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The Venice Biennale and Art in Belgrade in the 1950s. A Contribution to the Study of the Artistic Dialogue between Italy and Serbia¹

Abstract: Throughout the twentieth century the International Art Exhibition Venice Biennale was seen as a major event by the art world of Belgrade and, more broadly, of Serbia and Yugoslavia. After the Second World War this biggest and most important international show of contemporary art provided Belgrade's artists and art critics with an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the latest developments on the international art scene. At the same time, it was used as a platform for the leading figures of Belgrade's artistic and cultural-policy establishment to create, through the exhibitions mounted in the national pavilion, an image of the country's artistic contemporaneity aimed at achieving its desired standing in the West. The attitude of Belgrade's art scene to the Venice Biennale went through a particularly interesting phase in the 1950s. Its transformations offer an opportunity to observe, analyse and expand the knowledge about the changes that marked that turbulent decade in the history of Serbian art, which went a long way from dogmatically exclusive socialist realism to the institutionalization of a high-modernist language as the dominant model. Based on the reconstruction of Yugoslavia's sustained participation in the Venice Biennale (1950–60), this paper analyses the models of the representation of Serbian art in the international context of the Biennale within a broader context of the intensification of Serbian-Italian artistic contacts during the period under study.

Keywords: Venice Biennale, twentieth-century Serbian art, exhibition history, cultural diplomacy, post-war modernism

During the 1950s Belgrade's art scene was undergoing an intensive process of internationalization in line with the liberalization of the country's foreign policy. Among the exhibitions staged in Belgrade were: *Contemporary French Art* (1952), *Le Corbusier* (1953), *A Selection of Dutch Painting* (1953), *Belgian Printmaking* (1954), *Henry Moore – Sculptures and Drawings* (1955), *Contemporary Art in the USA* (1956), *Contemporary Italian Art* (1956), *Contemporary French*

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¹ The paper was presented at the International Scientific Conference *140 years of establishment of diplomatic relations between Italy and Serbia* held at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade, May 31–June 1, 2019.

Art (1958) etc.² At the same time, Yugoslav artists used the opportunity to show their work at various artistic events abroad, among which the International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale stood out as the largest and most important overview of current artistic trends on a global scale. From 1950 the Yugoslav state sent its artists to the Venice Biennale to represent their country with an exhibition in the national pavilion built in 1938.³ Its presence at the event was used as a platform for creating an image of Yugoslavia's artistic up-to-dateness for the purpose of achieving the desired position of the country in the West. A more comprehensive understanding of the attitude of Belgrade's art scene and the Yugoslav cultural policy apparatus to the Venice Biennale in the 1950s requires a brief overview of the situation surrounding the first Biennale organized after the Second World War, in 1948. Yugoslavia at first, at the recommendation of the Communist Party of Italy (CPI),⁴ officially confirmed participation in the event and carried out preparations for it,⁵ but then, less than a month before the opening of the Biennale, cancelled its participation due to – as officially stated – “unforeseen technical reasons”.⁶ Given Yugoslavia's international political situation in 1948, technical reasons probably were not the only reason for its withdrawal, but rather some other factors were also at work, such as the earlier withdrawal of the Soviet Union, which ensued after the electoral defeat of the

² For more, see L. Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast. Srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968* (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet/Fond Vujičić kolekcija, 2010), 64–68.

³ For more on the founding of the Yugoslav pavilion, see A. Bogdanović, “Kraljevina Jugoslavija na Bijenalu u Veneciji 1938. i 1940. godine”, *Zbornik Seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu* 11 (2015), 22–33. For a more detailed account the history of Yugoslav participation at the Venice Biennale, see: A. Ereš, *Jugoslavija na Venecijanskom bijenalu (1938-1990): kulturne politike i politike izložbe* (Novi Sad: Galerija Matice srpske, 2020).

⁴ Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), 314–5–21, Press attaché of the Legation of the FPRY to Italy to the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 Feb. 1948.

⁵ AJ, 314–21–83, Chief of the Department for Art of the Ministry of Education of the PR Croatia to the Committee on Culture and Art of the FPRY Government, 8 Apr. 1948.

