

Irwin Navigator: Retroprincip 1983–2003

Inke Arns

On June 6, 1992, after having been initiated by the Slovenian group Irwin (NSK) and the American film director Michael Benson, Russian and ex-Yugoslavian artists and theorists performed an action in Moscow in the context of the *NSK Embassy Moscow*.¹ On Red Square, before the Kremlin, they spread out a square of black fabric 73 x 73 feet in size (*Black Square on Red Square*). Apart from some video footage and a few photographs, nothing more has remained of this action – neither a concept nor, as with the Russian group Collective Actions, any systematic reports by participants. There is only a casual mention of the action in the essays by Michael Benson and Natal'ja Abalakova documented in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, which between 60 and 70 people participated in. Uninvolved observers on Red Square became transformed into actors after spontaneously helping the approximately 25 participants smoothen out the fabric: “The Black Square, at first rolled up like a funeral shroud for rapid transportation from the bus, is opened by innumerable hands with a twisting, clockwise motion. Spread out in the heart of Red Square, it functions as Malevich first designed it to: inscrutable, radiative, possessing an indefinable power. Hundreds of people, gathering at its perimeter, define the Suprematist archetype. As cameraman Ubald Trnkoczy observes, they look ‘like a swarm of ants around a giant sugar cube.’”²

The goal of spreading out the *Black Square* in the center of (ideological) power was the confrontation of an ideological system with a system that was equal in its totality – although explicitly artistic and not ideological. This becomes clear in the action's title, which creates a parallel between “Black Square” and “Red Square” that is only possible in English. As various sources reported, this confrontation on Red Square, with its long history of state burials and military parades, was a deeply moving experience for all those participating. Contrary to the assumption that the militia would immediately intervene and terminate the action, the militiamen present on Red Square kept to the background: “Apt-Art curator Elena Kurlandzeva has tears in her eyes. She points to a militia member. ‘Go talk to him,’ she says. ‘Finally I can believe that things have really changed.’ The uniformed officer is indistinguishable from the legionaries who once cordoned off the Western embassies of Moscow. ‘It's a black square, it's a painting,’ he explains. ‘I don't understand this work – but I don't see anything wrong with it.’ Asked about the Balkans, he looks grim. ‘My wife and I worry about Yugoslavia,’ he says, slowly. ‘We watch it on television every night. Women and children are dying there... Thank God nothing like that is happening here.’”³

When the group *Rose Irwin Sélavy* was founded in 1983, its members Dušan Mandič, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, and Borut Vogelnik were between 22 and 29 years old. They came from the punk and graffiti scene in Ljubljana.⁴ The group's name – an obvi-

¹ The NSK Embassy was a part of the international *Apt-Art* project, which was organized and carried out in 1991–92 by Viktor Misiano, Lena Kurlandzeva, and Konstantin Zvezdočetov in Moscow.

² Michael Benson: *The Future is Now*, in: Eda Čufer (ed.): *NSK Embassy Moscow. How the East Sees the East*. Koper, undated [1992/93], pp. 80–88, here p. 85.

³ Benson, undated [1992/1993], p. 86. Because the militia did not terminate the action, the participants packed the square of cloth up again after twenty minutes and left on a bus.

⁴ Cf. Aleš Erjavec/Marina Gržinič: *Ljubljana, Ljubljana. The Eighties in Slovene Art and Culture*, Ljubljana 1991, as well as 75'85. *Do roba in naprej. Slovenska umetnost 1975-85*, cat. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana 2003.

ous reference to Marcel Duchamp⁵ and whose typical written form stemmed, according to Irwin, from a Cincinnati clockmaker of the same name – was soon shortened to *R Irwin S* and finally, in 1984, following the founding of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), to *Irwin*. The first project the group realized at the beginning of 1984 and still under the name R Irwin S was called *Back to the USA* and consisted of a complete reconstruction (some would say a copy) of a group show of American artists by the same title that was touring through Western Europe at the time. Although this project didn't yet possess the formal language that would become typical for Irwin only a short time later, it anticipated – and this is what makes this project so incredibly important – the radical copying strategy so central for the group, practically in a single coup.

