CURATORIAL PRACTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE: THE POPUP PROJECT IN OSIJEK (2012–2017)

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Abstract

Curatorial practice has become one of the defining paradigms of contemporary exhibition-making, profoundly reshaping the presentation, interpretation, and mediation of contemporary art since the 1960s. While its development has been conditioned by changing historical and socio-economic circumstances, it has also been shaped by the specific cultural environments in which curatorial initiatives emerge and operate.

This article examines the POPUP project, an independent exhibition platform established in Osijek in 2012, as a case study of contemporary curatorial practice in Croatia. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of institutional critique and new institutionalism, it analyses the curatorial methodologies developed through the project's thirty-four exhibitions between 2012 and 2017. Particular attention is given to the ways in which POPUP redefined exhibition-making by activating alternative urban spaces, encouraging collaborative curatorial models, and fostering new relationships between artists, institutions, and audiences.

The paper argues that POPUP not only challenged established museum and gallery conventions within the local cultural context but also demonstrated how independent curatorial initiatives can function as agents of institutional transformation and cultural innovation. As such, the project represents a significant contribution to the development of contemporary curatorial practice in Croatia and offers a valuable perspective on the relationship between institutional critique, exhibition-making, and independent cultural production.

Keywords: Curatorial practice, institutional critique, new institutionalism, independent art scene, POPUP, Osijek

Curatorial Practice: The Formation of a Critical Position

From a historical perspective, the origins of curatorial practice can be traced to the 1960s, although many of the patterns of curatorial activity associated with contemporary curatorial practice can already be identified earlier in the twentieth century. In her doctoral dissertation *Curatorial Practice and Institutional Critique*, Maja Ćirić identifies Félix Fénéon, Harry Graf Kessler, Herwarth Walden, and Alexander Dorner as members of the pioneering generation of curators associated with the phenomenon that

would later become recognised as *curatorial practice*.[1] Emerging from the intellectual climate of the historical avant-garde, they established a mediating position between artists and institutions, thereby extending "the boundaries towards the creation of new institutional structures and interdisciplinary practice" within what was then a traditionally rigid field of art. As Ćirić further argues, these pioneer curators did not regard themselves as experts, since this would have implied operating within predetermined and institutionalised categories. Instead, their primary objective was to conceive "the field of art as an open space through the construction of a diagonal methodology."[2]

The 1960s also witnessed the emergence of new exhibition models. As artists increasingly moved beyond the gallery into public space, the role of the curator became considerably more visible. Bruce Altshuler famously described this period as the "rise of the curator as creator."[3] Consequently, a new generation of so-called *exhibition auteurs* emerged, including Walther Hopps, Jan Hoet, Pontus Hultén, Kasper König, Seth Siegelaub, and Harald Szeemann, while in Croatia comparable developments were represented by Želimir Koščević and Davor Matičević, whose work clearly demonstrates an aspiration towards a more active curatorial role.

A further shift in curatorial practice became evident during the 1990s. At that time, the curator's role became increasingly intertwined with art history, managerial strategies, social theory, audience education, and the stimulation of debates on artistic and socio-political issues. Although a synergy between the academic, artistic, and curatorial communities had already begun to emerge earlier, during the 1990s it became an almost dominant model of exhibition-making.[4]

The flourishing of the independent cultural scene in the early twenty-first century coincided with the emergence of *new institutionalism*, through which attempts were made, both theoretically and practically, to implement an internal reform of art institutions based on a critical rethinking of their possible and necessary transformation from within through

1 Maja Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika" [Curatorial practices and institutional critique] (PhD diss., Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 2012), 12.
2 Ibidem.
3 Ivana Meštrov and Mihaela Richter, "Fragmenti kustoskog diskursa" [Fragments of curatorial discourse], *Život umjetnosti* 85 (2009): 6.
4 "Besides this methodological heterogeneity and gradual incorporation into the international trends, the post-war art history was marked by the emergence of a specific form of synergy between the academic, artistic, and curatorial communities, which contributed considerably to its vitality and self-confidence." Ljiljana Kolešnik, "Novija povijest umjetnosti u Hrvatskoj i suvremena kriza institucija" [Recent art history in Croatia and today's crisis of institutions], *Život umjetnosti* 93 (2013): 8.

