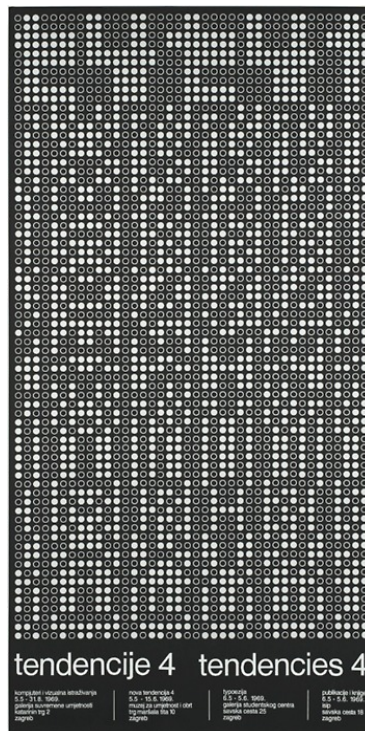


CROATIAN ELECTRONIC LITERATURE 2000-2012

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Introduction

Contemporary Croatian literature is not much interested in exploring new media art forms. This disinterest should be studied having in mind at least three facts: the history of media art in Croatia during the 1960s and 1970s, the history of Croatian literature during the 1980s, and the symptomatic interest of contemporary literature in media as a literary motive. Let us shortly sketch the first complex. Croatian media art during the 1980s was organically related to the contemporary international scene. Vladimir Bonačić's computer-controlled dynamic objects, Ivan Picelj's or Aleksandar Srnec's optical and kinetic-visual art, and the works of Goran Trbuljak placed Croatia in the contemporary media art scene¹. Programmed and computer art works were related to the annual international exhibition *New Tendencies* and the *Bit international* magazine which both practically and theoretically promoted media approach. *New Tendencies* was the joint exhibition of European artists in 1961 that grew into an international movement. The movement promoted plurality of the avant-garde of the time with a whole array of themes and subjects. Darko Fritz, in his study *New Tendencies*, summarized those practices as “neo-constructivist and concrete art, tautological and monochromatic painting, and visual research through algorithmic works” (Fritz, 2006). *New Tendencies* did not only promote new approach towards art, but it also summoned “theoreticians during the Cold War, first from Eastern and Western Europe (and dissidents from South America), and, from 1965 onwards, also from the USA, the Soviet Union and South America, and subsequently from Africa and Asia” (Fritz, 2006).



Picture 1: Poster for New Tendencies 4 by Ivan Picelj (1969)

The second historical complex is even more important to literature and literary experiments. One can be suspicious of the disinterest in literary artistic experiments from the 1990s onwards because of the heritage of the postmodernist literary experiments in Croatian poetry. The literature of the 1980s explored its material from its linguistic artificiality to its mediated status. The poetry of the *Quorum generation* promoted exploration in language as well as experiments in media. The name of the generation was derivative of the title of the prominent literary magazine that summoned literary theoreticians, poets and novelists of young generation. The title of one of the leading theoretical books of that time, *Screens of emptiness (Ekran praznine)* by Branko Ćegec, refers to the importance of media interfaces to poetry and, *vice versa*, the importance of incorporating poetical experience into a media artist's experience.

Finally, there is a third reason for investigating the forms of media experiments. Although experiments with formal media aspects are reserved for what can be seen as the literary margin, media constitute the narrative horizon of contemporary Croatian novels. Such is the case with Vlado Bulić's *A Journey into the Heart of the Croatian Dream (Putovanje u srce hrvatskog sna)* and Renato Baretić's *Hotel Grand (Hotel Grand)*. There is also a whole scene of so called *blog literature* (part of that scene used the term *eventualists* as a self-ironical umbrella term). The novels such as Dario Rukavina's *Buddha in supermarket (Buddha u supermarketu)* or Zrinka Pavilić's *World & practical women (Svijet & praktična žena)* were published in print after a period of promoting their remediated literary prose formats online.

