

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE:

The Biennial of Industrial Design over the First Twenty Years

Категорија чланка: оригинални научни рад

Abstract: The text is an attempt to analyse the first twenty-year history of the Biennial of Industrial Design BIO. It focuses on the Biennial's chief organizational aspects: the effort behind its establishment, purpose, and role; the Biennial's achievements; and, not least of all, the need to revise its underlying concept.

In Yugoslavia, the main aim of the BIO exhibition was to connect designers with industry. This was done with considerable success, especially in its first decade, when the Biennial of Industrial Design in Ljubljana was, along with the Milan Triennial, one of the most important design events in Europe; it was also the first such biennial in the world. Large numbers of designers from both Western and Eastern Europe took part in the exhibition.

Key words: Biennial of Industrial Design, industrial design, history of design, organizational aspects of the biennial

The Museum of Architecture and Design, from which BIO has been operating since 1972,¹ houses a rich archive of documents that tell not only of the Biennial's history but also of the history of design in Slovenia, in other republics of the former federal state of Yugoslavia, and in the rest of the countries that took part in BIO, either regularly or sporadically. And their number was not small. In the period of socialism, designers and manufacturers from both West and East met at the international biennial design exhibition. This was possible only because of Yugoslavia's unique political position, which it had won for itself in the years after the Second World War and solidified globally with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Origin and Aim of the Biennial of Industrial Design

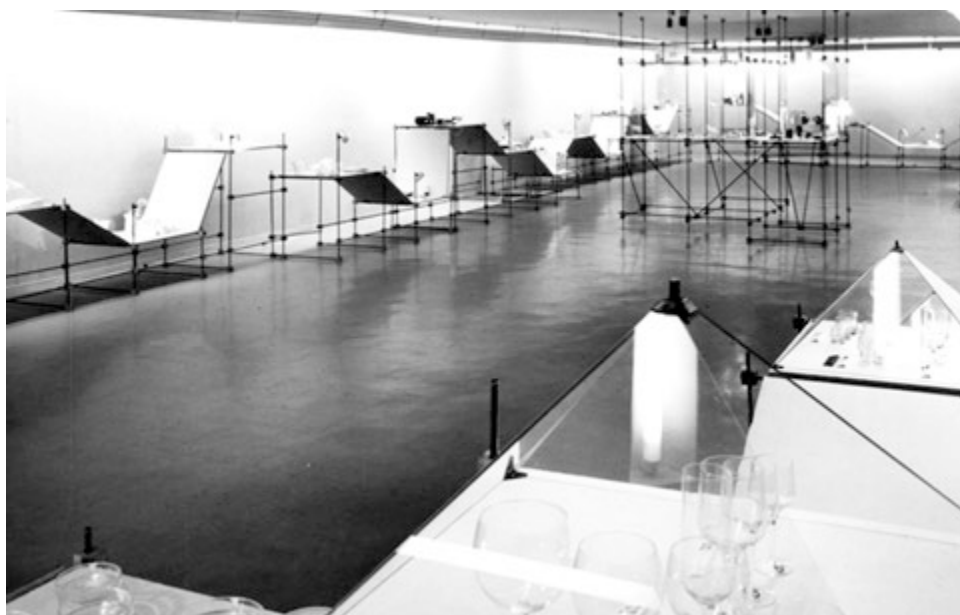
In the latter half of the 1950s, calls for establishing stronger ties between designers and manufacturing became more explicit. Pressure came both from the Association of Visual Artists of Applied Art of Slovenia (DLUUUS) and from the Architects' Union of Slovenia (ZAS). Some of the

