Slovene Studies 30.2 (2008): 185–217

# REFRAMING HISTORY

**Gretchen Bakke**

> We believe that every generation must construct the best history possible. Each nation is created to produce culture. We want to make a new Athens on Slovene soil, a cultural space where art will be integrated with the social and spiritual order.
>
> Irwin[1]

There are several contemporary Slovene artists whose work explicitly tackles the renarration of history. Among them is Marko Kovačič, whose *Plastos civilization* can be read as an allegory for the demise of Yugoslavia and also provides an interesting take on some of the personal challenges to have arisen from its dissolution, and Tadej Pogačar, who under the auspices of his *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum* makes temporary use of the permanent collections and exhibition spaces of Ljubljana's galleries and museums, "occupying" them (somewhat artificially and with prior permission), reorganizing their artifacts, and, occasionally, contributing his own things to their collections. Pogačar's goal in doing this is not only to construct different stories from much the same materials, but to transform—as a parasite might—the host institution.[2] Third is Irwin, the Department of Fine Art and Painting of the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) who have explicitly tackled the writing of history in two projects. The first is their installation *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* (2000), in which they reframe classic works of the Yugoslav period in their own signature pitch and wax frames. The second is *East.Art.Map* (2002), a retroactive reconstruction of the personal links and artistic influences that constitute (in their telling) the history of Eastern European modernism.

History in these projects is not a given nor is it a rationally organized narration of facts and proper names. It is rather a history artfully and artificially constructed to suit the artists' own needs. In other words, it is a medium, along with those of paint (Irwin), sculpture (Kovačič), and curation (Pogačar), and it is also a means to an end. Each of these projects brings particular tellings of the historical to bear upon present circumstances and future dreams. More, however, than just serving as

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1 Furlong, Bill and Mike Archer. "Interview," London August 1988. Reprinted in Arns (2003: 248–49).

2 www.ljudmila.org/scca/parasite/info.htm (accessed January 2007).

oblique voices of the historical, each of these projects takes the renarration of history as its task and each, in very different ways, posits a future and thus also a present in which art, using Irwin's words, is "integrated with the social and spiritual order" (Arns 2003: 248–49).

Of the three, Irwin is the most articulate in this regard. Their working method, which they call the *retroprincip* 'retro-principle', is explicitly concerned with a return to and a reconstruction of moments of traumatic break within the history of art. These "traumata" are then, according to them, mended, or at the very least soothed, by the transportation and transposition of iconic elements from artworks of that time into the present context. For Irwin, history is something that is both malleable and highly political and they make their art, in large part, by means of manipulating it often to explicitly political ends. More important, however, history is also something which exists most strongly in its present tense narrations (Arns 2003; Neue Slowenische Kunst 1991). History is made in the present and it is the constant making and remaking, interpretation and reinterpretation, of the historical that gives it its power and lends those who manipulate it ground upon which not only to imagine, but to build, a certain vision for the future. For Irwin, and indeed all of NSK, art is political and as artists they are politicians (NSK 1991: 53),[3] and this is never truer than when they take up the palette of history.

If Irwin's guiding tenet is the retro-principle then the banner flying over Kovačič's installations might well read *Naprej v preteklost* (Forward into the Past), a phrase he used to title one of his early (1995) video works on *Plastos civilization*.[4] Like Irwin, Kovačič premises much of his work on manipulations of time, though his approach to temporal (re)organization—as well as to audience inclusion—is quite different than that of the Irwin collective and of NSK as a whole.

The simplest possible reading of Kovačič's long-term project, *Plastos civilization* (1991–2007),[5] is that it, much like science fiction, is a history whose telling illuminates nothing so much as the present moment. One of the questions raised by such future predictive and past interpretive projects is: what biases do certain imagined futures or reconstructed pasts

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3 The actual quote, from a 1985 interview with Laibach runs "We hold that politics is the highest and most personal art and we, who make contemporary art, consider ourselves politicians" (translation by the author).

4 *Preteklost* in Slovene would be more literally rendered by the awkward English phrase: "that having already flowed by." A phrase that evokes a sense of the past, in this writer's mind at least, more akin to that of Heraclites' river (into which one cannot step twice) than the English "past" which is more thoroughly closed and therefore also less active in the eddies and vortices it imposes (or can be made to impose) upon the present.

5 I write in 2007, the project is ongoing.

reveal about the circumstances under which they were constructed or envisioned? Like the Soviet films of the late 1940s in which Stalin (then still living) is pictured as a young revolutionary critical to the unfolding of events at which he was (in reality) not even present, or the careful erasure of Trotsky from even earlier films on the same revolutionary subject, the present can be read through the ways in which it details and depicts the historical.[6] The truth of the future is no more sure in Kovačič's project than the truth of the past is in Irwin's because in each the future and the past are being continuously rewritten from the ever shifting perspective of just now. Thus, one can approach *Plastos' civilizatio*n aesthetically, as a collection of objects in the world, or textually, as a means of reading present concerns and anxieties through depictions of the soon-to-be and the already-gone-by. I will do both in sections one and two below.

**Image 1: *Civilizacija Plastosov*,** Marko Kovačič, Ljubljana, 2003 (image from a promotional postcard)


Artist and curator Tadej Pogačar takes yet another approach to the manipulation of historical narrative, one that is at once more material and more modernist than that of either Kovačič or Irwin. Pogačar aims at social transformation through an artistic practice he refers to as "new parasitism." While this term encompasses several different sorts of projects including work with persons considered to be parasites on the social body—the homeless and prostitutes—the aspect of Pogačar's work with which I will be interested here is his appropriation of museum collections and exhibition

6 Many Slovene art projects from the late 1980s and early 1990s could be classified as science fiction projects—or, alternately, institutional fiction projects—since they play with the concepts and structures of the scientific and bureaucratic, pressing a certain creative content into these forms and the processes associated with them.

spaces as a means of creating alternate narratives from the same materials. The vehicle for these transformations is the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E Museum of Contemporary Art* (founded by Pogačar in 1993), which is more an on-going curatorial project than either an artwork in its own right or an institution standard conceived. Under the auspices of the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E Museum*, Pogačar has undertaken "artworks" as divergent as the reorganization of the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary History (formerly the Museum of the People's Revolution) in 1994—just as that museum was itself in the throes of institutional redefinition following Slovene independence (in 1991)—to the organization of the *First World Congress of Sex Workers and New Parasitism* as a part of the Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2001. Pogačar's strategy has consistently been that of reworking what is already given rather than producing new things. And he views this juxtaposition (of extant objects and persons) as both an artistic and an activist activity. It is not therefore history per se that is interesting to Pogačar but its host institutions and its material remnants, the latter of which, he holds, can be used to transform the former via artistic intervention.

Though all three of these artists take different approaches to the historical in their work they share a single tactic: each uses the medium of art to churn history into an unquestionably heterogeneous present in which what might otherwise remain unspoken, unseen, and unacknowledged is simultaneously articulated and made publicly available.

## 1. The future is the seed of the past[7]

For most of the winter of 2002–2003 the archeological remains of the Plastos civilization occupied the arching interior atrium of the National Museum of Slovenia (*Narodni muzej Slovenije*) in downtown Ljubljana. Upstairs, in this same museum, was an exhibit on Vučedol astronomy and calendar—the oldest in Europe.[8] There, there were bones on display, along with human skulls pocked by divots made by a single drop of molten copper on the heads of the long-ago living, and potsherds that had been carefully reconstructed into pots, rotating precariously in Plexiglas cases. Behind these, affixed to the walls, were long explanations on the meanings of markings, handle variations, and the movement of the stars through the heavens in 3000 BC. Narodni muzej at that time also held a vast permanent collection of bugs in glass boxes with pins through the abdomen, stuffed birds and voles, and hunting cats, and shelves upon shelves of rocks, each

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7 "The Future is the Seed of the Past" is the title of one of Irwin's early manifestos (1987). Reprinted in Arns (2003: 147).