⁶ L'Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Fonds *Padiglioni, Atti 1938–1968*, box 20, Letter of the FPRY Legation in Rome to Secretary General of the Biennale of 6 May 1948, states: “Con riferimento alla Sua lettera del 29 aprile a c. ho l'onore d'informarLa che questa Legazione ha inoltrato il materiale allegato alla predetta lettera alle competenti autorità jugoslave, le quali hanno risposto telegraficamente di essere dolenti che per ragioni tecniche imprevedute non sarà possibile agli artisti jugoslavi di partecipare all'Esposizione Biennale di Venezia di quest'anno con le loro opere d'arte”; AJ, 314–21–83, FPRY Legation to the Committee on Culture and Art, Confirmation that the Yugoslav decision to withdraw from participation due to “unforeseen technical difficulties” was presented to the Biennale administration, 8 May 1948.

CPI.⁷ Yugoslav officials had inquired about the Soviet stance on the Biennale and were aware that the USSR would not send its representatives to Venice.⁸ What also contributed to the withdrawal was the insufficiently organized art system in Yugoslavia itself, still in the process of post-war consolidation and lacking the resources to put on a representative exhibition of contemporary art at the international level which would be able to use a new and clearly articulated artistic language of a new Yugoslavia. The latter argument was offered only a year later, in 1949, with reference to the organization of the *Exhibition of the Medieval Art of the Peoples of Yugoslavia* in Paris. Namely, during the preparations for a representative exhibition of Yugoslav art abroad the proposal was made to organize an exhibition of contemporary rather than medieval art. The proposal was rejected by the Ministry of Culture of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY) because "we still have at our disposal only a limited number of representative artworks".⁹ That the lack of a sufficiently representative art production was the reason for the withdrawal from the Biennale is supported by the assumption of Želimir Koščević that the FPRY did not participate in the 1948 Biennale because of a large exhibition of Yugoslav art in the countries of Eastern Europe.¹⁰ He probably had in mind the exhibition *The Painting and Sculpture of the Peoples of Yugoslavia of the 19th and 20th Century* which included a good part of Yugoslav post-war art production and between the beginning of 1947 and mid-1948 made a tour, visiting Moscow, Leningrad, Bratislava, Prague, Warsaw, Krakow and Budapest.¹¹

In spite of Yugoslavia's withdrawal, the Biennale did not go unnoticed by the art public at home, as evidenced by the art historian Grgo Gamulin's review

⁷ For more on the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from the 1948 Biennale, see N. Jachec, *Politics and painting at the Venice Biennale 1948–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 41. It is interesting to note that Czechoslovakia followed a similar pattern in 1950 and 1952. On both occasions, its participation was officially announced and then cancelled due to "technical reasons" just before the opening. This has been attributed to the country's political relations with the Soviet Union which boycotted the Biennale at the time. See V. Wolf, "Czechoslovakia at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s". In *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2016), 345–356.

⁸ AJ, 314–5–21, Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Committee on Culture and Art, 1 Apr. 1948.

⁹ B. Doknić, *Kulturna politika Jugoslavije 1946–1963* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2013), 90.

¹⁰ Koščević only briefly mentions the Yugoslav absence from the 1948 Biennale, claiming that the reason "allegedly was the large exhibition of Yugoslav art in the 'democratic countries' of Eastern Europe", see Ž. Koščević, *Venecijanski Biennale i jugoslavenska moderna umjetnost 1895–1988* (Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba and Grafički zavod Hrvatske 1988), 32, n. 28.

¹¹ The list of 404 artworks shown in this exhibition is available in the catalogue *Slikarstvo i vajarstvo naroda Jugoslavije XIX i XX veka* (Belgrade, 1946).

“Spectres in the lagoons. A report from the 24th Biennale” published in *Književne novine*. This text was publicly read and discussed within the programme of ideological-political and professional edification of the members of the *Union of Visual Artists of Yugoslavia* (Savez likovnih umetnika Jugoslavije – SLUJ) held in Belgrade between April and June 1949. Gamulin’s harsh and partisan criticism of the Biennale as a symbol of the ideological (capitalist) adversary in the face of which the rightness of the doctrine of communist ideology and socialist realism should be asserted has been seen as “one of the best examples of the influence of political art criticism in the age of socialist realism”.¹²

How this text was discussed in Belgrade artistic circles is not known, but the minutes of the Second Plenum of the Board of the SLUJ held on 11 and 12 April 1949 allow us an insight into the debate that offered a few significant arguments in favour of a perception of foreign art which did not conform to the Soviet understanding of socialist realism, and pointed to the need for creating an authentically Yugoslav language for representing socialist reality as “the spirit and the will that inspire people to create a better future life”, or “poetry that guides man into the progress of socialism”, as formulated by the prominent Belgrade painter Petar Lubarda.¹³ Moving away from the Soviet model of socialist realism in art ran in parallel with the shift in Yugoslav foreign policy which, after the Resolution of the Cominform of June 1948, gradually took on a more broad-minded attitude to the influences and values of the West.¹⁴ As far as the attitude of Belgrade’s art public to the Venice Biennale is concerned, this debate is indispensable for a more thorough understanding of Yugoslavia’s participation the following year, 1950.

