the story of the zenitist and Slovene constructivist's political and aesthetic revolutions undermining the very Western European Centric and bourgeois societies was over. First Yugoslavia was far from being a democratic structure in which the avant-garde movements and liberal thought could be developed. Together with the left wing politicians, mostly members of the prohibited Yugoslav communist party the avant-garde artists became targets of the personal dictatorship of the king Alexander I.

From neo- to retro-avant-gardes

The history of avant-garde movements in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia consisted of three phases. The first (1920s and 1930s) of zenitism and surrealism in Serbia and of constructivism in Slovenia; the second (1960s and 1970s) of the neo-avant-garde in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Subotica, Kranj, Ljubljana, and Zagreb; the third one (1980s and 1990s), the retro-avant-garde was predominantly Slovenian. Zenitism and constructivism were rediscovered in the neo-avant-garde and retro-avant-garde periods by authors and groups experimenting with new media, communities, and artistic procedures. The paradoxical term "retro-avant-garde" was first developed by artists working in the late socialist and post-socialist contexts of Eastern Europe and the territories of the ex-Yugoslavia. The use of the term dates back to 1983 with the exhibition of the rock group Laibach in Ljubljana entitled as "Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Monumentalna Retroavantgarda". Retro-avant-garde artistic procedure is based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present can be healed by returning to the initial conflicts. The term "retro-avant-garde" was elaborated by curators and theorist-practioners such as Peter Weibel, Boris Groys, Marina Gržinić, and Inke Arns. I will name some of them: the neo-avant garde artists and groups Pupiliija Ferkeverk, Tomislav Gotovac and OHO in the 1970s; Vlasta Delimar, Kugla Glumište, Ljubiša Ristić and KPGT, Ana Monro, Haris Pašović in the 1980s and the retro-avant-garde artists and groups Dragan Živadinov, Neue Slowe-



(As if your eyes were from Italian paintings.)
White towers rise out of dun walls.
The flood.
Europe is stepping into a grave.
We come with a hurricane.
With poison gasses.
(Your lips are like strawberries.)
Ljubljana is asleep.
On the tram the conductor is asleep
Slovenski narod
is read in the Europa cafe.
The clicking of billiard halls

– and *Cons:Z* (*ibidem*, p. 103). The whole poem reads as follows:

A melancholy accordion.
Swimming season.
Blue lightnings.
Shoes size 40.
Istria is dying.
The sea.
Europe is dying.
Sports, the economy, politics.
Japan versus Russia.
NEW CULTURE.
New culture: humanitarianism.
New politics: humanitarianism.
New art: for man.
Europe's hour of death draws near.
Anoint it with H₂SO₄.
The hour of grief.
A curtain has unveiled a new world.



¹³ *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Ed. Irwin, London 2006, p. 54.

¹⁴ P. Piotrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ S. Žižek, *East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe: On (Un-)Changing Canons and Extreme Avantgardes*, Art-Margins Online, <https://artmargins.com/east-of-art-transformations-in-eastern-europe-qon-un-changing-canons-and-extreme-avantgardesq> (access date: 3.01.2023).

nische Kunst, Marko Peljhan, Branko Brezovec, Matjaž Berger, Vlado Repnik, and others in the late 1980s and 1990s. They were inspired by the artistic concepts, specific subversiveness, and formal procedures enabling them to invent new theatrical worlds and promote new cultural positions. And they wanted to draw a new, alternative map of the avant-gardes that differed very much from the mainstream Western-Centric maps, namely the Irwin Group *East Art Map*¹³.

East Art Map's aim was thus to critically (re)construct the history of art in Eastern Europe from 1945 to the present, in an effort to transgress against these closed systems of interpretation and evaluation. With its international artist and scholar collaborators (Piotr Piotrowski, Miško Šuvaković, Marina Gržinić, Igor Zabel, Eda Čufer, Viktor Misiano, Roger Canover, Boris Groys) Irwin was working on a new *East Art Map* that would include artists from Eastern European peripheries, sometimes even forgotten territories. While doing so the project established some basic interpretations and criticism of the Western centrism that used the concept of “horizontal art history” developed by Piotr Piotrowski in an article “On the Spatial Turn or Horizontal Art History”, and “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, by using a specific “deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art”¹⁴.