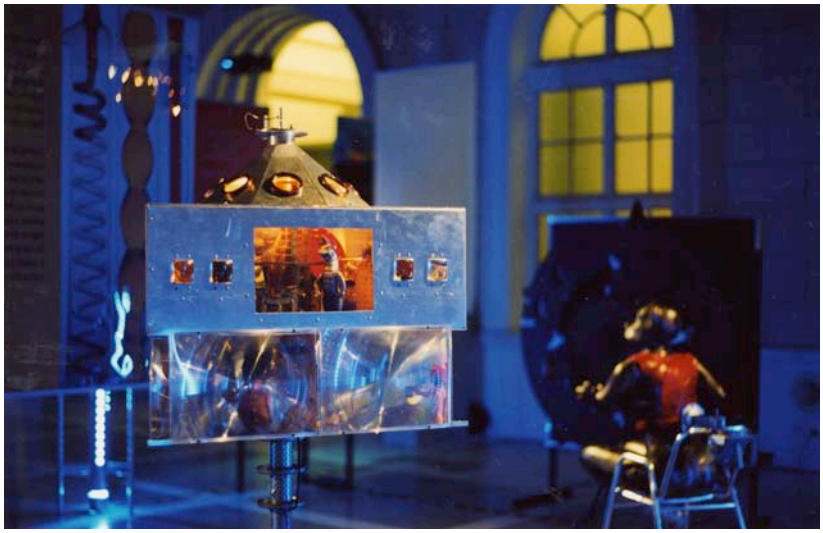
8 Vučedol culture flourished between 3000–2200 BC on the territory of what is now eastern Slavonia.

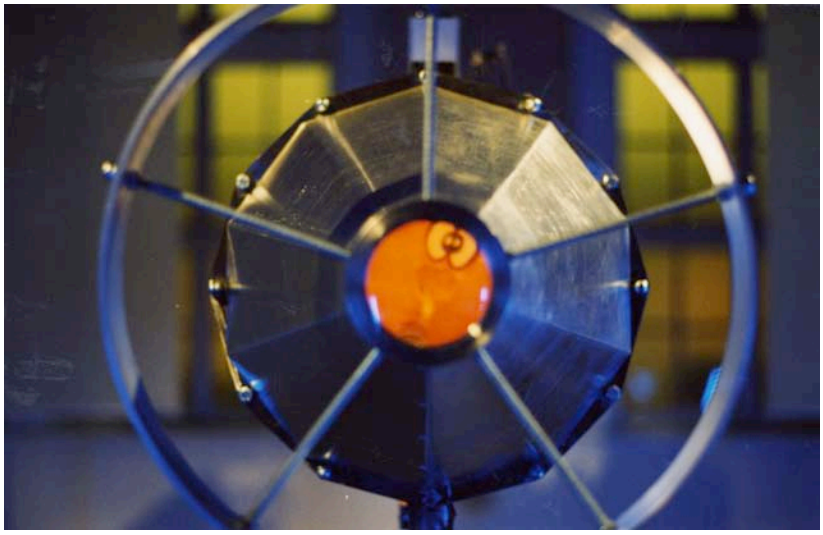
accompanied by a small rectangular label with its scientific name, and the place and date of its discovery.

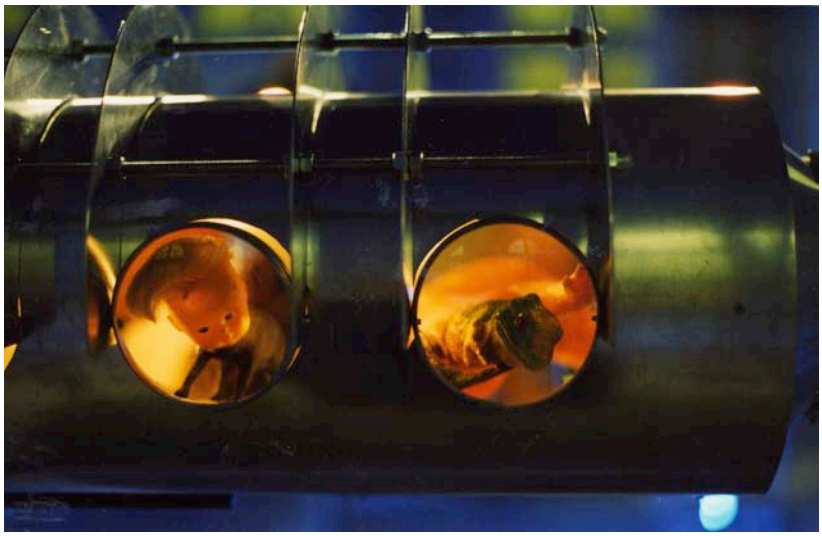
In the winter of 2002–2003, the atrium of Narodni muzej was also filled with glass cases. One of these held what appeared to be human bones rudely conjoined to circuit boards, castors, and steel rods. Each of these bones together with its artificalia was labeled, much like the rocks and bugs found elsewhere in the museum, with a small, white, rectangular label bearing the name, date, and site of discovery. Nearby, cases contained strange heads covered with the skin of fish (or maybe dinosaurs?) with sheet metal, variously cut, screwed directly into their faces; these too were "properly" labeled. By far the largest portion of the exhibition space was occupied by ten or so shiny glass and metal boxes which glinted and twinkled in the shifting blue and pink of the atrium's artificial light. These boxes had been constructed in such a way that visitors were forced to come close and peer in if they hoped to catch a glimpse of what was inside—squinting their eyes to peek into peepholes or through glass portals built with the basic transparency of the bottom of a coke bottle.

**Image 2: Remnants of the Plastos**, Marko Kovačič, Ljubljana, 2003 (photo by the author)

**Images 3, 4 & 5:** ***Plastos Civilization***, Marko Kovačič, Ljubljana, 2003 (photos by the author)







What they saw inside, distorted and few larger than four inches high, were the Plastos, looking like cast-off toys, broken apart and reassembled, with heads and bodies all a-jumble: A stag's head on a soldier's body, a wind-swept baby-doll conjoined to a dog, a bright red stegosaurus with the head of a small, bald, dark green man. Bearing down upon one of these—a small sightless, or at least eyeless, being who had a thumb where its head ought to be and an arm made from a fuse (or perhaps a camera battery)—was a man with the head of an alligator, bodily conjoined to a motorcycle, was a small reptilian arm protruding from his back.

A videotape made in Katastropolis,[9] the home of the Plastos' civilization, was projected on one wall of the exhibit space; it told the short, sweet, silent story of two Plastos having troubles with centipedes in their computer, there was a lot of smoke and confusion and in the end the one with a humanoid head of putty and a body assembled of various machine components ate the pesky critters and saved the day. Beneath this projection was a map of migrations of the Plastos from all parts of Europe after the global nuclear war of 2036 toward the city of Katastropolis in the Russian far north, just to the east of the Urals. The entire exhibit, much like that on the Vučadol two floor up, was scattered with banners and info-panels that detailed the lives, habits, scientific, and genetic undertakings of Plastos, at least to the degree that such things could be determined from the ruins of Katastropolis, discovered, as it was, by archeologists in 2223.

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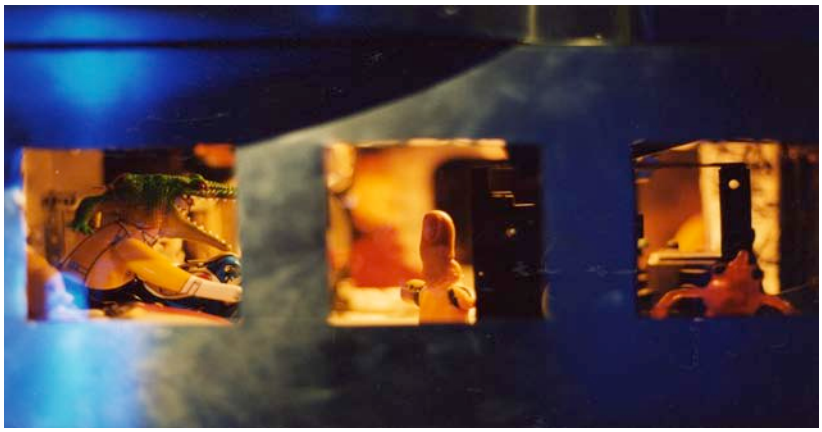
[9] Kovačič transliterates Katastropolis as "Catastropolis" when writing in English. I have left it in the Slovene original throughout.