Yugoslavia made its first post-war appearance at the Venice Biennale in 1950, staging in its pavilion a collective exhibition of Kosta Angeli-Radovani, Gojmir Anton Kos, Antun Augustinčić, Vojin Bakić, Frano Kršinić, Petar Lubarda, Ismet Mujezinović and Vanja Radauš. The works displayed in and around the pavilion used the rhetoric of socialist realism but some nonetheless evaded a direct or unambiguous socialist-realist expression, such as Petar Lubarda’s Montenegrin landscapes painted in 1948–50. The text for the catalogue states that this selection of artworks is an introduction to the current efforts of Yugoslav artists who, “forming part of the overall socialist transformation of the country, are aware that human dignity requires that they devote attention to the

¹² L. Merenik, “1948: Bijenale u Veneciji i jedan primer recepcije izlagačke prakse modern umetnosti”, *Zbornik Seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu V* (2009), 252.

¹³ AJ, 317–80–113, Stenographic minutes, Second Plenum of the Board of the Union of Visual Artists of the FPRY, 11–12 Apr. 1949, pp. 29–35.

¹⁴ B. Doknić, M. F. Petrović and I. Hofman, “Kulturna politika Jugoslavije 1945–1952”. *Zbornik dokumenata*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2009), 28.

efforts of the people on their path of socialism building".¹⁵ The 1950 presentation of contemporary Yugoslav art was based on an ambivalent interpretative matrix which, in the broader context of socialist-realist rhetoric (concerning the active participation of artists in the socialist transformation of society), made room for individual artistic poetics inspired, on the one hand, by the universal humanistic spirit of post-war Europe and, on the other, by the individual artists' formative experiences in West-European centres, i.e. the practices that drew continuity from the tradition of modernist experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This model of representing art may be understood as part of a broader process of developing and consolidating the desired distinctly Yugoslav artistic language in the complex social and political situation of uncertainty immediately after 1948, a language which would go beyond the bounds of the strict socialist-realist rhetoric of the Soviet type. It should be noted here that the curator of the 1950 Yugoslav exhibition in Venice, the writer Petar Šegedin, was instrumental in the process of deconstructing the dogmatic position of socialist realism. His speech at the Second Congress of the Union of Writers of Yugoslavia held in Belgrade in 1949, having provoked intense reactions from the expert public, was decisive for the emergence of a different understanding of the relationship between art and social reality.¹⁶ Šegedin challenged "party-ness" as the main criterion in art evaluation, as well as the artwork conceived of as "a mere reflection of reality". Putting forth the view instead that the source of art was in "the human and natural being" and that the artwork was a fact in itself which produced new meanings and insights, he decisively contributed to the introduction of the concept of autonomy of art, reiterating it in his text for the exhibition catalogue. Yugoslavia's appearance at the 1950 Venice Biennale was, though more in intention than in accomplishment, a sign of the country's gradual moving towards the West-European artistic and cultural sphere as the primary space for the international promotion of Yugoslav art in that period.¹⁷

¹⁵ P. Šegedin, *Padiglione della R.P.F. di Jugoslavia. XXV Biennale Venezia* (Zagreb: Tipografija, 1950), n.p.

¹⁶ For more on the importance of Šegedin's speech, see Lj. Kolečnik, *Između Istoka i Zapada. Hrvatska umjetnost i likovna kritika 50-ih godina* (Zagreb: Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2006), 70–72.

¹⁷ As far as the strategies of opening the country towards the West are concerned, it should be noted that the Council for Science and Culture of the FPRY funded the trip to Venice of students and professors of the Academy of Applied Arts in Ljubljana and the Department of Art History of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. The expenditure was approved by decision of the Council no. 1647 of 6 July 1950 for the Academy in Ljubljana, and no. 3340 of 20 July for the students and professors from Zagreb (AJ, 317–92–133).

