



**Exhibiting Illustration In Croatia:
From The Concept To The Biennial Manifestation (2000-2010)**

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Abstract: The article discusses the need and possibilities of arranging a concept of exhibiting illustration in Croatia in an international context considering past experiences of worldwide manifestations, contemporary quality of illustrator's production and future perspectives of that kind of approaches.

Key words: exhibition, biennale, illustration, Croatia.

Introduction

Whenever I started discussing about the exhibitions of Croatian illustrations held since 2000 I remembered the need to organise next exhibition of the same kind in Zagreb, Croatia, in the Klovićevi dvori Gallery. I always highlighted the quality of current Croatian production of illustrations as was a basic starting point, which needed to be substantiated by a critical and scholarly gallery presentation. The cycle of exhibitions in the Gradec Gallery on Katarinin Square 5, also in Zagreb, under the name *Croatian Illustration and Illustrators* I planned as three or four exhibitions a year to fill an exhibition and gallery vacancy. The exhibitions managed to accomplish these goals in the first and only year when they were held (2002). There was a retrospective presentation of the illustrations of Ivan Vitez which consisted of a selection of eight hundred illustrations, the exhibition *Pictographs of Words* by Vjekoslav Vojo Radoičić, which also had a great success outside Zagreb, and the retrospective of Rudi Stipković. Some art critics, especially Branka Hlevnjak, Marina Tenžera and Barbara Vujanović, recognised and wrote about the scope, limitations and aims of these first exhibitions – to encompass, evaluate, represent, and provide a stylistic syntax... not only the language of illustrations for children and young people, but also the wider context of illustration as an art form, including its history. I tried to affirm the scholarly approach to caricature supported by the known professor Frano Dulibić. Also I tried to affirm the synthetic approach to the strip cartoon supported by, recently gone art and music critic Darko Glavan, including exhibited the art layout of books, frontispieces etc. However, as it is simpler and faster, here in Croatia, and probably worldwide, to reach the user through the better-paved approach of illustrated magazines, the print and already-existing regular events originally instituted for graphic design, only the best illustrators remained devoted to the children's



book, libraries and book publishers for children, book fairs and work on commission. I hoped that the cycle would be developed into an international event with a dynamic of happy returns.

First period (2004-2006)

In 2004 the Gradec Gallery closed to the public for objective reasons, and thanks to the support of some Croatian curators, art historians, artists, illustrators, writers and specialists in books for children, in 2005 preparations already began in the Klovićevi dvori Gallery for a biennial exhibition of illustrations to be held in the ground-floor exhibition halls and the lapidarium. The popularity of new media in illustrations for children was growing rapidly, and this, combined with the activities of Croatian publishers seen in recent years, strengthened the decision to hold the first exhibition as soon as possible, in accord with the rhythm of kindred events in Europe. I must mention, as a curiosity, that Cvijeta Job, a famous Croatian female artist and illustrator has not got the retrospective exhibition in Zagreb until 2003, in the Ulrich Gallery, although her works were first shown in 1937 in Split, and in 1967 she won a diploma at the international exhibition of illustrations in Bratislava. Another curiosity is the non-existence of an entry for illustration in the *Encyclopaedia of Croatian Fine Arts*.

All this shows that there was no systematic approach and no well established concept concentrating exclusively on the selection and presentation of illustrations in a particular gallery. The continuity and tradition of book illustration in Croatia was not a priority at the first Croatian biennial of illustrations, although this too could have been presented in a large retrospective exhibition that would cover the heritage from the illuminations in medieval Slav manuscripts to bibliographic editions and the visual and textual perfection and “abundance of data” offered by the newest electronic publications. For many years the 1986 exhibition *The Written Word in Croatia* in the Museum and Gallery Centre, “quotations” from which still sound convincing and are still topical, remained a model for the size, organisation, realisation and value of scholarly and gallery presentations of this kind of material. It is not unimportant that some countries, our neighbours even, have for many years had biennial events devoted to their illustrators in the international context, like Slovenia in Ljubljana, Serbia in Belgrade... Illustration is today taught at the Zagreb Academy of Fine Arts, at the department of graphic art there are many graduate works in illustration which should be seen, either published in a book or shown at exhibitions as unpublished proposals. Today we can observe the complexity



