Art criticism and the semantic construction of the concept of Design

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Art critics contributed significantly to the development of a semantic understanding of the concept of design in the local history of industrial modernization during the 1950s and 1960s in the Socialist Federative republic of Yugoslavia. The needs of growing urban areas and rapid developing industrial production of material goods were seen as a principal social task. Along with public efforts by architects and artists, art critics were among the key promoters of the public need for industrial design. The contradiction of promoting mass consumption to the egalitarian ambition of the ruling party ideology was rarely seen as an issue in the focus of art criticism as applied to everyday objects.

1. Introduction

Public promotion of the idea of industrial design developed in socialist Yugoslavia during the 1950s and ‘60s as part of the newly formed urban culture. This occurred on four levels: through the critique of the concept of applied arts, through an extension of architectural projects, through social activism in housing and through art criticism as part of the lifelong learning of the working class (Vukic 2008:135-182.). The level paper presents here is art criticism of the late fifties in Zagreb (Croatia), which was the center of such efforts. The activities of the Workers’ University of Zagreb, and articles published in the magazine 15 dana (“15 days”) often covered the culture of industrial products. In the development of the discourse on the subject, the most important impact came from art historians. The magazine 15 dana was initially launched in order to simplify the operational activities of the Workers’ University, the mission of which was to provide education to all, at least nominally to all participants in social projects identified as workers. However, the Workers University should have provided the basis for practical training to individuals in certain professions, and thus enable the social dynamics of knowledge, and as a consequence of social dynamics in general. Cultural activities were carried out within the Workers' University Cultural Center, which launched the magazine 15 dana in 1957. In the early years it was published as a bimonthly; then, in the mid-sixties, its issues came out less regularly. The magazine still exists today, even though its original publisher no longer formally exists.

2. Bringing Culture to the Working Class

From 1958, the header of the magazine listed its areas of focus as "theater, film, visual arts, literature, science", highlighting its cultural profile. The following year, music was added to the magazine's list of interests. However, in 1961 15 dana reduced its field of interest by placing in the header the following description: "Magazine for Culture and the Arts", which indicated its intended function to popularize art as a form of culture for the broad range of consumers in a classless society. Thus, the magazine often reported on workers visiting art exhibitions or theatre shows, or on actors reciting poetry at the construction sites of a new housing development or it informed readers about a debate on literature in a factory, during a meeting of the workers council.

It is not easy to clarify what was a program [or even propaganda] and what referred to actual events in such a magazine. But a definite and clear editorial orientation towards raising the cultural level of society was evident, and in such an orientation a significant share of the articles in the magazine were on industrial culture and issues of product design. Most of the authors on these issues were art historians with experience in art criticism, and they made significant theoretical and critical contributions to the semantic construction of the concept of design throughout the pages of 15 dana.

In addition, it should be noted that authors of other professional profiles worked on the same topic, although within a slightly different framework. The architect Andrija Mutnjakovic has published a series of articles for the magazine in the late fifties and early sixties on the subject of housing culture, with a series of practical tips for the organization of housing (Mutnjakovic 1958:175-177). This type of discourse was present in the context of architecture as well, in the articles written by Zvonimir Marohnic for the magazine Covjek i prostor (Man and Space), which certainly made a significant contribution to the articulation of the culture of everyday life, but at the level of practical advice (Marohnic 1960). This can be largely understood today as a structural part of the context of social activism concentrated around the organization Rodica i domacinstvo (Family and Household) (Vukic 2011:5-6).

3. The Concept of Industrial Design as Culture

Theoretical discourse of art criticism in the magazine 15 dana, with regard to its social mission and its target group, is a set of critical concepts dealing with the culture of the industrial product. The initial significance in this regard is explained in Zlatko Kauzlaric’s text “Terms and Concepts in the Field of Industrial Design”, in which the title refers to the discipline, but the elaboration of the thesis starts from the protagonist. So the term “artist in industry” is described as ‘industrial designer’ (in English), and the profession as ‘Industrial Design’ (in English). Yet this is followed by a Croatian definition of the discipline as ‘industrijsko...
oblikovanje’ [industrial formgiving] and the protagonist as ‘industrijski umjetnik’ [industrial artist] [Kauzlaric 1959:19-20.]. Kauzlaric will argue that the adjective “industrial” with the term artist is used instead of the less usual oblikovatelj [formgiver], which is more appropriate, however, in the Slovenian language, with the use of oblikovalec. The author clearly points out that the industrial arts should not be understood as part of applied art, since “… an industrial artist expresses - in the design of machines and products - with plastic values, while the details of the equipment and its colors are less important and belong more to the field of ornamentation” [Kauzlaric 1959:19]. If he specified the method, he did not forget the aesthetic grounds because “industrial design is a practical activity based on the principles of industrial aesthetics,” which would imply a certain set of attitudes or principles according to which the items are mass-produced. He referred to Herbert Read directly, explaining his views in two theses: the industrial product not only meets the individual’s feelings and thoughts, but utilitarian purposes too, and the creation of industrial products should learn from nature [1].

