

FIFTY YEARS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL OF GRAPHIC ARTS

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The *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* is the only fine arts event in Slovenia with such a long tradition, and 50 years of continuity for this kind of event is unique, even in world terms. The *Ljubljana Biennial*, as the oldest event of its kind, has given rise to a number of similar events throughout the world, a genuine network for the exchange of graphic art experiences. The biennials launched in Tokyo (Japan, 1957), Grentchen (Germany, 1958), Krakow (Poland, 1966), Florence (Italy, 1968), Bradford (England, 1970), and Fredrikstad, (Norway, 1972), among others, were all modelled on the *Ljubljana Biennial* and its statute, as were numerous national biennials not only in former Yugoslavia (Zagreb, Bitola, and Belgrade) but also elsewhere (Tallinn, Riga, Cairo, Bucharest, and Sofia). It was in the 1980s that the bulk of these biennials ceased to exist, and some were reorganised. New events were initiated in the 1990s, mainly with the idea that they would be repeated; this, however, did not happen. National events in former Yugoslavia were also converted into international ones, but without notable or qualitative changes. The *Ljubljana Biennial* has preserved its leading role. Of the international events mentioned above, Krakow is still going; it succeeded in internationalising itself. Its statute, modelled on the Ljubljana statute, has remained unchanged. Tallinn has raised its level of quality, growing from the graphic art biennial of the Baltic republics to the international triennial of graphic arts. Its young team explores the boundaries and possibilities of the graphic medium. Perhaps it has not been consistent enough in certain segments; nevertheless, it has gradually built up international contacts. The *Grafica Creativa* international exhibition in Finland is probably the most dedicated to research of the graphic medium in contemporary daily life. However, its concept has been quite different from the outset: it is less international but, perhaps precisely because of this, is of the highest quality. The biennial in Banska Bystrica (Slovakia) is becoming interesting from an international point of view. Nevertheless, Ljubljana has remained the focus of all kinds of graphic art activity, turning into the most complete source of information in the domain of contemporary graphic arts.

Where, when and why did it all start, and what stories have been woven into its background? Answering all these questions would require much more space than is available here. Prior to World War II, Slovene art was considered the art of a tiny nation on the margins of the grand Western European culture, always somewhat behind and derivative. Circumstances changed after 1945: during the war years, this relation had been interrupted and Slovene fine art marked by the prodigious production of partisan graphics; and, in the first years after the war, it fell under the formal dictate of conservative and uniform Socialist Realism. Post-war exhibiting activities were linked to the party line, as well, with exhibitions being almost exclusively organised by fine art associations. After the political break with the Soviet Union in 1948, the first substantial changes really began to be noticed in the early 1950s, namely in the functioning of the Museum of Modern Art, which was the main producer of exhibitions at home and the initiator of cooperation with foreign countries. An important modification occurred in 1952: we restored our contact with the world and participated in the *26th Venice Biennial*; Zoran Kržišnik was the assistant of the Yugoslavian commissar. He met there Zoran Mušič, a Slovene artist-dissident, and, already at the time, a member of the School of Paris. New relations with the world led to meetings with foreign artists and gallery owners, and in

the first half of the 1950s, several Slovene artists started to take their place actively and successfully within global art currents, particularly in the domain of graphic arts.

The idea for an international exhibition of graphic arts, which originated in Venice and grew alongside developments in the field of graphic arts at home and abroad, was realised in January 1955 in Ljubljana with the founding of the committee for the *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts*. At its first session, the committee drew up guidelines for the future exhibition, which was to present reproductive graphic works made in the last decade. The aim was to invite some one hundred artists from all the countries that had political and cultural contacts with Yugoslavia at that time. There can be no doubt that Zoran Kržišnik assumed the lion's share of the organisation of the exhibition and of further elaboration of the concept for the next 23rd *International Biennial of Graphic Arts*. He had observed graphic art creativity around the world since 1952, and ascertained that conditions were ripe for an action that would yield results—meaning that, at least in the graphic arts domain, where we were creatively strong, we could take part in global developments. With his sensitivity, stubbornness, and great courage, Kržišnik set the process in motion. He went to Paris on his own initiative to win over the cooperation of School of Paris members, whose aesthetic ruled Europe at the time. He made heavy use of the contacts provided by Zoran Mušič and Veno Pilon, who were living in Paris. Mušič helped him to meet Zadkine, Léger and Pignon, while Pilon introduced him to Picasso. Kržišnik collected 144 graphic prints by representatives of the School of Paris during this trip to Paris, and they were to present the core of the 1st *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts*¹ in Ljubljana in 1955. This move significantly altered the basic concept and final appearance of the exhibition. Prior to the 1st *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in Ljubljana, this kind of exhibiting activity had already become familiar throughout the world: the Biennial of São Paulo, *Bianco e nero* in Lugano, *Xylon* in Geneva, the lithography exhibition in Cincinnati. Since the development of graphic arts after World War II was extremely rapid, the need for a larger and more wide-ranging graphic arts event was evident.