architects already involved with industrial design were active in one or even both of these organizations. The purpose of such calls was the “concern for a more suitable design of industrial products” (Anonim 1961). This was also demanded in resolutions passed by DLUUUS at its general assembly in 1959 and by the Union of Visual Artists of Applied Art of Yugoslavia at the federal conference.² As a result, the DLUUUS administrative committee conducted a survey among the membership and discovered that thirty-seven were already involved with design in the manufacturing process while fifty others wished to be involved (*loc. cit.*). Based on this, they concluded that in order to create stronger ties with industry, an organization was needed that would focus entirely on such tasks. Accordingly, at the DLUUUS plenary meeting in 1959, “lively interest [...] was aroused by the news that they had seriously started working on a campaign of an intensive involvement in the field of design through the establishment of a centre for design” (Gajšek 1959: 9). They undertook to accomplish three basic tasks: to devise a programme for the planning work in organizing the Centre for Design,³ to recruit a small number of hard-working members who would form the centre's core, and to secure a space for association activities and exhibitions. Intensive preparations for this first attempt to found a Centre of Industrial Design in Ljubljana lasted a full year, from May 1960 to May 1961, but nothing came of them due to a lack of understanding and support (Gnamuš 1970). The inability to find a director for the centre and problems with obtaining space for the association meant that the centre could not be realized in the anticipated form (*ibid.*: 4). Nevertheless, in 1961, the association came to the conclusion that its efforts had in any case “created the necessary basis for the work of the centre; they had created a programme of work, had convinced manufacturers, retailers, and authorities that the design of utilitarian objects had been an exceptionally important task, which also had a profound impact on our national economy” (Anonim 1961: 3). The DLUUUS administrative committee,

¹ The Museum of Architecture and Design was founded in 1972 by the City of Ljubljana as the Architecture Museum; in 2010, it became a national museum and was given its current name.

² In Yugoslavia, design associations such as DLUUUS, operated at the level of the constituent republics (e.g. Slovenia), while the Union of Visual Artists of Applied Art of Yugoslavia (*Savez likovnih umjetnika primenjenih umetnosti Jugoslavije*, or SLUPUJ) operated at the federal level.

³ The administrative committee first proposed this in 1960. See *Kronika DLUUUS*: 3.



1. BIO I exhibition, 1964, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana
1. Прво бијенале индустријског дизајна, 1964, Модерна галерија, Љубљана

which ended its term in 1961, expressed the opinion that, in continuing the work set out for it, one of the tasks of the new administrative committee must be “a concern for a permanent exhibition of good form that would encourage deepened efforts in design” (*ibid.*: 4).

Nevertheless, the idea of a design centre did not just die away; there were further efforts and discussions in various organizations, and even the mayor of Ljubljana, the architect Marjan Tepina, was favourably disposed to the concept (Bajželj 2008: 16). Marijan Gnamuš recalls: “There existed [...] different initiatives, almost disputes, among architects, builders, and the Designers' Association of Slovenia. They each had their own initiative, and the architects' association had a wide range of discussions and explorations.” (*ibid.*: 15) To put an end to the debates, Mayor Tepina proposed creating a biennial of industrial design.

In the invitation from the Ljubljana City Council to a meeting of the initiating committee (on July 18, 1963), Tepina wrote the following: “It has been observed on various occasions that in the present phase of the development of our light industry it is necessary and beneficial to dedicate greater attention to the dynamic role of industrial design. These observations are now coming together in the proposal that in Ljubljana, following the model and experience of the Biennial of Graphic Art, we organize every other year – in years when there is no graphic art biennial – a biennial of industrial design.” (Letter 1963)

Officially, the Biennial of Industrial Design was founded by the Ljubljana City Council and the Chamber of Commerce of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia (BIO

Informacija 1968). The Cultural Community of Slovenia supported the event and also co-funded it. The Secretariat of the Biennial of Industrial Design began operations in the autumn of 1963; its direction was entrusted to the architect Marijan Gnamuš.

The First BIO Exhibitions: International Recognition, Successes and Problems

The programme prepared by Marijan Gnamuš (*idem* 2008: 16) for the First Biennial of Industrial Design consisted of three basic ideas (1. *bienale industrijskega oblikovanja* 1964: 6–8): to improve the quality of industrial design in every field associated with it; to aim for the industrial design of products to be treated as “formal and functional values” that in conjunction with other elements shape our everyday environment into a greater whole; to educate and inform the professional and general audiences on the achievements and culture of industrial design at home and abroad. Here we see in a nutshell some of the basic modernist ideas: the affirmation of design in industry, the widespread use of good-quality industrial products in everyday life, and the development of the design profession and its educational role.