Kauzlaric is referring to Read’s discourse on the general character of art, the relation of form and ornament, “art” and “applied art”, as well as his theory on “humanistic” and “abstract” arts as a framework for the development of a separate industrial aesthetic [read 1934]. Kauzlaric has apparently accepted a small part of this, appropriate to context of a popular magazine, which, however, had to write about culture in a way that readers could understand. The author shares Read’s position on the evolutionary character of forms, from ornamented forms, typical of small scale manual production, to “plastic”, non-decorated forms typical of mass machine production. This was through a discourse that dealt with concepts such as “traditional” and “modern”, “backwards” and “advanced”, which is exactly the conceptual apparatus that was founded in Read’s book.

4. The Idea of Visual Culture

A series of articles from 1959 by Radovan Ivancevic has special significance in this discourse. In the series, he discusses the basic principles of industrial aesthetics. He specified the basic rules of industrial design as follows: the object should serve a purpose and meet certain aesthetic expectations; it should be of a harmonious shape, designed with a purpose and to communicate that purpose, the shape of the object should be to the logical properties of the material from which it is made and, ultimately, that it represents value for money [Ivancevic 1959:13-15]. Ivancevic, like Kauzlaric, promotes Read’s thesis on industrial design, which follows the same functional laws by which nature builds. In addition, he points to the same evolutionary understanding of the development of an imaginary industrial aesthetic, from the original ornamented objects, “served by man”, to the present case with the plastic qualities which “serve man”. Ivancevic establishes his thesis in a critique of idealistic philosophy according to which “beauty is just that which serves no purpose,” in order to support his criticism of manufacturers who, despite the evolution of the means of production, machinery and form, still do not comply with at least one rule of industrial design. Before he noticed that “in social context, where there is social control of production, in which a manufacturer is also a consumer, this problem becomes particularly important, but has unexpectedly good opportunities for solution” [Ivancevic 1959: 13]. In order to found a basis for critical thinking methods to set up this aesthetic discourse, Ivancevic introduces the protagonist - “a new professional designation of artist” – the “disajner” [in Croatian], created by industrial production. He described this more specifically as a “designer to draft a model (prototype) of a product which will later be mass produced in a factory by machines” [Ivancevic 1959b: 13-15]. This newly defined protagonist will serve the need for the extensive elaboration of the compliance of forms to purposes, and for the discussion about compliance with the material aspect of the product, since “the designer must have an honest relationship with the material” [Ivancevic 1959c: 12-14]. In the description of the relations of forms and purposes, the author uses the example of Le Corbusier’s Chaisse longue, while throughout the debate on materials he points out recommendations for the treatment of material, exactly along the lines of the concept of Herbert Read, using illustrations of industrial items that have no author. Stressing the beginnings of industrial aesthetics and comparing them with the current state of affairs [as Herbert Read widely quoted Walter Gropius], Ivancevic creates a critical apparatus following modernist discourse on the concept, which exactly Read had accurately formulated and Alfred J. Barr and Philip Johnson had branded as “Machine Art” [Barr, Johnson 1934:123-135].

5. Art Criticism of Material Production

Given the social context, in particular with regard to the medium in which a series of articles were published, such theoretical positions were significantly amended in the discourse with references to the local situation. This was accompanied by visual presentations and verbal analyses of items collected in the stores, which mostly belonged to the domain of “irregular” industrial design, in order to point out bad examples of form and ornament relations. The elaboration of the concept of design as a signifier of the practical method of industrial aesthetics was a part of the overall efforts of the Workers’ University and its magazine 15 dana to seek the purpose of educational activism, focusing on cultural awareness and a wide range of non-specialized readers. Hence the simplicity of language and and the clear social basis of critical apparatus in the affirmation of a new understanding of the culture of industrial production. Such activism in the field of culture in industrial production continued after the nineteen-fifties, and most significant contribution came from art critic Radoslav Putar in his long series of articles in which he dealt with industrially produced objects and communications, gathered from the immediate trade environment.

His interest in the idea of the synthesis “of painting, plastic, and architectural creativity in one whole” [Kolesnik 1998:35] had already been elaborated in a critical review of the first exhibi-
tion of the EXAT 51 group (the seminal group for the foundation of experimental art and design in socialist Yugoslavia) in 1953. Later, in his review of Salon 1958, held in Rijeka, expressing his views of the need for “more complex treatment of contemporary visual culture in our country” because “the Salon, which is isolated within the limits of easel painting and sculpture in galleries which required pedestals only, certainly is in delay” (Putar 1959:1). This “delay” could be interpreted not only in relation to accepted theoretical values from the manifesto of EXAT 51 group, but also in relation to the other, indeed synthetic, approaches to the presentation of art, such as Putar witnessed on the occasion of the Zagreb Triennial Exhibition in 1955 or in the broader context of the XI Triennale di Milano, on which he wrote a critical review (Putar 1957:49-55).

