

Avant-garde Design Beyond Borders

The Slovenian Constructivist Avgust Černigoj

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine the idea of avant-garde design operating beyond borders during the interwar (World Wars I and II) period. I focus on the Slovenian Constructivist Avgust Černigoj (1898-1985), who was a member of the group 'Tank'. I try to place Slovenian Constructivism in the context of the International avant-garde movement as well as that of the Hungarian 'MA' and Czechoslovak 'Devětsil'. Slovenia had become independent country from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and became part of Yugoslavia after the First World War. This was an important time for formation of national identity and the creative energy of artists became oriented toward constructing new societies.

Avgust Černigoj was born in Trieste (now Italy). He became well known as a Slovenian Constructivist who developed the ideals of the Bauhaus. His experience at the Bauhaus greatly influenced his creative activities. After he returned to Ljubljana, he organized his first Constructivist exhibition and displayed his architectural models, reliefs and sculptures. It was possible to recognize the similarity between Černigoj's architectural models and Russian Constructivist's works. Černigoj also created many collage works and drawings of stage designs and costumes that reflected Constructivism. At this early stage design and costume drawings, he unconsciously produced that clearly presented his avant-garde ideas. His technique demonstrated new Slovenian national identity.

The principles of avant-garde design embodied much of the utopianism associated with this new age. The technique and theory of avant-garde design was easily transplanted into various fields and into many countries through journals edited by artists. The journals were effective media for building their networks. In 1927 Černigoj created print works for the journal 'Tank' published by his friend, editor and theater director, Ferdo Delak in Ljubljana. Tank's visual typographical layout presented their ideological manifesto. By the end of 1920s, they used 'Tank' to develop international networks with the German group 'Der Sturm'.

We can see the concepts of early 20 century modern graphic design embed the ideological ideas of the Slovenian avant-garde movement. The group associated with 'Tank' played an important role in progressing international modern design.

Key words: Avgust Černigoj, avant-garde, Slovenia, Central / Eastern Europe, modernism.

1. Introduction

After the Cold War, many art works and documents from the Central and Eastern European countries became available and exhibited to the public. This new opportunity enabled us to reexamine and redefine the history of modern art and design. The outcomes of this re-assessment will have far reaching consequences and will complete our understanding of modernism. Over the past decade, a considerable number of studies have focused on avant-garde design in the interwar period [1]. Although avant-garde activities in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary have been recently revealed, little is known about Yugoslavian avant-garde [2]. I would like to emphasize that Yugoslavian artists took part in the formation of transnational network of the movements that enabled them to spread their activity beyond the borders. The theory of avant-garde was formed and expanded geographically with its ideas influencing many fields of design, including graphics, various consumer products, architecture, etc. The main factor for expansion of avant-garde design was the idea of “avant-garde” itself, rather than the mere influence of another expressive design form. It needs to be stressed that the avant-garde arts had operated on both regional and international levels.

Design movements in the new nations of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia (now Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia) were born out of the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the First World War. This was the golden age of the avant-garde art movement. The internationalism of the art world in those countries was facilitated by beyond border artistic exchanges that reflected their various local and historical characteristics. At the birth of the new nation of Yugoslavia, artists participated positively in the process of community formation. The extent of their creativity was deeply concerned with cultural formation and formed the background of the various exchanges. To newly build from a disassembled society, a universal idea was required for design related to the various activities and affairs of society as a whole, as well as to that at the level of an individual. As a result, art works, especially graphic design, became the media itself, as the products of design crossed borders.

This paper focuses on the design of the Slovenian Constructivist Avgust Černigoj (1898-1985), and aims to verify the trans-border influences of Central and Eastern Europe avant-garde design. Because Avgust Černigoj was the typical artist of this time who did cross the borders and he built relationships with artists from Germany and Hungary. In this paper, first of all, I reexamine the meaning of the avant-garde in the modernism of Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, I investigate the relationship between Černigoj, the Bauhaus, and the avant-garde movement of Yugoslavia. Thirdly, I introduce the problem of regionalism and internationalism in respect to the avant-garde movements of Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, I show the historical importance of Slovenian avant-garde design, which has been overlooked in conventional historical research.