From the beginning, the Ljubljana committee argued for the widest possible participation. The only condition was the quality of graphic prints, made using whatever reproductive technique in a limited edition. The organisers endeavoured to attract the participation of the largest number of artists, so that the event would feature the widest range of art currents. One of the main ideas was to draw the “graphic map of the world.” The rhythm of every second year would permit observation of the developments of graphic arts and of individual artists. A further expectation of this two-year rhythm was to provide for the participation of younger artists with fresh ideas. The Biennial was to enable not only Slovene artists but all exhibitors to hold their works up against new achievements and test them; at the same time, it was also meant to have a wider cultural and even political significance. In the Cold War period, when there was virtually no dialogue between East and West, Ljubljana succeeded in joining artists not only from these two poles but also from the “Third World.” Finally, these international events in Ljubljana were decisive for the evolution of domestic artists, and they were deeply related to the development and foundation of the Ljubljana graphic school.

The intention of the 1st *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in Ljubljana was to gather in one place everything that had occurred in the contemporary graphic arts domain after World War II, bearing in mind that graphic art was becoming increasingly important throughout the world, and that it was a sphere of art with its own characteristics and creative potentials. The

¹ Until 1973 the *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* was called the *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts*.

organisers accomplished their intention, and created the biggest and most successful exhibition of its kind since the war. They attained this by means of an open concept not limited to one technique and particularly taking into account the development of colour in graphic art. The socio-political situation of the Yugoslavia of the time was a great advantage. And the successes enjoyed by Slovene graphic artists abroad, the first international prizes and the enthusiasm with which certain individuals embarked on the task also helped.

The 2nd *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* proved that Ljubljana had reinforced its position as a centre of international graphic art. This exhibition presented around one hundred artists more than the first. In most cases the artists were invited personally, and sometimes, exceptionally, through the official channels in countries where graphic activities were less significant. In addition to the invitations and official selections, a public invitation was also launched. Artists could take part with three works each, produced in the previous two years; this has since become a rule for the Ljubljana exhibitions.

With the 3rd *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in 1959, Ljubljana entered the heart of contemporary graphic creativity. The rapid growth in the number of artists participating at the exhibitions led to the expansion of graphic art styles. As interest in the 3rd *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* was so great, the organisers were forced for the first time to select works and to expand the exhibition premises to the lower part of the Museum of Modern Art. Retrospective exhibitions of the winners of the three main prizes at the previous Biennial were a new feature of this event; such exhibitions have formed part of the event ever since. The 3rd *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* affirmed the position of Ljubljana as a world graphic art centre. This was also evident in the wide response it received in foreign periodicals, which published a number of reviews of and reports on the Ljubljana event (*Art news*, *Arts Review*, *Le arti*, *Vita e arte*, *Les lettres françaises*, and others). The interest shown by foreign gallery owners, publishers, and ateliers also increased. Nesto Jacometti, the owner of the publishing house L'Œuvre gravée in Zurich, who had initially been opposed to the founding of the Ljubljana exhibition, lent his collection of one hundred and forty graphic prints, primarily comprising works by representatives of the School of Paris, for the 3rd *Exhibition*; and he donated seventeen prints to Ljubljana in tribute to its endeavour to develop graphic arts throughout the world. In the period following the 3rd *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts*, a number of individual and group exhibitions of graphic arts came to Ljubljana, and Slovene graphic arts continued to make successful advances abroad. The 1960s represented the blossoming of graphic arts and international graphic arts events around the world, while in Slovenia this was the period of the rise and maturing of the Ljubljana graphic arts school, as well as of the general affirmation of our graphic arts at home and abroad.

