

“The First Global State of the Universe”

A Discussion of the NSK State in Time as a Social Artwork



IRWIN, NSK Embassy Moscow, 1992

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Foreword

The home stretch of this thesis was written whilst the world slowed down due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst borders were being closed in the fight against a borderless virus, the issues discussed by this thesis' subject seemed to gain importance. The pandemic exposes the defects in our societies in a painful way, and all around the world individuals are coping with the effects. Even though the precise effects differ per country and every society, even every individual, has its own way of dealing with a crisis unknown to most of us, the impact of the pandemic is shared across the globe. The global state that is discussed in this thesis questions the concept of borders, nationality and the subsequent inequality that comes with the demarcation of the world. The concept of a transnational, border-crossing enemy suddenly relates to the topics I had researched in the light of this thesis, which I started months before the lockdown. Perhaps, the reader will see these parables like I did. At least, I hope that this thesis will be an example of how art and artists are able to cope with societal issues in a way that connects to many individuals with varying backgrounds.

I would like to thank several people for helping me in the writing process of this research paper. First of all, Linda Boersma for the professional supervision and for pointing me in the right direction when I got lost in the vast maze of the NSK. Her expertise on the (Russian) avant-garde was extremely valuable for completing this research and has given me a great basis that I will be able to use in the future. Secondly, I would like to thank Anika, Marcus, Cara, Marrit, Sandra, Nadine, Jaap and Leon, for reading, discussing and critiquing this thesis and for the overall support, especially with the multiple technical difficulties I encountered during this research.

— Megan Bruinen

23 April 2020

Abstract

In 1992, the NSK State in Time was constituted as an artistic response to the newly developing nation state of Slovenia. In 2020, the art project counts more than sixteen-thousand followers, who go by the name of ‘NSK citizens’. This extraordinary number of followers forms the motive for the research question of this thesis: *In what way does the social body of citizens of the NSK State in Time influence its original position as an art project, primarily focused on criticizing the idea of a (national) state?* This question is answered in four different chapters, in which various cultural theories are consulted to analyze the State in Time’s position as an artwork.

The first chapter elaborates on the historical context of the State in Time. The NSK State emerged in a turbulent political age, in the midst of a dissolving Yugoslavia. The initial intentions with which the artwork was developed will be clarified on the basis of this chapter. The following chapters each compare a cultural theoretical framework to elements of the NSK State in Time and its citizens, in order to define the role of these citizens in the total mechanism of the artwork. Respectively, the second chapter will argue that by mimicking a state structure, the NSK State takes part in attempting to bring art closer to life praxis. The text *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) by Peter Bürger is used as an evaluation of the State in Time in the traditional discussion on the disjunction of art and life praxis. Thereafter, the mirror concept as explained in Michel Foucault’s *Of Other Spaces* (1966) is used as an analogy to the NSK State. The mirror helps to explain why the position of the NSK State as a spiritual concept, that only occasionally materializes, grants its appeal to so many individuals. Finally, the fourth chapter uses the concept of the ‘social interstice’ (a space of social relations which suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail in the system), as coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, to argue that the citizens did not divert the NSK State from its artistic purpose. Instead, by defining the NSK State as a social interstice, the NSK citizens are observed as important part of the initial art project.

At the end of this research, it is concluded that the NSK citizens did not avert the NSK State from its initial artistic intentions. Instead, they added a new dimension to the total artwork. The NSK citizens changed the State in Time from a static artifact, criticizing their own Slovenian context, into a transnational artwork that appeals to a broad discussion on the concept of the nation-state. The NSK citizens, forming a social body, have become a significant part of the total artwork whilst they simultaneously act as co-artists of the NSK State in Time.

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Introduction

When visiting a country for the first time, one will always be confronted with unfamiliar phenomena. Cultural differences exist between different countries or regions, but also commonly between next-door neighbours. Borders artificially demarcate cultural areas, whilst there are differences to be recognized even within those marked territories. These differences commonly lead to tension and in some political conflicts, they lead to war. Slovenia is a country that arose because of a violent clash between the cultural regions of former Yugoslavia, and when I visited the country for the first time in the summer of 2019, I was confronted with a history I was previously unfamiliar with. The legacy of the still relatively recent developments of a dissolving Yugoslavia and its subsequent wars were very present in everyday Slovenian life, especially in Ljubljana.

I found a striking reflection of this legacy in the work of art-collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), which is presented in the permanent collection of the MSUM (the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana). The NSK erected a conceptual state in 1992 as an art project that dealt with contemporary issues on state formation and nationality: The NSK State in Time. The work of the NSK and its State in Time caught my eye for its specific aesthetic, which bears a strong resemblance to the imagery of totalitarian regimes like Nazi-Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin. I could read the work as politically charged, but as I lacked the familiarity with its political context, I was only able to wonder over the surface of its aesthetic power. Nevertheless, the exhibition had such an intriguing effect on me that after returning home, I started reading all I could find on the subject of the artistic discourse of the art collective, exposing myself to a new context of Eastern European art history and politics. I discovered that the art project, which was originally deeply rooted in the Slovenian political context, now included thousands of followers from all over the world. They are the 'NSK citizens' and form a transnational group of individuals that are drawn by the concept of the NSK State for miscellaneous reasons. The apparent disjunction between a Slovenian art project and the development of a transnational body of citizens intrigued me, and formed the base of this research's focus:

In what way does the social body of citizens of the NSK State in Time influence its original position as an art project, primarily focused on criticizing the idea of a (national) state?

In the following paragraph, I will provide brief contextual information about the State in Time. Thereafter, an overview of this research' structure will be provided, including the sub questions used

in order to answer the above-mentioned research question. In the last paragraph, the used methodology will be justified.

The NSK State in Time

The first years of the 1990s brought forth not one, but two states within the borders of Slovenia. After a ten-day war and a long period of increasing dissolution between the Yugoslavian republics, the Slovenian nation-state declared its independence in June 1991.¹ A year later, Ljubljana-based art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst established the NSK State in Time as a 'sovereign state'. By taking 'the state' as a framework for their art, the NSK artists questioned the state's general notions, with a specific critical focus on the then present situation in Slovenia.² As Conor McGrady (Irish artist and NSK citizen) has formulated, the NSK appropriated the state-principle as a "Duchamp-esque readymade", and placed the state phenomenon in a new context in order to expose its normally hidden structures.³ The state-principle is simulated by the NSK through the constitution of (temporary) embassies, mostly events composed of exhibitions, lectures and performances, and the creation of passports, introduced as being symbolic artefacts, only useful within the imaginative realm of the State in Time. The NSK State was erected as a concept around which the NSK would build their future artworks and actions. The State functioned mostly as a conceptual carrier for artistic projects on notions of statehood, and it did not possess physical territory. Instead, it was proclaimed to be existent 'in time' rather than in space, and their borders to be in flux according to the movement of the collective body of their members.⁴ These members were initially only the artists connected to the NSK collective.

The art project took a radical turn when the NSK started issuing passports for the State in Time in 1993. The introduction of the NSK passport, an essential token of statehood, allowed anyone regardless of nationality to apply for citizenship of the State in Time. In 2020, more than sixteen-thousand people have applied for and obtained NSK passports since the year of 1993.⁵ The NSK has therefore often referred to the State in Time project as a 'social sculpture', a concept coined by Joseph Beuys.⁶ The holders of these passports are called NSK citizens and acquiring NSK citizenship is mostly a symbolic act, which allows its holders to retain their previous 'nationality'. Because of this,

¹ IRWIN. "NSK State in Time" In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 7.

² Monroe, Alexei. *Interrogation Machine, Laibach and NSK*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 247-248.

³ McGrady, Conor. "The First NSK Citizen's congress in Berlin" In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN. (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 109.

⁴ Eda Čufer & IRWIN. "NSK State in Time" via: Jonah Westerman, "Contesting Utopias: Individual collectivity and Temporal hybridity". In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 180.

⁵ IRWIN, "NSK State in Time", 7.

⁶ Shukaitis, Stevphen. "Temporary Hegemonic Zones" In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 141.

the State in Time transformed into a transnational community, transcending the borders that hold so much importance in the traditional notion of statehood.

The conceptual State to which the NSK citizens have applied identifies itself with a totalitarian state system, an ideology that has always been present in the aesthetic of the NSK collective. The art collective has therefore been conceived as an elusive entity that is either parodying ideology or identifying with it. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that the NSK State in Time “frustrates the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it.”⁷ Žižek claims that through over-identification with the system, the “obscene superego underside of the system” will be brought to light, suspending its efficiency.⁸ This argument is adopted as a valid explanation for the NSK’s methods by many other critics, and is also referred to in texts by the art collective itself.

Historiography

Slavoj Žižek is part of the small group that has produced the majority of the literature on the State in Time and its founding groups. This group of core-writers also includes cultural theorist Alexei Monroe, curator Inke Arns, NSK co-founder Eda Čufer and members of the fine-art group IRWIN. The phenomenon of the NSK State in Time is mostly covered in fairly small essays, often combined in larger anthologies. Not much focus is reserved solely for the State in Time project in its current form, and even less is focused on the citizens as an influential element of the total art project. *Interrogation Machine* by Alexei Monroe (2005) forms the most extensive account on the NSK up to date. It discusses the State in Time as being “the most dramatic materialization and symbol of the regimes with which NSK interacts (totalitarianism, national and artistic history, spiritual and political authority, “real capitalism”, the music industry),” and its function to “extract the utopian energies of the state to provide a conceptual form of identification for individuals from diverse nationalities.”⁹ Despite its mention of the NSK citizens, Monroe also mentions that the NSK state does not support any literal “movement.”¹⁰ This, however, has changed radically after his *Interrogation Machine* was published. The community of NSK citizens began to virtually self-organize not long after the creation of the State in Time. First, they gathered only virtual through the un-official, citizen-run website NSKstate.com (2000), but later on also in physical form.¹¹ The appeal of the State in Time to the

⁷ Žižek, Slavoj. "Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" In: *NSK: From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 202-203.

⁸ Ibid., 202-203.

⁹ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 247.

¹⁰ Ibid., 264.

¹¹ Alexei Monroe. “NSK, The State which Ran Away with Itself...” In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 23-25.

diverse group of people that gathered as the NSK citizens community has made the State acquire a supposed “utopian-pragmatic position” according to Inke Arns.¹² After years of existing mostly as a virtual entity of a nation, the ‘First NSK Citizens’ Congress’ was held in Berlin in 2010. During the congress, several citizens, observers and experts with international backgrounds gathered to analyze the State in Time and to formulate future goals.¹³

According to Stevphen Shukaitis, the Citizens’ Congress has proved to be “a counterpoint in the State in Time’s maturation, since there has been a proliferation of activity and initiatives of NSK citizens ever since the event”.¹⁴ He regards the function of the congress as “a creation of a space where the virtual relations created within the State in Time are transformed in actual form as the project is taken on and run by its participants,” but mentions that the focus of the physical self-organization was put too much on finding new ways to participate in the project. The most interesting thing about the NSK State, according to Shukaitis, is “how it operates to create cracks in state imaginaries and processes of identification,” something that has been overlooked in recent literature on the State in Time.¹⁵ The focus of this thesis will supplement a part of the void pointed out by Stevphen Shukaitis. It will do so by focusing on these processes of identification through exploring reasons for the NSK State’s appeal to the diverse group of citizens and the extent to which the citizens have changed the original art project of the State in Time. Several theoretical assumptions from the field of art history, cultural criticism and philosophy will be used to investigate the appeal of the State in Time towards its citizens in the following chapters.