the active participation of curators. The concept of *new institutionalism* is founded upon dialogue and the participation of curators in the very process of artistic production, placing emphasis on the process itself rather than solely on the exhibited objects.[5] Parallel to these developments, Croatia witnessed a rapid expansion of independent civil society organisations, driven by the need to strengthen civil society and encourage autonomous civic action. This development followed the revision, after 2001, of the rather restrictive Law on Associations adopted in 1997.

Curatorial Practice and Institutional Critique

The phenomenon of curatorial practice is inconceivable without the figure of the curator. The curator occupies a central position because, as Ivana Meštrov and Mihaela Richter observe, "the exhibition is a complex medium in which all elements—whether consciously or unconsciously employed—contribute to the production of meaning; it constitutes a cultural practice that brings together norms and values while implicitly embodying ideological concepts."[6]

During the first half of the twentieth century, the curator's responsibilities consisted primarily, as Lawrence Alloway notes, of acquiring works of art for museum collections, overseeing their care, preservation, and conservation, and organising occasional exhibitions. Over time, however, this profession became increasingly complex and creative. In *The Curator's Handbook*, Adrian George defines the curator as a person who not only selects and interprets works of art for exhibition but also assumes the roles of exhibition producer, commissioner, educator, and manager. Consequently, the curator is no longer merely a specialist responsible for a particular collection but an active participant in the creation of exhibitions, either by developing original curatorial concepts or by interpreting those conceived by others. Increasingly, curators also function as artist-curators, independently organising and curating their own exhibitions.[7]

Contemporary curatorial practice frequently overlaps with contemporary artistic practice to such an extent that Rossen Ventzislavov, because of its creative dimension, considers it to be part of the *fine arts*. It is therefore important to distinguish between the conventional organisation of an exhibition and *performative curating*, which already enters the sphere of artistic practice. The curators of major international exhi-

5 Klara Petrović, "Eksperimentalne kustoske prakse na suvremenoj hrvatskoj sceni" [Experimental curatorial practices on the contemporary Croatian scene] (MA thesis, Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2018), 44.
6 Meštrov and Richter, "Fragmenti kustoskog diskursa," 9.
7 Petrović, "Eksperimentalne kustoske prakse na suvremenoj hrvatskoj sceni," 6.

bitions, such as the Venice Biennale or documenta, facilitate the work of art historians by determining, through their selection of artists and works, what merits critical and scholarly attention. Moreover, influential curators operating within the global art world frequently anticipate broader developments in art, culture, and society. As Ventzislavov argues, the act of selection has become fundamental to our contemporary understanding of art because many contemporary works do not contain explicit instructions for their presentation and therefore require curatorial mediation in order to become intelligible to a wider public.[8]

Želimir Koščević played a pioneering role in shaping the Croatian curatorial scene during his directorship of Gallery SC in Zagreb. In 1969, he spent four months at Stockholm's Moderna Museet under the direction of Pontus Hultén. Internationally renowned, Hultén conceived the museum as an open and flexible space in which visual art could be brought into dialogue with theatre, music, film, and other artistic disciplines through an interdisciplinary approach. His concept of the *museum without walls*, in which exhibitions are complemented by lectures, discussions, round tables, and conferences, remains a highly relevant model for sustaining exhibitions as dynamic cultural events throughout their duration.

Inspired by his mentor Hultén, Koščević introduced a series of experimental and innovative exhibition projects into the programme of Gallery SC from 1969 onwards, including *Imaginary Museum I–III*, *Hit Parade*, *Exhibition of Women and Men*, *Action Total*, and *Postal Items – Section of the Seventh Paris Biennale*. These projects profoundly challenged established curatorial and museological conventions and significantly transformed existing exhibition practice. Koščević's work also provides an important point of departure for understanding the emergence of ideas that later crystallised within the Croatian cultural context through the development of curatorial practice and institutional critique.