The 4th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* brought no new organisational solutions; nevertheless, it did seem unlike the previous ones. The Ljubljana event had formerly been merely a register of a randomly gathered survey of graphic arts in the world; it would later become, over time, a survey of the most characteristic figures and currents in contemporary graphic arts.

The 5th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in 1963 was the most comprehensive event to date, dispelling any lingering doubts about the autonomy of the graphic arts. The new feature of this Biennial was the multitude of young talents on show. Robert Rauschenberg, a prominent American artist and one of the founders of American pop art, won the grand prize in Ljubljana for his crucial work *Accident*—this was one year before he was officially commended at the Venice Biennial. With the array of new names, this exhibition also brought

a taste of the new directions in which fine art was developing and which were taking root during the 1960s: optical art and new abstraction on the one side, and the art of “social reportage,” from pop art to European new figurativeness, on the other.

The 6th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in 1965 went further in the direction hinted at two years ago: a breakthrough of new creativity, a shift in the content of contemporary art and, partly, a change of generations. It also introduced the Grand Prize of Honour; this was for graphic artists who had acted as pioneers, or foundation stones for contemporary graphic arts, or who had presented a confrontation between the grand beginnings of modernity and the future. The first prize of this kind was bestowed on Joan Miró, that great master of modern art.

According to the critics, the 7th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in 1967 presented an “explosion of youth,” while the 8th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* brought an explosion in silkscreen. The response to the invitation was so large that a number of prints had to be rejected despite the fact that they met the exhibition criteria. New technical procedures enabled graphic arts to move from gallery walls to the streets in the form of posters. Graphic arts became increasingly subject to technology instead of manual artisan work, and this meant the production of bigger, virtually unlimited numbers of copies. This brought about an artificial differentiation between artistic and commercial graphics, based on the characteristics of the market.

I consider the 9th *International Exhibition of Graphic Arts* in 1971 and the events connected with it to represent the onset of discussions about original and copy, about the issue of what a graphic print is and is not, and what its function is. It also featured a qualitative and quantitative expansion of work by Japanese artists. The organisers started to set up accompanying events alongside the main exhibition, such as workshops, seminars, and conferences about the production, distribution and circulation of contemporary graphics. In 1971, an international symposium on the theme of “Graphic Arts Today and Tomorrow” accompanied the event, put together by the Yugoslav section of AICA. However, the symposium missed the essence of the development of graphic arts as a means of artistic expression, as a medium that had to expand its function if it wanted to remain topical and interesting for the exploring minds of younger generations. The traditional comprehension of graphic arts as a medium essentially related to various technologies and techniques started to induce feelings of unease in the evaluation and selection of graphic art production.

On the occasion of the 10th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* in 1973, the AICA assembly initiated a conference on the theme of the “Social Role of Graphic Arts” in Ljubljana. The main focus was on questions of whether aesthetic consideration was possible at all in the framework of mass information, and whether graphic prints could persist and formulate ideas amidst the multitude of designer-produced and design-oriented posters. The “crisis in the graphic arts” spurred the search for organisational solutions rather than substantive ones. Specialists were invited from Slovenia and abroad to participate in the planning of modifications, and both sides responded in a lively manner, proposing changes. Špelca Čopič provided a truly substantive suggestion. She wrote: “As graphic procedures expand, so do the possibilities for the application of graphic means to new materials. This is no longer only a question of a graphic print of exceptional dimensions but, also, of graphic wall decoration, graphic art on spatial objects, graphic mobiles, film graphics, photo graphics, computer graphics, all of which are at the disposal of the Ljubljana Biennial. We should find possible solutions balanced between the limited possibilities of the **organisers** and the wish to

see all these new developments, without neglecting the extended and profound information about everything that takes place in the world of graphic arts. As even now many a graphic print at the Biennial looks like a poster, there could be no obstacle to posters appearing at the Biennial—and, in addition to graphic techniques, all the printing techniques with them.”² In his article published in the London *Studio International* magazine (n. 961/1973), Cyril Barrett proposed a solution in the form of an international committee of selectors for future Biennials. The committee would invite artists to apply for participation, and it would be obliged to eliminate works that did not meet the criteria, as had been the case before. However, these critics’ responses did not bring any essential changes. Ljubljana remained stuck with old contents and organisational problems, with only minor cosmetic adjustments. Neither did the Biennial change its image in the years that followed. The basic concept remained the same throughout the 1970s, and it persisted—with slight modifications—into the 1980s as well. After the change in artistic currents, which started in the late 1970s and lasted until the late 1980s, when capital vehemently intervened and began to define value imperatives for art (new image, *neue Wilden*, new British sculpture, new figurativeness), the viability of graphic techniques was questioned. The concurrent substantiation of the so-called visible recognisability of an artist’s personal touch in an artwork pushed the importance of graphic arts as a reproductive technique to the background. The Ljubljana *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* events lived through a period of crisis.