The ambivalence Šegedin pointed to when speaking about the relationship between art and politics was expressed more directly in his exhaustive report on the Yugoslav exhibition at the Biennale:

If we went to Venice to oppose frontally all those tendencies in Western artistic life, currently abundant, it is one thing and it is another thing if we wanted to be met with understanding. I am writing this report in the belief that we wanted to present our own artistic efforts so as to be met with understanding, and not only from the part of the public who look at things only in terms of subject matter and content but also from those who appreciate and evaluate artistic expression.¹⁸

Šegedin's report also offered particularly important observations about the Yugoslav exhibition in the context of Yugoslavia's positioning in relation to the Western public, problematizing the display of Augustinčić's monumental statue of Marshal Tito: it was "impossible, in these times, in Italy, to expect even the most objective of critics to separate the aspect of political content from the sculptural figural aspect", and so it "appeared political and one can only imagine how distorted in the eyes of the part of the public who is unsympathetic or barely sympathetic towards us".¹⁹ The predominant "academic-naturalistic" expression of the Yugoslav exhibition, as described by Šegedin, was a reason for the lack of understanding on the part of the critics and the absence of exhibition reviews in the international press.

The report on the work of the Department for Scientific and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries issued by the federal Council for Science and Culture in 1950, on the other hand, spoke more directly of the exhibition in a political context, paying most of its attention to the relationship between the Yugoslav exhibition and the Italian public. It emphasized that amidst the anti-Yugoslav campaign conducted in Italy, the political circumstances and the feel of the Biennale ought to have been taken into account:

Our part of the exhibition is politically inappropriate because the abovementioned specificities have not been taken into account. In the ambience of the Biennale, it appeared too obtrusive, too propagandistic (in the narrow sense) and, if one may say so, too Partisan. It is the motif of our Partisan struggle that is emphasized, and the motif of post-war construction, our cultural strivings and breadth in the selection of artistic themes are muted. It is understandable that this pronounced fighting spirit caused resentment in many Italian visitors of the exhibition, unfavourable to our country. The Italian petit bourgeois and

¹⁸ AJ, 317–92–133, P. Šegedin, *Report on our participation in the Biennale exhibition*, 7 Aug. 1950.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

intellectual had a feeling that our exhibition sought to remind them of their inglorious past, and amidst the struggle over Trieste...²⁰

The central question that the experience of Yugoslavia's first post-war appearance at the Venice Biennale raised was the purpose of the exhibition in the context of the country's international representation. As a result, preparations for the next international exhibition in Venice in 1952 began much earlier, as part of a more comprehensive, planned reorganization and strategic (re)positioning of Yugoslav cultural diplomacy, which in those years was undergoing the process of transition and reorientation towards the West, in line with the broader shift in foreign policy. In 1950 a conference was held in Belgrade on the country's international propaganda in the area of culture and art. It was concluded that the presentation of Yugoslav culture in the world was very important for the promotion of the country, especially in view of the Soviet efforts to isolate Yugoslavia.²¹ The previous rhetoric decrying the "decadent art of capitalist and imperialist Western culture" was toned down: Ivo Sarajčić, the federal Assistant Minister of Science and Culture, stated in his speech that there were things in the West "in all fields of activity and art from which we can learn much" and that "decadence, and of the kind that comes through in the West, must be known to us if we want to understand its culture and art fully, and we should not fear it will have an adverse effect on us."²² Changing the image of Yugoslavia in Western eyes was the main concern in laying down the basis for cultural policy strategies, which is yet another confirmation that the perception of the West as the unavoidable corrective of exhibitionary policy and its models of representation is vital to understanding the exhibitionary activity abroad of this period. These political decisions were crucial for participation in the 1952 Venice Biennale, especially in the light of the fact that in order to carry out an effective international promotion of Yugoslav culture, with Western Europe as the primary target, the federal budget allocation for culture rose from 2.6% to 4% in 1952, and most of it was intended for travelling abroad.²³ Besides, in the early 1950s, the artists of Belgrade and Yugoslavia saw the Venice Biennale as the only big exhibition abroad worthy of participating in, which was also the official stance of the SLUJ.²⁴

²⁰ AJ, 317–86–120, Report on the work of the Department for Scientific and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries in 1950, Belgrade 1950/51.

²¹ M. Perišić, *Diplomatija i kultura. Jugoslavija: prelomna 1950. Jedno istorijsko iskustvo* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije /Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2013), 33.

²² After Perišić, *Diplomatija i kultura*, 34.

²³ On this in detail, Doknić, *Kulturna politika Jugoslavije*, 122–124.