of illustration production in Croatia inside an institution of higher education, as part of the teaching methods of an excellent teacher, the illustrator Svjetlan Junaković. The First Biennial, held from 6 June 2006 to 30 July 2006 in the exhibition halls of the Klovićevi dvori Gallery, presented the work of contemporary Croatian illustrators in an international context and was a prologue of the future growing turnout of foreign artists. The criteria were tradition in exhibiting illustrations, peak execution in the applied arts and many years of successful cooperation. The reasons for inviting foreign art historians to act as curators laid, in the first place, in the financial restrictions of the first event, existing personal contacts and the belief that it made no sense for a serious gallery to promote the work of Croatian illustrators without at the same time making it possible to compare their work with that of foreign artists. For the first time I made a context of five national selections represented by artists and artist illustrators, chosen by art historians: Barbara Brathova (Slovakia), Karin Gavassa (Italy), Ranka Javor (Croatia), Luise Kloos (Austria), Farideh Khalatbaree (Iran) and Nina Pirnat Spahić (Slovenia) besides twenty Croatian illustrators.

The Second Period (2006-2008)

The Second Croatian Biennial of Illustration elaborated further on the subjects, experiences and achievements of the First Biennial and took into account suggestions made by the illustrators themselves, all of which has broadened the content of the exhibition. I have expanded its range to include new fields of illustration, so the second exhibition contained book, newspaper, children's and commercial illustration. The experiences gained at the first exhibition through the personal impressions of the artist-illustrators, a round table discussion on illustration and the lectures of two invited teachers together with a review of collections of printed material, have led me to change the conception of the second exhibition which I have extended to other forms of illustration besides those for children, although the latter still remain the most numerous.

The International Context

Comparison with the work of foreign artists became even more important at the Second Biennial of Illustration, to which all the countries mentioned above were invited to participate with different selectors, and also some new countries. Italy was represented by Leo Pizzol, Director of the International Exhibition of Children's Book Illustrations in Sarmede,



an expert on the Italian art scene and initiator of international art workshops of illustration. Iran was represented by Lili Hayeri Yazdi, head of the programme for presenting Iranian illustrators abroad within Kanoon, a special institute for the development of artistic talents and creativity among children and young adults in Tehran, and with the support of the Iranian Cultural Centre in Zagreb. The Slovenian selection was prepared, in the organisation of Cankarjev dom, by the art historian Tanja Mastnak from Ljubljana. From the beginning the Slovenian selection was planned as representing not only children's but also popular-science illustration. The Hungarian selection was organised by the free-lance curator Gyongyver Horvath from Budapest according to the same principle. The Slovak selection was again made by Barbara Brathova from Bratislava because of her many years of experience in the preparation of biennial exhibitions of illustrations at Bibiana and the People's Hall in Bratislava. Luise Kloos from Graz is an artist whose international projects, many of which were realised in Croatia, gather all the relevant Austrian illustrators. The Russian selection was made from among artists affiliated, as well-known illustrators, with the Moscow Association of Artists and Gyorgy Mahashvili wrote a critical introductory text. For the first time, in a selection both traditional and innovative, we had the opportunity of seeing in Zagreb original works by Russian artists, some of whom illustrated what are certainly the most beautiful works of world literature. The Israeli selection was basically concentrated on book illustration, not only of children's books but also of those for adults and it was prepared by Liliana Livneh (thanks to the recent cooperation in exhibitions between the Cities of Zagreb and Tel Aviv). During the jury's work on selecting illustrations by Croatian artists they encountered the works of three illustrators from Serbia who had on their own initiative submitted their works in answer to the published Croatian competition. Because of the art quality of the illustrations they sent, I included Serbian illustrations as an addition to the foreign selection.