Aside from the fact that a fraction of contemporary literature was presented as a form of new media art (but was formally more or less traditional), their main relation towards media took place at the level of their content. Contemporary Croatian literature from the year 2000 onwards is taking the new media as its literary and narrative motive, but also as an ideological horizon that is forming the specific political and new economic milieu. That milieu is present in two almost opposite forms: media is either a substance of novelist's analysis and a critique or horizon of social structure, or present as a social context while works are more or less unconscious about its hegemonic character. In the second type of media art, media is not actually present (although blog literature is claiming its presence), besides the spectacular media character of that literature (the new media genre is validated as better, modernized, *interactive* form of literature). There is an array of literature about web programmers, web journalists, bloggers, media workers, and media figures, but while in the second case it is a fashionable motive, in the first one it is a literature about desubstantialized subjects disjointed from their national (and nationalistic), gender, and political origins, and thrown into new neo-liberal relations where media plays an important role.²

Experiments with the form of electronic literature

This context will serve as a matrix for final remarks about the status of electronic literature in Croatia. But it is important to list those experiments that can, never the less, be defined as electronic literature. At the beginning of the new millennium there were some hypertextual experiments. The projects were initiated by the literary magazine *Libra Libera*, a non-institutional place for literature and critical theory that had an important role in the student movement during the late 1990s in Croatia (<http://www.zamir.net/libera/>). (It started as a student literary magazine *Libra* published by the Student's Center of the University of Zagreb, but was censored during 1999 because of publishing what was described as *vulgar* prose by

Kathy Acker). *Libra Libera*, theoretically interested in elaborating the concept of hypertextual writing, initiated the first hypertextual experiment in 2000. Unfortunately this as well as all other Libra's works are lost which is partially an outcome of the non-institutional framework that was the only available framework for such experiments. The first hypertext was created by a group of young writers from the ex-Yugoslavian countries. Andrea Pisac, Snežana Žabić, Stjepan Balent and Krešimir Pintarić were summoned in collaborative writing process based on the first line of a poem: "Mixal, Wenders and I, hanging out in the supermarket". The sentence is from a poem of famous Croatian writer Branko Maleš, who was a prominent figure of the *Quorum generation*. One word of the sentence was given to every writer as his/her starting point. The outcome was a labyrinth of personal confessions, self-elaborations and comments on literature either as a personal profession or a social practice. One of Libra's collaborators Krešimir Pintarić continued to write electronic literature. In 2006 Pintarić published "Commedia"³ which is the first and only Croatian multimedia poetry collection. It was published on his own website.

In the period from 2000 to 2001 *Libra Libera* initiated several hypertextual projects, all in various ways devoted to the ex-Yugoslavian context and to media and the mediatized experience of young writers and literary theoreticians. The project titled *The introduction to positive geography (Uvod u pozitivnu geografiju)* created an interactive map of Europe. The spots on the map were related to specific texts: travel guides and travel writings (itineraries), literature in post-colonial studies, Orientalism and Balkanology. The project also allowed users to create their own texts (travel notes, poems, theoretical works) and to connect those writings to the concrete location on the map. The project aimed at enlightening the status of the Balkans in European literature and thought. *The introduction to positive geography* initiated discursive analyses of the Balkan imaginary. (Important part of the project was based on the paragraphs from Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Milica Bakic-Hayden's *Nesting Orientalisms*.)



Picture 2: A screenshot of *Mixal, Wenders and I*. (2000).

The following project was *Hypertext for the masses (Hipertekst za mase)* and was initiated for the 150th anniversary of Marx and Engels' *Communist manifesto*. The first paragraph of the *Manifesto* was open for comments and rewriting. The project was well received and the paragraph was widely commented, and it acted as a form of collective therapy for ex-socialist citizens. The last project initiated by *Libra Libera* was titled *OHTXT* (Open hypertext). It was a free software for creating hypertextual works.

If we take into account the wider definition of electronic literature, we can find some interesting works that can be classified as flash art. In 2002 Bulaja naklada, a Croatian publisher of electronic books, launched their international project "Croatian Tales of Long Ago" (<http://www.bulaja.com/price/price.htm>), based on a fairytale book written in 1916 by Ivana Brlić Mažuranić. Eight independent teams of collaborators from all around the world contributed to this award-winning project. The whole work was done in Macromedia Flash.