²⁴ The view of the Venice Biennale as the only big and established art exhibition abroad worthy of sending national representatives to was expressed by Vinko Grdan, secretary of the

Yugoslavia's representation at the Venice Biennale in 1952 and 1954 was organized in a cultural and political atmosphere where more attention was paid to planning. Preparations for the 1952 Biennale began much earlier and the suggestion of Italian experts was taken into account that the selection should rely on a smaller number of artists who would thus be able to show more of their work.²⁵ The commission composed of prominent figures of the Yugoslav art world, set up under the auspices of the federal Council for Science and Culture,²⁶ opted for the artists whose work was marked by an intimist note: Predrag Milošavljević, Nedeljko Gvozdenović, Emanuel Vidović, Antun Motika, Gabrijel Stupica, Risto Stijović, Petar Palavičini and Zdenko Kalin.²⁷ The nature of the Yugoslav selection was considerably different from the previous one both in idea and in subject matter, which in particular goes for the fact that, apart from recent art production, it included artworks created in the 1930s. The inclusion of interwar artworks and the choice of intimism as the conceptual framework of the exhibition established a direct and clear link to the tradition of Yugoslav interwar modernism, which had been the framework for the country's representation at the Biennale in 1938 and 1940. The shift in the strategy of Yugoslavia's representation in Venice was the consequence of twofold (re)positioning. On the one hand, the intention was to be more in tune with the conception of the Biennale which in that period promoted the legacy of the modern art of the first half of the twentieth century, re-establishing continuity after the Second World War. On the other hand, this exhibition concept was part of the changes

Union of Visual Artists of Yugoslavia, on behalf of the Union, see AJ, 317–86–120, Grdan to the Council for Science and Culture of the Government of the FPRY, 7 Sept. 1951.

²⁵ Department for Scientific and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries of the Council for Science and Culture of the FPRY government was intent on paying more attention to propaganda at the 1952 Biennale, aiming at a more active presence and more favourable positioning within the conception and competition framework of the event, but due to the faulty communication with the Legation in Rome, which was supposed to pass the plans on to the ministry in Belgrade, preparations for the Yugoslav appearance in Venice did not follow the desired course. Vlada Novosel, chief of the Department, wrote quite exhaustively about that, see AJ, 317–92–133, Department for Scientific and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries to Vladimir Velebit, FPRY Minister in Rome, 8 Apr. 1952.

²⁶ Members of the commission were: Frano Kršinić, master sculptor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, full member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, and one of the Yugoslav representatives at the 1940 and 1950 Biennales; Marino Tartaglia, professor of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb and one of the Yugoslav representatives at the 1940 Biennale; Gojmir Anton Kos, professor of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana and one of the Yugoslav representatives at the 1950 Biennale; and Momčilo Stevanović, curator of the National Museum in Belgrade.

²⁷ AJ, 317–86–120, Exhaustive report, Our participation in XXXI Biennale in Venice, 4 July 1952, p. 3.

in exhibitionary practice in Serbia and Yugoslavia which was going through the process of “exculpation of interwar Yugoslav art anathematized in the post-1945 period”, with “exhibitions heralding the changes that would take place in Serbian and Yugoslav art after 1950”.²⁸ Continuity with the legacy of interwar art is also visible in the inclusion in the preparations and realization of the 1952 Biennale exhibition of artists who had represented the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Venice in 1940, such as Predrag Milosavljević, Marino Tartaglia and Frano Kršinić.

The strained Yugoslav-Italian relation over the Trieste crisis resulted in a relative lack of interest in the Yugoslav position at the Biennale as opposed to the countries which maintained stable relations with Italy. The Yugoslav representatives were aware of the fact, but they saw their presence at the opening as very important for establishing contacts with foreign colleagues and arranging for future exhibitions, hoping that the promotion in artistic circles of the exhibition mounted in the national pavilion might ensure better press coverage and, possibly, consideration for some of the awards.²⁹

The Yugoslav pavilion at the 1954 Biennale, apart from Sreten Stojanović's sculptures as the focus of the exhibition, showed a selection of recent works by thirty printmakers.³⁰ The Yugoslavs had been informed timely that the thematic focus of the Biennale would be on surrealism, but the Yugoslav concept did not reflect the Biennale Board's suggestions. Instead, the central place in the national pavilion was given to a retrospective of Sreten Stojanović's work, who expressed a distaste and lack of understanding for the dominant trend at the Biennale, considering surrealism to negate the essential qualities of sculpture or painting, and claiming that abstract art

throws many of its protagonists into a state of panic, because it is difficult to keep drawing from inside oneself something that does not produce a natural form. Hence dots here, cubes there, lines, thin or thick, paints, transparent or

²⁸ Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast*, 65.