Institutional critique emerged during the second half of the 1960s. It has become customary to distinguish between two major waves—although some authors, such as Simon Sheikh, identify a third phase as well. While these phases share many common characteristics, they also differ in significant respects. The first wave, initiated during the 1960s and 1970s by artists including Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Robert Smithson, focused primarily on analysing and criticising the relationship between artistic production and the institutional structures of museums and galleries. Even its most radical proponents did not seek to reject art itself or its constitutive elements. Rather, they criticised particular aspects of cultural production in the name of an alternative culture and the creation of new and original institutional models, instead of advocating the abolition of culture altogether.

The second wave, which emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought about an important shift in both the context of institutional critique and its professional discourse. Artists such as Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser gradually moved away from direct political confrontation with the capitalist market system. Anti-institutional revolt became less pronounced as artists increasingly recognised the necessity of participating in institutional structures, acknowledging that they themselves formed part of the art world and could scarcely survive outside it.[9]

Whereas the earlier position had been characterised by an attempt to escape institutional frameworks and established dogmas, it gradually became evident that such a strategy was neither simple nor sustainable. This realisation was reflected in the emergence of *new institutionalism*, characterised by openness, responsiveness to context, and the transformation of institutional space into social space. The second wave of institutional critique also gave rise to a more profound examination of museum representation, questioning its relationship to economic power and to epistemological assumptions rooted in postcolonial theory, where the "Other" is constructed as an object displayed within the museum showcase.

Gerald Raunig, however, argues that the widespread distinction between two waves of institutional critique is not supported by rigorous empirical evidence. In his view, this division arises primarily from the political and theoretical necessity inherent in institutional critique itself, since each phase developed its own strategies and methods within specific historical and cultural contexts.[10]

In the introduction to *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice*, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray argue that contemporary scholarship should not merely examine the historical relationship between institutions, critique, and artistic production, but should also explore the present and future possibilities of their coexistence. Institutional critique is therefore not confined to condemning institutions; rather, it seeks to generate more productive institutional models through critical dialogue.[11]

This is particularly evident in the way the crisis of public institutions, artistic production, and the traditional relationship between artists and curators encouraged independent curators to enter institutional structures as sites of cultural power, while artists increasingly assumed curatorial roles themselves. Curatorial practice thus became one of the principal mechanisms through which seemingly new and original institutional models could be developed, negotiated, and sustained.[12]

8 Rossen Ventizislavov, "Idle Arts: Reconsidering the Curator," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 86.

9 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 147.

10 Gerald Rauning and Gene Ray (eds.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (MayFlyBooks, 2009), 3.

11 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 147; Rauning and Ray, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, xiii.

12 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 147.

Museums, Galleries, and the Changing Role of the Curator

The consolidation of capitalist market structures profoundly transformed the art market during the second half of the twentieth century. These changes first became evident after the Second World War, particularly in the United States, and soon spread throughout Europe. The new market conditions stimulated a growing body of critical writing that questioned the role of museums and galleries in the promotion and presentation of contemporary artistic production within an increasingly market-oriented cultural system.

Allan Kaprow devoted particular attention to the role of the museum. In *Where Art Thou, Sweet Muse? (I'm Hung Up at the Whitney)* (1967), he questions whether the museum can still function as a relevant institution for contemporary art, arguing that contemporary artistic production constitutes a living organism, whereas museums preserve lifeless artefacts.[13] He concludes that the museum is incapable of presenting contemporary art because, once inside the museum, works of art are transformed into a form of still life, losing the vitality that characterises their original existence. As Kaprow famously observes, "The museum is a conservative remnant from another era." These ideas were further developed in his dialogue with Robert Smithson, *What Is a Museum?*, where he compared the museum to a mausoleum—a place where one may observe what art was in the past, but not what it is in the present.[14] Smithson pursued a similar line of argument in *Cultural Confinement* (1972), where he metaphorically described museums as prisons and compared them to asylums divided into wards and cells. Once an artwork enters such a space, it loses its inherent "charge" and becomes an isolated object detached from the outside world. Displayed in an empty, brightly lit gallery, artworks begin to resemble "lifeless invalids" awaiting the judgement of critics who will determine whether they are worthy of rehabilitation. Under such circumstances, the curator appears to assume the role of someone who "separates art from the rest of society."[15]