The Conclusion

In my opinion, the second biennial exhibition of illustrations in the Klovićevi dvori Gallery was important as a continuation of international exhibition cooperation, in the first place of curators and artists and the establishment of lasting, close and valuable communication. The most important thing that it emphasized was the fact of loosing magazines and newspapers illustration in Croatia. While book illustrators are in the first place



expected to imaginatively interpret the text, newspaper illustrators are expected to give both an interpretation and their own comment, to provide a pictorial angle for the text. Newspaper illustration had to be a visually striking rendering of a current theme with the purpose of additionally awaking interest in the newspaper's or magazines topical texts. Unfortunately, in Croatia illustration has almost disappeared from the daily and weekly press, pushed aside by the view that its time has passed and that today the only place for illustration is in the confines of publications for children. Also the history of illustration in Croatia (as yet unstudied and neglected), which shows a constant advance in printing culture, exceptional contributions by artists, and fruitful cooperation of illustration editors and graphic editors. This is how things were until digitalisation speeded up the printing process and proportionately decreased the quality of contents, texts, language culture, graphic culture, and led to the almost complete rejection of illustration as a remnant of the past. Today many illustrators here and everywhere partly draw their illustrations on paper and then finish them off electronically, and sometimes they draw them directly on the computer in various combinations of electronic and traditional tools. To this trend we can connect the appearance of illustrators and agencies that offer so-called stock illustrations, collections of "copy-paste" illustrations accessible on the Internet, arranged according to subject, from which the necessary illustration can be picked. In this moment unfortunately, in Croatia, all the newspapers and magazines seemed to be very similar or identical as a result of the trend of "cut and paste" journalism showing that photography is faster and more effective than illustration. I have proved with two international exhibitions that quality illustration should have found a place alongside good photography. Today's printed media in Croatia maybe have no interest in the better identity, but they should carry on quality art comments in the form of contemporary illustrations.

Third Croatian Biennale of Illustration centred on a different concept and with new jury members led us to new conclusions. As the illustrators adapted to the specific demands of each of the separate events their work introduced new art "trends". We have recognised the finest young artists who included in their CV's participation at the First Croatian Biennale of Illustration, where they established lasting international contacts. These contacts led to interesting subject-matter, curator experiences and stimulating discussions with publishers and at international bodies, launched round tables on illustration as an independent art discipline and accompanying art workshops. The reduced funding for this exhibition led to the complete abolishment of foreign selections. Without being able to engage foreign curators, I



had to rely on the artists' motivation and confidence gained earlier to respond to the invitation sent to them via their art associations and art historians we have collaborated with, via other artists and the web pages of the event, aware that there will be no substantial financial prizes. Another novelty was the change in the size – instead of the 700x500 mm permitted on the first occasion, as guarantee of artistic “freedom” in a larger-than-print size; works were limited to 290x220 mm. However, this finance-based change showed itself stimulating and did not affect the number of computer-processed illustrations submitted. A considerable number of fine drawings and prints in various techniques were submitted to the competition – pencil, Indian ink, lithographs, watercolours and others, without the small size in any way harming the art quality of the works. The works of 206 illustrators from the following countries were submitted to the competition: Austria, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Italy, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Therefore the conclusion should be made according the great success of the minority action – Croatian Biennale survived. How? With the support given to my biennale through its encouraging world wide reception, for which I would especially like to thank enthusiasts such were Barbara Brathova, Gyongyver Horvath, Olga Ionaitis, Luise Kloos, Leili Hayeri Yazdi, Farideh Khalatbaree, Nina Pirnat Spahić, Julija Panipartova, Claudia Sonnago, Virág Jenó and many others, regardless of their own personal experience in the promotion of illustration as an art discipline. Their support is a constant and irreplaceable treasure in the network of contacts between experts and lovers of illustration.

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