To understand the working methods and the consequent oeuvre of the NSK, it is important to have an overview of its relevant historical context. The first chapter will therefore answer the sub question: *What relevant (art-)historical and political processes preceded and influenced the creation of the NSK State in Time?*

In the second chapter I will discuss the concept of the ‘Retrogarde’, which is the NSK’s self-invented term for their working methods. *What guidelines does the Retrogarde method offer, and in what way did it influence the constitution of the State in Time as a politically engaged artwork?* The Retrogarde movement will be compared to the art historical notion of the Avant-Garde, as explained by Frankfurter Schule-inspired critic Peter Bürger. His book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) will be used to evaluate the position of the State in Time in the traditional discussion on the disjunction of art and life praxis.

In the third chapter, I will analyze the text *Of Other Spaces* (1966) by Michel Foucault

¹² Arns, Inke. "The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as escape and entrance vehicles" In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 91-93.

¹³ IRWIN, “NSK State in Time”, 9.

¹⁴ Shukaitis, “Temporary Hegemonic Zones”, 139.

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

to compare the NSK State in Time to the ‘mirror’ concept that is elaborated on in this text. Although the Foucauldian text dates back half a century, it still offers relevant motifs to describe contemporary phenomena. This chapter will serve to answer the question: *To what extent does the fact that the NSK State functions both as an immaterial and material entity, contribute to the State’s success in attracting citizens?* The analogy between the State in Time and Foucault’s mirror will serve as explanation for the appeal of the NSK State to its citizens. Building on the second chapter, the third chapter zooms in on the power that the State as an art project has proved to have outside the realm of the artworld.

The fourth and final chapter of this research will use the concept of the ‘social interstice’ by Nicolas Bourriaud and the Manifesto *I am looking for Field Character* by Joseph Beuys in order to discuss the influence of the social element of the citizens within the project of the State in Time. Through these concepts, it will be argued that it is possible to position the State in Time as a social interstice (a space of social relations which suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail in the system), and thus characterize the social body of citizens as a part of the art project.¹⁶

Methodology

This thesis relies upon a qualitative research approach, executed primarily through desk-research. The limited amount of field research has consisted of visiting several exhibitions in Ljubljana. The research consists of literature study as well as the analysis of visual artworks like paintings, installations and videos. The libraries of Utrecht University and BAK Utrecht have proved to possess useful collections of literature for this project. I gathered most data through the literature found in these libraries, with additional sources found via online journals.

As already mentioned, the largest body of key-sources on the topic of the Neue Slowenische Kunst, and in particular about the State in Time, have been written by a small number of authors. The authors, including cultural theorist Alexei Monroe, Curator Inke Arns, NSK co-founder Eda Čufer and fine-art group IRWIN often cross-reference each other and use similar theories and opinions to construct their research. Along with the fact that many writers of these key-sources are related to the NSK in some way, this leads to a homogenous discourse with an occasional lack of critical distance. Additionally, several anthologies of collected texts on the NSK have been published throughout the years. These anthologies contain many writings by the above-mentioned authors, but even more important is the fact that they are mostly edited by members of the NSK. The collection *NSK State in Time*, published in 2014, is edited by IRWIN (fine-art department of the NSK), and the exhibition catalogue by the MSUM, *NSK: From Kapital to Capital*, was co-edited by NSK-member Eda Čufer.

¹⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas. “Relational Aesthetics” (1998) In: *Documents in Contemporary art*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: 2006), 160.

I did use many of these key sources, for they offer the best basis for a comprehensive understanding of the practice of the NSK. Only a few texts accessible on the internet are written by authors not affiliated with any of the NSK anthologies. These are all written after 2015, the last year that an extensive publication on the NSK was published. In order to avoid reproducing the homogenous discourse, I used applicable theories that have not yet been connected to the topic.

The theories I consulted, the most prominent respectively *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by Peter Bürger (1974), *Of Other Spaces* by Michel Foucault (1966) and Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), are all quite old and classic texts. I could have chosen more modern critical theories, but I have consciously decided on these theories for several reasons. First of all, these texts all form basic accounts that are still thankfully used by modern theorists. The Foucauldian concept of the heterotopia proposed in *Of Other Spaces*, for example, still forms a relevant motif within modern architecture. Secondly, the theories were written not far from the year that the State in Time was constituted, meaning that the texts are situated in a relevant timeframe for examining the context of the NSK State. Finally, my choice for these theories is a reflection of the academic context I have been educated in during my bachelor Liberal Arts and Sciences, which influenced my range of academic references up until now. This is also the reason these sources are primarily written by West-European theorists. In addition to these theories however, a lot of Eastern European sources have been referenced in order to be able to write a balanced account on the NSK State in Time that originated in an Eastern European context but now forms a transnational concept, appealing to thousands of citizens that now call themselves 'NSK citizens'.

Chapter 1 - Historical Contexts



Image 1.1 - LAIBACH, *Become a Citizen of the First Global State of the Universe*, 1994.

'Become a Citizen of the First Global State of the Universe!' Exclaims a poster made by Slovenian music group Laibach, calling for people to apply for citizenship with the State in Time (image 1.1). Since the State in Time was created as a conceptual territory, existing not in space but 'in Time', its borders are in constant flux according to the position of its citizens. These citizens are located all over the world, hence the term 'global state'.

The NSK State in Time saw the light of day in 1992 when Slovenian art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst created it as an artistic alternative for the then-present conditions under which the Slovenian state was forming. It is therefore not entirely coincidental that the constitution of the NSK State coincided with the independence of Slovenia in 1991. It is rather assumed as a direct result of

the newly developing nation-state of Slovenia, that was influenced by the legacy of socialism and advancing capitalist forces.¹⁷

In the first place, the State in Time was a politically engaged artistic movement, in their initial form mostly focused on forming an alternative to the formation of the new nation-state of Slovenia. The constitution of the State was preceded by a turbulent time on both political and artistic levels. The most important events will be discussed in this chapter, in order to form a base for the rest of this research.

§ 1.1 – Tito’s Yugoslavia

The death of Marshal Josip Tito in the year of 1980 marked the ‘beginning of the end’ of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It triggered a political shift, for his leadership was the most important thing that held the different republics of Yugoslavia together in the 1970s. After Tito’s death, the federation started to show gradual dissolution between the different republics of Yugoslavia, reaching a climax with its complete collapse in the first years of the 1990s.¹⁸

During the Second World War, Marshal Tito had led the resistance movement against the German occupation and managed to gain back power over Yugoslavia. When the war was over, Tito turned Yugoslavia into a communist state that was to stay neutral between the Warsaw pact nations led by the Soviet Union and the NATO nations of West-Europe. Yugoslavia’s political independence from the Soviet Union, and the fact that its territory was located quite literally on the border between the East and the West, made it possible for the country to maintain diverse connections with both sides of the Iron Curtain.¹⁹ These connections caused the influence of consumerist values and the market system of the West to come together with the structures of an Eastern European communist society. According to Piotr Piotrowski in his work *In the Shadow of Yalta*, there’s a strong correlation between the coming together of these two ideological spheres and the development of the Yugoslav art scene.²⁰

Contact with the West affected both the alternative art scene and the official state-art of the Republic of Yugoslavia. The influence of Western artistic trends is reflected in the choice of Tito’s government to gradually replace the socialist-realist style, that had shaped the countries’ image in the previous decades, with a modernist approach to architecture and state-imagery. This development started around 1950, as a result of the break between Tito and Stalin and the subsequent social

¹⁷ Arns, “The Nigerian Connection”, 91.

¹⁸ Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta, Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 248.

¹⁹ Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 302-303.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

liberalization of Yugoslavia. The at first sight a-political nature of modernist art lent itself perfectly for the new image that Yugoslavia tried to create for itself, also implying that Yugoslavia could keep up with the high level of Western art.^{21 22} Tito wanted to position his Yugoslav republic with an image reflecting an ‘open, modern and contemporary’ socialist society, something that wandered off far from the truth of Tito’s Yugoslavia after the Second World War.²³

§ 1.2 - Artistic Contexts

The Yugoslavian alternative art scene after 1945, referred to as the Yugoslav ‘neo-avant-garde’ by Piotr Piotrowski, shows a few general tendencies shared over the entire country. Artists often joined forces in collectives, and study centers, art academies and university galleries formed important axes where the art scenes could revolve around.²⁴ From the year of 1960, the influence of the West caused the alternative Yugoslavian art world to slowly shift their attention from socialist theories of art towards more Western trends, specifically conceptualism.²⁵ Whilst conceptual art is often affiliated with modernism in our Western tale of the history of art, in the Yugoslav context this conceptual movement was a strong opponent of modernism. The strong tendency by the so-called ‘neo-avant-gardes’ of Yugoslavia to reject ‘modernist’ values was fueled by the fact that Tito had replaced socialist-realism with a modernist looking abstraction as the accepted style of the state.

Braco Dimitrijević (Sarajevo, 1948), nowadays classified as Bosnian artist, is an interesting example of Yugoslav conceptualism of the 1970s. Dimitrijević was concerned with questioning modernist assumptions such as the exceptional character of the artwork and the artist as ‘individual genius’. Around the end of the 1960s, he made several works where he transformed arbitrary men into ‘artists’ by solely letting them sign artworks. This strategy made the randomly chosen man Kresimir Klika an ‘artist’ after Dimitrijević made him sign a painting, made by a milk carton that a car had driven over (image 1.2).²⁶ He became best known for his still ongoing series *A Passerby Whom I Met By Chance*, which Dimitrijević introduced in the early 1970s. For these series he photographed ‘casual passers-by’ and put their photo’s up on billboards, whilst their identities were kept anonymous (image 1.3). Using ordinary people to show on those billboards, instead of the usual

²¹ Babic, Maja, “Modernism and Politics in the Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945-1965” (MA thesis, University of Washington, 2013), 76.

²² Zabel, Igor. “Art and State: From Modernism to the Retroavantgarde”, In: *Essays, no. 1* (2006), 319-325. via: Atlas of Transformation.

²³ Ibid., 319-325.

²⁴ Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 303-304.

²⁵ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 36.

²⁶ Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 308.

important political leaders, Dimitrijević simultaneously elevates and challenges the everyday mechanics of implicit cultural codes that preserve hierarchies of power through images.^{27 28}



Image 1.2 - Braco Dimitrijević, *Painting* by Kresimir Klika, 1969.



Image 1.3 - Braco Dimitrijević, *CASUAL PASSERBY I MET AT 11.09 AM*, 1971.

The Slovenian Underground

Until the mid-1970's, Zagreb and Belgrade formed the most important centers of Yugoslavian contemporary art, but from the second half of the '70s, the Slovenian Republic became more visible. The Slovenian art scene, mostly based in Ljubljana, consisted mostly of art collectives and artist-run Galerija Škuc formed a pivot in the Slovenian alternative cultural scene. The artists were preoccupied with the reassessment of Slovenian 'historical avant-gardes', like the futurists and constructivists, and used the motifs from these earlier avant-gardes in their work. The reassessment of old motifs was

²⁷ Taylor, Rachel. "Braco Dimitrijević". Tate museum website, July 2005. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/braco-dimitrijevic-1008>.