By eliminating the context in which the artwork originally existed and through its subsequent "neutralisation", the conditions are created for its reintegration and re-entry into society. Smithson therefore argues that the museum system neutralises the social context of the artwork by extracting it from lived reality and depriving it of its vitality. Equally significant were Brian O'Doherty's three influential essays, published in *Artforum* in 1976 under the title *Inside the White Cube*, which profoundly challenged the traditional conventions of curatorial and museological practice.

13 Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (MIT Press, 2009), 52-54.
14 "Life in the museum is like making love in a cemetery." Alberro, Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique*, 56-66.
15 Ibid., 140.

Daniel Buren approached the institution of the museum from a somewhat different perspective. Rather than focusing exclusively on its negative aspects, he examined the functions of cultural institutions from a more balanced standpoint. For Buren, the museum is a privileged institution possessing a triple function—aesthetic, economic, and mystical.[16] It exists to collect and preserve works of art, serving both as a refuge and as the interpretative framework through which artworks are presented to the public. At the same time, he argues that it is illusory to believe that such presentation can ever be free from class-based or ideological influences. Within the framework of institutional critique, one of the principal objectives therefore became the transformation of established institutional models, particularly through the critical reassessment of the existing artistic canon.

Hito Steyerl describes institutional critique as a "new social movement within the artistic sphere,"[17] emphasising that the most effective cultural institutions must actively include minority communities as well as those groups that have historically occupied disadvantaged positions, such as women and artists from the so-called Third World. This perspective connects institutional critique with broader paradigms including multiculturalism, reformist feminism, environmental movements, and related forms of social activism.

The sociologist of art Pierre Bourdieu argued that artistic and social movements generally emerged and developed in parallel, interacting within an international and interdisciplinary framework. This thesis, however, has itself become the subject of institutional critique. Andrea Fraser, unlike Bourdieu, has maintained that the artistic field constitutes a relatively autonomous sphere governed by its own internal rules, and that developments occurring outside this field exert little direct influence upon it, just as the artistic field itself does not necessarily determine broader social processes. In doing so, she has positioned herself in partial opposition to Bourdieu, who likewise recognised the relative autonomy of the artistic field, while simultaneously insisting that the distribution of power within it ultimately depended upon a wide range of social and economic forces operating beyond its boundaries.

Demystifying Art and Engaging the Public

As already noted, the curator occupies a crucial mediating position between the artwork and its audience within contemporary artistic practice. Since contemporary art has frequently been criticised for its perceived hermeticism, artists, critics, and theorists throughout the twentieth century repeatedly called for the demystification and democratisation of

16 Ibid., 102-106.
17 Rauning and Ray, "Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique," 16.

art. The mystifying discourse surrounding the artist-genius, creating on the threshold of consciousness under the influence of divine inspiration, was gradually replaced by a more rational understanding of the artwork, its production, and its performance. An important role in this transformation was played by efforts to bring artworks closer to the public, making them more accessible, more visible, and more readily understood.

Individual artists and artist groups increasingly extended their activities beyond the gallery, transforming the street into a new stage for artistic practice. Exhibition spaces, whether institutional or alternative, gradually assumed greater importance than the individual artworks themselves, while curators increasingly became producers and mediators of cultural meaning. Their task was to adopt a critical position that would facilitate the circulation of ideas, acting as catalysts capable of "articulating and making visible and interesting things and processes that were not initially noticed by the audience."[18]

Many institutional constraints arose from the very way museums and galleries functioned, where the artist's own voice often remained marginal. This circumstance contributed significantly to the redefinition of both the curator and curating. In *Demystifying Art*, Julio Le Parc argues that artistic power possesses an inherently authoritarian dimension because it allows a relatively small number of artists or cultural professionals to make decisions and impose changes binding upon the majority. Artists are therefore deprived not only of the possibility of influencing the conditions established by the art world but also of questioning accepted artistic values and defending their own artistic convictions.

