

Contemporary Art Collection Marino Cettina

Selection



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Marino Cettina

The gallerist Marino Cettina (Umag, 1959–1998) attended high school (Istituto d'Arte) in Trieste. There his interest in contemporary art was encouraged by his professor, art critic Maria Campitelli, with whom he later collaborated in numerous artistic projects. He continued his studies at the Academy in Venice (interior design) but abandoned it early. For several years, he spent long periods in Lugano in Switzerland, where he made his first personal contacts with some famous names from the art circle. In 1985, he opened the Cafè-Gallery Dante next to his restaurant in Umag, Croatia, the first private gallery of contemporary art in Croatia and one of the first in Eastern Europe. In 1996, the gallery moved to a new, larger space (Stella Maris, Umag) and was re-named Galerija Dante Marino Cettina.

He cooperated with artists from the contemporary Zagreb art scene and art historian Prof. Zvonko Maković. From the beginning he also collaborated with Slovenian artists, critics, and galleries (primarily the Piran Coastal Galleries, the IRWIN Group, and, later, Marina Gržinić). In his gallery and elsewhere, including abroad, he presented and promoted Croatian, Slovenian, and other contemporary artists. He often travelled to New York, where he collaborated with galleries, such as Leo Castelli, Paula Cooper, and Luhring Augustine, which made it possible for him to bring to Umag exhibitions of renowned American artists (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andres Serrano, Zoe Leonard, Robert Gober, and Jack Pierson). He participated at the Gramercy international exhibitions of contemporary art in New York (1996 and 1997) and RIPARTE in Rome (1996).

Marino Cettina was a versatile personality: a gallerist, curator, collector, editor, publisher, and organiser. His short life was devoted to contemporary art; what he left behind is a rich legacy of many exhibition and other artistic projects as well as a precious collection of contemporary art bearing his name.

To See, Know, Value and Protect

Tatjana Sirk, curator

The Piran Coastal Galleries (PCG) will soon celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding (1974). Since 1976, when the galleries started operating in full, the intensive and ambitiously designed programme based on presentations of Slovenian and foreign artists has strongly marked the local, national, and then Yugoslav gallery milieu. Parallel to the branched exhibition activities, the Galleries soon designed their collection policy. From the start, systematic collection of artworks by Slovenian artists anchored in expertise has been carried out which to this day forms the core of the fine art collections of the Piran Coastal Galleries. The collection entitled *Slovene Figurative Contemporary Art after 1976* presents important artists and some of the crucial works, especially from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the periods when the exhibitions in the coastal galleries also resonated in the wider, international space. The *Collection of Modern Primorska Artists* focuses on the fact that the Galleries have the status of a regional museum and is composed of selected works by artists from the Primorska region from the second half of the last century onwards.

The majority of the acquisitions in both collections are connected to purchases. These followed temporary exhibitions and the vision of those responsible who, at certain points in time, recognised the excellence and long-term quality in individual pieces of art. Collections were also formed through donations, among which the donated international collection of a foreign collector, the *Francesco Conz Avantgarde Collection*, stands out, which was donated in full. We should also not overlook the *Collection of Photographs*, which has its beginnings in the photo colony Koštabona in 1973 and was formed through purchases and donations. Today, the Galleries manage a diverse fund of a dozen of art collections, among which a special position is held by *Forma viva Portorož*, an international open-air collection of stone sculptures. The collections are continuously supplemented with approved purchases, sculpting symposia, and donations.

At the time the PCG collections were being formed, private collections of various companies were also being created in Slovenian Istria: the Splošna plovba art collections, and those of the Bernardin, Palace and Metropol hotels, Banka Koper, Istrabenz, Luka Koper, etc. These are only a few bright examples of best practice lasting from the 1970s, when some state-owned companies with an ear for the arts supported purchases of artworks of local and other Slovenian artists. The cooperation between the businesses and the art world is the result of the then tourism boom and economic growth, and above all the understanding of the management and architects that while designing public spaces their art should also be carefully planned. It is commendable that while doing so they did not only rely on the decorative value of an artwork. They were also aware of their social responsibility and left the selection entirely up to the experts. Thus, rich collections were made that are also valuable for the whole country.

Just a year after its creation (1977) an exhibition of an extensive fund of exceptional graphics, which formed the main part of the Bernardin Collection, was presented in the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. The presentation of a private collection in the main national institution for contemporary art confirmed its quality and greatness, but above all, the exhibition emphasised the collections' public character that exceeded private interests. The collection suffered a similar fate as the majority of collections created at the time; through ownership transformation or ruin of the companies they mostly lost their original status. In a truncated form some are kept in inappropriate facilities, hidden from the eyes of the public, while many well-known artworks disappeared completely during this time. After many decades, the *40 let Bernardina. Izbor iz likovne zbirke* exhibition, which was displayed in PCG (Piran Civic Gallery, July–August 2016), again emphasised the significance of such collections and loudly warned against the irresponsibility of individuals and companies for the unenviable state they are found in today.