**Image 6:** ***Plastos Civilization****,* detail, Marko Kovačič, Ljubljana, 2003 (photo by the author)



Kids loved this exhibit and every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock Dr. Jevgenij Skavčenko, phrenologist, archeologist, and Plastos expert (he in fact led the expedition that discovered the ruins of Katastropolis) drove his Subaru to the National Museum in downtown Ljubljana, donned a white lab coat and gave a thorough tour. He talked about the history of Plastos and discovery of Katastropolis while demonstrating the big silver junkmobile used by expedition. This shakes and hums and is covered with all manner of antennae, TV screens and satellite dishes, telephones and bicycle parts, lights and whistles—i.e., all the flotsam and jetsam of early techno-culture. He explained the cult of speed, the Plastos's religion, which had its origins in the fourth wave of migration to Katastropolis in 2070. Plastos' ideologies were detailed, scientific advancements described; reproduction, eating habits, architecture, and the difficulties procuring funding for research were each covered in turn. And when the floor was opened for questions the visitors—adults and children alike—asked them *as if* the endeavor were entirely serious. In 2223, or so the exhibit's story goes, there are still people that inhabit a human form (represented by the audience members, their children, the museum staff, and Skavčenko himself) but we are no longer the only intelligent race on the planet and what we want to know is what they are like—even though the conditions of this curiosity are entirely fictitious. Though I was not at the exhibit for every Sunday tour, on those days that I tagged along I never saw anyone break out of character to ask, for example, where this crazy Plastos idea came from, or about the history of their civilization as an artistic undertaking.

Audiences to Plastos were, by virtue of their willing participation, effectively doubled in time. Even though this was an effect of the

imagination, it serves as a condition of possibility for the vitality of the performances Kovačič has produced about the Plastos over the years. These do not just inhabit occasional museum spaces at 11 A.M. on Sunday mornings when Skavčenko himself arrives to give audiences a tour of his discoveries. They also travel into streets and homes via the Plastos newspaper and the various "documentary" videos Kovačič has made about them over the years. They travel, even, into mainstream movie theaters with the occasional projection of his videos as shorts before the feature.[10] Audiences, both intentional and accidental, are moved, if only briefly, via these experiences to a position from which it is possible to gain perspective on the world of the now, a now which is made via the temporal torsion inherent in the work into a romantic sort of place that, while lacking things like human cloning—which is how the Plastos reproduce—is resplendent with (obsolete-in-2223) things like nation-states.

Each time Kovačič exhibits the Plastos their story changes a little. Sometimes they are dangerous, infectious creatures who seduce humans into joining them, luring them away from the path of scientific objectivity (*Naprej v preteklosti* 1995). At other times they are entirely peaceful, going about their lives as if humans had never actually come across them (*Lab Party* 2003). Or alternately those on display are just reconstructions—remnants—of a dead civilization and Katastropolis is no more than an archeological site (*Civilizacija plastosov* 2002). Regardless of the status, living or dead, of their civilization they tend to serve as tools in a wider discussion of ideological difference, or religious and moral practice. Each manifestation, while making fun of the scientific method by constantly changing the nature of the object under investigation, also reflects a particular version of the past as it is presented in the (ever-changing) present by means of future.

## 2. The stuff of history (and what to make of it)

Proto-Plastos first appeared in the 1991 video *No More Heroes Any More* (Moskva 2017) in which two men go to war as children might; they tower—grimacing and growling—over a chess board filled with wind-up robots, and jumping toy dogs, and walking penguins each treated (by them) as more dastardly than the next. These toys are unmodified, old, first-generation wind-ups, and as they wobble and totter into each other the mutual-intimidation of the cigar smoking enemies in suits grow ever more absurd. Then, just as the toys begin to explode a deus ex machina appears in the form of a bloody doctor who pulls a butcher knife out of each of his rubber boots and hands them to the enemies. With this move they are

[10] On 27 March 2003, for example, *Lab Party* was the short shown before *Terminator*, itself lovely tale about time travel and the project of remaking history, at *Slovenska kinoteka*.

transformed into the very pieces they had been manipulating; the two begin to fight each other directly rather than by means of toys on the chessboard of war and in the end they chase one another with the ineffectual shuffle of wind-up sparrows, knives held with menace, across the black and red pattern of the chess board. The spirit of the video is reminiscent of *Brazil*, Terry Gilliam's terrorist fantasy film from the mid-1980s. An aura of faux-seriousness permeates even the most ridiculous of moments rendering grave topics and power structures absurd both in terms of the content and the style with which they are presented. One story that *No More Heroes Any More* tells is that of Yugoslavia and the stupidity and futility of those who, while manipulating the lives of others, suffer the delusion that this can be accomplished without getting dirty or wounded themselves. In time these manipulators of men become inextricably—and what's more, personally—bound up in the battles and war games they imagined could be controlled from a hygienic distance; the players become the pieces and nobody in the end is absolved of responsibility.

The next time Plastos appears on film is 1995; by then they are already junk. The toys that played the part of pawns in a very human game of power in *No More Heroes Any More* and were in the end exploded (literally) individual by individual—robot, dog, penguin—are here resuscitated. The war is over (again literally, the Dayton Accords that effectively ended the war in Yugoslavia was signed in 1995) and those beings who were disassembled during the course of that war have in *No More Heroes Any More* been put back together again, not as the whole beings they once were but as hybrids. Most notably their heads and bodies are all mixed up. They are miniaturized bio-mechanical mutants with heads and bodies and wires and cogs all glommed together into individual beings. It is rather as if Humpty Dumpty had been reassembled not only from the eggshell of his former body but from all the trash laying around him: bits of wall, bits of all the king's horses and all the king's men; and as if these too had been made whole again by incorporating pieces of him.

Again here, Plastos civilization clearly forms a user-friendly mirror—or more precisely, an allegorical reflection—of the shredded Yugoslav society though Kovačič never says as much. He is not here engaged in the romantic project of depicting what was lost in the (ethnic) cleansing of the (ethnic) patchwork of the former Yugoslavia but rather with the more delicate, and in my opinion, more difficult problem of what became of individuals who belonged to Yugoslavia as it imploded. In Kovačič's civilization old things, extinct things, like the dinosaurs or the Yugoslav citizen, get conjoined with new things like Lisa Simpson or Barbie or with robots, or bits of cast-off machinery. In this way each Plastos—each allegorical human being—is made anew as it is brought into the future, but not without the past clinging to and constituting its body. For while these beings become whole, functional, and social again they will

never be able to so much as even claim the status of integrated beings.[11] Nor do they reproduce integrated beings. Plastos do not have sex, they clone themselves, grafting bits of machinery into the cells and onto the bones of their offspring. There is no culture of parentage, there are no children, but there is cultural reproduction and with it a disjointed conglomerate of civilization. That is to say that between 1991 and 1995 everything "natural" was lost, and perhaps most important among these was the loss of the very ability make a claim to naturalness, and with it the possibility of professing belief in an enlightenment ideology of perfectible "human" beings. What Plastos make of humans in the aftermath of war is the exact opposite of perfectible; they have become conglomerate beings, little more than post-modern assemblages of junk. Plastos are, I believe, primarily a way of making the depth of the present post-war Yugoslav situation—of which, in Kovačič's telling, Slovenia is very much a part—obvious and approachable, funny, awkward, and at times even sweet and often patently absurd and yet with a social resonance that raises the project up from that of junk show to elegant in its ability to achieve a balance between saying: "This is what history has made us to be," and "This is all just for fun."

Through his manipulation of time and thus also audience perspective of current events, Kovačič highlights the historical, creating with his Plastos civilization a means of not only narrating history while never speaking of it but also—and more importantly—of involving audiences in this discussion. Indeed the Plastos, as well as Kovačič's video works from the 1980s, are among the few projects to have emerged in the years bracketing Slovene independence that explicitly deal with the country's history and with the real human consequences that come as the result of ideological paradigm shifts, societal collapse, and war. Kovačič's projects, while often allegorical in their content and spurious in their form, still manage directly to address how (in his video work of the 1980s) socialism encouraged people to bind themselves up and how (in his Plastos work of the 1990s) war makes trash of people and how trash can, in turn, be used to represent what people have become.