According to Le Parc, without a living relationship to social issues and the broader context in which they operate, artistic positions risk becoming either uncritical support for the existing system or isolated forms of individual activity that remain politically neutral. Artistic struggle becomes meaningful only when artists critically examine their own position, attitudes, place within society, and artistic production. Meaningful change is therefore possible only through action within one's own field—that is, within the field of art itself. By demystifying art and exploiting the possibilities offered by extra-institutional practices, artists acquire the capacity to intervene directly in public space. It is precisely here that the potential for genuinely living artistic activity emerges—a possibility largely absent from museums, whose institutional structures tend to reject or neutralise every form of live artistic action.

The demystification of art, however, could not remain confined to the street or alternative exhibition spaces alone; it also had to take place within cultural institutions themselves.[19] Martha Rosler argues that the

18 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 17; Catherine David, "The New Curator" in *Conventions in Contemporary Art: Lectures and Debates Witte de With 2001* (Witte de With, 2003).

19 The "fourth generation" of curators only managed to fully accomplish this task in the 21st century, since they were to some extent moulded into formal procedural systems and manoeuvred into the institutional environment, reinforcing the "author's voice," but at the same time fulfilling administrative roles. Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 23.

purchasing power of the upper classes should not be underestimated in relation to artistic production, particularly because major collectors frequently collaborate with museum directors, gallery representatives, and curators in shaping both the economic and symbolic value of works of art.[20] Many collectors acquire artworks not only for aesthetic reasons but also for decoration, entertainment, social prestige, or investment.

Rosler therefore maintains that the influence of the upper social classes within the art world is considerably more complex than a simple question of purchasing power. However much artists and collectors themselves may seek to minimise the role of the market, it nevertheless remains the principal intermediary between artists and their audiences. Within such a system of values, museums and galleries function as the very foundations of the art world—or, in Rosler's words, as "profane temples of art." Art journals likewise play an important role by informing audiences about contemporary artistic developments while simultaneously contributing to the construction of artistic value through the mechanisms of the market.

Unlike Rosler, Mel Ramsden adopts a far more radical critique of the capitalist art market. In his 1975 essay *On Practice*, he examines the dominance and hegemony of the New York art world, arguing that the fundamental problem underlying the bureaucratisation of artistic production lies in the overwhelming influence of money. According to Ramsden, recipients are increasingly transformed into passive consumers driven by a "blind instinct" to consume works of art.

By bureaucratisation Ramsden does not simply mean a centralised administrative structure. Rather, he refers to a system in which the most important decisions concerning culture are removed from artists themselves and imposed instead by market mechanisms largely controlled by commercial galleries. Bureaucrats, in his view, are those who unquestioningly serve such a system. At the same time, ambition and careerism increasingly become the principal motivations for many artists. Although artists cannot ignore the existence of the market, Ramsden argues that meaningful change can only emerge through a critically self-aware artistic practice. Even during the 1970s, when market forces appeared almost impossible to resist, Ramsden maintained that consumerism could nevertheless be challenged. His critique also extends to art criticism, which he believed frequently served the interests of the market. Since neither galleries nor art journals can present the entirety of artistic production, selection inevitably becomes necessary, often according to cri-

20 According to: Alberro, Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 206-233.

teria associated with notions of artistic progress. During the mid-twentieth century, formalism became one of the dominant critical approaches within the capitalist cultural system. By concentrating primarily on the technical and formal properties of artworks, it facilitated their administrative evaluation and encouraged their passive consumption.