²⁹ Šepić's report from the Biennale reveals that its officials and other Italian art experts intimated to the Yugoslav emissaries that the Yugoslav exhibition would be difficult to promote to the public on account of poor political relations between Italy and Yugoslavia, see AJ, 317–86–120, Exhaustive report, Our participation in XXXI Biennale in Venice, 4 July 1952, pp. 9–10.

³⁰ The printmakers who exhibited their works (most of which were created between 1952 and 1954) were: Petar Bibić, Vesna Borčić, Lazar Vujaklija, Vilko Gliha Selan, Zdenko Gradiš, Riko Debenjak, Božidar Jakac, Boško Karanović, Albert Kinert, Tone Kralj, France Kralj, Miha Maleš, Mario Maskareli, Mirjana Mihać, France Mihelič, Ankica Oprešnik, Mihailo Petrov, Marjan Pogačnik, Marij Pregelj, Zlatko Prica, Božidar Prodanović, Nikola Reiser, Josip Restek, Josip Roca, Vilim Svečnjak, Maksim Sedej, Mladen Srbinović, Dragoslav Stojanović Sip, Stojan Čelić, Dušan Džamonja and Aleksandar Šivert.

dense, motifs from bags, carpets, spheres, bent iron, some strange forms with or without hollows, polished or unpolished.³¹

In the context of the creation of a new image of Yugoslavia through participation in the Biennale, it is pertinent at this point to look at how the Yugoslav pavilion in 1954 was received in the West. Western art critics mostly emphasized that the display of prints showed a relative openness of the Yugoslav regime to contemporary and formally freer artistic tendencies, making this selection considerably different from what could be seen in the pavilions of the Soviet bloc countries, whereas the sculptural part of the exhibition was perceived as more traditional, naturalistic artistic expression. Expectedly enough, foreign critics were not necessarily of one mind, and prominent Italian critics wrote about the Yugoslav selection as follows: Gillo Dorfles described it as an example of the most backward type of academism, whereas Roberto Longhi found that the Yugoslav prints brought a true cultural surprise.³²

Yugoslavia's appearances at the Biennale in 1952 and 1954, although prepared in keeping with the new orientation of the state's foreign cultural policy marked by its opening to the West, should not be seen as the only and unilinear examples of pursuing this political agenda. This cultural-policy strategy is strongly reflected in the intentions and preparations of these exhibitions. Their realization and effect show, however, that a clear-cut exhibitionary strategy for the international scene was not fully defined yet, in part due to technical and organizational inconsistencies, in part to the tension in political relations between Italy and Yugoslavia, and also because of some compromises made in the selection of artists. This is why these exhibitions may in a broader art-historical sense be seen as a transitional model of post-war modernism representation in international context, its main features being: the establishment of continuity with the local and, through it, West-European modernist legacy of the interwar period, which suggested that the Serbian and Yugoslav cultural milieu shared a common, European, experience of modernity, and its policy of openness to the West.

From 1956 the organization of Yugoslav participation in the Venice Biennale became the responsibility of the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. As a body of centralized government, it oversaw the conception of the exhibitions in the Yugoslav pavilion in keeping with a

³¹ S. Stojanović, "Smotra likovne umetnosti 32 nacije", *Borba*, 4 July 1954, quoted after L. Trifunović, *Sreten Stojanović* (Belgrade: Galerija Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti, 1973), 54.

³² G. Dorfles, "La XXVII: Biennale e la crisi surrealista", *Aut aut*, 4 July 1954; R. Longhi, "Grossi premi grosse sorprese", *L'Europeo*, 4 July 1954 (after AJ, 559–92–206, FPRY Legation in Rome to Committee on Cultural Links with Foreign Countries, 21 Jan. 1955).

clearly defined foreign cultural policy, marked by openness to the world and the dynamic and systematic promotion of Yugoslav art and culture aimed at creating a positive image of the country in international context. In a thus regulated cultural and political climate, the character of the exhibitions in the Yugoslav pavilion was shaped by expert commissions composed of prominent figures of Yugoslav culture, using the principle of equal participation of artists from major art centres, primarily Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. An important selection criterion was their previous accomplishments on the international scene, because winning one of the awards was one of the main goals of exhibiting at the Biennale. From the mid-1950s, artists from Belgrade had been taking part in other big art events in the world, such as the Sao Paulo Art Biennale, the Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries, the Tokyo Biennale and the Paris Youth Biennale, but the Venice Biennale was still seen as the key event for international artistic promotion.