The history of the collections is always a multi-layered reflection of the economic, social, and political circumstances at the time and in the place of their creation. In the national space, in the period since independence, a new and increased interest in collecting can be noticed, including with the purpose of international recognition of Slovenian artists. A bright example is the *Factor banka Art Collection*, which was born out of a private initiative in the 1990s. The art historian Professor Dr Tomaž Brejc, who was entrusted the selection of artworks for the collection, wrote about the importance of such collection in the collection catalogue in 2000: "The fundamental purpose of the Factor banka art collection was and remains to form an original selection of new Slovenian art founded on contemporary aesthetic criteria. (...) Collecting of this kind requires knowledge, aesthetic vision, and a certain amount of creative courage: to see, to know, to value, and to protect – these are the tasks that the Factor banka collection implements with innovative approaches established in the international cultural space." The collection, which is priceless for the national cultural space, is today owned by the state. It is incomprehensible that it has still not found a place for its permanent installation and continuing communication with the public.

Public presentations are one of the vital ways of assessing a collection. These are living organisms beating in various contexts, spaces, and points in time. Each new critical perspective preserves their vitality and at the same time evaluates the artistic value of individual works or the collection to which they belong. Different collecting policies, the nature of collections, their significance in the local and international space, and the relationship between the public and the private are frequently topics of contemporary curating practices. The placement of artworks from private collections into the exhibitions organised by public institutions therefore has a special meaning. Generally, these exhibitions are designed according to the highest professional standards, hence the ear of relevant public institutions for the works of private collectors is a good reference for the status of their collections in the system of art.

Contents connected to public and private collections are a component part of the Piran Coastal Galleries' annual programmes. A fresh perspective and rumination on their wider significance is one of the priorities of the public service; occasional new views of a certain collection are also necessary for its future content. These endeavours include the aforementioned exhibition 40 let Bernardina, but also exhibitions *Arte Colta* (Piran Town Gallery, February–May 2013), *Mojih 5 najljubših* (Loža Gallery, Koper, August–October 2015), and *Istra-Foto-Internationala* (Piran Civic Gallery, December 2018–March 2019), and the *Panorama* (Piran Civic Gallery, March–August 2022). After last year's premier in Norway (Centre for Contemporary Art – NITJA, Lillestrøm), the international project of the PCG (*Everything Is*) *Not What It Seems / Vse ni tako, kot se zdi*, with its new selection of artists, is this year on display at the Piran Civic Gallery (June–August 2023) and presents a selection of works from the public collection of the Piran Coastal Galleries and from Slovenian and international public and private collections.

The last in the series of mentioned exhibitions is the *Marino Cettina Collection of Contemporary Art* at the Loža Gallery in Koper (June–September 2023), which presents a selection of works from the private collection of the late gallerist and collector from Umag in Croatia. His engagement in the field of art was not confined with Croatia's borders; he was also closely connected with art and artists from Slovenia and beyond. Another reason for the presentation of the collection in the Piran Coastal Galleries is his long-time collaboration with the galleries, then under the leadership of Anton Biloslav with the professional support of Andrej Medved. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Croatian gallery was an important art venue. In 1987, they jointly prepared an exhibition of the world-famous photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, which was held in Piran and then, in a smaller scope, in Umag.

In 1985, on Dante Alighieri street, Marino Cettina (1959–1998) opened the Cafè-Gallery Dante next to his restaurant. This was the first private gallery in Croatia and one of the first in Eastern Europe. This brave decision was fostered by his great love of contemporary art which, along with his passion for gastronomy, he had nurtured since his youth. With an ambitious and grand programme the gallery saw instant success. It became a venue for gatherings and internationally resounding cultural and artistic projects: they hosted literary evenings, concerts, and performances; with its bold, always topical, occasionally even visionary exhibitions, the gallery soon drew attention outside the small town, too. In 1996, the gallery moved to a new, larger space (Stella Maris, Umag) and was re-named Galerija Dante Marino Cettina.

Cettina was an honest and sociable person, an excellent host, and a skilful and passionate connoisseur of contemporary art. He was a gallerist, curator, editor, and organiser who was determined to make his dream and ambition to put Umag on the international art map come true. His money and the immense energy that he, as a constantly restless person, perpetually radiated was invested in the art and international promotion of contemporary artists from Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy. In his gallery, he confidently hosted world-famous names from the USA (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andres Serrano, Zoe Leonard, Robert Gober, and Jack Pierson), Great Britain (Young British Art: Tracey Emin, Marc Quinn, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Gillian Wearing), and other countries. He liaised with renowned Croatian and foreign art critics and gallerists, was eager to listen to their experience and expert advice, and personally engaged them in his artistic adventure. He relentlessly followed the events of the art world at home and abroad and often travelled to New York, where he visited the galleries and made friends with the famous gallerist Leo Castelli. He was closely connected to the artists he presented in his gallery and promoted elsewhere, who, from the very beginning, included many Slovenian authors. He paid special attention to young and promising, still unknown artists.