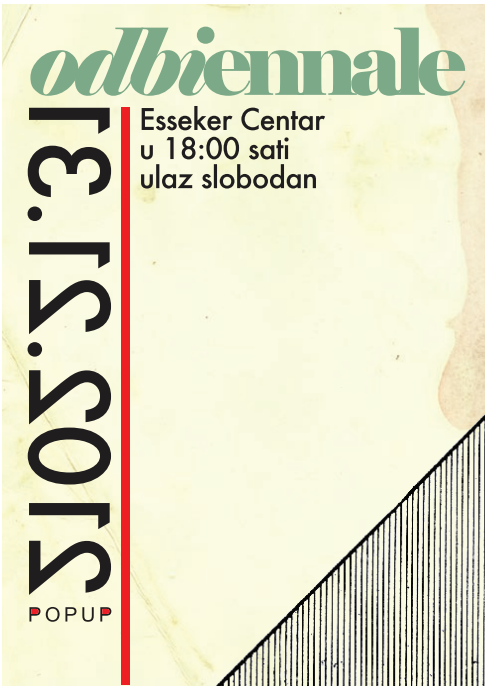
If, however, art is not an autonomous sphere but forms part of a broader network of social experience, as Pierre Bourdieu argued, then its evaluation necessarily extends beyond the field of art to encompass the cultural industry as a whole. It therefore becomes essential to expand the institutional framework of the artistic field and reconnect art with everyday life—a position shared by Rosler. Within the context of curatorial practice, it is above all curators who facilitate this process through the symbolic authority they possess within the field of art. In her essay *Smuggling: A Curatorial Model*, Irit Rogoff distinguishes between *curating*, understood as the practice of organising exhibitions, and *the curatorial*, which refers to a broader conceptual framework encompassing the principles, methodologies, and possibilities of curatorial activity. The curatorial thus represents a mode of critical thinking that resists immediate realisation or closure, instead sustaining an open process of questioning capable of leading inquiry in unforeseen directions. Maja Ćirić similarly argues that the curatorial implies "the principle of knowledge production, activism, and the culture of circulation and translation, which determine other forms through which art can be engaged."[21] The emergence of clearly articulated models of curatorial practice within the field of visual arts has fundamentally shaped the methodology of curatorial activity in the twenty-first century.

The POPUP Project: From Gallery to Urban Space

The POPUP project was launched in Osijek in 2012, and over the following five years, until 2017, a total of thirty-four exhibitions were realised within its framework. Its primary objective was to present contemporary artistic production in Osijek through alternative exhibition venues located in vacant commercial premises in the city centre. The project was firmly grounded in the idea of democratising art by relocating it from the "consecrated temples of art"—museums and galleries—into urban public space, thereby bringing contemporary art closer to the everyday citizen.

There is no doubt that POPUP drew upon exhibition strategies developed during the 1970s, such as those associated with Pensioner Tihomir Simčić, the Group of Six Artists, and the Red Peristyle, while adapting them to a very different social and cultural context. An additional characteristic of the project was the composition of the collective itself, which consisted predominantly of young students and several professors from the Department of Visual and Media Arts at the Academy of Arts (today

21 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 26.



Odbiennale (Salon des Refusés), 2012 (December 2012, Esseker Shopping Centre, Osijek); conceived as a Croatian equivalent of the Salon des Refusés, it presented works rejected from the Slavonian Biennale together with works by artists who supported the concept

the Academy of Arts and Culture) in Osijek, established in 2004. Their objective was to create a different and more dynamic artistic climate in the city through exhibitions of contemporary artistic practice, at a time when Osijek offered very few exhibition opportunities and when existing institutions were generally reluctant to present the work of young and recently graduated artists. The principal exceptions were Gallery Kazamat, operated by the Croatian Association of Visual Artists Osijek, and the Waldinger Gallery, whose programme was then curated by Marina Viculin.

For this reason, the POPUP project occupies an important place within the context of contemporary non-institutional curatorial practice in Croatia. It initiated significant changes in the understanding and presentation of contemporary art in Osijek, encompassing not only the visual arts but also theatre, contemporary music, and experimental film. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this approach was the sixth POPUP exhibition, *POPUP Odbiennale*, organised on the occasion of the 23rd Slavonian Biennale. Held in the Esseker Centre in Osijek, the exhibition stimulated important conceptual changes within the Slavonian Biennale itself. Until then, the Biennale had had no thematic title, while participation had been restricted to "artists who live and work in Slavonia or are connected with Slavonia through their life and work." The following edition of the Biennale was given a clearly defined thematic title, while participation was



POPUP 9 – Tomislav Brajnović, *Dinner with the Artist*, 2013



Tomislav Brajnović, *Dinner with the Artist*, 2013
Fotografija: Robert Sošić

POPUP 15 – János Sugár, *Subversive Designers*, 2014



expanded to include artists who did not necessarily live and work in Slavonia. Since then, under the coordination of Valentina Radoš, the Slavonian Biennale has gradually developed into a significant manifestation of contemporary art with an increasingly international profile.