There is also a prominent Quorum writer, Damir Miloš, who expectedly explored the new medium. In 2000 he started writing *Novel about sea (Roman o moru)* and offered his readers the chance to rewrite some parts of it or to illustrate its paragraphs. (The project was taking place at Miloš's web site *Sea pig (Morsko prase)* about sailing and literature.) In 2008 a collaborative book WriteSomething (www.writesomething.net/knjiga) emerged. It was more a business than a literature experiment. The creators decided to publish everything that users posted on their web site. (It was also turned into an unedited book that became a bestseller.)

Visual artists, expectedly (given the history of media art in Croatia), played a more important role in experimenting with new media forms. Some of these experiments could be defined as electronic literature. Kata Mijatović's *The Dream Net (Mreža snova)* is an Internet adaptation of the ambiance used at the exhibition K+Z in Fine Arts Gallery at Slavonski Brod in 2001. The adaptation was a more or less classic hypertextual work with links and lexia composed of verbal material and photographs. The work relates the textual and visual representations of an artist's dreams in order to elaborate the role of the unconsciousness in the work of an artist.

The important part of electronic literature during the 1990s and the early 2000s was the combination of new media literary experiments and visual arts. If we appropriate N. Katherine Hayles' classification of electronic literature, then the list of electronic works can be extended (Hayles, 2008) with important names in Croatian visual art. Andreja Kulunčić is among leading Croatian artists working in new media. Her projects *Closed Reality - Embryo* (1999) and *Distributive justice* (2001) could be classified as generative art. In Kulunčić's art works an algorithm is used to scramble and rearrange pre-existing texts. These are multidisciplinary projects that engage several scientists with the aim of creating art with social and cultural goals.

The project *Closed Reality – Embryo*, realized between 1998 and 2000, was formed around a Web page as an impulse for several live presentations and discussions among artists, educational professionals, feminists and academics (Ilić, 2003). The core of the work was online where the participants were creating their own embryos by using software that simulates the creation of life. The goal of the project was to provoke critical reflection on the consequences and implications of genetic engineering. Kulunčić's next project *Distributive justice* provoked questions not about genetic but social determinants. Distributive justice is a central issue in moral and political philosophy and also in common sense and moral reasoning (Kulunčić, 2004). The aim of this concept was to engage participants in debates about social "good" that can take various forms of expression. The web page was formed as a questionnaire in which participants were asked to distribute social goods (money, freedom, social position, opportunities, public services, and pleasure) according to social theories (libertarianism, egalitarianism, communism, welfare state, etc.) (Ilić, 2003).



Picture 3: Andreja Kulunčić's Distributive justice

Conclusion

Now we can go back to the initial question of this paper – the reasons for such a poor reception of electronic literature in Croatia. The reasons are not obvious if we take into account the already summarized facts about media art in Croatia: the history of visual-kinetic and computer generated art and the media-oriented literature of the *Quorum* generation as well as media as conceptual context for contemporary Croatian literature. The major turn happened around the year 2000 when Croatian literature transformed towards a dominant style that literary critics marked as “reality-oriented” (Bagić, 2012). That transformation was partially undertaken as a manifesto of prominent literary movement titled FAK, a group of writers that popularized contemporary literature through the form of festivals and public readings. (There are debates over the meaning of the acronym. There is an obvious relation to the obscene English word, but it also stands for the Festival of alternative literature and/or Festival of A literature.) The gesture of breaking with the past was partly motivated by the critique of conceptual art tradition and its linguistic and media experiments.

In that context artistic movements such as *New Tendencies* and the literature of the Quorum generation were questioned for both poetical and socio-economic reasons. As Bagić put it “The 2000s were marked by the democratization of the society and the establishing of political stability but also by recession, the crisis of values, and the tabloid aesthetics.” (Bagić, 2012). The buzzword “reality-oriented literature”, often used to describe FAK's literature, must be interpreted differently – it is most of all a turn towards “more communicative” forms

of literature (Postnikov, 2012). This kind of literary dominant does not open creative space for experiments with media forms although media forms and media genres become important facts of popular literature.