The First Biennial of Industrial Design (Fig. 1), held between October 9 and November 15, 1964, at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, was attended by participants from no less than eleven countries: Austria, Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Italy, Norway, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Yugoslavia. What was it



2. BIO 2 exhibition, 1966, Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana
2. Друго бијенале индустријског дизајна, 1966, Модерна галерија, Љубљана

about the design of this first Biennial that elicited such a response? The invitations asking for submissions listed eight categories defining the Biennial's content – essentially, these were the current fields of industrial design.⁴ These categories were also slightly adjusted to the national production, that is to say, to the existing industrial design products. They wanted to ensure a balance between international and national participants; consequently, works in glass, furniture, and technical appliances dominated the exhibition.

In order to take part in BIO 1, manufacturers, designers, and artists either submitted works themselves or were invited to participate. Some national associations and design organizations responded to the invitation by assembling a selection of products for the exhibition. When the nine-member Yugoslav jury, headed by the Croatian architect Vjenceslav Richter, prepared a selection of all products for the exhibition, they took into consideration the selections that had already been made. The Yugoslav jury members were also involved in the international jury along with four foreign members.⁵ The international jury had to deal, first of all, with the question of how to evaluate the exhibited works, which varied considerably, both in number

and quality, in their representation of the twelve participating countries. They wanted to know how and according to which criteria the works had been chosen. Along with the explanation offered by Marijan Gnamuš, Marjan Tepina, the chairman of the BIO organizing committee, articulated the reasoning that had guided the organizers of the first Biennial:

“Our industrial design is still young and we must take this into account, so help from other countries is very much needed. The exhibition was not set up in a rigorous way, which is partly why we called it a Yugoslav exhibition with international participation. It was only in the course of its development that the proper proportions between the exhibits became apparent, so that now we can consider it an international exhibition, and no doubt the 2nd BIO exhibition will have earned this name.” (Jury Minutes 1964)

Generally speaking, the evaluation of the jury took into account both the functional and aesthetic aspects of the works, as well as their originality. The jury, headed by the renowned Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles, awarded twenty gold medals and eighty honourable mentions, with most awards going to Yugoslav designers.

⁴ These categories were reorganized a little further by the members of the BIO 1 international jury. The final arrangement was as follows: 1. Furniture; 2. Hospitality and household equipment and appliances (a. Ceramics, b. Glass, c. Plastics, d. Metal, e. Wood, f. Mechanical household equipment); 3. Textiles; 4. Optical objects; 5. Lamps; 6. Sport equipment; 7. Machinery, industrial products from the engineering industry; 8. Electrical machinery and telecommunication devices; 9. Clothing and fashion; 10. Toys; 11. Architectural details; 12. Transportation; 13. Packaging; and 14. Visual communications. (Minutes 1964). As these categories did not substantially change in the later biennials, I am listing them only here.

⁵ The Yugoslav jury members were Zdenka Munk, Zagreb; Vladimir Braco Mušič, Ljubljana; Edo Ravnikar, Ljubljana; Vjenceslav Richter, Zagreb; Svetozar Križaj, Ljubljana; France Ivanšek, Ljubljana; Zoran Kržišnik, Ljubljana; Stanko Mandić, Belgrade; and Ivo Štraus, Sarajevo. The foreign members were: Gillo Dorfles, Milan; Åke Hult, Stockholm; Karel Gerstner, Basel; and Mieczysław Porebski, Warsaw (Poročilo 1964).



3. BIO 3, International Jury
3. Трпеће бијенале индустријског дизајна, међународни жири

At the exhibition, the works were arranged in groups regardless of the country of origin; the organizers thereby demonstrated their desire to create parallels and correlations between the displayed products and so highlight the comparative aspect of the exhibition. Since they clearly understood that industrial design in Yugoslavia was still in its initial stages, this was an ambitious idea for the time: to measure oneself against the world's best designers and at the same time learn from them.