2. The avant-garde and its artistic characteristics in Central and Eastern Europe

Throughout the Stalinist era after the 1917 Russian Revolution, in those Central and Eastern Europe countries influenced by the Russian Revolution, the concept of the avant-garde has mostly been connected with the

concept of the Communist Party. On the other hand, Matei Calinescu points out that “by the second decade of our century, avant-garde, as an artistic concept, had become comprehensive enough to designate not one or the other, but all the new schools whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and by the cult of the new.”[3]

In the interwar period, the term “avant-garde art” and its tendencies in art grew more rapidly and vigorously in Germany and neighboring countries than in Italy and France. The avant-garde movement was very stylized and was very much in fashion. Artists who had strong political views, such as communist, tended to be “avant-garde” especially in Central and Eastern European countries. They defined their objective as creating a standpoint of “the avant-garde”.

The works treated in this paper take a "standpoint" that supports the formation of an international community and a new network through art. For example, architectural and stage designs had the quality to clearly demonstrate the ideological ideas. The design has elements extracted from the concept of the "avant-garde", and since these are abstract, the design can be considered to have acquired "internationalism" beyond the "local" design language. The tendency was seen in many Central and Eastern Europe artist groups. "Devětsil" of Czechoslovakia, "MA" of Hungary, "Tank" (Slovenia), "Zenit" of Yugoslavia, "Út" of the Vojvodina autonomous state in Serbia, and "Contimporanul" of Rumania all shared methodology modeled through contacts with the advanced movements developed in Russia and Germany.

Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia emerged as new nations in 1918. Czech and Slovakia merged to become Czechoslovakia. Although there was no common ethnic group or language, the new nation imagined itself as constituting a community. Similarly, Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic nation composed of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and the ethnic groups of the Balkan Peninsula. While it had many languages and religions, it was held together by the concept of "a unified south Slavic nation (south Slavism)", a commonly held idea since the 19th century. Each artist was, therefore, connected by a sense of belonging to this community. They were connected with the community on the local, as well as, on transnational level.

3. Slovenian Constructivist Avgust Černigoj

3.1 Transplanting the Constructivist ideal from Bauhaus to Ljubljana

Avgust Černigoj, a Slovenian Constructivist who embraced the ideals the Bauhaus, was born in Trieste, then part of the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy before its collapse in 1918. The capital city of Slovenia, Ljubljana, was located close to Trieste and was a passage point for the artists coming from Zagreb and Belgrade on their way to Paris, and for Trieste artists going to Munich. As did many of young artists, Avgust Černigoj studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich after finishing his school education. In 1924 he joined the summer semester led by Wassily Kandinsky and László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus in Weimar [4]. At the time, Walter Gropius, Paul Klee, and Oskar Schlemmer also taught there. Černigoj also met with other avant-garde artists at Piscador's theatre in Berlin.

When Černigoj returned to Ljubljana, he held the First Constructivist Exhibition in 15-25 August 1924, at the Secondary Technical School [5]. In this exhibition, Černigoj presented “Counter Relief”, a title that clearly shows deference to Tatlin’s works. For this exhibition he created architectural models, 1980s reproductions of which are in the collection of Černigoj’s Gallery Lipica. Other works, ‘Relief G’, ‘Object’, ‘Object Wien KOLIN’, ‘Object KLINIKA’ and ‘Sculptures’ reflected Dadaist, Constructivist or the Bauhaus concepts. The way geometrical figures were constructed, with circles and rectangles had parallels with El Lissitzky’s ‘Proun’. In his relief ‘Relief G’, Černigoj designed a letter “g” turned up side down as he did in his collage works. The architectural models ‘Object Wien KOLIN’ and ‘Object KLINIKA’ were designed as a synthesis of architectural elements. Černigoj opened a private art school at 8 Fornace Street, Trieste in 1925. He based it on constructivist principles of education. The young artist Edvard Stepančič (1908-1991, he signed himself as Eduard) joined Černigoj’s school and became a member of the Trieste constructivist group.

