

**NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST (NSK):
THE ART GROUPS LAIBACH, IRWIN, AND
NOORDUNG COSMOKINETICAL THEATER CABINET —
NEW STRATEGIES IN THE NINETIES**

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To sketch the most important concepts in artistic and cultural production in Slovenia, particularly when these concepts relate to what is called Slovenia's art creativity, entails an abandonment of all linear development as well as all simplistic concepts of the historical watersheds which these productions were believed to have caused.

Events in the 1980s in Slovenia were marked particularly by certain key productions — the appearance of what is known today as alternative culture and/or the Ljubljana subculture movement, the formation of the art collective NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST (New Slovene Art) [NSK], and the new generation of painters, sculptors, photographers, fashion designers, video artists etc., who emerged during the decade with an impressive number of fine arts and multimedia projects.

In this context, a special status attaches to the alternative culture and/or the Ljubljana subcultural scene (later named "The Art of the Eighties") in Slovenia. This culture did not just produce binding artistic influences, and new strategies and tactics for the production and presentation of works of art, but also encouraged and shaped a series of socialization processes and non-formal institutional bodies that decisively marked and defined the Slovene cultural scene. Founded primarily on the work of the Student Cultural and Artistic Center [KUC] in Ljubljana, the Ljubljana subculture created distinctive productions and organizational forms of culture, despite the exceptionally meager possibilities for functioning in the socialist context of the time. The coming-out of Ljubljana's male homosexuals, and later lesbians, and the constituting of a gay culture (the first of this kind of organized movement in one of the then socialist countries of Eastern Europe), as well to the establishment of new social movements (the Section for a Culture of Peace at the KUC-Forum,

1985, and others) were a part of these processes. The alternative culture also decisively changed the way in which art, as a more diverse production process, is perceived. The alternative processes and projects demonstrate the exceptionally interwoven nature of culture and politics, and that in the 1980s art and culture made fundamental contributions to the social and political changes with which Slovenia entered the last decade of the second millennium.

Slovene alternative culture incorporated different artistic forms, media, theories, alternative forms of social behavior, and the so called “new social movements.” In this sense it can also be understood as part of the effort toward the establishment of civil society in Slovenia. From today’s perspective, the entire subcultural activity can therefore be regarded as a movement that radically marked the process of the “Slovene spring” which culminated in Slovenia’s independence.

The alternative culture or subculture was more than simply a passing fashion or trend (fashion’s tradition of unending surplus production never became known in socialism anyway); it signified the reconfiguration of the social and artistic arena, a reconfiguration which despite underground activity of one sort or another in Eastern European contexts, in Ljubljana experienced its own radical and specific forms.

In its relationship to the underground phenomena of East European countries (the Russian “Sotsart” and “Apt-Art” movements, and the Polish Post-Conceptualism), which were characterized by the paradigm of shaping new artistic “practices” in private spheres that were believed to be completely removed from the system, the alternative culture of Ljubljana represented a metaphorical “fight for the state.” The demand for the formation of new cultural, political and artistic institutions and organizations was formed, so to speak, within the very institutions of the socialist self-management paradigm of reality.

Changes and new cultural traditions originating in Eastern Europe at the time of real socialism and before it — including cultural strategies and tactics as well as those of civil movements — should be taken into consideration when trying to define the “new” European culture in the nineties.

The establishment of new codings not exclusively concerned with art — the visual reconfiguration of the “original” socialist

cultural texture and structure — had as one of its consequences the formation of “explosive” contradictions between the external and the internal, the sexual and the mental, the ordered and the chaotic, as well as the conceptual and the political.

Within such a context the activity of NSK, an art collective with a specific character, was extremely important both in the context of the ex-Yugoslav territory and beyond; it comprised the music group LAIBACH, the fine art group IRWIN, the “retrograde” theatre group SESTER SCIPION NASICE (later renamed RED PILOT COSMOKINETIC THEATRE, and now the NOORDUNG COSMOKINETIC THEATRE CABINET), and the design group NOVI KOLEKTIVIZEM [New Collectivism].

NSK, which declares itself to be an abstract social body situated in a real socio-political space, represents simultaneously a Western and an Eastern phenomenon. The way it functions, its structure and organization resemble a diabolical capitalist machine, a corporative system, which, however, cannot be found in the Western artworld, for there such an organization is possible only if linked to real financial capital. Thanks to its socialist heritage NSK was able to emerge on purely ideological foundations.