²⁸ Djuric, D., et al. *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, (MIT Press, 2003), 223.

partly a result of the influence of western postmodernist theories about recycling and repetition.²⁹ Works by the Slovenian avant-gardes around the 1980s can be characterized by the use of image-manipulation and visual repetition. These techniques were used by the Slovenian artists as useful methods to address and perverse elements of the everyday through art, increasingly adopting a critical character. Most works were multimedia projects that blurred the distinctions between artistic techniques and pop culture. Laibach, for example, have always collaborated with other artists and often established concerts that were simultaneously expositions of visual arts. Their first shows of this sort were carried out in Galerija Škuc.³⁰ The Neue Slowenische Kunst forms an exemplary pinnacle of these characteristic elements of the Slovenian underground around the start of the 1980s.

§ 1.3 - The Neue Slowenische Kunst

The Neue Slowenische Kunst originated in 1984, when music group Laibach initiated the establishment of a multidisciplinary art-collective with fine-art collective IRWIN and theatre group Gledališče Sester Scipion Nasice Theater. These founding groups started working together, whilst also maintaining several disciplinary projects of their own: Laibach for example never quit performing under its own name and nowadays still publishes concept albums, nevertheless with great analogies to the themes of the NSK works (image 1.4, 1.5).³¹ As a collective however, they joined forces to battle several urgent topics of their times, mostly focused on themes linked to nationalism, statehood, political regimes and ideology. They also addressed the (non-existent) infrastructure of the art- and music scenes in Slovenia. Most collective artworks functioned as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, like the NSK event *Krsta pod Triglavom*, in translation *Baptism under Triglav* (1986), for which the theatre, music and fine art department all contributed to put together a theatre play re-enacting the defeat of the Slovenes by the Christian Germans, which led to their submission under Austrian rule for the next 1000 years (image 1.6).

The NSK strategies mostly corresponded with the techniques of manipulation and perversion of the everyday like their artistic contemporaries, but the NSK used a unique militant strategy in which they adopted characteristics of aggressive totalitarian ideologies that had haunted Europe in the 20th century, like Nazism and Stalinism. In his essay *Why are Laibach and the NSK not fascists?* (1993), Slavoj Žižek reasons why the NSK identified with these characteristics. Embodying an ideology, he states, ““frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic

²⁹ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 39.

³⁰ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 37.

³¹ IRWIN. “NSK State in Time”, 7.

imitation, but over-identification with it – by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency”.³²

Over-identification

Over-identification with and reflection of the contemporary system in the 1980s occurred on different levels in the work of the NSK. The Retrogarde method, a self-invented working strategy by members of the Slovenian underground, served as the NSK’s guideline for addressing pressing contemporary issues. The Retrogarde is based on the assumption that history, specifically historical traumas, influence the present and will continue to do this in the future. The only way to overcome these traumas is “by returning to the initial conflicts”, as stated by IRWIN.^{33 34} This strategy of returning to initial conflicts is what Žižek calls ‘over-identification’. Using the Retrogarde as a guide, the NSK over-identified in its artworks with the political circumstances of their time, like the legacy of socialism, the newly entering capitalist ideology and the increase of nationalism.

Slovenian nationalism was strongly reflected in the works and motivations of the NSK, since the collective was created in the wake of Tito’s death and in the midst of a dissolving Yugoslavia that went hand in hand with a growing nationalism amongst the different republics.³⁵ An example of this nationalism is the use of German names for NSK founding group Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst. The use of a German name refers to the intense relationship between the Slovenian and German culture throughout history. This relationship is marked by German reign over Slovenian territory during the Austrian Habsburg Empire and the traumatic occupation during the Second World War. The German names thus hint at the existence of a common history that binds the Slovenes as a nation.³⁶ The individual names also imply additional nationalistic ideas: Laibach, the German name for Ljubljana, makes a clear statement on Slovene identity through taking the capital of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia as their denominator.³⁷ The NSK, through introducing itself as the ‘New Slovenian Art’, implies that there is such a thing as a Slovenian identity that actively produces art.³⁸ The recurring use of nationalist symbolism, like the mountain Triglav (nowadays still an important

³² Žižek, Slavoj. "Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" In: *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 202.

³³ Čufer, Eda, IRWIN. “NSK State in Time.” In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 13.

³⁴ German artist Joseph Beuys abides to a similar concept. Referring to the traumas of the Second World War, Beuys argues that it is necessary to show the wounds that we have inflicted on ourselves. Only through exposing unhealed wounds, it is possible to overcome them. Beuys argues that artists can play a part in indicating the traumas of a time and initiate a healing process, if they indeed return to these previously inflicted traumas in their practice. *Show Your Wounded Manliness*, Corrina Tomberger (2003), 3.

³⁵ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 55-56.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 134-135.

³⁸ Mohar, Miran. "Why Neue Slowenische Kunst in German?" In: *E-flux journal*, no. 57 (September 2014).

symbol for the Slovenian identity) used as a reference in the memorable NSK theatre play *Baptism under Triglav* is an example of Slovenian nationalism in their visual work (image 1.7).

Another example of over-identification with the contemporary system by the NSK is the *Organigram* (1986). The *Organigram* shows a complex web of the different elements, members, departments and associates of the NSK, and is similar to the diagrams that were used to explain the highly complex structure of the Yugoslav political system in school textbooks at that time (image 1.8). This reference to the traumatic, inhuman mass organized totalitarian state is an example of the NSK's strategy of over-identifying with certain political structures in order to spotlight them. In this case, they were referring not solely to the Yugoslavian situation but to the general way totalitarian states function.^{39 40}

A Dramatic Materialization

“The State is the most dramatic materialization and symbol of the regimes with which NSK interacts (totalitarianism, national and artistic history, spiritual and political authority, “real capitalism,” the music industry)”, as put by Alexei Monroe.⁴¹ The State in Time, in a way, embodies all the previously mentioned characteristics of the Neue Slowenische Kunst and more general notions of the Slovenian art scene in an extreme fashion. It is an extreme embodiment of political regimes, of the perversion of common structures, of self-organization and nationalism (and so on). After the NSK transformed into the State in Time, the collective still published works, nevertheless now all exclusively linked to state concepts. One of those projects was *the Passport Project* (1993), through which the NSK started issuing passports in order to enable anyone interested to join their State. The addition of acquiring citizenship took the State in Time not only to a next level of state-simulation, but also added a new artistic dimension in the form of new members. From 1993 on, everyone could become part of the NSK State and contribute to the phenomenon first solely managed by their founders. Despite this new group of members, the style of the original artists that initiated the State in Time has always stayed visible in the works produced by its citizens. This distinctive style has been created by the NSK members through practice of the Retrogarde working method, already briefly mentioned in this first chapter. The next chapter will elaborate on this working method and in what way it influenced the NSK and its State in Time.

³⁹ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 106-107.

⁴⁰ Žižek, "Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?", 202.

⁴¹ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 247.



Image 1.4 - LAIBACH, *Album cover of third studio album Opus Dei, 1987.*



Image 1.5 - LAIBACH, *vinyl sleeve of third studio album Opus Dei, 1987.*



Image 1.6: NSK, *Baptism under Triglav*, 1986.

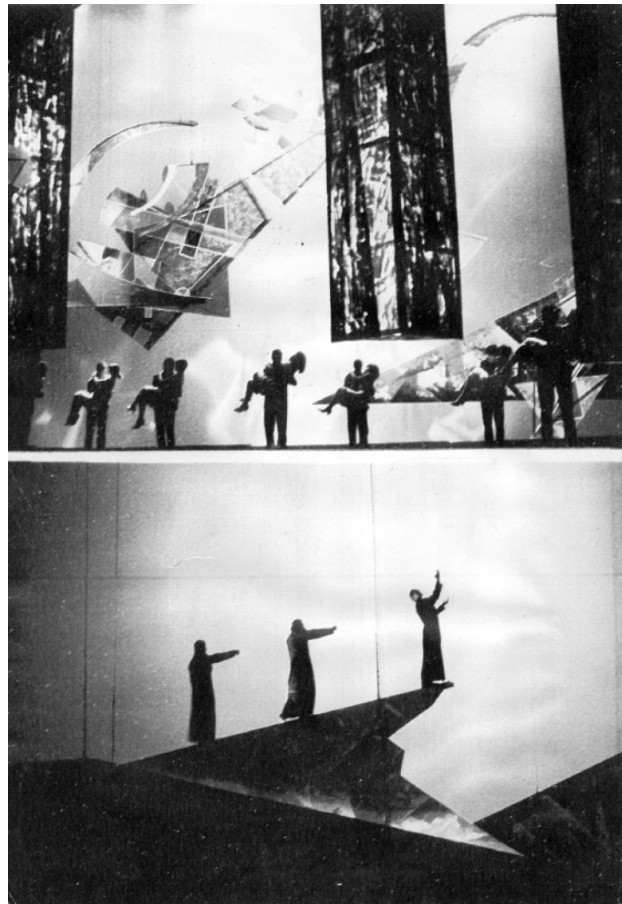


Image 1.7 - NSK, *Baptism under Triglav*, 1986.

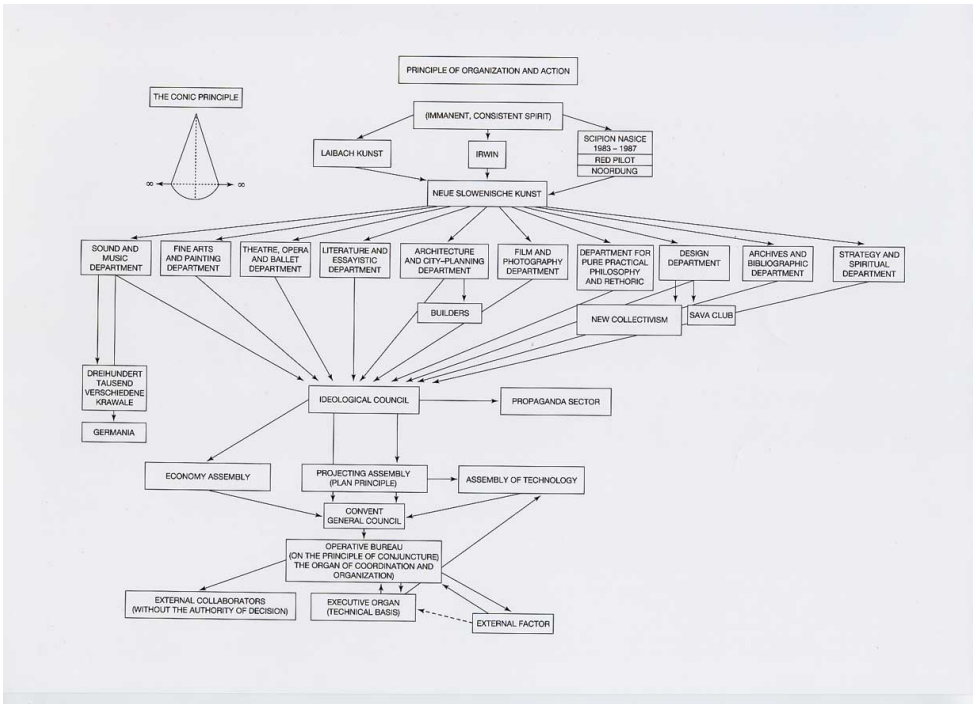


Image 1.8 - NSK, *Organigram*, 1984.