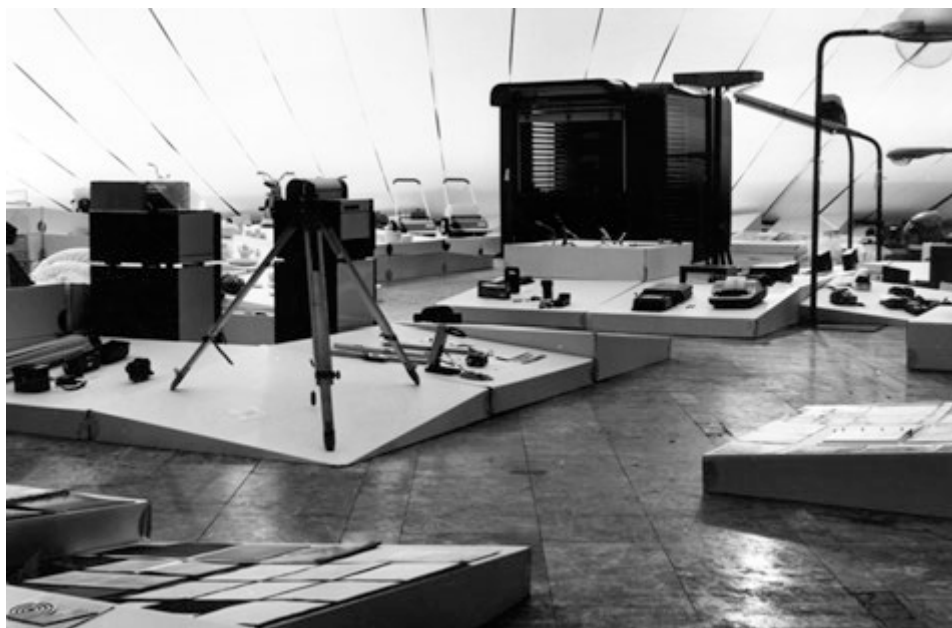
The massive response from foreign designers allowed organizers to make the Second Biennial of Industrial Design (Fig. 2) – held from June 10 to September 18, 1966, again at the Museum of Modern Art – an international comparative exhibition with fairly equal representation of products from different countries (732 works from twelve countries were exhibited). In this context, Gillo Dorfles, who was a member of the international jury both for BIO 1 and BIO 2, observed:

“The differences between the two events are obvious beyond doubt. While BIO 1 was a national exhibition with small international contributions, at this exhibition [i.e. BIO 2], we have the opportunity to see a genuine international event. This realization is very important, for it also speaks of the future possibility that that the BIO event will be of exceptional importance for juxtaposing and regularly comparing products from the countries of Eastern and Western Europe.” (Anonim 1966: 111)

The Biennial of Industrial Design thus became an internationally relevant, influential event only since its second exhibition. The BIO Secretariat succeeded in this because, among other things, they had forged connections with the world's most influential design associations, as well as with individual designers, who advised them in organizing the Biennial. The BIO 2 rules for submission were drafted in accord with the members of the Biennial's International Advisory Council.⁶ Several members of the advisory council expressed the wish that foreign designers and manufacturers no longer submitted works individually; the collection of submissions and the selection of works was instead to be left to national design associations, which, being well acquainted with the situation in their own countries, would ensure the best selection. Honouring this wish, the organizers cancelled individual submissions by designers and manufacturers as an option; this decision would soon prove to be a problem.

BIO 3 (1968) – the largest so far in terms of the number of exhibits – was moved to the Ljubljana Exhibition Centre (Fig. 3). However, it turned out that industry and commerce did not take much interest in the event: only three representatives of the commercial sector attended BIO. Nevertheless, the interest of consumers was great: the exhibition was seen by twenty-five thousand local and foreign visitors. Therefore, it was both a failure and a success. Despite the financial problems, the organizers managed to hold an internationally acclaimed and well-attended event, but local industry and commerce failed to see its potential.

⁶ The International Advisory Council was established after the first Biennial, along with the BIO Honorary Committee.



4. BIO 5 exhibition, 1973, Ljubljana Exhibition Centre

4. Пето бијенале индустријског дизајна, 1973, Изложбени центар у Љубљани

In the 1960s, industrially designed products were seen as a foundation for humanizing the living environment in modern industrial society; they were part of its cultural standard. This was the aim of both the Biennial organizers and designers. However, it was becoming increasingly clear that BIO would not survive without broader support. The situation was absurd: a widely acclaimed international event had been created, one that was written about in international press⁷ and visited by numerous foreign designers, manufacturers, schools, etc., and yet, in Slovenia, BIO was operating almost without financial support from local industry, on the shoulders of a few enthusiasts and with funds allocated for cultural activities. In the struggle for BIO's survival, Matija Murko (Murko 1972) wrote: "We have capital that we do not know how, or do not want, to exploit."