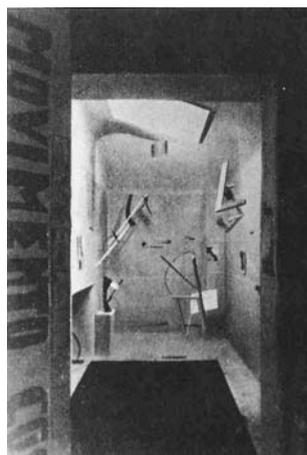
3.2 Localism and Internationalism in the Balkans: The Slovenian avant-garde group “Tank”

The Slovenia constructivism group was moved from Ljubljana to Trieste by Černigoj. “Tank” was initiated through the journal “Tank: revue internationale active” (figure. 1); published in Ljubljana by the director of a theater museum, Ferdo Delak (1905-1968), at the beginning in 1927 [6]. At the same time, Černigoj held the “Exhibition of the Constructivist Group in Trieste (Gruppo Construttivista di Trieste)”, and declared a manifesto written in Slovenian and Italian; “moj pozdrav! (My greeting! Manifesto)” in the 1 1/2 issue of Tank (1 1/2 številka) as follows:

“Long live Tank, the international journal of the new art of Ljubljana-Slovenia! A movement which our new journal will endow with life and power: all of you who live in the spirit of the times, opt for and propagate the new Slovenian and international art. across the private border of the nation, the mighty force must reach the world where the struggle is also continuing and is victorious. ” [7]



(figure. 1) “Tank: revue internationale active” 1927
Collection of Pamatnik Literarnih arhiv, Prague



(figure. 2) The exhibition of the constructivists in Trieste
Tank, 1 1/2 1927. p.89.

Černigoj explained the purpose of his exhibition as being “to attract attention to the elasticity of space and to the permanence of time. The displayed posters proclaim the program of the constructivist group. The Trieste public,

which so far had not had a chance to come in contact with revolutionary activists, was greatly disturbed but also very interested.”[8]

This publication was also the catalogue of the exhibition. In this manifesto, Černigoj asserted his theory of art as in Tank; a synthesis of movement and space and time. “Art + object = activity, this is the total synthesis of movement in space.” [9]

The constructivist nature of Stepančič’s and Černigoj’s works “Dynamic Space Construction” can be seen in the photographs taken by Ivo Stepančič [10].(figure. 2) Stepančič probably got his ideas of constructivism through Černigoj in 1926, when he attended Černigoj’s school. Thus, this exhibition was a proclamation of the formation of a constructivist group in Trieste, becoming one of the branches of the international avant-garde movement.

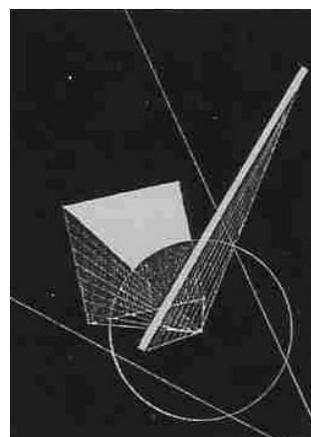
We perceive that Černigoj influenced the work of Stepančič, who began making his linoleum-cut works in 1927. At the time when Černigoj’s linoleum-cuts were first published in the journal “Tank”. (figure. 3) The technique of linoleum-cut became fashionable in avant-garde graphic art movements around 1922. Especially, the Hungarian artists S. Boltnyik, L. Moholy-Nagy and L. Kassák had published their works in various journals. Stepančič made diagonal formations with circles showing a three-dimensional perspective that gave his works some similarity with those of Moholy-Nagy’s linoleum-cut ‘Construction’ of 1920-21 and the woodcut ‘Circle and Planes’ of 1922. (figure. 4,5)



(figure. 3) Avgust Černigoj
linoleum-cut, “Tank” 1927



(figure. 4) Edvard Stepančič
linoleum-cut, “Tank” 1927



(figure. 5) László Moholy=Nagy
‘Circle and Planes’, wood-cut, 1922
Collection of Fuji Xerox co. Ltd.

We can also recognize that the collage works by Černigoj influenced Stepančič. Stepančič created stage designs using photocollages. Černigoj’s works, created in 1925 and 1926, of ‘Come attraverso la strada’ (1925), collage ‘OSP’ (1925), “Skica za scenografiju (Sketch for Theater)” (1926) (figure 6), ‘Kompozicija 1 (Composition 1)’ (1926), ‘Nacrt na scenografiju (Plan for theater)’, ‘Papa Eccellenza’ (1926), and ‘Kompozicija 2 (Composition 2)’ (1926), represented the spirits of their age. Moreover, there is some similarity between Černigoj’s stage designs and the work of O. Schlemmer. This can be seen in the disorganization of perspective, construction using geometric elements, lighting effects, and mechanical human figures. However, most of Černigoj’s theater

designs were not realized. His costume designs also had extreme abstract forms and so can be considered as costumes that an actor could wear. (figure. 7) The stage and costume designs and the portraits of Černigoj showed no specific plan or sizing. It can be said that these works were representative of his ideas of what was avant-garde.