Since then, the painters' collective Irwin looks back over a 20-year oeuvre.⁶ Together with the music group Laibach or Laibach Kunst (*1980), the Theater of the Sisters of Scipio Nasica (*1983, today: Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung), and the design department New Collectivism (NK), it forms one of the main groups of the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK),⁷ founded in 1984.

Like the other groups, Irwin – as the fine arts department of NSK – has formed an allegiance to the so-called “retro principle.” This retro principle is “not a style or art trend, but rather a conceptual principle, a particular way to behave and act”⁸ that has sometimes also been termed a “working method.”⁹ It refers to a paradoxical movement forward into the future that takes place exclusively in reference to the past. In concrete terms, this means that the visual language the painters' collective developed throughout the 1980s – in addition to having adopted many of Laibach Kunst's image montages – consists exclusively of quotes from Western and European art of the 19th and 20th century. Irwin used motifs of Socialist Realism and the art of the Third Reich, motifs from the art of various European avant-garde movements, explicitly those that were politically committed (such as Italian Futurism and Soviet Russian Constructivism), as well as motifs from Slovenian art of the 19th century. Along with religious quotes, Irwin adopts Laibach Kunst's usage of the eagle, deer, Sower, and the Black Cross of the Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich as leitmotifs. The group's oil paintings, made in a traditional technique and contained in heavy frames, unites all these quotes from a variety of sources into complex and many-layered montages.

On the exhibition

Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003 marks the 20-year existence of the group Irwin; at the same time, it's the group's first large solo exhibition in Berlin, 15 years after their debut exhibition in Germany at the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf in early 1989. Through a combination of projects from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and supplemented by a film and video program on Irwin and Neue Slowenische Kunst,¹⁰ the exhibition *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003* unites

⁵ Marcel Duchamp used “Rose Sélavy” (“Rose – c'est la vie”) from 1920 on as one of his feminine pseudonyms.

⁶ More on Irwin cf. in this cat.: Inke Arns: “Irwin (NSK) 1983-2002: From *Was ist Kunst?* via ‘Eastern Modernism’ to *Total Recall*.”

⁷ On NSK, cf. in this cat.: Inke Arns: “Mobile States / Shifting Borders / Moving Entities: The Slovenian Artists' Collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK).”

⁸ Cf. the manifesto “Retro-principle” of 1984 in this catalogue.

⁹ Irwin: “The Program of the Irwin Group (1984),” in: NSK 1991, p. 114; first pub. in: *Problemi*, No. 6, Ljubljana (1985), p. 54.

¹⁰ Goran Gajić, *Pobjeda pod Suncem (Victory under the Sun*, 60 min., 1987); Marina Gržinić/Aina Šmid, *Transcentrala - NSK Država v času* (20:05 min., 1993); Peter Vezjak/Retrovizija (NSK), *Bravo - Laibach in Film* (53

Irwin's most important work complexes and offers a comprehensive representation of a body of work rich in change and highly complex in terms of subject material. Thus, it marks a premiere not only for Berlin, but for all of Germany and the rest of Europe, as well.

Since 1983, the group Irwin has been involving itself extensively with the art history of Eastern Europe in its artistic projects, in particular with the ambivalent inheritance of the historical (Russian, but also southern Slavic) avant-garde and its totalitarian successors, and thus with the dialectic of avant-garde and totalitarianism. Following the creation of an individual visual language in their appropriation projects of the 1980s,¹¹ the group has been concentrating since the 1990s on a critical examination of the art history of "Western Modernism," countering it with the "retro-avant-garde" of a fictive "Eastern Modernism" which, in its own obvious artificiality, points to the artificiality of Western art historical structures that continue to exclude contemporary Eastern European art to this day. For this reason, the goal of one of Irwin's new projects is to initiate a critical (re-) construction of Eastern Europe's art history between 1945 and 2002, that is, well beyond the official, (ex-)Socialist chronicle, national "legend formation," and fragmentary information available in the West (*East Art Map*, 2002).