Laibach (and later on other members of NSK) used all the classic avant-garde methods: manifestos, collective appearances, public provocations and interference with politics. Slovenia, even Ljubljana, had never seen anything so shocking.

The NSK strategies of representation and presentation and their collectivism were often equated with totalitarianism and their art was considered to be a menace to the existing social order. However, by defining NSK’s activity as a point of “potential terror and destruction,” the state merely reinforced the opinion that, in fact, “terror and destruction” resided in its own core. With its activities in the 1980s, NSK questioned the very mechanisms which compel us to think, as Norman Bryson puts it, “of a terror intrinsic to sight, which makes it harder to think what makes sight terroristic.” NSK did not interpret the gaze as a menace, but showed that this “menace was a social product determined by power and not a natural fact.” The result of NSK’s concepts, strategies and tactics in the 1980s was therefore a specific process of denaturalization of the previously “naturalized” socialist cultural values and rituals — but also something more. With its

entire strategy, NSK laid the foundations for a different politics (!), but above all for a different “politics of sight.”

It was only with the totality of their concepts and the complexity of their productions and presentation that NSK managed to win its place in a social and cultural reality which was completely dominated, if not totalized, by political discourse.

With its projects, documentary materials, and testimonies, the NSK attempts to point to a new cultural context and bring about a more rapid disintegration of obsolete ethical and esthetical standards for the understanding of culture and one’s own identity. The work of NSK is characterized by a radical questioning of the realization, presentation, and circulation of works of art. This, then, is a significant intervention in all historical artistic “continuities” and also into Slovene artistic production.

In the 1990s one of the most attention-drawing projects of the NSK movement, mainly carried out by the group Irwin, is the project *Neue slowenische Kunst – State in Time*. It was in the context of paradigm of this kind that the NSK Embassies were realized. The *NSK Embassy* and *NSK Consulate* projects can be read as specific social installations which symbolically and artistically simulate the transfer of the phenomenon of NSK into another cultural, social and political context. NSK Embassies were realized in Moscow in 1992, in Gent (Belgium) in 1993, at the Berlin Volksbühne in 1993; NSK Consulates were opened in Florence, Italy in 1993, at the Hotel Ambasciatori; and in Umag (Croatia) in 1994, in the kitchen of the private apartment belonging to the gallery-owner Marino Cettina.

The group Irwin established the NSK Embassy in Moscow in a *private apartment* (address: Lenin Prospect 12, apt. 24) in May and June 1992. There Irwin exhibited paintings from the “Capital” series. Posters, design work, video works by Laibach and a play by the the Noordung Cosmokinetic Theater Cabinet were also presented. Lectures and public discussions were led by guests — invited critics, theoreticians, artists from Slovenia, Russia, Croatia and Serbia. The façade of the residential dwelling was embellished with the artistically articulated insignia of a state embassy.



IRWIN, *NSK MOSCOW EMBASSY*, 1992

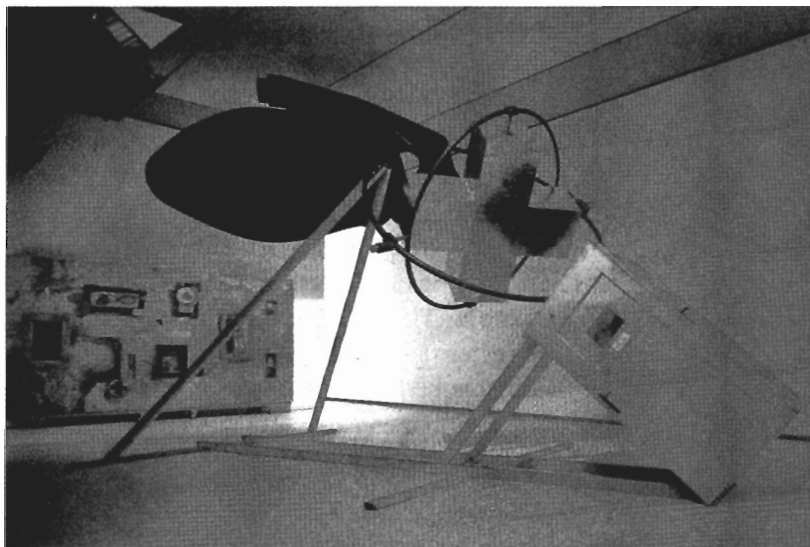
The NSK Moscow Embassy project took place in the context of the internationalization of one of the great East European phenomena, entitled *APT-ART* (Apartment-Art), a phenomenon of