The East European retro-avant-gardists and theoreticians like Piotrowski, Zabel, Šuvaković, Irwin, Laibach, Mladen Stilinović attempted to relativize the Western art history and place it “next to other art historical narratives – in accordance with the horizontal paradigm”. The avant-garde movements enabled them to reverse “the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of ‘our’ art history (read: of the West)”¹⁵. In fact, what they were doing went hand in hand with the philosophical interventions of the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek claiming that a specific political autonomy exists in East and Central Europe even today. He elaborated his thoughts in a non-formal manner in his lecture at MoMa New York, describing the specificity of the radical avant-gardes in Eastern Europe:

So what I ask is, why is East European experience so important? Because now the big opposition is First World versus Third World: build a capitalist metropolis versus undeveloped, exploited, economically colonized countries.

But I think we occupy an ex-dissenter space, from where things might be visible. Which is why, I think that the only [...] to use the fashionable term [...] site of resistance will come from here.

[...]

I think we need the eccentric position, which is ours. So my message is that we are not here to learn from you. Instead you should learn from us. We should be absolutely avant-garde¹⁶

Using his eccentric position of the *enfant terrible* of today's materialist philosophy, Žižek speaks also in the name of the exploited and colonised art markets of the East and Central European periphery. His thoughts are not far from those of the Irwin group and their contemporaries that realised that even after the fall of the Berlin wall and in the beginning of the 21st c. we are still living in the art world defined by the West East or Centre Periphery logic. From the centres in the West particular models come to the periphery, the art of the periphery was supposed to adopt the models established in the centres. The centres provide "canons, hierarchy of values, and stylistic norms" and the peripheries adopt them in a process of reception. Even in cases when the periphery has its own outstanding artists, their recognition, or art historical consecration, depended "on the centre: on exhibitions organized in the West and books published in Western countries"¹⁷ In 1992 NSK and their colleagues wrote the *Moscow Declaration*¹⁸ in which they stressed the fact that the Eastern countries have a specific history, experience, time, and space that should not be forgotten, hidden, rejected or suppressed. In a new, post-socialist situation "the former East does not exist anymore" and "new Eastern structure can only be made by reflecting on the past which has to be integrated in a mature way in the changed present and future"¹⁹.

By introducing the idea of the Retro-avant-garde the NSK movement opened up the paradoxes of the reception of the avant-gardes, specific to the Central and East European cultural and political space. The dramaturg Eda Čufer thus emphasises the fact that retro-avant-garde as a basic artistic procedure of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* is based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. She is persuaded that:

modern art has not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states. The common perception of the avant-garde as a fundamental phenomenon of twentieth-century art is loaded with fears and prejudices²⁰.

The artists opted for a specific presentation and interpretation of the identity of other cultures and productions without eliminating them with the one-sided and already formed view of the dominant culture. Thus (to use the wordings of Piotrowski writing about IRWIN) they reminded the art historians that "East European political and cultural heritage had universal dimensions and defined the physiognomy of Europe as a whole"²¹. In addition to this, they stressed the importance of a pluralistic definition of the art geography of the 20th century.



¹⁷ P. Piotrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ *Moscow Declaration* was written at the time of the *Apt Art* and the *NSK Embassy* projects of the group Irwin on 26 May 1992 in Moscow.

¹⁹ As quoted in: A. Erjavec, M. Gržinić, *Mythical Discoveries, Utopian Spaces and Post-Socialist Culture*, "Filozofski vestnik" 1993, No. 2, p. 29.

²⁰ Čufer, Irwin, *NSKState in Time* (1992/93), [in:] *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, Ed. L. Hoptman, T. Pospiszyl, Assist. M. Braun, C. Tarica, Forew. I. Kabakov, New York 2002, p. 301.

²¹ P. Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, Transl. A. Brzyski, London 2009, p. 434.



²² T. Miller, *Incomplete Modernities: Historicizing Yugoslavian Avant-Gardes*, "Modernism / Modernity" 2005, No. 4, p. 714.

²³ P. Piotrowski, *Toward a Horizontal...*, p. 54.

²⁴ A. Erjavec, *The Three Avant-gardes and Their Context: The Early, the Neo, and the Postmodern*, [in:] *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, Ed. D. Djurić, M. Šuvaković, Cambridge-London 2003, p. 61.

That was what happened to Slovene Constructivist Circle in Trieste, Ljubomir Micić in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb during the time of the historic-avant-gardes. The avant-gardes that were interrupted and unfinished in the 1930s due to the dictatorship of the 1st Yugoslavia and fascism in Italy, later on became the forgotten objects due to the "ignorance and indifference of Anglo-American modernist scholarship to the marginal spaces beyond the European geo-political 'core'"²². Also to most of the neo- and retro-avant-garde artists in the region, OHO Group, Pupilija Ferkeverk, Vlado Gotovac and the retro-avant-gardists. Irwin group from Ljubljana, Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, and a certain Kazimir Malevich from Belgrade.