The socio-economic context is fundamentally important for understanding new media as the obligatory form in contemporary Croatian prose as an actual and pragmatic form of literature oriented towards future, and, as literature in relation to mediated reality. In that context media is emerging not in the form of exploration and experiment, but mostly in feasible forms of quasi-mediated practices (such as blogs that are later published in print literature). As Boris Postnikov noted, exactly the moment when Croatian literature turned away from postmodernism (by rejecting literary experiments and explorations), postmodernism entered Croatian literature as the cultural (but not poetic) dominant and the fundamental condition of literary production.

For that reason, it has to be noted that there is not a gap between media forms - traditional forms of print literature and “new technologies and new communication frames (Internet, blog, reality show, hypertext)” (Bagić, 2012). Instead there is a break in economic conditions of literary production understood as the cultural dominant of late capitalism by Frederic Jameson and David Harvey (Postnikov, 2012). The spectacularisation of literature through the festivals and the devaluation of literary journals (as was the case with *Quorum*, *Razlog*, or *Krugovi*) and literary critique (Postnikov, 2012) are closely related to the devaluation of media experiments in literature, and not the other way around. The gap between new media and traditional print media does not exist but in the form of a gap between co-opted media forms (such as blogs, and blog literature) and alternative literature/art that uses media as its fundament and material. The new media artistic and literary works (Andreja Kulunčić's works, *Libra Libera* hypertextual experiments, etc.) discussed in this paper are more often in conflict with the cultural dominant than with anything else. Analyzed as symptoms of a broader socio-economic context, these artistic experiments provide an insight into conditions of literary production.

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Footnotes

1 The scientists and artists worked together as was the case with one of the most prominent participants, Vladimir Bonačić, “a scientist who, influenced by New Tendencies, started creating works of art, expanding on his scientific work with aesthetic categories” (Fritz, 2006). Bonačić “showed a 36-meter-long, computer-generated light installation at Kvaternik Square in Zagreb”. The algorithm included in the title of the work led “to cognitive insights, through observing sequences of visualized symmetric or asymmetric compositions of the mathematical algorithm of the Galois field (a system of pseudo-random algorithms)” (Fritz, 2006).

2 One of the most important work of Croatian literature at the beginning of new millennium, Vlado Bulić's *A Journey into the Heart of the Croatian Dream (Putovanje u srce hrvatskog sna)* represents the world of web journalists and questions the role of Internet portals in using celebrity scandals to create a virtual political order. At the beginning of the novel entitled *Boris Becker's sperm* the reality of the protagonist begins to fade as spectacular forms of news begin to simulate and finally replace what the nihilistic journalist acknowledges as boring and non-spectacular reality. (After the working day, he finds people in the tram non-attractive, and concludes that people “do not know how to be a news” (2006:14). Bulić's novel carries “the mark of the digital” as theorized by N. Katherine Hayles in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008). Bulić is combining two different perspectives of non-mediated and *remediated* reality (the latter represented as Internet news portal) until the very moment when it becomes obvious that the second perspective co-opted the first one (and that the protagonist has gone insane without the possibility to any longer differentiate between what is Real and what is Imaginary). A specific font is used in paragraphs in which the web-journalist's voice is taking over the objective voice of the narrator, and transforms the reality into the brutal and violent web-news-scandal world. Combining two different fonts in order to make a distinction between mediated and non-mediated reality is similar to the practices of the print novelists N. Katherine Hayles sees interested in displaying the mark of the digital, such as Jonathan Safran Foer (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), Salvador Plascencia (*The People of Paper*), and especially Mark Danielewski (*House of Leaves*).

3 Pintarić runs *Society for promoting new media literature* (<http://www.elektronickeknjige.com/dpkm/>). The web site promotes digitalized works of Croatian authors. The only electronic literature here in the purest sense is Pintarić's own work.