While Irwin has been highly present on an international level for ten years already, the group has never, beyond a few gallery exhibitions (Inge Baecker, Cologne) and group shows,¹² been presented in Germany in a large solo exhibition that spans the past 20 years. Since the exhibition *Irwin/Neue Slowenische Kunst*, curated by Jürgen Harten for the Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf¹³ in early 1989, 15 years have passed in which the group Irwin – not least driven by the political changes and upheavals following 1989 – has redefined its concepts from the 1980s ("retro-garde," "over-identification") and developed important new projects and concepts for the 1990s and 2000s. In this context, the most important have been *NSK Država v času* (*NSK State in Time*) with its temporary embassies (i.e. in Moscow in 1992), founded in 1991; the *Transnacionala* project, carried out in 1996; the initiation of *East Art Map* (2002); as well as Irwin's year-long commitment towards establishing collections of Eastern European art in the territories of the former Yugoslavia (currently: *ArtEast 2000+ Collection*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana). These projects all have the common goal of inducing the East and Eastern Europe to confront itself – aptly, the subtitle Irwin selected for the documentation of the work *NSK Embassy Moscow* (1992) was "How the East Sees the East." It is this view of one's own (Eastern European) art history that makes Irwin so compelling – particularly in the context of another exhibition taking place simultaneously in Berlin, *Berlin – Moskau, Moskau – Berlin 1950–2000*. Following the exhibition in Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, the show will travel on to the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen and finally to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade.

Irwin Navigator: Catalogue book and anthology

The catalogue book published on the occasion of the exhibition *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003* has several goals. First of all, it compiles the most important articles and texts that have been written about Irwin and Neue Slowenische Kunst over the past fifteen years. A compilation of this kind seemed called for in that many of these texts and articles have appeared indi-

min., 1993); Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire* (95 min., 1995); Marina Gržinić / Aina Šmid, *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + Irwin* (22:05 min., 1997).

¹¹ Cf. Inke Arns: *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK – eine Analyse ihrer künstlerischen Strategien im Kontext der 1980er Jahre in Jugoslawien*, Regensburg 2002.

¹² E.g. *unfrieden*, Hamburg 1996; *After the Wall*, Stockholm/Berlin 1999/2000; *Vulgata – Kunst aus Slowenien*, Berlin 2001; *Museutopia*, Hagen 2002.

¹³ Taken over from the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris.

vidually in catalogues, magazines, or books that have long since gone out of print or become otherwise unavailable. Secondly, the present catalogue book makes many of these texts available for the first time in German or English language respectively. And thirdly, through the thematic divisions worked out in Ljubljana in April of 2003 together with Irwin, it offers the reader an important guide through the group's complex body of work. With the aid of the present publication's four extensive thematic complexes – "Destruction and Construction (Ideology)," "Rétrograder pour mieux sauter," "Creating Connections," and "Eastern Modernism" – it becomes possible to follow how the various thematic points of concentration within Irwin's work have changed over time, undergone an expansion, or become important in entirely new contexts.¹⁴

The catalogue's individual thematic clusters are allocated to texts and essays by various authors, manifestoes of the group Irwin, or work groups by the artists. In the process, the texts have been ordered such that each chapter begins with the most recent text, some of which have been written especially for the current exhibition (Daniel Spanke, Gregor Podnar), and ends with the oldest. In addition, texts, manifestoes, and works are interconnected through hypertextual links, making a non-linear reading of Irwin's oeuvre possible despite the linear organization of the medium book. This hypertextual linkage with other texts, works, and contexts arose out of the insight that individual works are difficult to pin down to a single theme.

As has already been mentioned, the catalogue book is divided into four thematic chapters: "Destruction and Construction (Ideology)," "Rétrograder pour mieux sauter," "Creating Connections," and "Eastern Modernism." Following the fourth chapter is an additional section containing six interviews that various authors have conducted with Irwin between 1988 and 2000. A comprehensive biography and bibliography on Irwin as well as short biographies on the authors and a list of sources for the texts contained in this anthology complete the volume.

Destruction and Construction (Ideology)

The first chapter primarily illuminates the socio-critical aspects connecting the group Irwin to the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) – and here, particularly, to the group Laibach and the design department New Collectivism. With Irwin and the NSK, destruction (or criticism) has always existed and continues to exist as construction (or affirmation), while affirmation reveals itself to be an inimitable criticism of the system and its ideology.