From the outset, POPUP was conceived as an alternative exhibition platform responding to the emergence of a new generation of artists associated with the Academy of Arts and Culture. Their growing number highlighted the need for new exhibition venues and innovative curatorial strategies through which young artists could present their work to the public. One of the project's principal ambitions was to expand the exhibition possibilities available to contemporary artists in Osijek, where alternative culture had largely survived only as a memory of the vibrant cultural scene of the 1980s, when the Osijek Student Centre provided an important platform for numerous cultural events operating beyond the mainstream.

The model adopted by POPUP was based on short-term, small-scale exhibition projects dedicated to contemporary artistic practice that deliberately operated outside conventional institutional frameworks and sought to challenge established understandings of both art and contemporaneity. Kruno Jošt's exhibition *RAD – Recycle Art Dome* represents a particularly clear example of this approach.

The very name of the project evokes the logic of internet pop-up windows: temporary, unexpected, and impossible to ignore. Equally important was its social dimension, as the project sought to revitalise numerous abandoned premises in the city centre, transforming them through temporary exhibitions and artistic interventions into places of encounter for artists, curators, and audiences. This mode of operation enabled the collective to avoid the often rigid and impermeable structures of museums and galleries. The exhibitions themselves frequently lasted only one or two days and were conceived according to the specific requirements of the artworks, as well as the spatial characteristics of each individual venue.



POPUP 16 – Kruno Jošt, *RAD_Recycle Art Dome*, 2014



POPUP 18 – Ana Petrović, *NaJežiti*, 2015

Since no two exhibition spaces were identical, each location was approached as an active component of the exhibition itself, establishing a specific relationship with the artworks displayed within it. The dialogue between the curatorial collective and the exhibiting artist likewise assumed particular importance, with both parties participating in an active curatorial process in which the artist increasingly adopted the role of artist-curator.[22]

Within the POPUP project, the objective extended beyond the mere presentation of artworks. Equally important was the continuous questioning of the very justification and purpose of exhibiting art and presenting it to the public. Members of the collective did not seek simply to educate or direct audiences; they also sought to understand for themselves what made each exhibition distinctive, particularly in relation to its ability to transcend the institutional framework of Osijek and, ultimately, that of Croatia itself. In this respect, their role may indeed be described through the words of Mirjana Dragosavljević, who argues that "Work on (self-) education, production of knowledge as a public good, and emancipatory artistic practices therefore represent a *conditio sine qua non* for understanding art as a public sphere and the author as a public intellectual."[23]

Within the POPUP collective, therefore, the emphasis gradually shifted from curating understood merely as the organisation of exhibitions towards what Irit Rogoff defines as *the curatorial*: a mode of critical inquiry that deliberately remains open-ended, generating multiple and often unpredictable interpretative possibilities. During the five years of its activity, the POPUP collective significantly contributed to redefining the previously rather rigid and stagnant local paradigm through which contemporary artistic practice had been understood. This transformation did not simply represent qualitative improvement; it also created space for experimentation, research, and critical reflection. Its institutional independence and, in many respects, guerrilla-like position enabled POPUP to develop exhibitions that were not constrained by pre-established systems of artistic value. Instead, each project deliberately incorporated a certain degree of risk without attempting to predetermine its future critical evaluation. To borrow Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, the informal and constantly changing curatorial collective gradually acquired symbolic power within Osijek's cultural field. Initially dispersed and marginal, this symbolic capital eventually began to influence the work of established cultural institutions themselves. This influence was grounded primarily in knowledge, enabling curators and artist-curators to exercise symbolic power capable of "imposing a particular vision of the social world, or of its divisions," while simultaneously occupying positions within an artistic field inherently structured by conflict.[24] As Bourdieu himself observes, the field of power constitutes "the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields (notably economic or cultural)."[25]