After BIO 3 – which was described as "an international assembly of ideas and achievements in industrial design at the intersection of European cultures" (Bernik 1973: 228) – the Biennial entered a period of crisis. Expectations of support for BIO from business and industry were not materialized, nor was there sufficient interest from the organizations that were supposed to encourage and develop industrial design.

For these reasons, there was a three-year gap between BIO 3 and BIO 4, held in 1971. BIO's revival was the work of Stane Bernik and Matija Murko, as well as the City of Ljubljana, which once again supported the Biennial. BIO 4

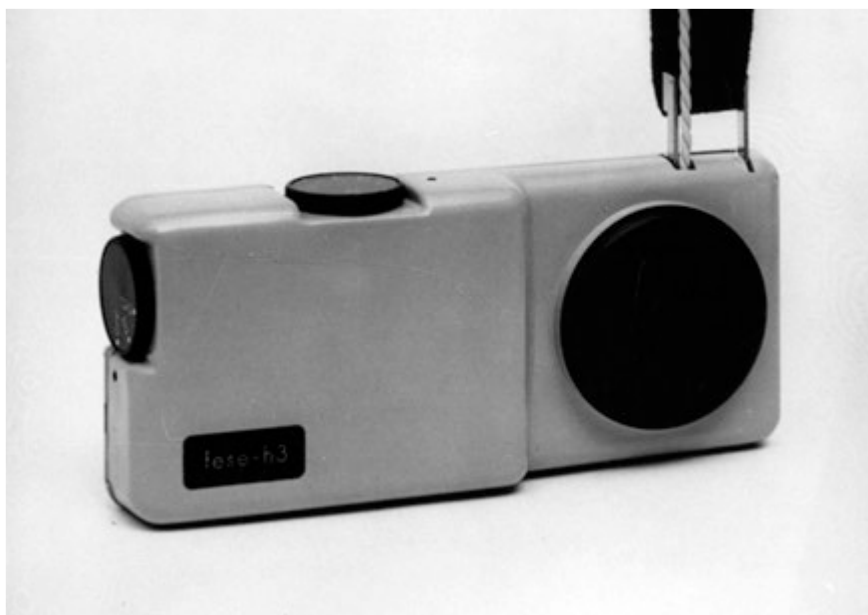
thus became the first exhibition to show exclusively Yugoslav products; the same principle was applied in BIO 6 (1975) and BIO 8 (1979). Unfortunately, this idea was a step backwards, as for four years BIO was taken out of the international sphere.

Efforts to Change the Biennial's Concept

BIO 5, in 1973, was again an international exhibition, which was not easy to organize after a four-year hiatus. The event (Fig. 4) was dominated by works of Italian designers, and they also received the most awards (twenty-one out of sixty-two). Nevertheless, successful and well-designed products could be found even among works that failed to win any awards – which was a substantial proof that BIO was still an internationally important exhibition that featured current trends in contemporary design.

In their evaluation, the BIO 5 Jury relied on the same criteria as the BIO 3 International Jury "in the desire to contribute to the continuity of previous BIO exhibitions, but with the particular inclination [...] to accentuate the social significance of the design ideas and achievements that are presented" (BIO 5 Jury Report 1973). Although some exhibits were first presented at BIO, the jury expressed the unanimous opinion that "in the future the organizer could undoubtedly also attract those countries active in this creative field whose design achievements would more thoroughly contribute to the fullness of the information at the BIO exhibitions" (BIO 5 Jury Report 1973). But despite the organizers' best efforts to juxtapose current developments in industrial design, this was difficult to achieve with the existing selection method. Stane Bernik had indeed expressed some justifiable concerns about

⁷ The first three Biennials were reviewed in a number of Western European design magazines, including *Avanti*, *Casabella*, *Design Industrie*, *Form*, *Graphik*, *MD*, and *Design* (London).