artistic creation and exhibition in private apartments within the Moscow art underground. The “Apt-Art” projects were carried out by the Moscow artists and art critics Lena Kurljandževa, Viktor Misiano and Konstantin Zvezdočotov. It enabled artists and avant-garde art to survive prior to the period of Perestroika and Glasnost in the Soviet Union. The “Apt-Art” project, begun in the 1980s, represents an attempt to search for political and personal/artistic paths which run parallel to the official institutions and are physically connected to them, but politically and culturally wide apart. Apt-Art, which emerged at the time of Brezhnev, also represented an ironic paraphrase of the American POP ART movement.

The Moscow Apt-Art emphasized the status of private space and changed it into a center of communication through the self-organization of those most excluded. The “phantasm” which structures artistic life in the former totalitarian Eastern European countries is here completely grounded in the private sphere, in the private apartment, at the kitchen table so to speak, surrounded by art-works. In the context of the post-socialist European paradigm — which today reviews this phantasm on a completely metaphorical level so that it forgets to include fear, “the fear with which we lived,” in its imagery, as one of the Moscow underground theoreticians wrote — the NSK Moscow Embassy project represents a new actualization of the phenomenon of life and creation in private apartments during the era of communist totalitarianism. The NSK Moscow Embassy project did not attempt to achieve equilibrium in the opposition between the totalitarian ideology and the “non-ideological” private, untainted sphere (although it is true that it holds onto something of a totalitarian type of claustrophobia), but rather tried to actualize both spheres as “two sides of the same coin which are both going to waste with post-socialist democracy” (Slavoj Žižek).

The NSK Moscow Embassy gave to a *private apartment*, which should not be present in any hierarchy of visible cultural, artistic and social areas and for this reason cannot be inserted in the social structure, the status of a historical place! Because the apartment takes on this kind of status, these concepts function as the “institution of different cultural and artistic projects and

histories into the visible.”¹ This meant: to make visible what was thus far hidden from the gaze.



IRWIN, *TRANSCENTRALA*, Kunsthalle zu Kiel, 1993

We deal here with repetition — so as to gain memory. The “other” is here inscribed in a certain “transition,” which then refers to images, memories, histories, and clichés. As NSK artists put it, a big large kitchen table, surrounded by art works, unites the private and the public. The private apartment thus became a cultural space as well as a center of spiritual communication. Since the NSK Consulate in Umag (Croatia, 1994) was installed in a kitchen, a kitchen thus became a consulate!

Numerous discussions which took place at the time of the NSK Moscow Embassy project showed that communist totalitarianism, with Russia as its epicenter, destroyed all possibility of the emergence of other discourses. In this respect Slovenia was a very different story, for it was on the margins, at the periphery of this absolute totalitarianism. This enabled Slovenia to preserve a relative freedom as well as the coexistence of different political and artistic discourses.

¹ See Jo Anna Isaak, “Mapping the Imaginary,” *The Event Horizon*, ed. Lorne Falk & Barbara Fischer (Banff: The Coach House Press & Walter Phillips Gallery, 1987).

Thus, the Irwin-NSK Moscow Embassy Project also signifies a deeper and far-reaching process of self-reflection from an eastern position. Such attempts to fashion an “alternative” history of cultural and artistic production in the East express a demand for the redefinition of this (alternative) attitude within existing, contemporary East-West power formations. Instead of the single previously available option of reading “the East in the reflection of the West,” the option of an East that reads the East, i.e. itself, is now opening up.

Despite the end of East European socialism and communism and the processes of European integration, Europe is more divided now than ever before. The war in Bosnia-Hercegovina and the special approach (Western) Europe and U.S.A. have adopted to resolve it, confirms this unquestionably. At a time when the East is, so to speak, still “east” but is in the process of acquiring its “bastard western form,” the question of an internal, spiritual system which lived for almost half of century here without being acknowledged, carries deep significance.

The emergence of NSK is also a good area for the conceptualization of the phenomenon of post-socialist multiculturalism. What we are now witnessing is a process of Eastern self reflection which does not recycle Western histories but refers to Eastern positions and conditions. An alternative history of the East signifies a demand for the redefinition of the context of contemporary constructions and relations of power. Some of those demands are articulated in the “Moscow Declaration,” written at the time of the “Apt-Art” and the “NSK Embassy” projects.²

² The “Moscow Declaration”:

1) We, the artists and critics from Ljubljana and Moscow who met in Moscow on 26 May 1992 on the occasion of the Apt-Art and IRWIN NSK EMBASSY projects, recognize the following facts:

A) The history, experience and time and space of Eastern countries of the 20th century cannot be forgotten, hidden, rejected or suppressed.

