

Sanja Sekelj

Institute of Art History, Zagreb

Digital Art History and Artists' Networks in Croatia of the 1990's and 2000's

Based on the premise that particular art-historical phenomena can be observed as spaces of sociability, in which occur complex personal, social and spatio-temporal relations, the goal of this dissertation is to contribute to the field of digital art history through the application of network analysis for art-historical research, as well as to describe certain phenomena of the Croatian art scene of the 1990's and early 2000's as network phenomena. In other words, networks are simultaneously the theme and the method of this dissertation.

While it can be said that the use of the concept "network" in a metaphorical sense is already established in art-historical discourse (e.g. network of the historic avant-gardes, mail art network), the application of network analysis for art-historical research, that would combine quantitative and qualitative data analyses, is still under development. This dissertation relies on a mixed-method approach, which combines ingrained art-historical methods (such as archival and historiographical research, contextual analysis) with social network analysis (SNA) and certain qualitative approaches, as developed in the social sciences. Including data collecting, data modeling, data visualization, and network analysis and interpretation, this process is iterative and integrative. In other words, the application of digital tools (CAN_IS database and its visualization interface, visualization tools such as Gephi) and methods is not an end to itself, but is a different way to think about and interpret art-historical processes, the goal of which is to consider structural and cultural properties of selected phenomena simultaneously.

In terms of content, the dissertation deals with the period of the 1990's and early 2000's, or – more specifically – with a cultural complex today most commonly called the independent cultural scene (a common denominator that refers to cultural actors that share similar esthetical and ideological values and are mostly working within the legal framework of NGO's). It deals with activities of main "independent" organizations, their protagonists, inter-organizational cooperation within the scene and their tactical organizing into platforms, structural changes that occurred in the cultural field in the year 2000, transnational cooperation of these actors with artists and organizations in other ex-Yugoslav and European countries. By using the above-described mixed-method approach, this dissertation tries to

answer questions such as: How did the network of the independent scene come into being? What is its composition and dynamics? Which conversational mechanisms and events enabled its creation? How does this network enable and constrain the activities of its actors? Which new patterns of agency and types of actors does it give rise to? What is the impact of the network on the cultural field as a whole? What is the significance of social ties between different types of actors? How do the different sorts of ties interact and which ties matter for what?

Based on selected examples from the dissertation, the presentation will mostly focus on methodological issues, concerning the above-described integrative process (data collection–data modeling–data visualization–network analysis and interpretation). Some of the issues that will be discussed include questions such as: unsystematic or missing data sources, definition of network boundaries, data deduction, qualitative interpretation of quantitative data, and relation of time and space in network visualizations.