5. Davorin Savnik, Stimulator for opening the hand, 1976, awarded at BIO 7 (1977)
5. Даворин Савник, Симулатор за отварање шаке, 1976, рад награђен на Седмом бијеналу индустријског дизајна (1977)

the selection method four years earlier at BIO 3. What bothered him most was that the national selections could be based on many different things, and this caused problems for such an event: "These basic assumptions, and others too, each one ultimately speaking in its own way about the culture of the place where it was developed, are what compose BIO's mosaic image." (Bernik 1968: 31). In other words, with the loss of "control" over the selection after BIO 1, the organizers had to respect very diverse selection processes, all of which relied on different factors but especially on the will and commitment of particular individuals in national associations.

The issue was first discussed publicly at the BIO 5 panel discussion "Evaluating Industrial Design in Light of Exhibitions and Their Influence on the Development of Industrial Design". In his opening address, Stane Bernik, among other things, stressed that it was time to "start thinking about revising some of the basic premises concerning the substance and organization of this event" (Bernik 1973: 229). Asking whether BIO was mainly a cultural or an economic event, Bernik provoked a debate around the two basic concepts. Miroslav Fruht, who believed that *the Biennial needed the best possible support*, proposed that the organizers moved to a higher stage in its development and "carefully" *considered the idea of organizing thematic exhibitions (BIO 5 – mednarodno posvetovanje 1973: 17)*. This was one of the first calls for a substantial change to the exhibition concept with the aim of enabling it to deal more directly with specific problems and issues relating to design in society, a point that was also stressed by the BIO 5 Jury.

The organizers heeded suggestions that BIO become a thematic exhibition with the next international biennial, BIO 7, in 1977: they announced they would "define the theme of the exhibition in advance and specify in advance a basic or issue-related selection of objects and families of objects for BIO" (Krečič 1978: 34). The theme they chose was *Industrial Design as a Response to the Pressing Questions of Modern-Day Life*. They were inspired by Victor Papanek's concept of the "design for the real world"⁸ and related it to the world around them and to often-neglected groups of people (the disabled, children, anonymous users, etc.). If in the 1970s the changes happening in society – and also in the design field – left their mark on the Biennial, this was only because BIO never relinquished its status as a cultural event. Despite constant criticism that it was not tied closely enough to industry, the organizers resisted pressures to turn BIO into a kind of trade fair adjusted to the needs of industry, the market, etc. By emphasizing the social role of design, BIO, in its second decade, became the only Slovene institution that was at least trying to problematize this kind of design practice, not only in its greater social commitment with the selection of works for BIO 7 but also in an accompanying exhibition by the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass. In the early 1970s, Sottsass left the Olivetti company and "stepped down" from the position of a designer employed by industry. By doing so, and through his creative work, he radically problematized the designer–client relationship and, more specifically, the designer's role in service to industry and, accordingly, to capital.

⁸ Victor Papanek gave a lecture in Ljubljana on April 9, 1974.



6. Sven-Eric Juhlin, Grip tongs, 1974, awarded at BIO 7 (1977)
 6. Свен Ерик-Јулин, Хватаљке, 1974, рад награђен на Седмом бијеналу индустријског дизајна (1977)



7. Enzo Mari, Aggregato system, 1976 awarded at BIO 7 (1977)
 7. Енцо Мари, Систем „Агрегато“, 1976, рад награђен на Седмом бијеналу индустријског дизајна (1977)

BIO 7 was an attempt to change the concept of the Biennial and adapt it to the socio-political context of the 1970s, a time when similar design events were abandoning review exhibitions, looking for alternative, more complex ways to present the social role of design. With their more socially engaged approach, proposing that the national institutions select works in line with the stated theme, the Biennial's organizers responded to developments in the design field in other countries.⁹ Their greater commitment bore fruit both in terms of the number of exhibited works and in the number of socially beneficial works that received awards, such as Davorin Savnik's stimulator for opening the hand (Fig. 5), S. E. Juhlin's pickup extension tool for the disabled (Fig. 6), and Enzo Mari's Aggregato system of lamps (Fig. 7), to name only a few.