In the strategies and work plan of the Commission, art exhibitions were recognized as an important instrument for presenting Yugoslav culture abroad, as clearly formulated in its work plan:

Exhibitions offer a good opportunity for systematically and continually acquainting the international public with the culture-historical and artistic traditions and values of our peoples as well as with contemporary achievements and accomplishments. They should be planned for a period of several years, and conceived as interrelated, so that they complement one another and logically expand the areas of culture in their approach.³³

Apart from being recognized as an important vehicle for pursuing Yugoslav foreign cultural policy, art exhibitions were given a clearly defined function with regard to the global geopolitical situation after the war. This was articulated with precision in 1960 by Ivo Vejvoda, a prominent diplomat serving as Yugoslav ambassador in London at the time, in his address to the Art Exhibitions Committee, a body of the federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries:

[...] I would ask this Committee to keep mainly these three areas in mind when making plans, which can be quite compatible politically with our interests too – these are the West, the East and the neutrals. As for the West, I believe it is no exaggeration to say that it is there that we can achieve the most at this moment. It is in the West that we are struggling to achieve some recognition as a nation which has a cultural history, which has a culture of its own that did not come into being only after this revolution and war, but which is of long standing and of which the West knows little or nothing.

³³ AJ, 559–8–20, Work plan for 1955 of the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, p. 3.

I believe that the exhibition of modern art and the exhibition of frescoes are tremendously important in the struggle for the affirmation of Yugoslavia as a nation which exists on the cultural map of the world, because – let me repeat – the West knows little or nothing about it. [...] So, this struggle for our affirmation is tremendously important and artistic events can be of tremendous help. [...] More can be achieved in the West than in the East. In the third part of the world – among the neutrals – everything is still vacillating. We ourselves don't know what would be the most suitable things to represent our country with in Asia and Africa. So, I have no doubts that at this moment these artistic events probably are of the greatest importance for us in the West in the foreign-policy, propagandistic, sense.³⁴

The Western political and cultural sphere was the most important reference point for evaluating and confirming the contemporaneity of Yugoslav art and society. In the political agenda of the country's leadership in that period this meant that the practices of cultural representation abroad, in this concrete case art exhibitions, were supposed to send forth the image of an open society which communicated with the West in the universal language of contemporaneity, while at the same time being the inheritor of a particular culture-historical legacy. The principle of international promotion of Yugoslav art based on a combination of the universal, contemporary, and the particular, local, on the re-signification and transformation of the local through a formal semantic framework of the universal (post-war international modernism), was the backbone of the modernist model of representing Yugoslav art abroad in the second half of the 1950s. This model corresponded to the ideological and conceptual framework of the Venice Biennale which operated as a platform that cultivated a particular form of experience within which the artists were supposed to represent the cultural (and national) setting they were coming from and which they, by fitting into the concept of the Biennale, transcended and, hence, acted internationally. In other words, to be recognized as an exponent of the international art scene, the artists were expected to speak a global language (of post-war modernism) in order to express the representative distinctiveness of the cultural milieu they came from.³⁵

The model of representation used at the Biennale from 1956 meant the creation of a panoramic overview of Yugoslav artistic contemporaneity based on significant individual contributions resulting from modernist artistic explorations. The model was flexible enough to be able both to reconcile the differences emerging on the Yugoslav art scene and, by showing the heterogeneity

³⁴ AJ, 559–84–189, Stenographic notes, First meeting of the Fine Arts Committee of the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 14 Nov. 1960, pp. 31–32.

³⁵ C. A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 96.

of art production, to convey the idea of the freedom and openness of Yugoslav society. In the case of Yugoslavia's representation at the Biennale, this model resolved the dilemma laid out in Šegedin's report on the 1950 Biennale in favour of the definitive reorientation to the West as the space of primary interest for the promotion of Yugoslav art, its protagonists and institutions. Between 1956 and 1960 the Yugoslav representatives at the Biennale from the art scene of Belgrade were renowned and established artists: Miodrag B. Protić (1956), Lazar Vujaklija (1956), Olga Jevrić (1958) and Petar Lubarda (1960). The same period saw an intensified artistic exchange between Yugoslavia and Italy: the large exhibition *Contemporary Italian Art – Painting and Sculpture* was opened in Belgrade in December 1956, and young Yugoslav artists presented their work in Milan at the exhibition *Giovani artisti jugoslavi* the same year.