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[11] One of the points that Allen Feldman makes in his 1991 book *Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland* is that violence not only deconstructs but reconstructs the bodies, social realities, geographies, and political possibilities of the place in which it is enacted.

## 3. The whole is the untrue[12]

Almost all of Tadej Pogačar's current work takes place under the auspices of the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art*, an institution of his own invention that functions more like a methodology or a production philosophy than a museum per se. It has no permanent home, no collections of its own, no staff (save Pogačar himself), and no appreciable infrastructure. It is parasitical in name and function, feeding upon the collections of existing institutions and occupying their spaces of display. It is also, though rarely named as such, symbiotic with these organizations. The spaces occupied by the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum* and the collections lent to it for sifting through and reorganization are those of institutions willing to share curatorial responsibly and which are respectful of Pogačar's abilities in this regard. And though he is occasionally given free reign to create what he will with what is made available, as was the case of *The Art of History—Through the Body*, the 1994 installation at the Museum of Contemporary History with which I will be most concerned in this section, it was more often the case that Pogačar was invited to guest curate a small section of a larger exhibition—for example, he managed the content of single room of the sprawling 2003 retrospective To the Edge and Beyond: Slovenian Art 1975–1985 (*Do roba in naprej: Slovenska umetnost 1975 – 1985*). Despite the appellation "museum" Pogačar often also works more as an artist within the framework of existing institutions putting on display parasite-themed art works of his own invention. For example, as part of the 1996 project entitled *Kings of the Street* (*Kralji ulice*) Pogačar convinced (in part monetarily) homeless men to sit in throne-like chairs in unexpected places around Ljubljana, including one in a downtown gallery, for passersby to be startled by and hopefully also therefore to really see, and in seeing to recognize the men as individual human beings. This project much like the first *World Congress of Sex Workers and New Parasitism*—which was what it claimed to be, a world congress of sex workers that was held in conjunction with the Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2001—embody another side of Pogačar's interest in parasitism: namely the social parasite ("the homeless, prostitutes, sex workers…") and persons situationally marginalized ("…accidental passers by, office clerks, hostesses, curators, and editors" (Šuvaković n.d.: 1). In other words, persons who generally speaking remain peripheral to, and invisible from the point of view of, mainstream activities. Though these seemingly parasitic persons may be said to drain the moral and material resources of the mainstream, in Pogačar's view they also have the potential to transform society though their continued presence and multiple marginalized interactions with it. Pogačar's interest in parasitism is thus threefold:

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[12] Theodor Adorno, "Aphorism 29" (Adorno 1978: 50).

> 1. Parasitizing institutions of culture, say, a museum, a laboratory, an office, [a] family apartment.
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> 2. Parasitic social behavior i.e. public parasitism in relation to public institutions, private parasitism in relations to private everyday lives (of an individual, family, social group, institution), or neither-private-nor-public parasitism of marginal groups…
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> 3. Parasitizing [as] an artistic practice: taking over an existing "world" and transposing it from a stable state that is free of entropy (some social and civil normality and norms) into a critical state of entropy (a state in which art becomes an agent of action that discloses and exposes the horrors of the functional utilitarian and safe normality of social production….) (Šuvaković undated: 3).

The art of transposition, of moving things from where one might expect them to be into situations alien to expectation, doubles as activism in Pogačar's work: regardless of whether this activism is social (the homeless in thrones); artistic (sex workers into the Biennale); or cultural (existing historical artifacts into new narrative forms). The efficacy of this activism and the aesthetic viability of his art, especially when considered in relationship to the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum's* claimed impetus for activity ("the transformation of the host" via the production of rearrangements)[13] is often doubted, or at the very least subjected to severe questioning. Pogačar, however, is attempting to steer a path between the two rather than to achieve perfection in one (art) or in the other (activism).[14]

On the indistinctness of what Pogačar actually seems to be doing, Slovene art theorist and curator Igor Zabel put forward the idea that:

> …through an 'unserious' and 'irresponsible' approach to [established narratives, activism, art, and professional and scholarly discourses] an artist can break such closed structures and throw light on the repressed contradictions, heterogeneities, and discontinuities inherent in them. 'The whole is the untrue,' Adorno declares in his *Minima Moralia*, indicating that the effect of completeness and wholeness is

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[13] Quote, likely by Pogačar, from www.ljudmila.org/scca/parasite/info.htm (accessed January 2007).

[14] Kenny McGill attended Pogačar's *The Sex Worker Conspiracy Soiree: Conference and Party* (2002) in New York City in my stead and reported back that artists and activists both demanded with some degree of insistence that Pogačar explain why his art was art and his activism activism and what could be recommendatory in blending the two so thoroughly that each watered down the strengths of the other.

> essentially ideological. If this is so, then that which is incomplete, unordered, and heterogeneous might, in fact, point a way to the truth (Zabel).[15]

Pogačar's strategy of "new parasitism" (thusly termed to differentiate it from parasitism as a biological phenomenon), while undeniably artistic in its motivations is not directed toward the production of new objects in the world, nor toward the perfect realization of any particular stance or practice. Rather Pogačar seems most interested in making a muddle, via curatorial intervention, of what might otherwise appear to be the clear, natural, or normal order of things. Even when rearranging the stuff of history as a means of disrupting a given historical narrative, he does not so much posit a new whole or an alternate telling of the historical record but assembles the artifacts he is given in such a way that they highlight the artificiality, arbitrariness, and constructedness of any attempt to produce a single overarching historical narrative.

The first major undertaking of Pogačar's *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art* (founded in 1993) was the 1994 installation *The Art of History—Through the Body* hosted by the Slovene Museum of Modern History (formerly the Museum of the People's Revolution and before that, in the 1940s, the Scientific Institute of the Executive Committee of the Liberation Front) in Ljubljana. For this exhibition Pogačar was given full reign over the museum's collections and five of its rooms within which to display the artifacts he chose in a manner to his liking. The extraordinary curatorial freedom accorded Pogačar in this project was in part due to the museum's own transformation after Slovenia's independence in 1991, which involved, as was the case with many formerly communist institutions, a certain soul searching for appropriate ways in which to integrate into a post-communist, more-or-less capitalist, national landscape. While Pogačar's *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum* suited this need it was still unprecedented, for though Pogačar was known within the Ljubljana arts scene, granting a single, unaffiliated, individual temporary control over any institution in Slovenia is a remarkable move. This is even more astonishingly so when the institution's official role was (or had been up to that point) the support of state-sanctioned ideology and historical narrative.

Relatively little documentation remains of the exhibit the *Art of History—Through the Body*. I know that it occupied five rooms of the Museum of Modern History, each of which was given over to one aspect of "the role, understanding and representation of the body as an indicator of fundamental historical and social relationships" (Zabel ibid). One of these was devoted to medicine and the body and another to a small office, where

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15 Igor Zabel, "Parasitism, Para-Sites and Parallel Systems," unpublished article, received from Tadej Pogačar, 5 February 2007.