B) The former East does not exist any more: a new Eastern structure can only be made by reflecting on the past which has to be integrated in a mature way in the changed present and future.

C) This concrete history, this experience, and this time and space structured a specific subjectivity that we want to develop, form and reform; a subjectivity that reflects the past and the future.

D) This specific Eastern identity, its esthetical and ethical attitude, is common to all of us and has a universal — not specifically Eastern — importance and meaning.

The "Moscow Declaration" points to the crucial issue of how to retain, in the present international constellation, specific cultural contexts and to avoid standardization; in other words, how to present and interpret (without eliminating) the specific identity of other cultures and productions within the one-sided and established perspective of the dominant culture. Apt-Art International provides an occasion to ask ourselves together with the Russian "Sotsart" artists of the how to save the monuments of socialist realism from destruction without being accused of preserving the totalitarian tradition; and how to change Moscow into "a phantasmagorical garden of post-totalitarian art."³

So, here we are not speaking so much about East-West relations as about this intermediary situation, when the East remains the East and when it is still acquiring its bastardized Western form.

The Irwin group is today displaying an accelerated development of its *Embassy* projects and the transfer of NSK phenomena into another cultural, social and political context, into the corpus of space, which equals a figure, a construction, an artifact, a transposition; since space cannot precede its temporal construction. What is important here are not the circumstances of this projection

E) The condition of this common situation is not only individual but belongs to social, political and cultural experience, to the identity and physiognomy of Europe as a whole.

F) The experience of oppressive régimes (totalitarian, authoritarian) is common to more than half of the world population and can be found in a more or less developed state all over the globe. This is a universal experience.

G) This context and developed subjectivity are the real base of our new identity which takes a clear shape (also in the form of new social, political and cultural infrastructure) especially in the last decades of this century.

2) This text should have the following practical goals:

a) To articulate the basis of this new consciousness which is in the process of formation and reflection.

b) To implement and materialize the presented ideas in reality through a formation of new infrastructures, a two-way communication and a new repository of information.

c) To appeal to everyone who accepts the principles of this declaration.

— Josif Bakštein, Eda Čufer, Marina Gržinić, Olga Kholmogorovna, IRWIN, Elena Kurljandževa, Georgy Litičevskij, Viktor Misiano, Dimitri Prigov, Konstantin Zvezdočotov.

³ See the project by Komar & Melamid in *Artforum*, May 1992.

into space, but this very space of difference, the space of the Other, and the transposing, integrating and determining of data from heterogeneous political, artistic and social environments.



NOVI KOLEKTIVIZEM: *NSK POST OFFICE*, Ljubljana, 1994

The NSK questioning of the rhetoric of space within the new Europe included the issuing of passports (the NSK State in Berlin 1993, the NSK Consulate in Umag, etc.).

The embassies represent an exploration of sensors and prostheses and of the gaze that now depends on miniature screens which are no longer a surface but enable us to enter, to be absorbed, not into a hyper-space, but into a space that is neither outside nor inside, neither saturated nor empty — into an a-modern space (Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway). In this extreme utopia, therefore, the NSK embassy signifies not merely a break with analogy but a break with the model on the basis of which we have established our certainty.



NSK DRŽAVA [NSK State], Volksbühne, Berlin, 1993

The ultimate destination of the travels of the NSK State in Time should come into existence in 1997 with the establishment of an NSK Embassy in Beijing, China.

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POVZETEK**NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST (NSK):
SKUPINE LAIBACH, IRWIN, KOZMOKINETIČNO
GLEDALIŠČE KABINET NOORDUNG – UMETNIŠKE
STRATEGIJE V DEVETDESETIH**

Avtorica predstavlja slovenski umetniški kolektiv in gibanje Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), ki ga tvorijo skupine (IRWIN, Laibach, Kozmokinetični kabinet Noordung, Novi kolektivizem). Osnovni motiv teksta je potovanje v strukturo "utopične" NSK države – države v času. V tem kontekstu avtorica pokaže, kako so najbolj ludično vizionarstvo, natančna strategija delovanja in totalno samozavedanje v osnovi koncepta NSK države, države v času.