At the time he had published a critical review of the Salon of 1958, the second Zagreb Triennial was just under preparation, where Putar had presented a lecture entitled “Art critique of material production”, and subsequently published it as a text. This was a systematic discourse on elements for a comprehensive foundation for the synthesis of ideas within the domain of industrial production (Putar 1959b:147-147). Putar emphasized at the outset how the visual culture of a certain context does not only consist of traditional artistic disciplines, but also of objects of everyday use which contain elements of artistic intervention. This expanded field of art he described as “the circulation of forms” which beats “at an accelerating pace in parallel with the industrialization of material production in our country.” After this, he argued his thesis statement that the final shape of products was directly related to the social and political structure of a society producing by industrial means. Therefore he asked, “could we be indifferent to the issues of industrial production?”

This argument deepened Putar’s concept of “synthesis” and above all, made strong reference to the problems of industrial production (Putar 1959b:147-147). Putar emphasized at the outset how the visual culture of a certain context does not only consist of traditional artistic disciplines, but also of objects of everyday use which contain elements of artistic intervention. This expanded field of art he described as “the circulation of forms” which beats “at an accelerating pace in parallel with the industrialization of material production in our country.” After this, he argued his thesis statement that the final shape of products was directly related to the social and political structure of a society producing by industrial means. Therefore he asked, “could we be indifferent to the issues of industrial production?”

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6. International Relations

The basic postulate was the idea of the development and evolution of the shape, which according to Putar, can have positive and negative aspects – in relation both to heritage and to acceptance of the new or “modern”. So his classification extends from items of folklore, to the imitation of tradition and the modernizing masking of traditions, to “authentic contemporary forms.” Over such a range Putar had developed a critical attitude on material production being subject to social and economic development, so the forms evolve. One important element of his theoretical position includes industrial production in the sphere of visual culture, another is the development of a typology of the research model, and a third places such theoretical positions and models in a particular social environment.

The impact of foreign periodicals has contributed significantly to the formation of attitudes such as Putar’s, within a general tendency towards promoting the concept of “good design” or “good form” or, in the French context, the concept of “l’Esthetique Industrielle”. Above all, the influence had come from the magazine of the same name that promoted the culture of industrial production, the arts, and industrial products (de Noblet 1993:21-26). This magazine was launched in the early fifties by l’Institut Francais d’Esthetique Industrielle, founded upon the initiative of Jacques Vienot, owner of one of the first French agencies for industrial design - Technes. Even slogans in advertisements that promote the agency through the magazine testify to its commitment describing the offer as a service “from the toothbrush to Autorail, from coffee pots to prefabricated house ...” (2).

Through the pages of L’Esthetique Industrielle, articles were published (3) which might confirm the thesis of de Noblet that both the magazine and the Institute were “… a logical continuation of the modernist goals of the founders of UAM (Union des Artistes Modernes) from the nineteen-thirties” (de Noblet 1993:25). This parallel is interesting, even before the detailed analytical comparison of Putar’s attitudes with ideas from the French magazine, since one of the ideas proposed in L’Esthetique Industrielle is the relation between abstract art and industrial aesthetics, to a large extent similar to the theories of Herbert Read. This relation considers forms that, according to Read, are “plastic”, i.e., they have a stronger inherent form than representational art. Therefore, even Putar’s theory on contemporary visual culture of material production, supported by the categorization of industrial products, builds its apparatus precisely upon this idea.

7. Conclusion

In the context of education of the working class organized by the Workers University in Zagreb and throughout the pages of the magazine 15 dana, the efforts of art criticism added significantly to the very idea of such an education. Furthermore, the art critics formed a theoretical position of discourse on industrial production and industrial items. In this discourse, the standard concept of oblikovanje (formgiving) was used, and sporadically (and for no particular theoretical reason) the term “design” (in English) is used, mainly to indicate the origin of the term, or “designer”, when they wanted to point out the carrier of the process. In this way, the concept of formgiving was established in the local context of a state-governed economy, giving way to later semantic construction of the concept of design.

The construction started in the nineteen-fifties and with a discourse fairly similar to criticism of the concept of applied arts. Even the protagonists of this discourse were shared between the two contexts of theoretical construction, with Putar being the foremost example. The particularity of the theoretical elaboration of the concept of formgiving within the context of educational activism is the general usage of discourse appropriate for a non-specialized audience. But from the beginning of the nineteen-sixties, with the introduction of economic reforms in the context of self-managed socialism, this level changed in this context in Croatia and the former Yugoslavia, with the full introduction of the term and concept of dizajn (design).
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Kolesnik, L. 1959b, Likovna kritika materijalne proizvodnje [Art Criticism of Material Production], Naše teme, II [4].


Notes
1. All texts referenced in this paper were published later in Vukic, Fedja (ed.), Od oblikovanja do dizajna/From Formgiving to Design, 2003
2. L'Esthétique industrielle 6, Paris 1952, advertisement on last page.

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