The image of the Biennials between 1955 and 1961 was the image of the entry of graphic arts as an independent, equivalent branch of the fine arts. The 1960s were an era of innovation, of the testing of the possibilities offered by mechanical and technical means. It was the period of structuralism; our graphic arts blossomed in this period and, more than ever, came close to the peaks of graphic creativity seen elsewhere in the world. At the end of the 1960s, developments turned away from the testing of structural and technical virtuosity, which was given the place, or status, it deserved: a means of materialising fine art expression. Once again, developments turned to “objectness” and figurativeness—the time of surprises and great changes had passed. Instead, this was a period of endeavours towards a “universal graphic image of the world,” an international graphic art style. It is interesting to note that this style pleased the public: it was understandable and more familiar. The Biennial entered the 1980s in the same form it had before. Mr. Kržišnik wrote in the introduction to the catalogue of the 14th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* that an evolutionary path was chosen and that any organisational scheme would be changed only when a qualitative shift was promised. This meant, of course, that all the ancient modes of selecting artists for presentation at the Biennial remained in force—direct invitations, selection through advisers and through an official system (of state institutions), and open invitation in which nationality and geographical coverage were the prime criteria. Consideration of new approaches was oriented towards the foundation of the International Centre of Graphic Arts, which was supposed to supplement and expand the activities of the Biennial.

From the point of view of tradition and continuity, the 15th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* in 1983 entered the age of maturity. The organisers wished to take advantage of the 30th anniversary to reconsider the work done up to then. An analysis showed that the numerous accompanying exhibitions and events were more interesting than the central Biennial exhibition, which presented some 1,300 works by 541 artists from fifty-six countries. The outlook of the exhibition was extremely pluralistic, and the general opinion was that the Biennial had strayed from the path taken by the contemporary graphic arts. This pluralism

² Špelca Čopič, “Ob deseti mednarodni grafični razstavi v Ljubljani / On the occasion of the 10th International Exhibition of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana,” [*Sinteza* 28, 1973]:p. 57.

was repeated at the 16th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* two years later, and even the 17th and the 18th *International Biennials of Graphic Arts* did not present a fundamentally different image.

The International Centre of Graphic Arts was founded in 1986, when it split from the Museum of Modern Art and moved to the reconstructed Tivoli Mansion, with its fabulous location in Tivoli Park. It had already been signed up as the producer of the 17th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts*, while its official opening coincided with the 18th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts*, when new approaches were introduced. The selection of artists was left to selectors, named for the occasion by the participating states themselves. This was the first time that a kind of mass-curatorial principle has been established, and in the majority of cases it turned out to be interesting and satisfactory. Again, the committee invited individual artists and preserved smaller retrospective exhibitions of past Biennial prize winners—for the first time, these were located in the gallery of the International Centre of Graphic Arts. The organiser did not want to suspend the invitation. In addition to selections made by individual countries, it was precisely this plethora of criteria that made the Biennial look diverse and pluralistic, and thus interesting for the wider public.

As the 1990s arrived, the 19th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* had to face a large number of problems brought about by the uncertain economic and political situation, with the war in Slovenia starting one short week after opening. The threat of war had a greater influence on the response of foreign partners and less on circumstances at home. The decision of the Museum of Modern Art that it would no longer move its permanent collection exhibition during the Biennial created a problem of space since, throughout the years, the exhibition premises of the Museum of Modern Art had been the setting for the Biennial. This decision was the impetus for changes. The organiser had to modify the concept of selection by national selectors, adopted two years previously, with a proposal for (diminished) numbers of participating artists from individual countries. Thus, for the first time, the number of works at the exhibition was significantly reduced. The 19th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* did not have much luck with selectors, either: dissimilar curatorial criteria led to even greater disharmony in the appearance of the exhibition.