Tadej Pogačar sat for a few hours every day, answering questions, and guiding tours, and in this way including his own body—itself redolent with contemporary Yugoslav and Slovene history—into the larger thing of the exhibit. Perhaps the most curious object selected by Pogačar for display was Tito's death mask, which, though it had been in the museum's collection for fourteen years, had never before been exhibited. This despite the fact that Tito's Yugoslavia had by 1994 utterly collapsed and yet the material evidence of his death—the single remnant of his passing that marked him both as great, i.e. worthy of having had a death mask made in the first place, and as a phenomenon clearly of and in the past—had remained in storage.[16] If anything from the exhibit pleases Pogačar it is that he took Tito from his shelf and made him into history.[17]

The exhibit *The Art of History—Through the Body* was thus not without a political repartee, though politics was clearly not the main thrust of its content. Nor was politics, despite the location and timing of the exhibit, its organizational theme—history was; history and the body. Thus, while Pogačar's explicit aims with this exhibit and with the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art* more generally, were: first, to turn the audience's attention to the artificiality of what might otherwise be assumed to be the natural order of things; and second, to materialize a small utopian hope that the transformation of the container (the museum) might be effected via a parasitic action upon its contents (the collection); in the end the exhibit was also about the art, history, and the body intimated in its title. History, if not the explicit subject of the undertaking was its material, while the artist's body was every bit as much "art" as were the rest of the body themes objects gathered in recombination around it. *The Art of History—Through the Body*, thus, leveled a strong if implicit commentary in both its choice of theme and in its realization, about history—as something a single individual can remake according to his or her own personal proclivities or whims. History, here, loses none of its importance though it fails to retain much by way of surety. Likewise, the body—normally considered to be an individual "self" with a particular biography, name, agenda, traumata, story-to-be told—is recast in this exhibit as the zero-sum exemplar of the materiality of being in the world.

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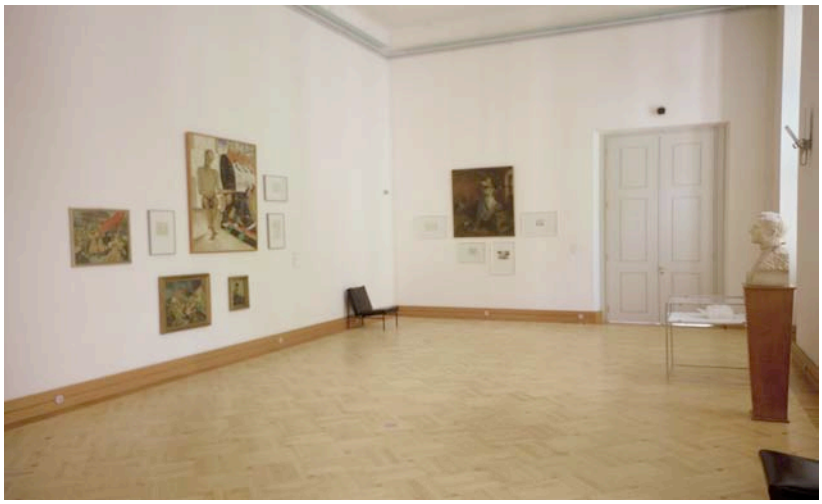
[16] Tito died in Ljubljana in 1980; it is likely for this reason that the museum was in position of his death mask.

[17] Personal correspondence 5 February 2007.

**Image 7:** ***The Art of History - Through the Body***, Tadej Pogačar, Ljubljana, 1994 (photo by the artist)



## 4. Irwin and the art of history

> The greatest responsibility an artist can shoulder is to influence the evaluation of dead painters.
>
> Irwin[18]

Irwin, Neue Slowenische Kunst's Department of Fine Art and Painting, first presented their project *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* at Vulgata—Slovenia's third triennial of locally produced contemporary art (14 December 2000–18 February 2001).[19] Irwin was likely the most renowned of the artists participating in the triennial and their contribution was the least accessible; hung at the far end of the far side of a large roe-colored wall that bifurcated the exhibit's final room, thus insuring that the twelve paintings that comprised *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* would be among the last pieces viewed by any visitor to the exhibition. When seen close up these

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18 NSK (1991: 121).

19 Kovačič and Pogačar both also had work on display at *Vulgata*. Pogačar exhibited a series of photographs of two black globes in a variety of outdoor environments, entitled "[Two] Traveling Globes" [*Potujoča globusa*] (1990). Kovačič also provided photographs; his detailed the physiognomy of some few Plastos: "The Physiognomy of Plastoses" [*Fiziognomika Plastosa*] (1998/2000).

paintings were at best puzzling—even when allowing for a docent's long explanation. Here was the crowing jewel of Slovenian contemporary art of the past three years—or so their location seemed to bespeak—and here too were twelve classic paintings of Slovene modernism on loan, for the most part from Moderna galerija's (The Museum of Modern Art) permanent collection, in heavy glop-covered black frames, each with small decorative plaque screwed in at the bottom center bearing the inscription: "Was ist Kunst" (What is art).

**Image 8: Vulgata's nearly infamous "roe-colored wall,"** Ljubljana 2000 (from *Vulgata: Kunst aus Slowenien*, exhibit catalog Berlin, 2001: 11)

Indeed, at least on the surface of things, *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* was pretty much what it looked like: twelve paintings by fairly well-known painters from the period of Slovene modernism—including works by Avgust Černigoj, Veno Pilon, Rihard Jakopič, Anton Kos, and Tone Kralj, among others—had been reframed by Irwin in their signature heavy wood and dark pitchy lacquer frames and hung as if their own work in the nether reaches of Vulgata.

Irwin's work is such that it thrives on theoretical explications of it, no small number of which are produced by Irwin themselves, and as such it is much beloved by scholars of various stripes, from art critics and philosophers to historians and even the occasional anthropologist. On the surface of things, that is as artifacts to be apprehended by purely visual means, their work is very often baffling (at best) to general audiences and (at worst) it goes almost unnoticed. Without context, and explanation, and a degree of local knowledge—which it was assumed most visitors to Vulgata did have, though on my three visits to the exhibition I saw little evidence of it[20]—*Was ist Kunst Slovenia*, like many of the other works on display at Vulgata, was without nuance or striking aesthetic appeal. And certainly that it embodied radical acts of both appropriation and the recasting of history was lost on all but the most knowledgeable of audience members.

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[20] Igor Španjol, personal conversation, December 2001.

**Image 9:** ***Was ist Kunst Slovenia*** Irwin, Ljubljana, 2000 1. Bogoslav Kalaš *Coast* 1977; 2. Tone Kralj *Lenin* 3. Zoran Mušič *Rock* 1975; 4. Gojmir Anton Kos *Gosposvesta ulica* 1938; 5. Veno Pilon *On the Banks of the River Seine* 1928 (from Arns 2002: 30)

I make this point in part to distinguish Irwin's projects, despite the group's international renown, from works such as Kovačič's 2002 Plastos installation at the National Museum, or Pogačar's *First World Conference of Sex Workers and New Parasitism* at the Venice Biennale both of which were (albeit differently) concerned with the direct engagement of a co-present audience. In general Irwin's work accomplished this degree of engagement only with audiences previously in the know and already invested in, or at least charmed by, Neue Slowenische Kunst's larger project. Additionaly, in most though not all cases, audience engagement with Irwin's work is analytic rather than visceral and takes place at a distance from the object(s) on display and with the mass of secondary laudatory texts

that accompany much of the group's output. The paintings themselves, and not just those of *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* but also those comprising Irwin's extensive ongoing project entitled simply *Was ist Kunst* raise questions and these often turn audience attention away from the "art" objects with which they are confronted and toward the small printed wall plaques bearing explanations, or to a local docent more than willing to provide some back story, or to the multiple elucidatory accompaniments to Irwin's work to be found in the form of exhibition catalogs, scholarly essays, interviews with members of the group, documentary films, and web pages.

Since beginning the *Was ist Kunst* series in 1984—at approximately the same time that the group of five helped to found Neue Slowenische Kunst—Irwin's historico-aesthetic strategy, philosophy of production, and basic painterly styles have varied relatively little. Irwin's working philosophy, which they call the retro-principle, is, in their words: "…a way of behaving and acting [that] builds on reinterpretation, recreation of past models…[as they are] manifest through the history of art" (Irwin 1984).[21] In keeping with this philosophy most, though not all, of the 500 plus works that comprise *Was ist Kunst* are a recombination of little more than a handful of images, borrowed piecemeal by Irwin from artworks, famous, infamous, and all but unknown, of the past 150 years. Some among the motifs in most constant employ by the group are Kazimir Malevich's *Black Cross* (1915), Sir Edwin Landseer's stag (*Monarch of the Glen* 1851), Ivan Grohar's *Sejalec* (The Sower, 1907), and the coffee cup from Ivana Kobilica's *Kofetarica* (Coffee drinker, 1888), as well certain likenesses taken from Slovene nationalist iconography, such as Mt. Triglav or architect Jože Plečnik's design for the Slovene parliament building (1949) (image 9).