(figure. 6) Avgust Černigoj
‘Sketch for theater’, 1926
Collection of the National Museum in Belgrade



(figure. 7) Avgust Černigoj
‘Costume plans’, 1926
Collection of the Theater Museum in Ljubljana

This tendency also appeared in the stage and clothes designs of Stepančić, who was influenced by constructivist ideas. In 1928, Černigoj and Stepančić took part in a competition held in Ljubljana for the stage design of composer Marij Kogoj’s opera “Črne maske (Black masks)” [11]. For this Stepančić used a photo collage of geometric abstract compositions as his way of expressing constructivist ideals.

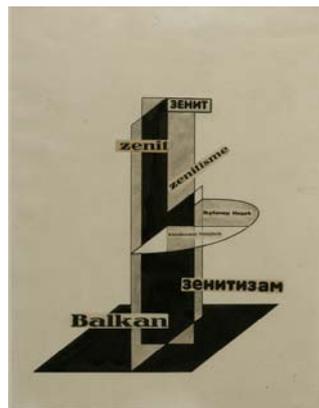
4. Internationalism beyond borders: Yugoslavian avant-garde “Zenit”

In 1924, the same year as Černigoj held his first exhibition in Ljubljana, the “Great International Exhibition of New Art” was held in Belgrade in April organized by a poet Ljubomir Micić (1895-1971). (figure. 8) This exhibition presented a topography of the Central and Eastern Europe art scene of that time. Modern artists drawn from all over Europe participated in the exhibition; Russians, German and French ones including Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Archipenko, Delaunay, Charchoune, Gleizes, Peeters, Zadkine, Paladini, and Prampolini. Participating local artists included Mihailo S. Petrov, and Jo Klek (Josip Seissel) from Zagreb [12].

Ljubomir Micić launched the Yugoslavian avant-garde group “Zenit” in Zagreb on 1 February 1921. He published an international art and culture magazine “Zenit, Internacionalnu reviju za umetnost i kulturu”, with its first issue coming out in June that year. “Zenit” gathered representatives of all branches of art, - poetry, literature, fine arts, theatre, film, architecture, and music - from Yugoslavia, Russia and the West. A total of 43 issues of ‘Zenit’ were published during 6 year period. The French-German poet and writer Iwan Goll and Serbian critic Boško Tokin contributed as editors. In the first issue, Micić presented their manifest “Zenitism” with Iwan Goll and Boško Tokin. Boško Tokin was also involved in the Hungarian journal “MA” as an editor while in Novi Sad (Vojvodina) [13].



(figure. 8) Mihailo S. PETROV,
Poster for 'Exhibition Zenit', 1924
Collection of the National Museum in Belgrade



(figure. 9) Jo Klek
'Zenit, zenitizm', 1923
Collection of the National Museum in Belgrade

The work of Jo Klek (1904-1987) best expressed the ideals of “Zenit”. Klek’s construction of space compositions with their bird's-eye view vision, which was also common to the work of Černigoj, can be seen in the drawings and collage works of 1923 to 1925. (figure. 9) “Zenithist” evenings (the first evening held on 23 April 1925) were organized in Ljubljana by Branko Ve Poljanski (1898-unknown) who was younger brother of Ljubomir Micić. On this occasion, Černigoj and Delak met with the group “Zenit” and so became aware of their activities. The relationship between “Zenit” and “Tank” is described in the pages of “Tank”.