Chapter 2 – Looking Backwards



Image 2.4 - NSK & IRWIN, *Black Cross on Clocktower Gallery*, 1991.

Laibach Kunst signifies the end of an era of movement, searching, the end of stylistic and aesthetic inventions, and is: (...) a choice which will rediscover history, return to power institutions and conventions.⁴² - Laibach, 1983

This quote is an excerpt from the manifesto published by music group Laibach in 1983. The manifesto, titled *Monumental Retro-Avant-Garde*, was printed in a leaflet of the eponymous exhibition by Laibach, hosted by Ljubljana-based Galerija Škuc (Appendix I). The manifesto would form the inspiration for the concept of the Retrogarde, referred to as a ‘working method’. According to Eda Čufer, “The Retrogarde is the basic artistic procedure of the Neue

⁴² Laibach. “Monumental Retro-Avant-Garde.” Official Laibach Website. Last Accessed 13 March 2020. <http://www.laibach.org/monumental-retro-avant-garde/>

Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts.”⁴³ ⁴⁴ The Retrogarde method was eventually adopted by multiple Slovenian underground collectives, amongst which also the NSK and their State in Time.

The Retrogarde method appeals to historical and conventional phenomena, like elements from art history and political regimes, and is focused on quoting these elements in contemporary artwork. In this fashion, the Retrogarde method also validates a return to power institutions, with the argument that the only way to overcome the influence of power structures is to embody them.⁴⁵ The NSK embodied such a power structure in their project of the State in Time. The art collective accepted a structure that is ever-present in our daily lives as the framework for their practice, and in doing so developed an artistic simulation of life praxis. The NSK simulated a state through the adoption of an organizational structure (see image 1.8), currency, embassies and passports (image 2.1). The NSK passport enabled anyone, with and without artistic intentions, to contribute to and become part of the proclaimed State. In this chapter, the NSK Retrogarde working method will be compared to the art historical notion of the avant-garde, using Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974). This chapter will serve to answer the main research question by exploring how the ‘rules’ of the Retrogarde influenced the project’s position as an art project, through answering the sub question: What guidelines does the Retrogarde method offer, and in what way did it influence the constitution of the State in Time as a politically engaged artwork?

⁴³ Eda Čufer cited in Roger Conover: “Against Dictionaries: The East as She is spoken by the West” In: *East Art Map: Contemporary art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (London: Afterall, 2006), 356. Via: Music on Stage Volume III, Fiona Jane Schopf, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

⁴⁴ This premise is, next to Joseph Beuys, also adopted by German artist Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer explicitly depicted elements of the Holocaust in his work, of which *Heroic Symbols* (1969) is an example. His work is regarded as an important contribution to the question how cultural representation can reshape past human experiences. *Representation and Event*, Matthew Biro (Yale Journal of Criticism, Spring 2003), 113.

⁴⁵ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 69.

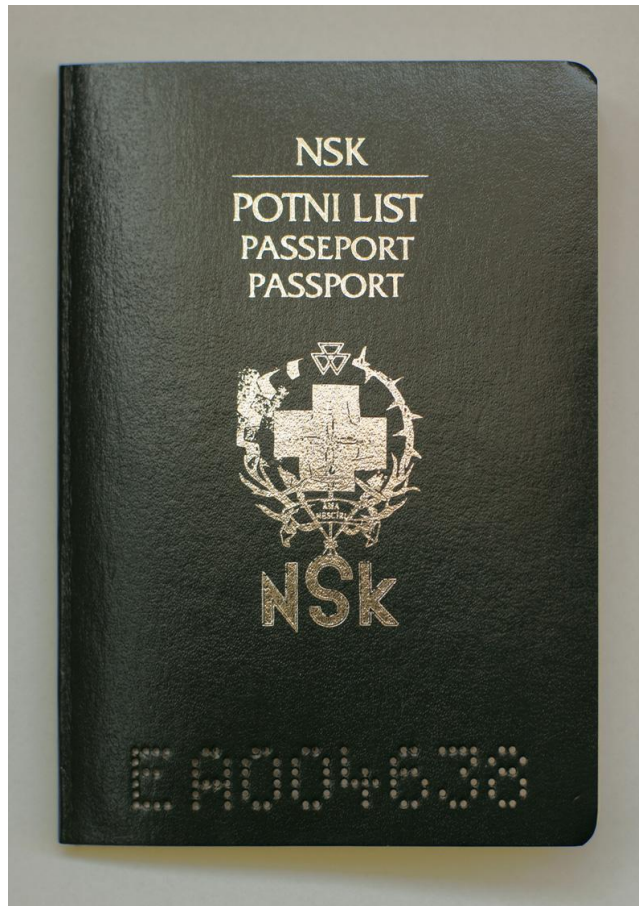


Image 2.1 - NSK, *NSK Passport*, 1993.

§ 2.1 - The Sinful Imitation of the Neo-avant-garde

In his extensive *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974), Peter Bürger argues that the concept of the avant-garde is nowadays falsely used as a general synonym for progressive modernization. The original intention of the historical avant-garde, active from 1910 to 1925, was to form a critical voice and to be politically engaged. The historical avant-garde criticized the notion of autonomy in art, as well as the institutionalized character of modernist art. The intention was the abolishment of the gap between art and life, considering the integration of art with life praxis as the ultimate goal.^{46 47} Bürger, in his account of the historical avant-garde, decries the model of bourgeois art that is produced and consumed by individuals, and advocates the fusion of the art and life praxis through a more collaborative model of art.⁴⁸

Bürger makes a clear distinction between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde movements from after 1950. The intentions of the historical avant-garde, like French Dada, Italian

⁴⁶ Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 54.

⁴⁷ Bürger, Peter. "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde." In: *New Literary History*, no. 41 (2010), 713.

⁴⁸ Bishop, Claire. *Participation* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), 46.

Futurism and Soviet Unionist Constructivism, may not have been executed as desired (he mentions the failure of the avant-garde to abolish the gap between art and life), but they were still original. They had a clear function of offering a counter-voice to the society of their times, which was marked by crisis. The neo-avant-garde, however, devoted itself to a repetition of previously explored methods, and this repetition is regarded by Bürger as the obvious of all failures in art. Through repeating methods from the original avant-garde, in for example Pop-Art, abstract expressionism and Neo-Dada, the neo-avant-garde supposedly “institutionalized the avant-garde as art” using the modernist practice of discursive institutionalism.⁴⁹ So, whilst the historical avant-garde was original in its methods, neo-avant-garde artists are imitators and their methods of imitation are signs of the institutional system of modernism. This institutional character makes their attempts for overthrowing authorities dysfunctional.⁵⁰ Next to this, Bürger argues the neo-avant-gardist’s attempt to fuse art and life to be invalid, since they do not operate in a condition of crisis. The original utopian ideal of the historical avant-gardes to fuse art and life emanated from a social context marked by crisis and revolution. Their wish to fuse art and life praxis was, according to Bürger, rightly drawn from a context in which change was needed. The context of the neo-avant-gardes, however, lacks any form of crisis which makes their imitation of this utopian ideal redundant, and sends ‘art’ back to its ivory tower.^{51 52}

Two things are important to mention as a nuance to Peter Bürger’s theory in relation to this research paper. Firstly, Bürger’s socialist background influences his conclusion on the invalidity of the neo-avant-garde movements to be analogous to the false sublation of the gap between art and life praxis by popular culture. He compares the character of the neo-avant-garde to commodity aesthetics, that falsely functions inside the system of consumerism as ‘culture’, but actually fully submits to this system to impose a particular kind of consumerist behavior on its audience.⁵³ Secondly, his account mostly discusses Western neo-avant-garde movements, that after the Second World War did not experience ‘crisis’. For the Eastern European art movements, which form the subject of research here, this situation was different for they did function in varying conditions of crisis and revolutions in the decades after the Second World War.

⁴⁹ Peter Bürger cited in: Buchloh, Benjamin. “The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” In: *October*, no. 37 (MIT Press: 1986), 42.

⁵⁰ Buchloh, “The Primary Colors”, 41-42.

⁵¹ Bürger, Peter. “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde”, 712.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 54.

§ 2.2 - The Retrogarde as Purposeful Imitator

The Retrogarde working method provides an ideological guideline that determines the system of aesthetics and the purpose of art produced by its practitioners. The NSK also refers to itself as a 'Retrogarde movement', despite the fact that the NSK is repeatedly characterized as an 'avant-garde' collective. Maria Gržinić, a founding member of the NSK, has stated that the Retrogarde movements used multiple 'classic' avant-garde methods, like "manifestos, collective appearances, public provocations and interference with politics".⁵⁴ This could be regarded as 'imitating' earlier movements.⁵⁵ If one abides to Peter Bürger's theory, the Retrogarde is therefore guilty of committing the most obvious failure of art. The role of imitation, however, is consciously at the core of the Retrogarde ideology.

The etymological meaning of Retrogarde makes it obvious that the name was chosen as a purposeful variation on the art historical use of the term 'avant-garde'. Similar to the imagery of the Retrogarde, the name of the working method hints at the appropriation of historical notions in order to reassess them in contemporary times. By using the term 'retro' instead of, or in addition to, 'avant', the signifier of forward movement, characteristic to the avant-garde, is replaced by a denominator of 'looking backwards'. Does this imply a critique on the avant-garde concept or is it just a play of words to establish the Retrogarde as a relevant movement? Both the Retrogarde movements and its recipients do not provide a clear unanimous answer to this question, resulting in many different analyses of this supposed link.

Tone Peršak, a Slovenian theatre director, describes the Retrogarde as embodying an active rejection of the avant-garde notion. Peršak, in his article "The Retrogarde as alternative Avant-Garde" (1984), reviews one of the first theatre pieces by Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (SNST), performed on the 26th of March 1984. He discusses the event, organized in a living room of a vacant residential building in Ljubljana's center, as "Showing the Retrogarde as the opposite of and resistance to the now established avant-garde and as a resistance to the prevalent forms of institutionalization and socialization of art."⁵⁶ Interesting here is that the Retrogarde is described the way Bürger defined the historical avant-garde's intentions, like the rejection of the institutionalization of art. The generation of artists that preceded those of the 1980s, Peršak recalls, was once regarded 'avant-garde', but now pervaded into the national artistic organizations as 'established artists', partaking in the artistic institution. This generation, once 'progressive' and actively rejecting any institutional authority, had

⁵⁴ Gržinić, Maria. "Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK): The Art Groups Laibach, IRWIN, and Noordung Cosmokinetical Theatre Cabinet - New Strategies in the Nineties." In: *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 198.

⁵⁵ Gržinić, "New Strategies in the Nineties", 196-198.