It is practically logical that, in addition to the rich exhibition activities, he also conceived with his knowledge, intuition, and commitment his own art collection. It was always done with the clear purpose and goal to create a high-quality plural collection of contemporary art that would remain in Umag. The collection includes 47 art works by 34 artists (individuals, tandems, groups) and in its diversity unifies different expressive media: classical and digital photographs, mixed techniques, acrylic paintings, drawings, graphics, sculptures, objects, and installations. In his selection, Cettina, always thrilled about new and avantgarde approaches, focused on engaged artists who dived deep into the current topics of contemporary visual art and society. In the collection, Croatian artists of different generations prevail but are accompanied by recognised Slovenian and great internationally renowned names:

Boris Cvjetanović, Vlasta Delimar, Sandro Đukić, Marijan Ječvovar, Dušan Jurić, Ivana Keser, Ivan Kožarić, Goran Petercol, Dubravka Rakoci, Neli Ružić, Edita Schubert, Sofijasilvia (Silvia Potočki), Mladen Stilinović, Olja Stipanović, Slaven Tolj, Goran Trbuljak, Ksenija Turčić, Ivana Vučić (Croatia); **Goran Bertok, Rajko Bizjak, Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid, IRWIN, Marko Modic** (Slovenia); **Giancarlo Dell'Antonia, Fabrizio Ples-si** (Italy); **Barbara Holub** (Austria); **Robert Gober, Zoe Leonard, Bruce Nauman, Jack Pierson, Andres Serrano** (USA); **Masa-ki Hirano** (Japan); **Alexander Brener, Vadim Fishkin** (Russia).

Marino Cettina died in the middle of big plans and much too early. After his death, his wife Dezi Cettina, who had always supported him in his decisions and shared his great passion, continued his mission. Until 2013, when the gallery closed its doors, more than a hundred exhibition projects, international presentations, and other art programmes took place there which marked the thirty-years of the gallery's story. Numerous efforts to accurately evaluate and preserve the gallery and collective work of Marino Cettina include publications and presentations of the collection.

A great tribute to the gallerist was the first and most extensive book entitled *Gallery (Dante) Marino Cettina – Future Perspectives* from 2001. It was edited by Marina Gržinić, an internationally renowned philosopher, theoretician, and artist who collaborated intensively with Cettina in the 1990s. The publication involving extensive documentation and a biography presents the rich activities of the gallery in the first fifteen years of its operation, which then became Galerija Marino Cettina, and the gallerist's multifaceted personality. Through essays by European and American writers, curators, art critics, theoreticians, and artists it opens perspectives to the world of art and culture. Hence, it is a testament and simultaneously a manifesto of art, critique, and cultural strategies for the third millennium, says in her introduction Marina Gržinić, who must take special credit for the publication of the book. -

The *Marino Cettina Collection of Contemporary Art* and the gallery documentary material is today carefully kept by his wife Dezi Cettina and the family. His great desire and intention that the collection be permanently presented in Umag, has until today, 25 years since Marino's death, not been realised. Occasional presentations are thus all the more important. A selection from the collection was presented for the first time in 2007 in Umag (Galerija Marin, Archeotrade), while the collection as a whole was presented in 2020 in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Istria in Pula.

"The passing of time and a look back reveal the greatness, uniqueness, sincerity, and authenticity which is unique and one of a kind not only in our region, (...) but offers and opens up new perspectives into the future. (...) The context, space, and time of Cettina's goals and achievements during his lifetime remain permanently recorded in the works of his collection, (...) every name within the collections speaks about the cooperation between the gallery and the artist, but also art historians, theoreticians, photographers, designers, etc. Every piece reminds us of an exhibition prepared, every item of printed material in the form of different catalogues mirrors the gallery's programme, Marino's positions, thoughts, and preferences," wrote Ketrin Miličević Mijošek, the Director of the museum in Pula.

The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with reproductions of the works of all the artists represented in the collection. The presentation of the collection and the publication with rich documentation, expert articles, and personal, even friendly records of numerous well-known people in the field of art (visual artists, critics, curators, and others) once again brought attention to the importance of the gallery work of Marino Cettina and the priceless value of the private art collection in the regional, national, and international space. This is also the purpose of its first presentation in Slovenia taking place in Piran Coastal Galleries.