Throughout the 1980s, the tactic of Neue Slowenische Kunst was to avoid expressing itself in an openly critical discourse on the state and its ideology or creating a distance to that ideology through ironic negation (catchword dissidence). On the contrary, it was about a repetition, an appropriation of components borrowed from the official ideology, a game with these "readymades," and an assumption of prevailing codes of rule in order to – according to Laibach – "answer these languages with themselves."¹⁵ It was a matter of a subversive strategy which the Slovenian philosopher and Lacanian Slavoj Žižek has termed a radical "over-identification"¹⁶ with the "hidden reverse" of the ideology regulating social relationships. In employing every identifying aspect, both explicit and implicit, provided by the official ideology, the NSK appeared as an organization that seemed to be even "more total than totalitari-

¹⁴ The exhibition itself does not follow the catalogue's four overarching theme complexes, but rather concentrates on the presentation of the group's most important work complexes.

¹⁵ Laibach, as quoted by: Claudia Wahjudi: „Zwölf Jahre musikalische Zitatenschlacht zwischen zwei konträren Systemen. Interview mit Laibach," in: *Neues Deutschland*, 8/13/1992.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek: "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" in: *M'ARS - Časopis Moderne Galerije* V/3.4 (1993), p. 4.

anism” (Boris Groys) – a provocative reference to Yugoslavia’s political system.¹⁷ A good example for this kind of “subversive affirmation,” that is, for a tactic that allows for a participation in certain political or social discourses, for affirming them, appropriating them, or consuming them while simultaneously undermining them,¹⁸ is the so-called Poster Scandal. In 1986/87, New Collectivism (NK), the design department of the NSK, unleashed an internationally respected scandal when it submitted a poster design based on a Nazi poster to the competition for the *Day of Youth (Dan Mladosti)* celebrated each year on Tito’s birthday – and promptly received the first prize awarded by a highly official pan-Yugoslavian committee consisting of representatives from the Association of Slovenia’s Socialist Youth, the Yugoslavian People’s Army, and the Association of Yugoslavia’s Communists. NK’s poster consisted of a slightly altered version of the picture *Das dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums* (1936) by Richard Klein and portrayed a youth marching victoriously into the future equipped with baton, Yugoslavian flag, and other state insignia. The committee praised New Collectivism’s poster and justified the award by saying that the design “expresses the highest ideals of the Yugoslavian state.”¹⁹ Following the exposure of the image’s source, it was all the more embarrassing when the Yugoslavian federal officials attempted to press charges against NK for “disseminating fascist propaganda,” which the Slovenian officials were able to hinder (here, differences in opinion were already beginning to become evident between the [increasingly non-liberal] Yugoslavian federal level and the [more liberal] Slovenian republican level, which was ultimately to lead to the factual split of the Yugoslavian Federation at the end of the 1980s). In her essay, the Slovenian art historian Lilijana Stepančič has undertaken an extensive analysis of the poster scandal, which led to the termination of the *Day of Youth*.

Still, it would be wrong to assume that Irwin and the NSK were reacting to daily political events. Irwin/NSK always emphasized that they weren’t so much interested in criticizing existing circumstances, but were rather concerned with erecting and constructing something of their own (which naturally constituted a thoroughly complex criticism of the prevailing circumstances). Finally, as Irwin’s members expressed more than once in the 1980s, they were not dissidents, but “state artists.” This ostentatiously exhibited lack of interest in directly criticizing the political situation of the 1980s took on an aesthetic form in the diagrams of the internal levels of organization and function within Laibach Kunst and the NSK (1984). In the 1980s and 1990s, the groups Irwin and NSK considered themselves to be explicitly state-like social structures representing a compensation for a context that was otherwise missing. This becomes especially clear in the installation *Retroprinciple* (2003), newly developed for the exhibition, in which the group Irwin subsumes their projects of the 1990s under the slogan “Construction of Context.”

Parallel to Slovenia’s declaration of independence in 1991 came the founding of the *NSK State in Time*. This is an artistic state structure that lacks any “real” territory or nation state and materializes in various locations in the form of an “embassy” or “consulate” on an intermittent basis. In addition, the NSK state issues passports upon application that are valid as a “confirmation of temporal space” (NSK) and can be acquired by anyone regardless of their citizenship or nationality. Various sources report that certain individuals successfully used this NSK passport to cross international borders during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first half of the 1990s – which wouldn’t have succeeded otherwise, due to a lack of official documents from a state that hadn’t yet achieved international recognition. The appropriation

¹⁷ Cf. Alenka Barber-Kersovan: “Laibach” und sein postmodernes “Gesamtkunstwerk,” in: Helmut Rösing (ed.): *Spektakel / Happening / Performance. Rockmusik als “Gesamtkunstwerk,”* Mainz 1993, pp. 66–80.