Through constant experimentation, reconsideration, and critical reflection, POPUP gradually developed an open, flexible, and experimental curatorial methodology that deliberately resisted definitive answers

22 Petrović, "Eksperimentalne kustoske prakse na suvremenoj hrvatskoj sceni," 7.

23 Mirjana Dragosavljević, "Nezavisna kustoska praksa od slobodnog stvaralašta do kulturnog menadžmenta" [Autonomous curatorial practice: From free creation to cultural management], *Život umjetnosti* 93 (2013): 97.

24 Ćirić, "Kustoske prakse i institucionalna kritika," 30-32.

25 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford University Press, 1995), 215.



POPUP 25 – Sonja Radaković, *Love Me*, 2016



POPUP 26 – Marijan Crtalić, *There Are Two of Them and We Are Alone*, 2016

and fixed systems of value, despite occasionally employing relatively conventional exhibition formats. Consequently, the role of the curatorial and artistic collective consisted in the continuous reinterpretation and recontextualisation of contemporary artistic practice. POPUP did not seek to reject traditional museological models outright. Rather, it appropriated selected aspects of curatorial methodology while simultaneously developing new conceptions of artistic practice. Throughout the project, particular emphasis was placed on research, discovery, experimentation, and critical reflection within the field of cultural power. Because this field remains dynamic and continually changing, it inevitably produces uncertainty—and uncertainty, in turn, continually generates new questions.

Conclusion

Although curatorial practice is a relatively recent phenomenon within the field of artistic production, the methodologies associated with it fundamentally shaped approaches to exhibition-making during the second half of the twentieth century and have become one of the dominant paradigms of curatorial practice in the twenty-first century. Within this framework, the artistic field is understood as an open horizon of interpretative possibilities, in which curatorial methodologies rarely seek to provide definitive answers or fixed meanings. Instead, through research-oriented and experimental approaches to artworks and exhibition concepts, curatorial practice raises questions whose significance continues to evolve through subsequent interpretation.

The emergence of curatorial practice also contributed to a redefinition of institutional critique during the 1990s. Rather than positioning themselves outside institutional structures, artists and curators became increasingly aware of the importance of acting critically from within them. At the same time, institutions themselves underwent significant transformation, giving rise to the phenomenon of *new institutionalism*, which profoundly influenced the subsequent development of cultural and artistic institutions at the turn of the twenty-first century.

From its inception, the POPUP project was informed by methodological principles derived from both curatorial practice and institutional critique. Curatorial models grounded partly in *curating* but, more importantly, in *the curatorial* contributed to changing the atmosphere within Osijek's artistic and cultural environment. As an informal curatorial collective, POPUP gradually acquired symbolic power by cultivating critical reflection on contemporary artistic practice and by emphasising knowledge production, activism, and the translation of the cultural field from traditional curatorial and museological frameworks into contemporary critical and theoretical discourse.

This process was shaped not only by international participants from Belgium, Germany, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Serbia, but also by local artists and recent graduates who consciously distanced themselves from traditionally understood artistic technicalism. Instead, they increasingly embraced conceptual approaches grounded in theoretical and practical reflection on their own artistic production and on the nature of art itself.

Through thirty-four exhibitions, the members of the POPUP collective succeeded in transforming exhibitions into spaces of dialogue, inquiry, and the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences related to contemporary artistic practice. At the same time, they demonstrated that the meanings generated through the discursive and analytical continuity of exhibitions remain open to discontinuity, reinterpretation, and changing contexts.

The POPUP project therefore represents a significant example of contemporary curatorial practice in Croatia. By consistently cultivating experimentation, critical inquiry, and curatorial research, it not only re-

defined exhibition-making within the artistic environment of Osijek but also demonstrated how an independent curatorial initiative can contribute to broader transformations in the relationship between artistic production, cultural institutions, and contemporary society.

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