⁵⁶ Peršak, Tone. "The Retrogarde as Alternative Avant-Garde?" In: *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 87.

eventually surrendered to the ideology of the state and its cultural premises. As the SNST theatre piece shows, the Retrogarde groups, in reaction, operated underground as a method of evading this subordination to authority and ruling ideology. The Retrogarde therefore invented themselves a new category that perverted the concept of the avant-garde through emphasizing the value of history over that of progression. This was an attempt to prevent themselves from making the same mistake that will abolish them to the realm of conventionality. The rejection of progression by the Retrogarde has an obvious reason. The young Eastern-European population in the 1980s was a product of almost a century of this fetishized progression, which had resulted in a generation traumatized by the self-destruction of the continent. Instead of progression, the Retrogarde consciously returns to tried and tested models from the past, in order to create “the Retrogarde as art that emerges from art (but not as art for art’s sake) and as resistance to the general fetishization of progress that has driven the world into a dead end of (self-) destruction.”⁵⁷

A more nuanced account on the Retrogarde can be read in Dimitrij Rupel’s article “Retrogardism” (1986). Rupel, a Slovenian writer and politician, regards the Retrogarde as a reflection of the notion of the avant-garde.⁵⁸ The Retrogarde is a reflection, insofar as it does not attempt to form an ‘alternative strategy’, but rather concretizes a new approach to the way the avant-garde is perceived. Rupel argues that the Retrogarde calls out the ignorance of the avant-garde, that perceives ‘progression’ as the strategy to be radically different and to escape their contemporary ideological systems and authorities. The Retrogarde, according to Dimitrij Rupel, comes to terms with the fact that even the most progressive movements in a society function within the ideological system of their times. The Retrogarde redefines being ‘avant-garde’ through not running away from these systems, but rather by acknowledging their influence. The strategy of over-identification with ideology and authority that characterizes the Retrogarde is a result of this attitude. In short, the Retrogarde regards ‘being progressive’ as being conscious of one’s own times and its accessory systems.⁵⁹ This description of the Retrogarde is especially in accordance with Bürger’s explanation of the rejection of understanding ‘progress’ as the core-purpose of the avant-garde artists.

§ 2.3 - The Retrogarde Executed

On the 7th of June 1992, IRWIN initiated the NSK performance *Black Square on Red Square*. Without official permission, the NSK unfolded a 22 square-meter black square on the Red Square in Moscow, in front of the Lenin Mausoleum (image 2.2; 2.3). As Boruk Vogel’nik, founder of IRWIN,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Rupel, Dimitrij. “Retrogardism.” In: *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 142-148.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

recalls: “Without a special permit, interventions on Red Square are forbidden, and all who had violated this regulation before us had ended up in police custody. But nobody tried to stop us. When people gathered around the unfurled canvas, a man in (I believe military) uniform even cautioned people not to step on it. After approximately half an hour we folded it up and loaded it back in the van.”⁶⁰

The black square was used as a reference to the *Black Square* painting of Malevich (1915), “manifesting a confrontation between an ideological system with a system that was equal in its totality - Although explicitly artistic and not ideological.”⁶¹ In the performance, the ideological system was symbolized by the location of the performance, the Red Square, a sacred place within the Soviet ideology. The artistic system was symbolized by the black square, referencing the Totalitarian art of Suprematism. *Black Square on Red Square* is part of *Transcentrala*, *New York, Moscow, Ljubljana*, a triptych of performance-pieces, also including a black cross being painted on the roof of Clocktower Gallery in New York and a dance performed in a circle by NSK members dressed in Slovenian national costume (image 2.4; 2.5).

Black Square on Red Square was one of the first actions carried out by the NSK under the name ‘State in Time’, and occurred during their first *Embassy Project* that was held in Moscow.^{62 63} The performance piece is an excellent example of the application of the Retrogarde method in an NSK artwork. In this case, the references to ‘past phenomena’ are primarily art historic, due to the fact that fine-art department IRWIN was the initiator of the performance. Their clear appeal to art history, the retrospection to previous art movements used as foundation for their contemporary artistic projects, is a sign of an active application of the Retrogardist ideology that demands the rediscovery and reassessment of (art-)historical essence.⁶⁴ Recurring Retrogarde motifs derive from Socialist Realism and symbolism of the Third Reich, as well as from avant-garde movements like Futurism, Constructivism and Suprematism, as was manifested in the performance *Black square on Red Square*.⁶⁵

The *Black Cross* painting (1923), again by Malevich, is another recurring motif in NSK art. This cross holds a prominent position over the whole oeuvre of the NSK and its founding groups. The cross is used in the NSK logo, where it is combined with John Heartfield’s swastika (image 2.6). It

⁶⁰ Vogelnik, Borut. “Irwin on Malevich.” Tate Museum Website, 2 August 2014. <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-31-summer-2014/irwin-on-malevich>

⁶¹ Arns, Inke. “Irwin Navigator: Retroprincip 1983-2003.” In: *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983-2003*, ed. Inke Arns (September 2002), 1.

⁶² “Chronology”; “Appendix A.” in: *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, ed. Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija-MIT Press, 2015), 524; 528.

⁶³ Gržinić, “New Strategies in the Nineties”, 196-197.

⁶⁴ Misiano, Viktor. ““Emergency Ambassadors to a “State of Emergency”: The NSK Embassy and the Moscow art scene of the 90s”. In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN. (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 35.

⁶⁵ Arns, “Irwin Navigator”, 2.

also forms the basis of Laibach's logo, that is comprised by the black cross, circled by an industrial cogwheel (image 2.7), and recurs in the before-mentioned triptych by IRWIN, as a performative piece in which the cross is painted on the roof of the Clocktower Gallery in New York. Next to being associated with Suprematism, the cross also links to the crosses used by Joseph Beuys in his conceptual works and to the black crosses used on German vehicles during the Second World War (image 2.8; 2.9).⁶⁶ The ambiguous meaning of this symbol is a typical 'retro-movement', using references to both art historical and political elements from multiple time frames in twentieth century history.

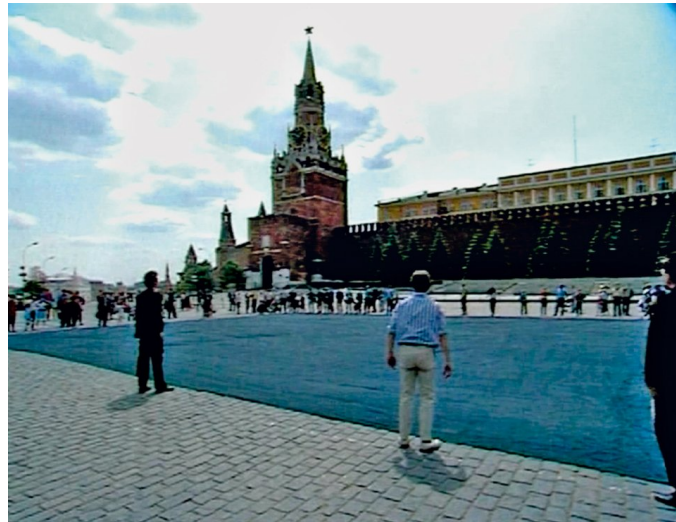


Image 2.2 - IRWIN, Film still of the performance *Black Square on Red Square*, 1992.



Image 2.3 - IRWIN, Film still of the performance *Black Square on Red Square*, 1992.

⁶⁶ Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 3-6.

§ 2.4 - The Avant-garde versus the Retrogarde

The Retrogarde actively uses imitation as a means to deal with authority and ideology, and as a method to overcome authoritarian structures. Bürger is opposed to artistic imitation, for he argues it shows the most obvious failures of art. It seems as though the Retrogarde fits into the notion of the failed concept of the neo-avant-garde as described by Peter Bürger. The Retrogarde method, however, also shows alignment with what Bürger calls the ‘original’ intention of the avant-garde.⁶⁷

One similarity is the rejection of ‘progress’ as the intention of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger points out that avant-garde is falsely used as a general synonym for ‘being progressive’, since the original intentions of the historic avant-garde focus more on the rejection of authority and used progress only as one of multiple means for turning against the status quo. The Retrogarde, especially in the reasoning by Dimitrij Rupel, also rejects the ‘naive’ avant-garde fetish of progress. This is interesting, for the Retrogarde actively rejects this fetish of progress through ‘retrospection’, resulting in the imitation and adoption of motifs from the past, something Bürger declares as failure.

Bürger’s rejection of the neo-avant-gardist methods of repetition relies on the dichotomy of the ‘original’ as genuine object versus the ‘copy’ as its fraudulent counterpart. An alternative for this dichotomy however, would be for the method of repetition to actually establish the historical meaning or authenticity of the art by the neo-avant-garde.⁶⁸ Benjamin Buchloh (1986) argues that the neo-avant-garde movements, through their repetitive methods, were establishing themselves as a unique movement within the timeline of the avant-gardes. Buchloh perceives the repetition by the neo-avant-garde as a possible indicator that the formation and conduct of modernism generates certain dynamics that have led to an accidental repetition of avant-garde methods by the neo-avant-garde. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the neo-avant-garde is insufficient. It rather means that they practice an alternative way of being sufficient, one of ‘connoisseurship’, that is aware of their history and is able to use elements from the past in a meaningful way.⁶⁹

The Retrogarde fits into the image of the neo-avant-garde that Benjamin Buchloh draws. Retrogarde movements ‘over-identify’ with ideology and authority, through the repetition of motifs from these historical movements or ideological structures like constructivism or totalitarianism. The Retrogarde consciously uses elements from the past to construct new motifs, using the by Bürger rejected act of imitation as a means to overcome the ruling ideology. In the State in Time, the Retrogarde method is activated in full force. The NSK State is an art project that embodies a state

⁶⁷ Buchloh, “The Primary Colors”, 41-42.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 45.

structure, implying that art and life praxis do not mutually exclude each other. Through this embodiment, the NSK State seems to either embody life whilst being an art movement, or make art become a life praxis. Either way, the State in Time resides somewhere in between the praxis of art and life, not making entirely sure what its final destination will be.



Image 2.5 - NSK, *NSK Panorama*, 1997.



Image 2.6 - NSK, *NSK logo*.



Image 2.7 - *Laibach Press Photo*, 1983.