These they have mixed and remixed not only with each other but with various other forms, visages (Tito, Stalin, Marx), and styles familiar from early capitalist, communist, national socialist, and Christian iconography (Spanke 2003; Zabel 2003).[22] Each of these individual elements was initially selected by Irwin in part for its iconographic and evocative potential and in part its aesthetic strength, that is for its ability to stand alone as an image even after having been stripped of its original context. A cross, a cup, a stag, Tito's profile, the crucified Christ, a cog, a mountain with three distinctive peaks—each has in turn been juxtaposed on multiple occasions with one or several others and in this way been redeployed in innovative and occasionally also kitschy ways for nearly three decades (Gržinić 1998).

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[21] The degree to which each of NSK subsections follow these mandates varies by group and over time.

[22] For a more detailed discussion of individual motifs and their uses in Irwin's more recent *Icons* project see: Spanke (2003) and Zabel (2003).

**Image 10: Coffee cups**, Irwin, 1985-2000 1.*The Coffee Cup* 1985; 2. *The Coffee Cup* 1985; 3. *The Coffee Cup* 1991; (Arns 2002: 26)

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3

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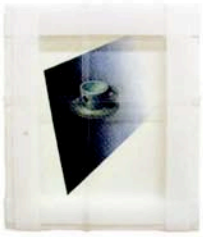

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What differentiated the images in *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* from Irwin's earlier works in the *Was ist Kunst* series was, then, less the logic of radical appropriation underpinning the piece—as this had long been a hallmark of their creative activities—than the profound degree to which the artwork was itself subsumed by this act of appropriation. For while the paintings in the frames were pointedly not Irwin's, the resulting works of art—i.e., paintings plus frames—were not only attributed to them but easily recognizable as such, precisely because of the frames, variations of which hold near-to-every painting ever produced by the group. Indeed the "work" of art accomplished in *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* subsisted not in the careful craft or painterly skill necessary to produce the paintings themselves but was rather to be found in the detailed design and construction of the frames, the selection of the original paintings to borrow and reframe, and the not insubstantial task of convincing Moderna galerija's administrative and curatorial staff, among others, to give the group access to these works for the duration of the exhibition (which would later travel across Slovenia's borders to reside six weeks in Germany).[23]

Not unlike *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* certain of Irwin's more recent works have also been fundamentally concerned with this problem of convincing persons to participate.[24] Most notable among these was the *NSK Garda* project (2002) in which members of the national armies of Croatia, Albania, Austria, Montenegro, Kosovo, and the Czech Republic were each persuaded to replace the national iconography of their respective states with that of Neue Slowenische Kunst's *State in Time* and to be photographed, at attention, beneath the NSK flag.[25] The resulting pictures look much like large format tourist shots, more documentary than "artistic" in their rendering, but the work (which took, in certain cases, years) of convincing the men, their commanding officers, and the national hierarchy of each particular military regime to stand guard beneath a foreign (albeit artists') flag was immense.[26]

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23 This exhibit traveled later that same year to the Neue Berliner Kunstverin (12 May–24 June 2001).

24 Cristo and Jeanne Claude's work tangles with bureaucratic restriction in much the same way as some of Irwin's more recent projects, albeit on a *much* larger scale.

25 Only in the case of the Kosovo army were NSK's signature arm bands placed below the "national" iconography of the state on the soldiers uniforms so that both were visible.

26 Interview with Andrej Savski and Borut Vogelnik of Irwin, May 2002.

**Image 11:** ***NSK Garda, Zagreb*****,** Irwin, 2002. (photo by Igor Andjelić, Arns 2002: 24)


The hidden labor of *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* mirrors (and precedes) that of *NSK Garda* and in both cases this labor contributes firstly to the artist's own understanding of the worthiness of the project; and secondly, it

embodies an important turn in contemporary European art—that of getting people to release a hold, whether personal or bureaucratic, upon something they are accustomed to keeping tightly under control. This judgment of "worthiness" of a project on the part of artists is not always so obvious on the surface of the things they produce. And as with many pieces of contemporary art that are, in critic Nicolas Bourriaud's words, doomed to be "identified, right down to its crises 'ambience,' with 'poor' and experimental art of the 1970's" (Bourriaud 1998: 43) *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* was, upon first sight, aesthetically and historically flat (Bourriaud 1998). A flatness that was, as I will argue below, neither useless nor unintentional.

In addition to their procedural commonalities and aesthetic biases, both *NSK Garda* and *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* also had a third thing in common—the motivation to remake history and culture in the present tense. This was not, as one might at first sight assume, an attempt to relive or redefine geopolitics (in the first case) or history (in the second), nor to glorify these. It was rather a way of bringing history to bear upon the present moment such that things past or outlying could be united in the here and now, and from this point of convergence they could, at least in theory, be integrated into the complex warp and weft of a future unfolding. The replacement of objects in time (old paintings in new frames), as well as the replacement of objects in space (NSK "state" symbols on Austrian state soldiers), while minor actions if one considers the world stage, were nevertheless socially productive acts. For in replacing true state iconography with that of a fictitious state and their own paintings with those of the traditional masters of Slovenian art—even the most renowned of whom have received barely a teaspoon full of international recognition—Irwin laid claim to, and simultaneous created, a very local art history within an international art historical and sociopolitical context. And, in the smallest of ways, they have changed this context to include unexpected players like Kosovar and Albanian soldiers or "socialist" and therefore largely disregarded painters like Tone Kralj or Jože Tisnikar. There is a tension, therefore, built into the very structure of Irwin's art between what would appear at first glance to be the work of art (the object) and where that work—and thus also where their art—might actually be said to reside.

The relationship between the flatness of affect that characterizes Irwin's end products (i.e., their "art" objects) is perhaps better illustrated by another recent project, the *East.Art.Map*, which though now grandiose and book-length began as a simple a pictorial rendition of Irwin's own history collaged onto a piece of plywood (Irwin 2002). This first map *Retroavantgarda* (1997) was something between an (art historical) family tree and a painting: up the left side ran a timeline divided into ten-year intervals, across the top, hand painted in red swirls, the word "Retroavantgarda" and, just beneath this, Irwin had painted and pasted in

images depicting the firm triangle of the retro-avant-garde, a "movement" that had been retroactively created by Neue Slowenische Kunst to provide a family of concern, a geographic grounding, and art historical context to their own work.

**Image 12:** ***Retroavantgarda*****,** Irwin, 1997 (Arns 2003: 208–209)


In the map's first instantiation this triumvirate included Irwin (Ljubljana), Kazimir Malevich (Belgrade 1986) (who is often referred to as "The Belgrade Malevich" to distinguish him from his Soviet precursor and namesake), and Mladen Stilinović (Zagreb). These three are fed by (signified by dashed lines) Laibach Kunst (Trbovlje, 1981) and—in gray paint rather than the black used to mark the main players—Braco Dimitrijević (Sarajevo), and (moving backwards in time and downwards on the "canvas") Mangalos and Zenitism. Each name, save that of Laibach Kunst, was accompanied by a black and white reproduction of a work of art. These were glued up next to the names in such a way that the viewer could trace the history through the images, the names, the geographic appellations, or time.

Each pathway was, however, imperfect; Laibach Kunst, for example, was down near 1920 on the timeline but subtitled by the date 1981. Slovene towns occupied the upper right-hand and lower left-hand corners of the piece while the rest of Yugoslavia (Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo) slid from left to right between them. And the art works selected to

represent influences over time seemed to have nothing visually in common with one another. As such, the "history" being told in *Retroavantgarda* was clearly one influenced by the aesthetic sensibilities of the artists (i.e., Irwin). And, if one is inclined to look deeper into it, it was a history of influence, space, and time, that while possible for a viewer to accept as true was not rendered in such a way a to appear natural or given. That is to say, *Retroavantgarda* was a constructed history told in such a way as to appear constructed.[27]

The *East.Art.Map* has grown up significantly since its humble paste, paper, and paint beginnings in *Retroavantgarda* into Irwin's most overt history (re)writing project. Premised in part on the uneven distribution of art historical detail, the *East.Art.Map* was originally an attempt to remedy a situation in which every sketch and chance meeting of artists in the west of Europe had been subjected to the most exhaustive of investigations while even the grossest of details like, say, the names of artists—not to mention their actual works—in Europe's east remain all but unknown.