A particularly interesting case in the context of Italian-Serbian artistic dialogue is the inclusion of the young sculptor Olga Jevrić in the Yugoslav selection at the 1958 Venice Biennale, which was in tune with the dominant climate of art informel. The selection of a young artist such as Olga Jevrić was not the usual practice of the Art Exhibitions Committee which operated under the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and as a rule sent established artists to Venice. Olga Jevrić was selected at the suggestion the Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles made to the curator of the Yugoslav exhibition Aleksa Čelebonović. Namely, Dorfles came to Belgrade in 1956 within the programme of lectures on Italian art organized by the Yugoslav section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). During his stay, he visited the atelier of Olga Jevrić, who was preparing her first solo exhibition, *Spatial Compositions*, scheduled for the following year at the Gallery of the Association of Visual Artists of Serbia (Udruženje likovnih umetnika Srbije/ULUS) in Belgrade. Dorfles was pleasantly surprised with her work, and his reaction influenced Čelebonović's decision to propose her for participation at the Venice Biennale the following year.³⁶ Jevrić's appearance in Venice was met with a very positive response from foreign critics, receiving the attention never given to a Yugoslav artist before (she showed two *Compositions* created in 1956/7, three *Proposals for Monuments* from 1957, and a few smaller sculptures from 1957). Positive reviews came from, among others: Enrico Crispolti, Gillo Dorfles, Giuseppe Marchiori, Charles Delloye and Alain Jouffroy, emphasizing the authenticity of her sculptural method (Dorfles), powerful expressivity resulting from her handling the relationship between form and material (Marchiori), and ranking her among the most interesting new figures on the sculptural scene (Delloye).³⁷

³⁶ After J. Denegri, *Olga Jevrić* (Belgrade: TOPY/Vojnoizdavački zavod, 2005), 83.

³⁷ Olga Jevrić's work was reviewed in the following texts: G. Dorfles, "La scultura straniera alla Biennale", *Domus*, 1958, 347; E. Crispolti, "Per un bilancio della Biennale '58", *Il*

Her noted appearance in Venice opened the door to European artistic circles, and her work was included in a few overviews of contemporary sculpture and exhibitions abroad. Olga Jevrić's success is an exception in Yugoslavia's representation at the Venice Biennale which reveals and confirms the workings of this international art forum as regards the recognition of current art trends and the moulding of tastes. Although the advisory bodies involved in Yugoslav cultural policy sought to achieve success at the Biennale by relying on the quality criteria dictated by the domestic art scene, the appreciation coming from the actors of the European art world, especially those who held prominent positions, in this case Dorfler's suggestion to Čelebonović, was decisive for achieving visibility in Venice.

* * *

The presence of the Yugoslav state at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s allows us an insight both into rapid transformations in the art world in the country and into the changing strategy of international promotion and positioning of Yugoslav art. This period saw three successive models of Yugoslav artistic representation: 1) the socialist-realist model, presented at the 1950 Biennale; 2) the transitional modernist model characterized by a reliance on continuity with interwar art, presented in 1952 and 1954; and 3) the high-modernist model, used from 1956, which achieved the desired internationalization of Yugoslav art. Continuous participation in the Venice event and the reception by the Italian professional public of the exhibitions put on in the Yugoslav pavilion were very important for the described development of Yugoslavia's policies designed for the representation of its art abroad, which was taking place in accordance with the goals of Yugoslav foreign policy. The dialogue with the Italian artistic milieu through the presence at the Venice Biennale was especially significant for Belgrade artists as a point from which they acquainted themselves with current art trends on an international scale and also as a stepping stone to international visibility.

taccuino delle arti, 1958, 32–33; G. Marchiori, "La XXIX Biennale di Venezia", *Art International*, 1958, 6–7; A. Jouffroy, "La pavillon yougoslave", *Arts* 657, 1958; Charles Delloye, "La sculpture à la XXIX Biennale de Venise", *Aujourd'hui*, 1958, 19. A complete bibliography, including her appearance in Venice, is available in Denegri, *Olga Jevrić*, 183. The press in the country also informed about the response to her work in the foreign press, see M. P. "Odjeci Bijenala: poznati svetski kritičari o skulpturi Olge Jevrić", *NIN*, 14 Dec. 1958, p. 8.

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