Since then, the organisation of the Biennials has been even more complex because of the harsh financial situation and the wavering enthusiasm for the Biennial displayed by Slovene cultural policy and Slovene critics—despite the fact that a view of art came to the fore in the 1990s that favoured reproducibility and multiplication. The graphic arts as a reproductive technique have satisfied the requirements of the day and comprised a potential to link the creative energies of post-industrial society, the political correctness of manifold ideas, ecologically-conscious thinking, the limited duration of artworks, the communicative status of art, and so on. The circumstances turned out to be beneficial for the continuation and reaffirmation of the Biennial. Of course, it was clear that these contextually and functionally beneficial circumstances could not be utilised without a revitalisation of the entire concept of the Biennial. The 20th, 21st and 22nd *International Biennials of Graphic Arts* brought a number of new features, though these were primarily in the accompanying programmes. The organiser attempted to revitalise the event; the fact is, however, that it did not deal with the essence of the Biennial. At the end of the 1990s, the Biennial introduced a new, more up-to-date approach to the structure of the event. National presentations of artists gave way to individual presentations, the Biennial appointed curators, and the number of selected artists was radically reduced—this tendency had been established in the early 1990s and each artist was presented on the basis of several works or a project. However, the truly radical was introduced at the

24th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* in 2001. The revitalisation of the Biennial was based on the understanding of graphic arts as a reproductive technique; the history of this technique tells us that the first preserved graphic prints were playing cards and books with iconographic motifs, which were used as models for large wall paintings. Graphic printing was a technique that enabled the mass reproduction of identical informative images. From the present standpoint of art, graphic printing was the first interdisciplinary art technique and contextual art praxis—the first example of popular culture. After the invention of graphic printing, technological developments contributed other reproductive techniques which have since become artistic tools. These include photography, Xerox, film, video, computer programs, web tools and virtual reality, and the *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* should to try to define its relation with these techniques more clearly.

The revitalisation of the Biennial is meant to be a process that probes the structure of the event, its internal organisation, its relations with domestic and foreign publics, and curatorial work. In shaping its concept, the International Centre of Graphic Arts has cooperated with domestic experts from several fields and from different generations, as well as with the international advisory board of the Biennial. From national exhibitions by national selectors, the segment dealing with works assembled by public invitation and the retrospective exhibitions of past Biennial prize winners, the 24th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* grew into four basic parts composed of different curatorial exhibitions, and it eliminated entirely the public invitation system. The central exhibition of the 24th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts*, entitled *Print World*, presented 39 projects at two exhibition premises in Ljubljana—the Museum of Modern Art and the Jakopič Gallery – and it was a result of the selection made by a single curator. The selection for the *Off-biennial* segment presented five projects by seven artists under the common title *Information-Misinformation*, spreading the boundaries of the exhibition premises into urban space, the media of mass communication and advertising billboards. The *Fundamina* segment, displayed in the Tivoli Mansion, comprised smaller personal exhibitions of works by Zoran Mušič, Andy Warhol and Mimmo Paladino, pointing to the historical aspect and significance of graphic printing. The historical moment and tradition were also invoked by the retrospective exhibition of graphic works by Richard Hamilton, entitled *Imaging Ulysses*, in the Cankarjev Dom Gallery. The goal was to inform and attract the largest possible numbers of professionals and visitors from home and abroad.

The changes in the structure of the Biennial have provoked many discussions among experts, which was also evident in the media response. The Biennial exhibition was most severely criticised at home. The conservative domestic fine art public frequently saw the new image of the Biennial as a threat to classical graphic techniques. Reproaches were mainly directed to the selection of works in the *Print World* segment and to the abolition of public invitation. On the other hand, a majority of foreign experts have welcomed the changes and understood them as an adjustment to global trends in the organisation of similar events, as well as helping to create these trends. This is best demonstrated by the international award for innovative approach to graphic arts bestowed on the Biennial by *Calcografía Nacional* at the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando* in Madrid. This institution also invited the curator of *Print World* to act as a coordinator of the international symposium on “New Technologies and their Influence on the Creation, Distribution and Consumption of the Digital Image.” The donation of thirteen silkscreens by Damien Hirst to the International Centre of Graphic Arts and positive replies from institutions worldwide to invitations to take part in the *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* and to collaborate with the International Centre of Graphic Arts also bear witness to the credibility which the Biennial acquired in the past and which the 24th *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* only strengthened and widened. They also testify to

the obligations of the Biennial and the International Centre of Graphic Arts towards their collaborators and the public at home and around the world.