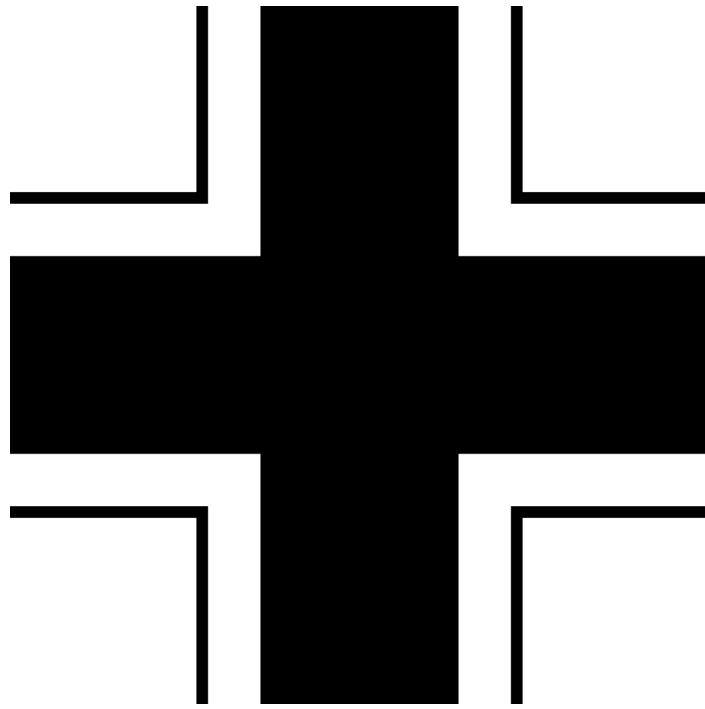


Image 2.8 - *Emblem of the Wehrmacht or 'Balkenkreuz', founded in 1935*



Image 2.9 - *(Destroyed) German tank with visible Balkenkreuz, Battle of El Guettar, 1943*

Chapter 3 - The Mirrored State



Image 3.1 - NSK, *NSK State Embassy Sarajevo*, 1995.

As discussed in chapter 2, the project of the NSK State in Time resides somewhere in between the praxis of art and life. The State in Time is an artistic critical reflection of the qualities inherent to the notion of a state. This critical reflection is executed in the NSK State through the perversion of, and over-identification with normally undiscussed elements of statehood.⁷⁰ An example of this is the organization of *NSK Embassy Moscow*: a temporary exhibition hosted in 1992, in a private apartment in Moscow (image 3.2). Through this event, the public identity of an embassy was reversed and transported to the private sphere, exposing the usual role of an embassy within the state structure by putting it in a different context. In principle, the NSK State solely occupies conceptual territory and is therefore described by its founders to be existing ‘in time’ rather than in space. The State in Time’s symbolical character seems to make the state an apparition, elusive both through its definition and because of its non-physical existence. This immaterial state, however, did materialize in several ways since its emergence in 1992, which makes the arguing of the NSK State as a pure immaterial entity questionable. The State’s materialization happens through the already mentioned temporary *NSK Embassy* projects, which are short-term social installations, composed of exhibitions, performances

⁷⁰ Monroe, Alexei. “NSK: The State that Ran Away with Itself...”, 22.

and public discussions (image 3.1).⁷¹ The State in Time also materializes through the NSK Passports. These yet again symbolic documents are a continuous manifestation of the existence of the State, and a bonding method, offering all the citizens a collective confirmation of their citizenship. According to Monroe, the State in Time's symbolic and conceptual character makes it possible for individuals to project their ideals on the outlines that are drawn by the NSK.⁷² At the same time, its physical manifestations make the NSK State claim actual space, making it a possibility for the citizen's ideals, although temporary, to become a reality. To what extent does the fact that the NSK State functions both as an immaterial and a material entity, contribute to the State's success in attracting citizens?

This chapter will argue that the State in Time functions as the 'mirror', proposed by Foucault in his text *Of Other Spaces* (1966). The mirror, explained by Foucault as the border between a non-existent (dystopia/utopia) and an existent (heterotopia) place, will be used as an analogy to concretize the elusive position of the State in Time. The mirror analogy will serve the argument that the NSK State appeals to the individuals that call themselves *NSK citizens* precisely due to its indecisive position between the purely conceptual and the physical: its position between "art" and "life". In the light of the total research objective, this chapter will come to terms with why there are so many individuals that have decided to join the art project of the NSK State.



3.2 - NSK State, *NSK Embassy Moscow Emblem*, 1992.

⁷¹ Misiano, Viktor. "Emergency Ambassadors to a 'State of Emergency'" In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 41.

⁷² Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 247-248.

§ 3.1 - The Passport as Utopian Artifact

Ever since the NSK started issuing passports in 1993, over sixteen-thousand individuals have applied for symbolic NSK citizenship. The passports are made in the same factory as the official Slovenian passports, and therefore closely resemble an official state-document. The NSK passport, though, was primarily intended as an artefact, and does not count as an official document of any kind.⁷³ Despite its initial artistic purpose, the NSK passport has been issued by individuals with a diverse range of motivations. Ever since 1993, the NSK passport has been requested by individuals with artistic, ideological or practical intentions and it has proven to function as both an ideological and a physical tool for a manifold of purposes.

In the first place, the NSK passport was mostly issued by a small group of artists from Slovenia, whose (artistic) ideas on the development of their new nation-state matched with that of the NSK State. Two years after the first passport was issued, it became apparent that not all interest in NSK passports was art related. In December 1995, at the end of the Bosnian War, a lot of passports were issued in Sarajevo. Despite the fact that the passport doesn't have an official function outside of the imaginary realm of the NSK, and the occasional embassy, the NSK passport helped several Bosnians to cross borders they would not have been able to cross with their own passports.⁷⁴ Since the first signs of its non-artistic use in 1995, other signs of its appeal outside of the art world have surfaced. In the '00s, a lot of applications suddenly started to come from Nigeria, specifically from the city of Ibedan. Up until now, the total number of NSK passports is for one-third issued in Nigeria. As a result of the exponential increase in Nigerian applications, the NSK was forced by the Slovenian authorities to post a disclaimer on the NSK website, stating that the NSK passport does not equal Slovenian citizenship. When this did not help to slow down the amount of requests, the NSK founding members decided to take action and investigate the reasons behind the applications.⁷⁵ In conversations with Nigerian passport holders, the NSK artists came across various reasons for application, ranging from individuals actually wanting to use it as a travel document to people that made sense of the passport in a different way.⁷⁶ One Nigerian NSK citizen stated the following: "I think that holding an NSK passport is a good thing. Because the State in Time could come into being at some point in the future, you know?"⁷⁷ He explained that he understood the symbolic, artificial character of the State in Time, but that this didn't stop his belief and his hope for it to someday maybe

⁷³ IRWIN. "NSK State in Time", In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 7-8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁵ Arns, "The Nigerian Connection", 91.

⁷⁶ "Public discussion following Inke Arns' presentation" In *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN. (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 97.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

become real. In reaction to this statement, Inke Arns argues that the NSK passport functions as a 'material vessel', materializing something spiritual that could become real if one believes in it.⁷⁸

The State as a concept seems to be simultaneously conceived as a utopian place that arouses hope, an imaginary space, and as a promise for the existence of an actual place. Its identification with totalitarian regimes, however, seems rather dystopian. The NSK passport, next to being an artistic object, seems to take on the role of the physical promise of a possibility that this imaginary place exists, a place that one can visit, if not now then perhaps in the future. In some cases, carrying a passport of the symbolic State has functioned as a practical tool for overcoming the limitations of an official passport. The NSK State as a whole functions as a conceptual and spiritual entity as well as a material and practical one. This description of the State as both existing and not existing is an elusive reasoning, one that seems more pretentious than actually carrying meaning. The mirror concept, as reasoned by Michel Foucault (1966) will therefore be used as an analogy for the State in Time in order to explain the importance of its position on the brink of existence.

§ 3.2 - Foucault's Mirror

The term heterotopia, its etymological template similar to that of 'utopia', signifies a place that is 'different' or 'other'. A heterotopia is a real, existing place that is formed within a society as some kind of 'counter space'. Foucault poses this against that of utopias, signified in his text as non-existent places that represent society in a perfected form and therefore have a general relation of inverted analogy with the real space of society. In some way, Foucault argues, a heterotopia is an effectively enacted utopia, in which the real sides of a culture are represented, contested and inverted and where the behavior of individuals deviates from what would be the expected norm in society outside of the heterotopia.⁷⁹ Foucault mentions cemeteries, boarding schools and festivals as examples of heterotopias. Heterotopias are worlds *within* other worlds, influenced by and in constant conversation with the overarching spaces and worlds they exist in, but fundamentally different from the outside worlds.⁸⁰ Can the State in Time then be regarded a heterotopia?

At first glance, the State in Time can indeed be linked to a lot of the 'principles of heterotopia' as posed by Foucault. Every culture constitutes heterotopias, and Foucault argues that heterotopias are constituted in various forms, depending on the historical traits of their time.⁸¹ The NSK State, as

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Despite the fact that Foucault fails to mention this in this text, the 'effectively enacted utopia' can also function as a dystopia, depending on the context and perception of the specific counter space. Foucault uses the term 'utopia' here as a collective name for non-existent spaces where deviant structures of the existing order are imagined.

⁸⁰ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." In: *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984), 3-4.

⁸¹ Ibid.

a concept, was constituted as a result of both political and historical circumstances in Slovenia in 1992. It also was a result of missing platforms and infrastructure for the Slovenian art world. The fundamental change that the independence of Slovenia caused in the history of the country, induced the heterotopia of the State in Time to be effective because it was relevant in its proposition of alternatives to the, at that time, newly created nation state of Slovenia. This corresponds to the argument that “heterotopias only start to function in full force when men arrive at a significant break in time.”⁸²

An important element of a heterotopia is its function in relation to the space that it exists in. Through the creation of a space of illusion, a heterotopia exposes the real space it mimics as even more illusory.⁸³ The State in Time, in that regard, exposes the notion of a state and shows its structures as being merely constructed by mankind. The exposure of its construction also implies the state’s instability, since what is constructed can also be deconstructed.

The wringing element throughout this whole comparison of heterotopias with the State in Time, is that the NSK State does not actually exist as a constant entity with a physical territory. The State in Time only knows temporary existence through its Embassies (temporal heterotopias), and a more symbolic physical existence through their citizens, that are scattered all around the world. The concept of the mirror, therefore, may be the most accurate analogy to the State in Time. The ‘mirror’ is said by Foucault as representing “the joint experience between the concepts of utopia and heterotopia.”⁸⁴ It is a utopia in being a placeless place that literally reflects a utopian vision in showing a reflection in the non-existent space of the mirror (where the reflected body is not actually present). It is, meanwhile, also an actual existing object which exerts a counteraction of the actual, realistic position the reflective has in the ‘real’ place, and thus also a heterotopia. Just like a mirror, the State in Time is both a merely symbolic concept (the reflection), of which apparitions are reflected in several physical manifestations (the mirror). The NSK State is an immaterial phenomenon made up as a tool for conducting ideological visions but takes on a physical form in its volatile happenings like the NSK Embassies and a somewhat permanent one through the existence of citizens.

§ 3.3 - The NSK Embassy as Temporary Heterotopia

By describing the State in Time as a Foucauldian mirror, it is implied that the State forms an existing place as well as a conceptual, imaginative space. The non-existent character of the State in Time is

⁸² Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 6.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

supplemented by its material manifestations, that function as vessels for preserving the confirmation of the State's actual existence.

One of the material manifestations are the NSK Embassies, a series of temporary social events, often including expositions, performances, discussions and citizen-meetings (Image 3.3; 3.4). The NSK Embassies have been executed in different ways, resulting in an NSK Embassy being installed in a private apartment (Moscow, 1992), theatres (Berlin, 1993) and as an Electronic Embassy (Tokyo, 1995).⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ The first NSK Embassy was set up in Moscow (1992), and formed the first official NSK State in Time event. In collaboration with the Apartment-Art movement, the NSK Embassy Moscow was conceptualized as a social gathering consisting of lectures, an exhibition and several performances.⁸⁷ The NSK Embassies are accessible to all carrying an NSK passport, and function as participatory events that enable citizens to physically enter a 'satellite' manifestation of the specter that is the State in Time. Following Foucault's *Of Other Spaces*, the NSK Embassy functions as a temporary heterotopia, herewith reconstituting the physical existence of the State in Time and keeping the promise of an actual existing State alive in the minds of its citizens. As described in paragraph one, the NSK State attracts individuals with many different motivations. The reasons for individuals to join the State in Time are not exclusively artistically driven, but also include ideological and practical motivations. What binds all these different motivations together?