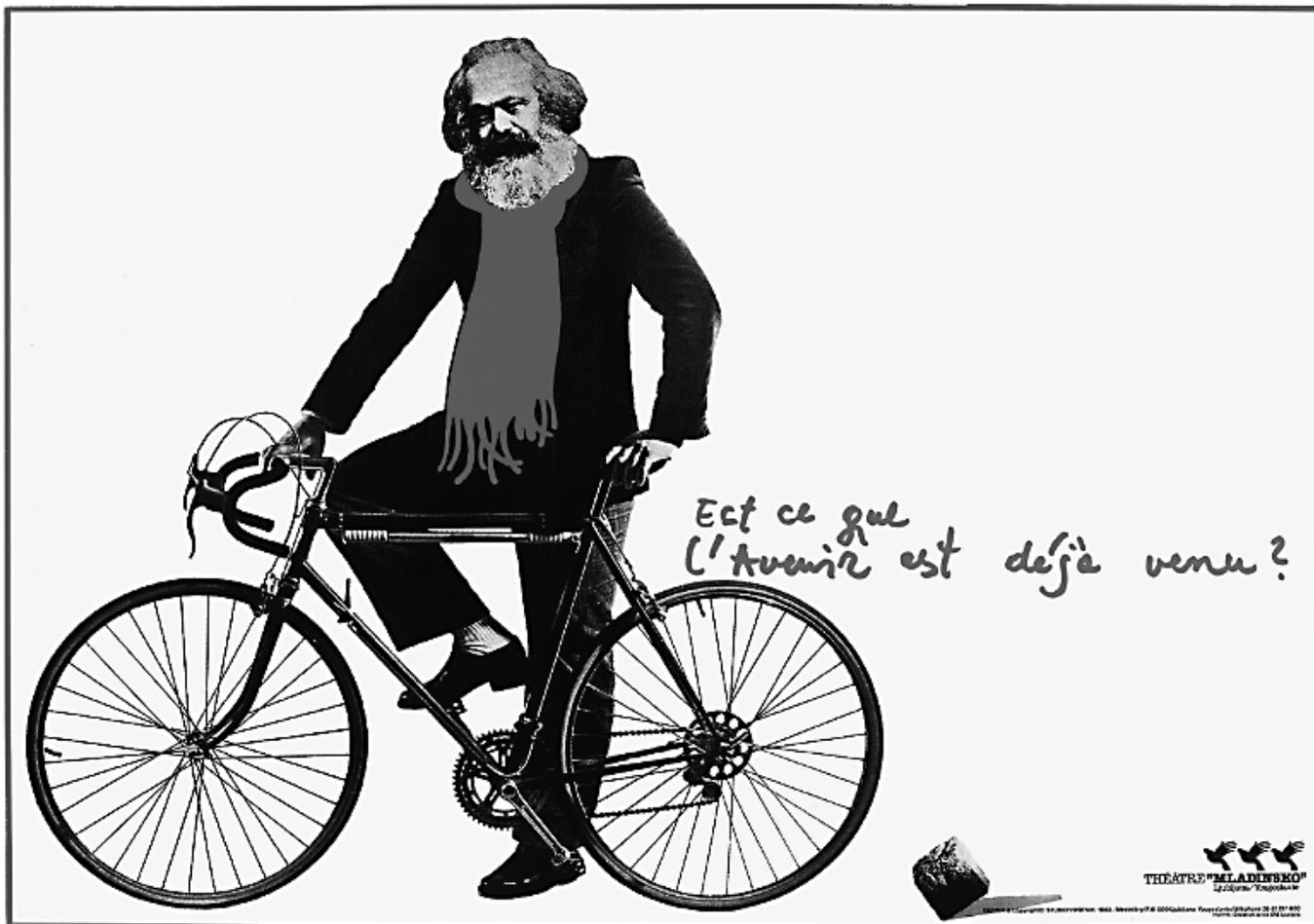
Irwin's East-Art Project can thus be regarded as a specific attempt of thinking art and its history in a horizontal way: a deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art, but at the same time a construction of the East European Art history. Irwin group did not attempt to cancel Western art history, but (I will once more use the argumentation of Piotrowski) "to call this type of narrative by its proper name, precisely as a 'Western' narrative"²³. Most of the artists from the post-socialist countries, analysed to a great extent in a wonderful reader of Aleš Erjavec *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, thus managed to separate two concepts: the concept of Western modern art and the concept of universal art.