According to Lenka Bajželj, however, the selection of works at the next international Biennial (BIO 9, 1981), whose theme was *Contemporary Currents in Industrial Design*, was not the best – “although we counted on the fact that designers would largely address issues related to energy, construction, and especially the issues of the disabled, the elderly, children, etc.” (Kladnik 1981: 4). The overly general expression “contemporary currents” failed to define the Biennial's theme. However, a greater problem was that the Biennial's structure did not change; the call for submissions included almost the same categories (with only minor modifications) as at the first biennials. The BIO 7 Jury, two years earlier, had warned about this with the remark that the evaluation criteria for a well-

designed screwdriver were completely different from those for good solutions to current questions of human existence (BIO 7 Jury Report 1977). Certainly, at BIO 7 the organizers' strong sense of social commitment had done much to ensure a better and more thematic selection of works; with BIO 9, however, this enthusiasm was already on the wane. By leaving the final selection to national associations, the organizers found their hands tied and yet did nothing about it – the problem only got bigger as time went by.

Conclusion

The beginnings of the Biennial coincide with the period of optimism in Yugoslavia and in Europe towards building a new and better world. At the same time, this was also the period of intensive industrialization of Yugoslavia. Managers of leading companies established after the Second World War (for example Litostroj, Iskra, Tomos, Elan, etc.) were quick to realize that they have to invest in research and development and produce well-designed and functional products in order to be competitive at international export markets. The pioneers of Slovene design and their work gave a decisive impetus in this and by establishing the Biennial they placed Slovene design in an international context. At the same time, BIO played a pioneering role in promoting industrial design in Slovenia, as well as in Yugoslavia.

In the first decade of its existence, BIO was fairly successful in fulfilling its primary objective to bring designers and industry together. However, the modernist concept of the Biennial was in the 1980s, in the post-modern period and after more than twenty years of the biennial's existence, no longer satisfactory.

⁹ I am referring mainly to the work of individual Italian designers (such as E. Mari, E. Sottsass, A. Mendini, G. Pesce, and R. Dalisi). In their work, they contributed to a different way of thinking, and their original design ideas presented an alternative to consumerist society.

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Abbreviations

DLUUUS – Društvo likovnih umetnikov uporabne umetnosti Slovenije (Association of Visual Artists of Applied Art of Slovenia)

SLUPUJ – Savez likovnih umetnika primenjenih umetnosti Jugoslavije (Union of Visual Artists of Applied Art of Yugoslavia)

ZAS – Društvo arhitektov Slovenije

Резиме

ЦВЕТКА ПОЖАР

Музеј архитектуре и дизајна, Љубљана

ТРАЈАЊЕ И ПРОМЕНА: првих двадесет година Бијенала (индустријског) дизајна

Текст представља покушај анализе историје Бијенала индустријског дизајна током првих двадесет година његовог постојања. У средишту наше пажње биће најважнији организациони аспекти: напори везани за установљавање Бијенала, дефинисање његових циљева и улоге, те његових достигнућа и, на крају, али не мање важно, потреба да се ревидира темељни концепт ове манифестације.

У Југославији, главни циљ Бијенала индустријског дизајна био је повезивање дизајнера са индустријом. Ова манифестација је са великим успехом испуњавала ту функцију, нарочито током прве деценије постојања, када је Бијенале индустријског дизајна у Љубљани, заједно са Миланским тријеналом, било једна од најважнијих манифестација у вези са дизајном у Европи. Поред тога,

било је то и једино бијенале те врсте на свету. На Бијеналу је учествовао велики број дизајнера како из Западне, тако и из Источне Европе. Уз редовно учешће италијанских, немачких и аустријских дизајнера, Бијенале је нудило више од пуког увида у историју и развој југословенског дизајна. У оквирима датог концепта и у различитим периодима, Бијенале је на једном месту окупило различите приступе неких од водећих европских дизајнера како у погледу технологије, тако и у погледу форме. Током прве две деценије постојања, Бијенале је прилично успешно остваривало свој циљ – повезивање дизајнера и индустрије. Ипак, осамдесетих година XX века, у време постмодернизма, као и након двадесет година постојања, модернистички концепт више није био прихватљив.