The State in Time often functions as a virtual imaginary space, which is being reminded of by occasional real spatial manifestations like NSK Embassies or passports. The NSK State therefore forms an analogy to the Foucauldian mirror concept, which explains the mirror as being a real spatial object reflecting a virtual world. This mechanism, the virtual being manifested through physical existing artifacts, can be claimed to be one of the reasons for the NSK State to be appealing to a diverse group of people. Whatever motivates an individual to apply for NSK citizenship, binding is the fact that their ideals can find a base in this artistic project and the possibility of these ideals to materialize. This applies to artistic intentions, for which the NSK State offers a framework for a collaborative practice on discussing statehood, as for more ideological and practical reasons, such as the (illegal) use of the NSK passport to travel, or to symbolically overcome limitations of a citizen's official nationality. Having established the reason why the NSK State has gathered a large group of citizens, the next chapter will investigate if this body of citizens have changed the initial artistic State through actively pulling the State in Time out of the mirror and into actual existence.

⁸⁵ "Chronology;" "Appendix A.," 524; 528.

⁸⁶ Gržinić, "New Strategies in the Nineties", 196-197.

⁸⁷ IRWIN. "NSK Embassy Moscow." Official IRWIN website, last accessed 20 March 2020. <http://irwin-nsk.org/works-and-projects/nsk-embassy-moscow/>



3.3 - *The interior of the apartment that formed the stage of the NSK Embassy Moscow, during a lecture, 1992.*



3.4 - *The interior of the apartment that formed the stage of the NSK Embassy Moscow, during a lecture, 1992.*

Chapter 4 - The State in Time as a Social Project

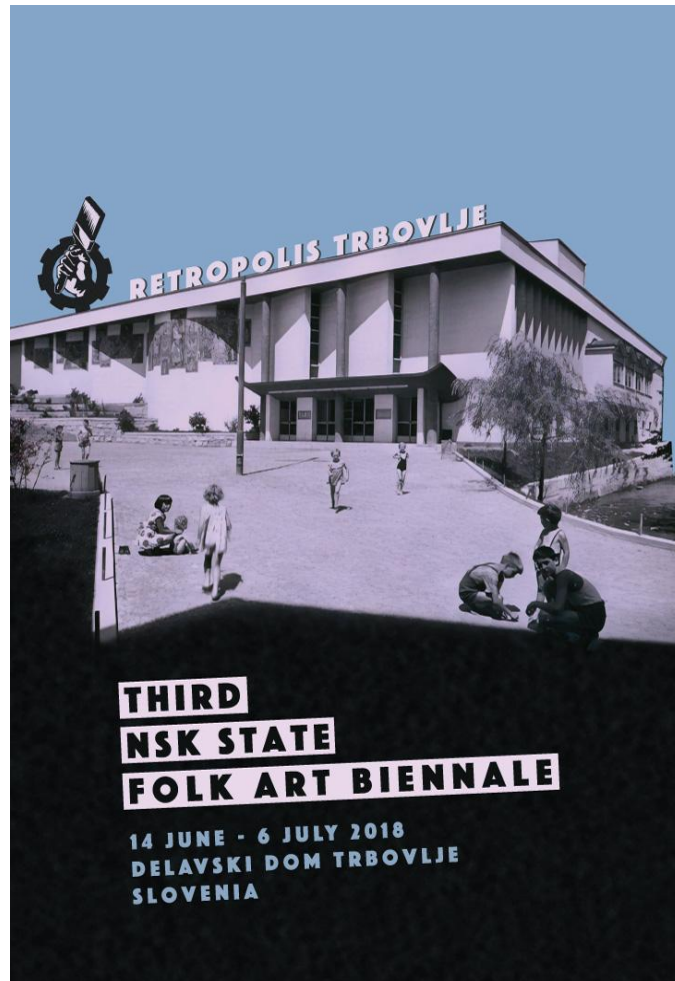


Image 4.1 - *Third NSK State Folk Art Biennale Program of Events*, 2018.

Only a conception of art functioning to [the degree that every living person is regarded as a creator of the social organism] can turn into a politically productive force⁸⁸ - Joseph Beuys, *I Am Searching for Field Character* (1973)

As described in the previous chapter, the NSK State in Time balances on the verge of existence, fluctuating between physical and virtual manifestations. The Foucauldian ‘mirror’, positioned between an actual existing counter-space (a heterotopia) and an imaginative space (dystopia/utopia), therefore forms a useful analogy to the NSK State.⁸⁹ This analogy can be used to ascertain the motivation for individuals to connect to the concept of the State in Time but omits the eventual role of the body of citizens in the total mechanism of the NSK State. Initially, the State in Time was created and run by a group of Slovenian artists, that treated the State as an art project. After starting

⁸⁸ Beuys, Joseph. “I Am Searching for Field Character.” (1973) In: *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (2016), 125.

⁸⁹ Foucault, Michel. “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias.” In: *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984), 3-4.

The Passport Project (1993) however, the art project was joined by a large group of individuals that did not necessarily share an artistic motivation for joining the State. Either way, the NSK enabled people to join the artwork by performing the simple act of ‘buying’ a passport online, creating a low threshold for individuals to become active participants of an artwork. The body of citizens has become increasingly autonomous since 1993, and often functions independently from their original founders, hosting exhibitions of NSK-inspired artworks made by citizens (*Volk Art Exhibitions*; image 4.1), for example. The citizens have become, without doubt, a significant part of the State in Time’s total character. In this chapter, the State in Time will be defined as a ‘social interstice’, as coined by Bourriaud, in order to argue that the NSK citizens form a part of the initial artistic concept of the NSK State and did not divert it from its initial artistic intention. The answer to the sub question of this final chapter will serve to add the missing piece to the final answer of this thesis’ research objective: To what extent did the role of the added NSK citizens change the original position of the State in Time as an artwork?

§ 4.1 - The ‘Social Interstice’

Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term ‘social interstice’ in 1998, as a derivative of Karl Marx’s definition of the ‘interstice’. This concept was used by Marx to define trading communities that bypassed the regular capitalist system, like trading performed through barter. Nicolas Bourriaud’s social interstice describes the ability of art to form “free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the ‘zones of communication’ that are forced upon us.”⁹⁰ This definition shows a clear comparison to the concept of a heterotopia as explained by Foucault, but Bourriaud is specifically focused on art and art exhibitions. Bourriaud describes social interstices as artworks that provoke and manage individual or collective moments of sociability.⁹¹

The previously mentioned *Casual Passer-by* series by Braco Dimitrijevic serves as an example of such an artistically invoked moment of sociability, as well as the event *Snow Dancing* (1995; image 4.2) by Phillipe Parreno. *Snow Dancing* consisted of a party, held in the Consortium in Dijon, after which the museum visitors were confronted with a display of the rooms as they were left by the attendees of the party. With this work, Parreno attempted to expose the hours of time that were spent at the party by visitors.^{92 93} A more intimate example of an artwork as social interstice is the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁹¹ Ibid., 162.

⁹² Ibid., 164.

⁹³ Blom, Ina. “On Snow Dancing.” E-flux architecture, (October 2016). <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/66881/on-snow-dancing/>

work *Les Dormeurs (The Sleepers)* (1979) by French artist Sophie Calle (image 4.3). *Les Dormeurs* shows the ability for an artwork to create a particular domain of exchanges that strongly deviates from the norms of society. In *Les Dormeurs*, Sophie Calle invited strangers and friends to come and spend 8 hours of sleep in her bed. Calle observed her sleeping visitors and took pictures of them, serving them breakfast or dinner after they'd woken up.⁹⁴ Although both of these examples did eventually produce some kind of physical reference, both in the form of exhibitions, the main artworks remain the created moments of sociability, in which deviating connections were made between the beholder, the artist and the concept of the particular space: For Calle the intimate sphere of her own bedroom, for Parreno the sacred space of the Museum.

In the previous chapter, the NSK was described as existing on the verge between the physical and the spiritual: a position that makes it difficult to know if the NSK State can be regarded as an artwork or rather a social, ideological movement. *The State in Time*, however, perfectly fits in the series of above-mentioned examples. The NSK State aligns with Bourriaud's definition of a social interstice precisely because of its social element that is the community of citizens. Ever since the start of the NSK State project, its initiators have conducted moments of sociability. The *NSK Embassy Moscow* (1992) is a prime example of this, but the *Passport Project* (1993) formed the official start of the large community that the NSK State would eventually produce. The common artefact of the passport and the denominator of being an 'NSK citizen' has united many people from different backgrounds and with differing motivations, eventually leading to multiple forms of self-organization, always inspired by the NSK ideology and aesthetic. *The State in Time's* body of citizens has therefore rather reaffirmed the NSK State as an artwork than averting it from its artistic purpose.



Image 4.2 - Phillipe Parreno, *Snow Dancing*, 1995.

⁹⁴ Calle, Sophie. "Les Dormeurs" In: *M'as-tu vue* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2003), 145.

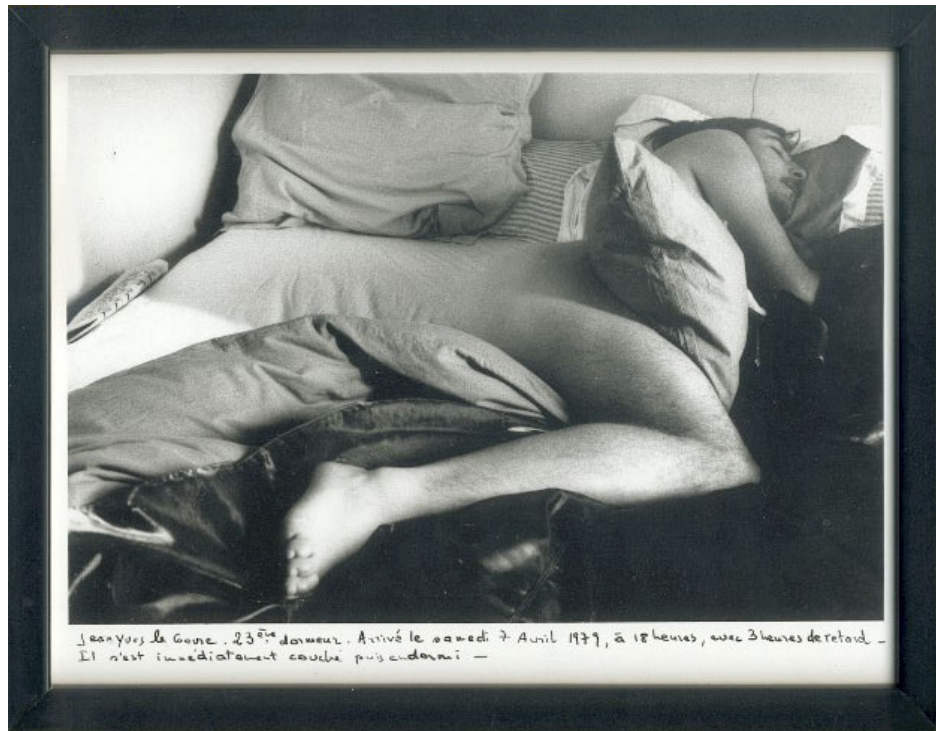


Image 4.3 - Sophie Calle, *Les Dormeurs*, 1979.