In accordance with the horizontal paradigm Western art history was thus to some extent placed next to other art historical narratives. In a simultaneous gesture, the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of the centres underwent some important changes.

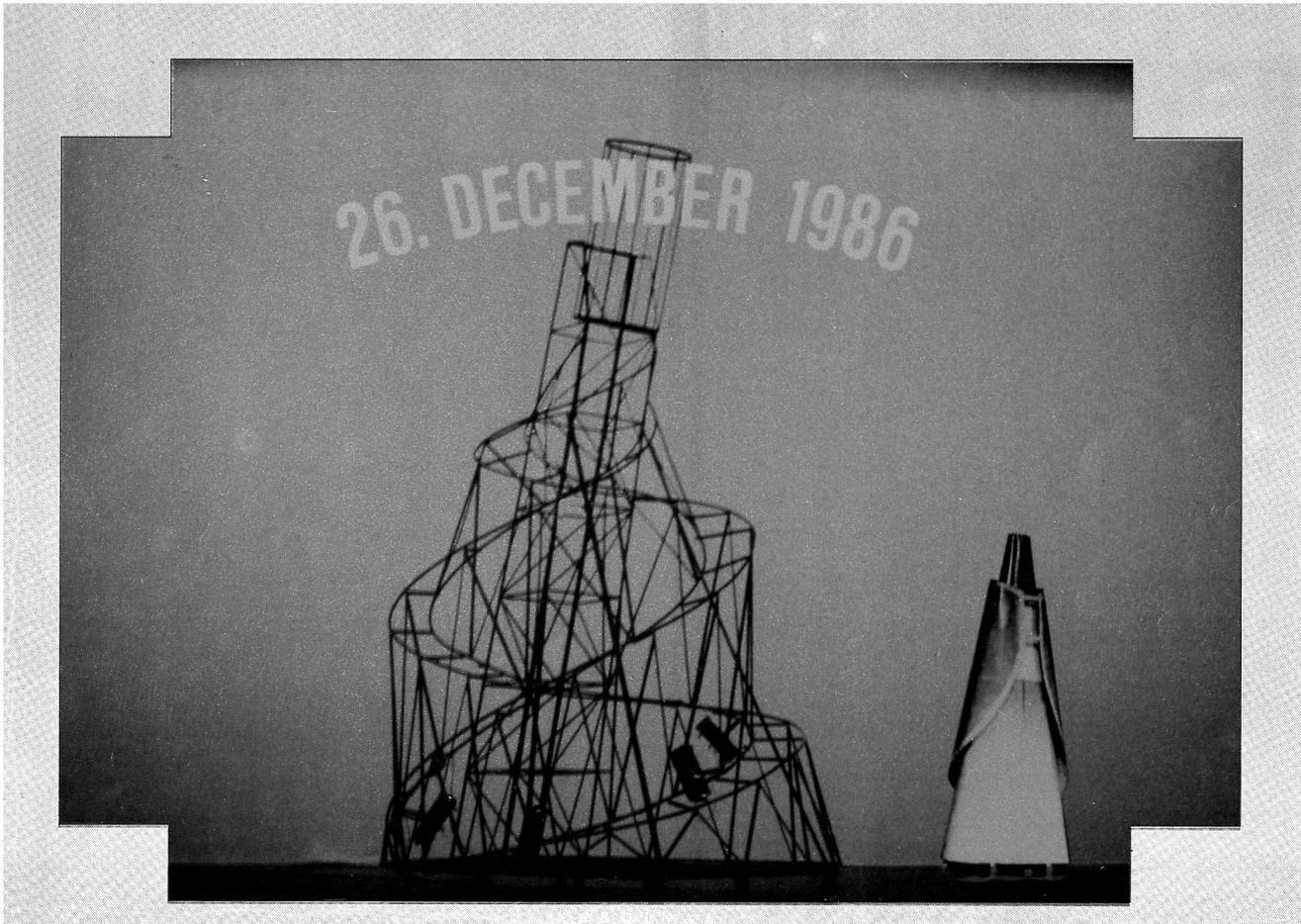
How the neo- and retro-avant-gardes fulfilled the utopian ideas of the avant-gardes

In order to give some preliminary answers to the questions posed in my essay, I will use an interesting quotation about the parallels between the 1920s and 1980s, which shows us how the history of the avant-garde of the 1920s can be seen inspiring its descendants in the 80s both artistically and politically. And producing an effect that caused the history to repeat itself. Aleš Erjavec details this fact as follows:

Musicians and visual artists in the 1980s from various parts of Yugoslavia collaborated and influenced each other strongly. It is perhaps fitting that while the country was falling apart, at a time when hardly anyone on a global scale even mentioned the avant-gardes, its avant-garde artists brought the country together one last time-as they did in the early 1920s when Branko Ve Poljanski published his "Svetokret" in Ljubljana, Micić his "Zenit" in Zagreb, and Černigoj enthusiastically emulated the zenitist discourse²⁴.



