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“We are not Gorgona”: Defining the Spirit of the Gorgona Group, 1959-1966

Research Summary:

My research proposes a monographic study on the proto-conceptual, Zagreb-based art collective called the Gorgona group (active 1959-1966) to develop a theoretical framework for the Group’s structure as a collective and their context within the artistic networks of post-war Europe. Gorgona was comprised of artists Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, Đuro Seder, Josip Vaništa, and Ivan Kožarić; architect Miljenko Horvat; and art critics Dimitrije Bašičević (known as Mangelos), Matko Meštrović, and Radoslav Putar. Coming from diverse backgrounds and expertise, Gorgona’s attitude towards art-making synthesized both their critique of modernism characterised by the mythos of the object and creator, yet also an engagement with avant-garde tendencies such as dematerialised art practices, negation of painting, and absurdist gestures. Collaborators such as Piero Manzoni, Dieter Roth, Otto Piene, Francois Morellet, and Victor Vasarely shared a similar outlook and through charting Gorgona’s connections to their wider network, it is possible to identify their longstanding impact.

What is interesting is the unique position Gorgona found themselves within this period. Being sited in Yugoslavia where citizens were able to freely travel was an envious position compared to contemporaries in other Eastern and Central European countries. As ‘underground’ or covert networking practices are currently gaining scholarly interest, especially exchanges between Latin America and Eastern/Central Europe based on similar political conditions, it is important to note that the Gorgona group operated in the open with very little oversight from the state. Thus, I argue that the formulation of Gorgona’s network was based less on political matters, and more on aesthetic and theoretical concerns, avoiding the political comparisons between the ‘East’ and ‘West’ in favour of a material-based critical theory. My research entails a close scrutiny of their archive and artwork as well as events and exhibitions that members participated in to ascertain transmissions of information between the group and their contemporaries in order to evaluate Gorgona’s impact within the broader neo-avantgarde zeitgeist. My research questions entail how the Gorgona group choose to define or undefine themselves and the choice of engaging in collective work. Collective art practices

were particularly prevalent in Eastern Europe and my scrutiny of the socio-political climate in Zagreb seeks to determine how collective work manifested within the local context.

Abstract:

This paper outlines the formation of the Gorgona Group and their position in light of the larger artistic and socio-political scene of Zagreb. Against this backdrop, I argue certain points of resistance to the status quo that manifest within the ideologies and work of the Group. Acknowledging Gorgona's desire for autonomy and determining how this was achieved, I consider some major themes that emerge in their philosophy, weighing previous claims made regarding the Group's supposed nihilism against material and archival evidence that supports a less antagonistic approach. In evaluating the overarching philosophy of the Group, it is my intention to create ties between the members that helped to knit the fabric of the collective together. It is through these inter-dynamics that I illustrate the identity of the collective through some key works. In addressing the selected activities, works, and ephemeral material formally, I address a certain *modus operandi* that determined the basis of their collective work and the media in which the Gorgona worked. In conclusion, I postulate how these foundational activities became a jumping off point for larger, more ambitious projects involving a wider artistic network.