In this way, artists in Belgrade and Zagreb (the Serbian group) evolved relationships with artists in Ljubljana (the Slovenian group). Their collaboration, however, did not last long because the Yugoslavian avant-garde movement had not been connected with the industrial activities seen in Germany and Czechoslovakia, and was also not well connected with the political movements, such as exemplified by the Hungarian activists. In the case of the German avant-garde movement, for example ‘the Ring Neuer Werbegestalter’ (The Circle of New Advertising Designers), these artists had many opportunities to get their works accepted into industry and the societal economy; which indeed was one of their aims. In the case of the Czechoslovakia avant-garde movement avant-garde artists participated in ‘the Družstevní Práce’ (Publishing Cooperative) and Svaz Československého Díla (Czechoslovakia Industrial Association) [14].

Yugoslavian artists did not have the opportunities for industrial work in their society. The Yugoslavian avant-garde posture can be characterized by Černigoj, as activities that preceded realization of producing actual products. Thus it was inevitable that Černigoj’s creative attitude was inclined toward to the abstract, reflecting the specific characteristics of the Yugoslavia avant-garde movement.

5. Conclusions

The stage and costume designs by Avgust Černigoj were similar to the graphic designs seen in his linoleum-cuts. However, the works could only be that found in the magazine “Tank” as visual media. The magazine itself became the medium that promoted exchanges with other groups “beyond the border”, extending into the chain of avant-garde art movements that collectively increased the solidarity felt among artists in Yugoslavia and the

Central and Eastern Europe countries. Černigoj's works and manifesto represented his views and soul as an avant-garde artist. He emphasized internationalism rather than regionalism. Slovenian graphic design had a meaning that it was "avant-garde" for the artists themselves, rather than demonstrating the necessity of creation. This illustrated well the characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe avant-garde arts.

6. Notes

[1] Recent research and presentations related to the avant-garde movement include the followings. A National Touring Exhibition organized by the Hayward Gallery (2004) *Avant-Garde Graphics 1918-1934*, London for Arts Council England. Stephen Bury ed. (2007) *Breaking the Rules: The Printed Face of the European Avant Garde 1900-1937*, the British Library, London. Toshino Iguchi (2008) Czechoslovak Avant-garde Design as Construction: The Czechoslovak Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris 1937. In *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference of Design History and Design Studies*, Osaka, pp.164-167.

[2] Recent research about the Yugoslavia avant-garde movement include the following. Moderna galerija (1998) *Tank! Slovenska Zgodovinska Avantgarda*. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana. Cankarjev dom (2006) Eduard Stepančič in konstruktivistični princip, sankarjev dom, Ljubljana. Видосава Голубовић и Ирина Суботић (2008) *ЗЕНИТ 1921-1926*, Народна библиотека Србије, Институт за књижевност и уметност, Београд, СКД Просвјета, Загреб, Београд. (Vidosava Golubović, Irina Subotić (2008) *ZENIT 1921-1926*, National Library of Serbia, Institute for Literature and Art, SKD Prosvjeta, Zagreb, Belgrade.)

[3] Matei Calinescu (1987) *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, p.117.

[4] Peter Krečič (1980) *Avgust Černigoj: monografija*, Založništvo tržaškega tiska, p.10.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Černigoj's collections of the Theater Museum in Ljubljana were donated by Ferdo Delak.

[7] Avgust Černigoj (1927) "moj pozdrav!", *Tank*, no.1 1/2, p.7.

[8] Avgust Černigoj (1927) "grupa konstruktivistov v trstu," *Tank*, no. 1 1/2-3, p.90.

[9] In this catalogue, Černigoj's students and friends exhibited their works; 10 works of Černigoj, 5 works of Stepančič, 2 works of Vlah Giuseppe, 3 works of Carmelich Giorgio.

[10] Avgust Černigoj (1927) "razstava konstruktivistov v trstu 1927". *Tank*, 1 1/2-3, pp.88-91.

[11] Mirko Polić (1927) marij kogoj: Črne maske, *Tank*, no.1 1/2, pp.24-26.

[12] Narodni muzej Beograd (1983) *ZENIT i avangarda 20ih godina*. Beograd.

[13] Видосава Голубовић и Ирина Суботић (2008) *ЗЕНИТ 1921-1926*, Народна библиотека Србије, Институт за књижевност и уметност, Београд, СКД Просвјета, Загреб, Београд.

[14] Toshino Iguchi (2007) Czechoslovakian Modernism and the United States: Ladislav Sutner's graphic design, *Graphic Design 1930: Print, Photography, Typography, Isotype*, Fuji Xerox Co., Ltd. pp.35-47.

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