6. Matjaž Vipotnik, the poster for Mladinsko Theatre tour in France, 1984. Photo: Archive of Mladinsko Theatre



7. Theater of Sisters Scipion Nasice, *Baptism Under Triglav*, dir. Dragan Živadinov, scenogr. Irwin Group, Ljubljana 1986. Photo: Iconotheque of SLOGI



²⁵ See his manifesto *Delo Zenitizma...*, p. 2.

²⁶ F. Delak, *Mladina, podaj se v borbo*, [in:] *Tank: Reprint of 1927 Edition*, Ljubljana 1987, p. 5.

Thus, it can be said the wheel of history fulfilled some of the utopian ideas of the historical avant-gardes at the end of the 20th century. The retro-avant-gardes of the 1980s and 1990s seemed to re-enact some basic ideas of the constructivist and futurist utopian questions raised by the avant-gardes. Fragmented, deconstructed and appropriated in the global world of exchange they present the foregoing avant-gardes as a lasting source of inspiration and a possible starting point for the work today. The new generations were proud to announce that they are the heirs of the artistic generation of the constructivists like Černigoj that wanted to promote Ljubljana as a centre of the new art, to establish a new bridge between the East and West (Micić spoke about a bridge between “Orient” and “Occident”).²⁵ Or in a highly futurist and constructivist metaphor Ljubljana was the “garage of fast-paced world beauty”, a centre from which “pilots prepare to fly around the world by means of mental machines”²⁶. This metaphor has to be understood in the sense of the “Zenit”–“Tank”

avant-garde notions of the rebirth arriving from the barbarian (south) east, their attempt to revolt against what Marijan Dovič defines as “the ‘asymmetry’ of international artistic lines of force, an attempt to revolutionise the peripherycenter relationship”²⁷. The Slovene constructivists and Serbian zenitists were united by a thought about this asymmetry described with a specifically Balkan black humour by Micić in his 1921 manifesto:

Barbarians are coming
do close do close
but we are going to enter anyway²⁸.

In this sense, what Micić, Delak and Černigoj did, has to be seen as radical attempts to redefine centrality and marginality, to show how (using the argumentation of Diana Mishkova) margins do not merely exist as extensions of the core. The artists from the East-Central Europe acted in the sense of Lotman’s margins with dynamics within the semiosphere. The relation between margins and centers of the semiosphere of the avant-gardes can be described as a spatio-temporal phenomenon, a combination of different tendencies from the East and West, South and Nord, that are in constant dialogue with one another, creating semiotic languages, which are not a simple sum of individual systems, but are characterised as a dynamic interactivity. The artists discussed deliberately chose not to play the role of the supporters of Western narratives and the artificial contexts within which Western institutions present their peripheral art as something never or very rarely taken in its entirety. Thus, they are opting for a specific interpretation of the identity of other cultures and productions without eliminating them with the one-sided and already formed view of the dominant culture. Thus they are mapping a new East Art map, a new, alternative, horizontal geography and history of art.

Słowa kluczowe

marginesy, centrum, awangardy historyczne, retroawangardy, grupa Irwin, Ferdo Delak, Ljubomir Micić

Keywords

margins, center, historical avant-gardes, retro-avant-gardes, Irwin Group, Ferdo Delak, Ljubomir Micić

References

1. **Bru Sascha**, *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–1935: A Portable Guide*, Edinburgh 2018.
2. **Čufer Eda, Irwin**, *NSKState in Time (1992/1993)*, [in:] *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, Ed. L. Hoptman, T. Pospiszył, Assist. M. Braun, C. Tarica, Forew. I. Kabakov, New York 2002.



²⁷ **M. Dovič**, *From Autarky to “Barbarian” Cosmopolitanism: The Early Avant-Garde Movements in Slovenia and Croatia*, [in:] *Mediterranean Modernism: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development*, Ed. **A. J. Goldwyn, R. M. Silverman**, New York 2016, p. 245.