§ 4.2 - Folk Art

From the moment that individuals were enabled to join the NSK State, they started reacting to the ideological and aesthetic realm the NSK had invited them to. The first acts of self-organization by NSK citizens happened online, kicked off by the unofficial NSK State website *NSKState.com* that was brought to life by Athens-based citizen Haris Hararis. The website initially provided information on NSK events, but gradually became the main platform for communication amongst citizens. Christian Matzke, one of the most active members of the website, later started the online NSK archive *Retrogarde Reading Room* (retrogardereadingroom.com), collecting texts, media and other sources on the Neue Slowenische Kunst and their projects.⁹⁵

The first physical manifestation of self-organizing citizens took place in Reykjavik, where the *NSK Embassy Reykjavik* was held without any NSK State ‘officials’ present. The Embassy showed several unauthorized artefacts that were inspired by NSK art, like an NSK Embassy shield in Icelandic and a variation on the *NSK Garda* series (image 4.4).⁹⁶ These artefacts are an example of what Alexei

⁹⁵ Monroe, “NSK: The State that Ran Away with Itself...”, 23.

⁹⁶ The *NSK Garda Series* originally consists of photographs from members of national armies posing in front of the NSK Flag and wearing black cross bands on their uniforms.

Monroe has proclaimed as “NSK Folk Art:” unauthorized NSK-inspired artefacts made by citizens of the State in Time.⁹⁷

In 2010, the first NSK Citizens’ Congress was held in Berlin, during which NSK founding members⁹⁸, active citizens and invited experts reflected on the position of the NSK State in relation to its citizens. Although the congress lacked radical re-conceptualization of the State and mostly reaffirmed the existing values of the State’s concept, it did fuel the citizens’ initiative.⁹⁹ After the Congress, a proliferation of events held by NSK citizens occurred, both online and physically. The first NSK Folk Art Biennale was held in Leipzig (2014), followed by a second in Burren College of Art, Ireland (2016) and a third in the mining town of Trbovlje, Slovenia (2018). The Folk Art Biennales feature works made by NSK citizens who appropriate and reprocess the aesthetic and iconography used by the NSK, automatically abiding to the Retrogarde principles to which the NSK aesthetic was devoted (Image 4.5).¹⁰⁰ Another example of a citizens’ initiative is the *NSK State Dacha* (2015), an annual temporary sovereign zone in the central New Mexican Desert where NSK-inspired expositions and performances are carried out by citizens, as well as the *NSK State Art: New York, The Impossible Return* (2017), an exhibition of Folk Art also containing works by famous citizen Marina Abramović.^{101 102}

⁹⁷ Monroe, “NSK: The State that Ran Away with Itself...”, 24.

⁹⁸ After the founding of the NSK State in Time, the NSK dissolved into its original core groups IRWIN, Laibach and Scipion Nasice Theatre, New Collectivism and The Department of Applied Philosophy. The groups started to focus again on their individual projects, although they did temporarily reunite during NSK State events.

⁹⁹ Mcgrady, Conor. “The ‘First NSK Citizens’ Congress’ in Berlin: A Summary.” In: *State in Time*, ed. IRWIN. (Ljubljana: Minor Compositions, 2014), 109.

¹⁰⁰ NSK State Folk Art Biennale. “2nd NSK State Folk Art Biennale - Call for Artists.” NSK State website. January 2011. <https://times.nskstate.com/2nd-nsk-state-folk-art-biennale-1916-2016/>

¹⁰¹ “Third International NSK State Dacha” NSK State Website. December 2015. <http://times.nskstate.com/third-international-nsk-state-dacha/>

¹⁰² “NSK State Art: New York, The Impossible Return.” NSK State Website. January 2017. <http://times.nskstate.com/nsk-state-art-new-york-the-impossible-return/#more-1842>



Image 4.4 - *The NSK Guard of Iceland, 2007.*

§ 4.3 - The Social Sculpture

It has already been mentioned that the State in Time aligns to Bourriaud's concept of the social interstice. In this light, the addition of NSK citizens rather reinforced the artistic intentions of the NSK State, instead of diverting it from its original artistic position. The individual citizens, though, do not all share artistic intentions for joining the project, but see an NSK passport rather as a practical tool, or a conductor of an ideology. This could be a reason for the NSK State project to lose its artistic form, but since the community that came forth out of the State in Time arose according to the premises laid out by the artists that started the NSK State, it did not. The addition of citizens, whether they would artistically contribute to the project or not, was a decision made in the creation of the NSK State and thus abides to its original artistic intentions: they form a part of the artwork. Because of this, founding members of the NSK have described the State in Time as a 'social sculpture', a term coined by Beuys.¹⁰³ The German artist described the social sculpture as a "most modern art discipline" that requires every living person to become, or to be regarded as, a creator, a sculptor or an architect of the total social organism of society. According to Beuys, the only way for art to become an actual politically productive force is when every living being contributes and has affinity to this

¹⁰³ Shukaitis, "Temporary Hegemonic Zones", 139.

social organism as a work of art.^{104 105} The State in Time's citizens do indeed align with the idea that every living being, in this case every NSK citizen, actively chooses to become a part of the project and is a determinative force in the direction the social body flows. The NSK citizens as social sculpture thus form an artwork in themselves and to some extent even a 'self-sculpting sculpture', since their autonomous actions also have a direct effect on their own sculptural state.

So, to what extent did the NSK citizens change the original position of the State in Time as an artwork? The NSK citizens definitely form some kind of social movement but are nevertheless deeply rooted in the initial artistic intentions with which the NSK State was constituted in the first place. The NSK citizens hold on to the framework the State has offered them, including the working method of the Retrogarde and its associated aesthetics. Because of the NSK State being both an artistic platform and the creator of a social space, the State in Time can be regarded as a social interstice, and thus still an artwork. The addition of the NSK citizens did not divert the State from its artistic concept but transformed the State in Time into a social sculpture that autonomously guides the NSK State towards its next destination.



Image 4.5 - Christian Chrobok, *Suprematistische Ikone*, 1995, example of NSK Folk Art.

¹⁰⁴ The discipline of the Social Sculpture would also serve as the fulfillment of the participatory ideals of Fluxus and Happenings, according to Joseph Beuys. *I Am Searching for Field Character*, Joseph Beuys, 125.

¹⁰⁵ Beuys, *I Am Searching for Field Character*, 125.

Conclusion

“In what way does the social body of citizens of the NSK State in Time influence its original position as an art project, primarily focused on criticizing the idea of a (national) state?” In this thesis, I have argued that the social body of NSK citizens did not change the position of the NSK State in Time as an art project. The addition of more than sixteen thousand citizens transformed the originally conceptual artwork of the State into a space of sociability, enabling citizens from all over the world to engage with the Slovenia-bred concept of the State in Time. The body of citizens has become the main feature of the artwork and has simultaneously become the co-director of the NSK State in Time’s movements: The social sculpture is sculpting itself.

The biggest change that the NSK State in Time went through in its thirty years of existence, is the transformation from being a framework for art projects carried out by a few members of the Slovenian underground into a social body of citizens located all around the globe. This change transformed the State in Time from being focused on criticizing the Slovenian state into being used as an approach to the reassessment of the general concept of nation states, which proves to be a transnationally relevant topic. This relevance has become clear through the appeal of the NSK State in Time to the large group of international individuals. This appeal of the NSK State to its citizens derived from the State’s position between physical and spiritual existence. The NSK State in Time functions as a Foucauldian mirror: reflecting an ideal possibility of the re-imagination of a nation state through temporary physical manifestations, such as the NSK embassies. In this way, individuals have been able to project their ideals for the notion of statehood within their own abilities, without any grave or official consequences. This also caused individuals with diverse motivations to join the State. Despite the fact that the NSK State founders did not expect the body of citizens to become as large as it did, the addition of citizens in itself does align with the founders’ original intention. This artistic intention was to mimic a real-life state in order to effectively criticize it and to escape its influence. This strategy derived out of the Retrogarde working method, that assumes that only by embodying a power structure, it is possible to overcome its influence.

The citizens have, to a certain extent, succeeded in pulling the concept of the NSK State out of the analogous mirror by actively performing as its continuous physical manifestation of the State in Time. The existence between the imaginary and the actual has granted the NSK its appeal, but also makes its concept hard to grasp. Bourriaud’s concept of the social interstice helps to determine the NSK State in Time as an artwork, nevertheless by placing it in a new category. Through defining the NSK State as a social interstice, the social body of citizens and the ability of the State’s concept to create moments of sociability are regarded as the artwork. The NSK State in Time seems to share the avant-gardist desire to abolish the gap between art and life, also referred to by Joseph

Beuys as the ultimate goal of Fluxus and Happenings, by evoking a level of participation in which the role of the spectator is likewise the role of the artist. Despite the fact that the citizens added a social aspect to the previously mostly politically engaged artwork of the NSK State, they did not avert it from its initial artistic concept.

The amount of theories used for this research made it hard to immerse completely into every single theory. Instead, just using one of the theories of Bürger, Foucault or Bourriaud might have functioned as a solid research objective on its own, something I, in retrospect, should have decided upon. Nevertheless, thanks to the use of these different theories, this research offered several new connections between the State in Time and cultural theories, that add to the existing discourse on the art project.

In this research, I have chosen to mostly focus on the role of the NSK citizens in connection to the initial artwork of the State in Time. Due to this focus, I was not able to link the artwork to more contemporary issues outside of the NSK's realm. The State can be linked, for example, to internet-culture and the way a virtual concept can evoke a community without needing a physical realm. At the same time, the NSK State has affinity with the ever-present discussion about nationality and borders, in recent years mostly triggered by the refugee 'crisis'. For further research, linking this Slovenian concept of the NSK State to more international and contemporary issues could form an innovative way of investigating what the State's concept means in the 2020s.

Appendix A

Appendix I - MONUMENTAL RETRO-AVANT-GARDE:

LAIBACH KUNST signifies the end of an era of movement, searching, the end of stylistic and aesthetic inventions, and is:

- a more mature, critical evaluation of art,
- a choice which will rediscover history, return power to institutions and conventions,
- a remodeling of history as a successful method of violence/oppression of new artistic practices,
- the application of force to the point of complete control over values,
- the depersonalization of authors,
- self-reproduction,
- the consequence of ideological dictate (*Gleichschaltung*),
- security for the aesthetic market (*Warenästhetik*);

LAIBACH KUNST conserves lasting values.

Source: Exhibition leaflet „Monumental Retro-Avant-Garde“– Ausstellung Laibach Kunst, Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, April 21, 1983.

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