> The artistic map of Europe contains different degrees of detail and resolution. Italy, France, and Spain are presented in fine grain, but the Balkan peninsula is little more than a vague outline. England, Germany, and Scandinavia have many features filled in, but to the east of Germany things are blurred. Until recently, cities like Sofia, Odessa, Skopje, and Belgrade had next to no definition. Further to the East, Moscow comes into focus, but this is no compensation for the Baltics, sentenced for the last half century to blank space (Irwin 2006).[28]

In hopes of equalizing the density of art historical reference Irwin—as artists and pointedly not as "real" historians—took on the project of mapping the history and interconnectivity of what they have dubbed "Eastern Modernism" a "fictive [notion] which in its own obvious artificiality, points to the artificiality of Western art historical structures that continue to exclude contemporary Eastern European art to this day" (Arns 2003: 10). They asked twenty-five curators, artists, and critics from Eastern Europe to each select ten art projects (from 1945–2000) that they deemed exceptional, whatever the reason.[29] From this original set of approximately 250 works Irwin constructed relationships of influence through time; on the

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27 Two later versions of this piece were also made (both in 2000) with much the same cast of characters but far more thoroughly illustrated, in some cases with original works of art.

28 From the book jacket.

29 Interview with Irwin, May 2002. See also www.eastartmap.org. Click knowledge, click intro.

map these relationships are depicted by lines connecting bubbles—each bubble an artist, each line a posited connection.

The first draft of the *East.Art.Map* was published in a special issue of *Art Margins* in 2002. It was later uploaded on to the web (www.eastartmap.org) where users can, in theory, both search the map and contribute to it and its latest instantiation—a full length book *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*—was published by MIT press in 2006.[30] Given that there is no other systematic history of modern art in the region, Irwin's art project in the form of an art history, despite its unconventional methodology is for the moment the most valid and thorough history of artistic developments, theories, relations, and influences across the former east of Europe. The fact that the *East.Art.Map* was in the beginning an *as if* true history of an invented phenomenon—i.e., "Eastern Modernism"—has dropped out as the history being told has become increasingly codified and gained the support of respected international institutions (like MIT press).

The *East.Art.Map* as much as *Retroavantgarda*, the *NSK Garda* project, or even *Was is Kunst*, makes solid use of the technique of causing something to appear to be something else entirely except… not quite—or, occasionally, except… too much so. This approach to aesthetics as well as politics might well be said to be the linchpin of Neue Slowenische Kunst's work and, even when confronted with an undertaking that would seems true to its form—like the *East.Art.Map*—anyone familiar with the group will immediately begin to scrabble about beneath the surface to see what it is that NSK is imitating; what forms, or truths, or taken-for-granteds they are approximating and in the process remaking to their own ends, and they will likely also try to determine what these ends might, with time and energy, plausibly be.[31] Such knowledge should cast *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* into a new light. The strong light of artificiality. Under the glare of which one is

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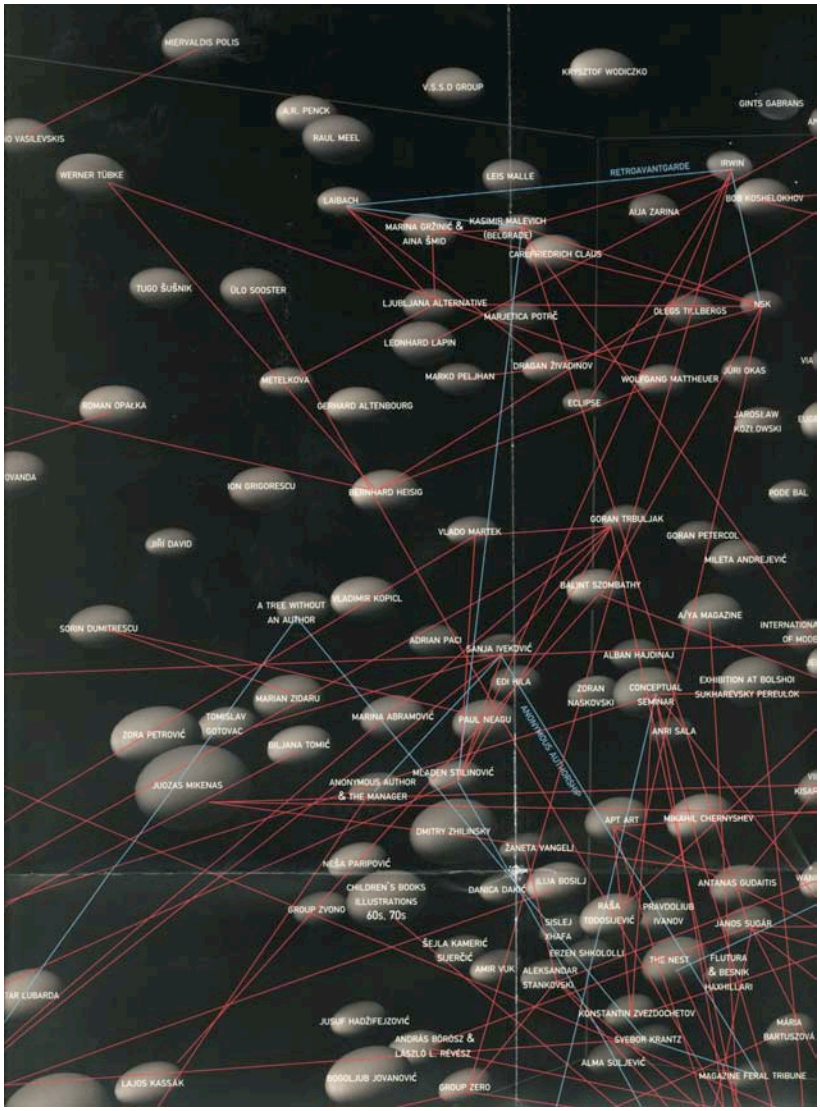
30 Irwin eds. *East Art Map: Contemporary art and Eastern Europe*, (London: Afterall, 2006).

31 A prime example of both scholarly digging for the founding forms of Irwin's work and Irwin's own retro-principle in action is provided by Inke Arns in the opening essay of the catalog for Irwin's 2002 Berlin retrospective: "[Irwin] refers, with a gesture typical for them, back to an entity that was central to the definition and derivation of modernism: Alfred H. Barr's *Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935*. This diagram, developed in 1936 by the founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), lists the European Avant-garde movements as precursors—almost in the sense of an aesthetic evolution theory—of the abstract art of modernism, both geometric and non-geometric. Irwin then transfers this scheme onto Yugoslavia, here in the form of a reversed genealogy of the 'retroavantgarde' which extends from the neo-avant-garde of the present back to the period of the historical avant-garde" (Arns 2003: 14).

compelled to ask: to what ends the apparent historical and aesthetic flatness of the work, rather than simply taking this flatness for granted, or as evidence of (the very simple judgment of) a lack of skill or a manifestation of laziness.

**Image 13: *East.Art.Map*,** detail, Irwin, 2002 (Irwin, *New Moment* 2002)



## 5. Representing history

> Oh, now that the Slovene people is renewed through retro-art/the old image is instilled with magic.
>
> Irwin[32]

During the course of my fieldwork I found that Slovene artists and culture critics afforded at least three different casts of meaning to the word representation when creating their art, when writing about it, or when discussing such works in English.[33] The first was the unadulterated term "representation" in this, the most straightforward usage, one thing or person was made to stand in the stead of another (or a mass of assumed-to-be-like others) becoming, in effect, the public face or speaking voice of this other. There is no effective need for a representation of this sort to bear a formal resemblance to what it comes to represent. A chart can represent a data set that in turn represents a group of people who exhibit a certain common attribute, like skin color or a preference for heavy metal, or their own premature death. Such is representative government or a representative sample, a graph, a chart, or a portrait. Representations of this type travel differently than originals, they change media blithely, and they often hold very different public relationships—to one another and between those things, persons or phenomena represented by them—than do their originals. Much of postmodern scholarship is devoted to theorizing the potential of such representations, whether bemoaning the havoc they wreak upon the authentic and the real (from Benjamin to Baudrillard) or (less often) lauding their potential to transform society, sociality, and individual persons (De Certeau 1984; Bourriaud 1998).