²⁸ **L. Micić**, *The Work of Zenitism*, “Zenit” 1921, No. 8 (of October), p. 3.

3. **Delak Ferdo**, *Mladina, podaj se v borbo*, [in:] *Tank: Reprint of 1927 Edition*, Ljubljana 1987, p. 5.
4. **Dovič Marijan**, *From Autarky to "Barbarian" Cosmopolitanism: The Early Avant-Garde Movements in Slovenia and Croatia*, [in:] *Mediterranean Modernism: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development*, Ed. A. J. Goldwyn, R. M. Silverman, New York 2016.
5. *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Ed. **Irwin**, London 2016.
6. **Erjavec Aleš**, *The Three Avant-Gardes and Their Context: The Early, the Neo, and the Postmodern*, [in:] *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, Ed. D. Djurić, M. Šuvaković, Cambridge–London 2003.
7. **Erjavec Aleš**, **Gržinić Marina**, *Mythical Discoveries, Utopian Spaces, and Post-Socialist Culture*, "Filozofski vestnik" 1993, No. 2.
8. **Erjavec Aleš**, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, Forew. M. Jay, Berkley 2003.
9. **Kosovel Srečko**, *Integrals*, Transl. N. Kocjančič Pokorn, K. Jerin, Ph. Burt, Ljubljana 1998.
10. **Mansbach Steven A.**, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*, Cambridge 1999.
11. **Mićić Ljubomir**, **Goll Yvan**, **Tokin Boško**, *Manifest [...] Zenitizma* (Manifesto of Zenithism), Zagreb 1921.
12. **Miller Tyrus**, *Incomplete Modernities: Historicizing Yugoslavian Avant-Gardes*, "Modernism/Modernity" 2005, No. 4.
13. **Mishkova Diana**, *Spatial Asymmetries: Regionalist Intellectual Projects in East Central Europe in the Interwar Period*, [in:] *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, Ed. M. Jalava, S. Nygård, J. Strang, Leiden–Boston 2018.
14. **Piotrowski Piotr**, *Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde*, [in:] *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, Ed. S. Bru [et al.], Berlin 2009.
15. **Piotrowski Piotr**, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989*, London 2009.
16. **Piotrowski Piotr**, *On the Spatial Turn or Horizontal Art History*, "Umeni/Art" 2008, No. 5.
17. **Šuvaković Miško**, *Avant-gardes in Yugoslavia*, "Filozofski vestnik" 2016, No. 1.
18. **Toporišič Tomaž**, *The New Slovene Theatre and Italian Futurism: Delak, Černigoj and the Historical Avant-garde in Venezia Giulia*, "International Yearbook of Futurism Studies" Vol. 4 (2014).
19. **Žižek Slavoj**, *East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe: On (Un-) Changing Canons and Extreme Avantgardes*, ArtMargins Online, <https://artmargins.com/east-of-art-transformations-in-eastern-europe-qon-un-changing-canons-and-extreme-avantgardesq> (access date: 3.01.2023).

Prof. Tomaž Toporišič, tomaz.toporisc@agrft.uni-lj.si, ORCID: 0000-0001-9636-9635

A dramaturge and theatre theoretician. A professor in Drama and Performance Studies at Academy for Theatre and Faculty of Arts at University of Ljubljana. An author of five books on contemporary performing arts. His essays on the theme brought up herein: *Deconstructive Readings of the Avant-Garde Tradition in Post-Socialist Retro-Avant-Garde Theatre* ([in:] *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, 2013), *The New Slovene Theatre and Italian Futurism: Delak, Černigoj and the Historical Avant-Garde in Venezia Giulia* (2014). His primary interests are political and politicized art; how to put in dialogue theory and practice, thinking on stage / thinking about stage / essay on stage / theoreticised performance art, politics of stage – staging the politics, rhetoric of space.

Summary

TOMAŽ TOPORIŠIČ (University of Ljubljana) / Linking the historical and retro-avant-gardes by questioning the periphery-Centre relationship: the case of Trieste, Ljubljana and Belgrade

The essay outlines two attempts to revolutionize the periphery-centre relationship in Central and Eastern Europe. First belongs to the time of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s. The second to the retro-gardes at the turn of the centuries, that re-enacted some basic ideas of the constructivist and futurist utopian questions. The retro- and post-generations were proud to announce that they are the heirs of the artistic generation of the constructivists and zenitists, that wanted to promote Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade and Trieste as the centres of the new art, to establish a new bridge between the East and West.