According to this use of the term "representation," Irwin, among the most renowned of contemporary Slovene artists, are at one and the same time just themselves—five individuals painting under the collective appellation Irwin—and they are also often taken to be representative of the whole of Slovene contemporary artistic production. This role as representatives of their country is one that the group has actively puzzled over in recent years and have, to a certain degree, taken in hand becoming the emissaries of Slovene contemporary art and also the spokesmen for less well-known Yugoslavian artists whose potential was lost in the morass of

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[32] NSK (1991: 118); first published in *Problemi* 6 (Ljubljana) 1985 (errors in original).

[33] I have written elsewhere extensively on *pretvarenje*, (representation, simulation, pretense) it might even be said that this is the central thematic of my entire dissertation "Contemporary Slovene Art and Artifice"; here, however, I deal with only a single aspect of the issue, which can be best glossed by the English word "representation."

the war (see *Retrovantgarda* above) as well as the principle architects, champions (and authors) of the history of Eastern European art of the modernist period (the ongoing *East.Art.Map* detailed above).

Thus, Irwin represents Slovene art in two distinct ways: first they are representatives of it and second they are re-presenting it; that is, they are gathering evidence from history (stories, art works, relationships) and reproducing them in a new medium (books, maps, paintings). This sort of "RE-presentation" is a second use of the term and the one that was, in my experience, most commonly used by Slovenes, artists or otherwise. Re-presentation is at the most fundamental level a change in medium in which one thing, or person, is taken and reproduced—literally re-presented—in another medium. A painting in glossy reprint in an exhibition catalog, the text accompanying that painting and describing the project, an artist interviewed by a music magazine, a TV broadcast of a rock concert, a Laibach cover of a Queen song, and Irwin's (re)use of the classic motifs of modernism in their paintings are all re-presentations in the second sense of the word.

More than just reproducing some thing, element, or person, the change in both context and medium afforded by re-presentation also offers a measure of protection to originals. An artist or artwork that is re-presented on his or her web page, or in a print advertisement, or even simulcast "live" is neither immediately available nor easily apprehensible as a whole and complex being/thing. Re-presentations recuse originals to a safe distance and (literally) replace them (or him or her) with a non-identical copy. As with representation (above) re-presentation need neither mimic the form nor the medium of the original and as such these are not simple reproductions but rather reproductions imbued with indexes of otherness, difference, distance, and history.

To return to a concrete exemplar, while Malevich's black cross may well have represented (in the first sense of the word) something in particular at the moment that he painted it, Irwin's and NSK's constant re-use of it as an icon, both for their own movement and for the greater history of small Slovenia "at the crossroads" (between east and west, north and south, capitalism and communism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Mediterranean and alpine cultures, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, the Balkans and Europe), is both a re-presentation of the original form and a recasting of its original points of reference.[34]

[34] Slovenia forms the western edge of the "chai-line." From Slovenia across the Middle East to Asia tea is called some version or another of "chai" and to the west, across Europe, across the Atlantic, and through out the Americas it is called some version of "tea." Espresso, interestingly enough penetrates about half way into Slovenia (from the west), shifting at some point around Trbovlje, at the center, from the stove top espresso maker to the džezva—the little pot

Malevich's black cross, that is to say, does not represent the same things in Irwin's hands as it did in Malevich's. While this is keeping with Irwin's basic philosophy of radical appropriation it also highlights a material strength of re-presentation: changes in the media and context of presentation inexorably link "re-presentations" to shifts in attributive meaning.

**Image 14: NSK "logo,"** Neue Slowenische Kunst, Ljubljana 1980s. About the constitutive elements of this logo Alexei Monroe says, "At its heart is the ubiquitous Laibach/ Malevich black square with the German anti-Fascist designer John Heartfield's infamous axe-swastika overlaying it. Also present are two other generic Laibach signifiers—the industrial cog wheel and, and antlers. The banner at the base of the object features the names of NSK's three founder groups—Red Pilot, Laibach, and Irwin. The logo also features a spinning atom at the base of the design and, in place of a torch flame, the three peaked insignia of the Slovene wartime resistance movement" (image and quote from Monroe 2005: 56–57)


In re-deploying, re-casting, re-contextualizing, and re-working representations—that are also re-presentations—of times past and places distant Irwin have made new objects of conglomerate reference, objects as polysemic and polyvocal as any Bakhtinian utterance while being simultaneously singular and limited (Bakhtin 1981). Such pointed conglomerations of what is disparate and distant leads to yet a third possible

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with a long handle used for making Turkish coffee—a device which continues east until tea at some point (and partially thanks to British colonialism) deposes coffee as the drink of the common man.

meaning of the term representation—that is, "re-PRESENT-ation," with the accent on the temporally inclined root word "present." What Irwin is in effect doing in gathering together motifs, borrowed elements, and in the case of *Was ist Kunst Slovenia* entire works of art, from times past and places distant is literally re-*present*-ing them, that is, moving what was historical, out of vogue, obsolete, or simply forgotten forward in time.

History, in this process, can be thought of as being remade in the dimension of the present. In part, certainly, so that it not be forgotten, but also for two other reasons articulated by the group. First, as a means of establishing an historical parity with the West whose intricately plaited mappings of their own art historical developments is, to put it mildly, thorough. And second, a means of building the ground from which a local and exuberant future might be coaxed. In both cases it is history that is re*present*ed—i.e. made present—and thus also flattened into a single canvas and single historical dimension—that of the now. History, according to Irwin is not a given it needs to be constructed, needs to be *made* present (Irwin 2002: 200–201) and as with almost all things NSK they accomplish this via the re-presentation of what they deem to be both representative—of past times and distant places—*and* worthy of recuperation. Or in Arns's words: "With Irwin, repetition is (subsequent) prospective memory—a 'present' opening of the past into the future" (Arns 2003: 13).

Making art, as John Dewey points out in his masterful 1934 treatise on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, is fundamentally an act of temporal optimism, it works both to create and to anticipate a near future out of the material of the present. The artist, in accomplishing his or her craft, anticipates a point in time not long distant at which the thing, experience, or body of work undertaken will leave the workshop of the mind and enter, interactively, a larger world of reception, circulation, presentation, and re-presentation (1934: 52). In so doing it will become a small piece of what constitutes this world. All art is, in other words, "a present opening of the past into the future." Irwin's art only seems to be more urgently so because the content of their work so nicely mimics the exigencies of its form.

Dewey however, makes a second point, one about "art" in the abstract, one that while not so perfectly descriptive of Irwin's practices alone highlights the necessarily representative nature of art as such. Contrary to many art critics of his age unhappy with the non-representative turn of Dadaists, minimalists, cubists, futurists, and modernists. Dewey does not take representation to signify a point-for-point visual or auditory correspondence between raw experience and end product. Art to his mind is rather a channeling of the experiences that give rise to emotions into "new" forms and these, while always and of necessity representative of the original experiences, need not formally mimic them. Representation-making is then,

in Dewey's conceptualization, the irreducible of the "work" of art, regardless of what the end product of this work resembles, or fails to resemble (56). Art, while real—i.e., extant—cannot by Dewey's definition be authentic, raw, true, or natural; it is always artificial and belabored but in its artifice and labor the artist's work is transformative of one thing (emotions, experiences, inspirations, impressions) into something else (art).

What all of the projects described in this essay do is take history as both a formal inspiration and as an emotional experience and re-new it, re-present it, and by means of these acts alone they help to constitute a present tense populated by unusual arrangements and objects and a future time in which these were always already inevitable. Like all artists Kovačič, Pogačar and Irwin are making history, albeit on the most minor of scales, what sets them apart from other artists is that each is doing so by means of the very stuff (objects and emotions both) that history itself provides.

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