¹⁸ More on this in Inke Arns/Sylvia Sasse: *Affirmation und Widerstand*, 2004 [in progress].

¹⁹ Cf. *The Economist*, London, 3/14/1987, p. 49 and *Profil*, Vienna, 4/13/1987, p. 56, as quoted by: Pedro Ramet: “Yugoslavia 1987: Stirrings from Below,” in: *The South Slav Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3 (37) (fall 1987), p. 25.

of signs of state authority such as embassies, consulates, passports, and other insignia (for instance postage stamps), together with the temporary conquest of territories and whole armies of existing states (*NSK Garda*) represents a concept that is ambivalent because it is at once affirmative and resistant: through its sheer “existence” (which is actually a “non-existence”), this state calls the logic of other existing state structures into question.

Rétrograder pour mieux sauter

The central “conceptual principle” of the group Irwin, which all of the works documented in this second chapter are based on, consists of a paradoxical movement that twists forwards into the future while slipping back into the past. While the group’s paradoxical movement along a temporally linear track could be characterized by words such as “sampling” and “loop” – as repetitions concerned with an insisting, with taking a position on something, a “memory in the forward direction” (Kierkegaard) – the concept of the palimpsest refers to the method Irwin uses to select certain motifs in putting their images together as well as to the principle of making layers “spacial” that lie temporally deeper.

In a narrower sense, “sampling” in music refers to the employment or quotation of “found” pieces of music, fragments, or sounds. In contrast to a more or less self-referential (“Dionysian”) sampling process, which uses samples as material for creating sound textures and architectures, the employment of quotes in Irwin’s paintings belongs rather to a “fetishistic” sampling method.²⁰ In this kind of sampling, the sample is a referential object that is chosen because it has a particular meaning – here, recognition comes about through repetition. Beyond this, “looping” creates a repetition which is “at once linear and cyclical, a spiral movement that repeats the past in order to gain the future, an open loop that can feed back to its effects as causes.”²¹ With Irwin, repetition is (subsequent) prospective memory – a “present opening of the past into the future.”²² On the other hand, the term palimpsest²³ can be used to characterize two different types of entities that are nonetheless closely interconnected: on the one hand, the principle of selection according to which the group Irwin chooses certain images (“pre-texts”) for their work, and on the other the method of aesthetic production employed in the paintings. For their paintings, Irwin doesn’t use random historical images, but rather deliberately chooses those images and signs that have acquired additional meaning and connotation over time through a change in context. These clusters of connotation or densities in denotation are primarily formed by and within signs that, in retrospect, mark the points in history at which a changeover can be discerned – from genuinely utopian aims to traumatic experience. Most importantly, the quotes used by Irwin from the (Soviet Russian) artistic avant-garde

²⁰ Diedrich Diederichsen differentiates between “insignificant” or “Dionysian” sampling and “significant” or “fetishistic” sampling. While in “Dionysian” sampling the sound is repeated, isolated, and manipulated for as long as it takes to refer to nothing but itself, the other sampling method uses sounds that are supposed to be “brought into connection with history, meanings, positions, party leanings, etc.” (Diedrich Diederichsen: “Zur musikalischen Technik in HipHop und Techno,” in: *contd* <<http://www.art-bag.net/contd/issue2/dd.htm>>. Lecture on 6/13/1997 in the Akademie der Künste Berlin in the context of the lecture series “Musik im Dialog”).

²¹ Martin Conrads: “Samplermuseum,” in: *Kunstforum International*, Der gerissene Faden. Nichtlineare Techniken in der Kunst, ed. by Thomas Wulffen, vol. 155 (June/July 2001), pp. 216–221, here: p. 217f.

²² Eckehard Lobsien: *Wörtlichkeit und Wiederholung. Phänomenologie poetischer Sprache*, Munich 1995, p. 19.

²³ A classical palimpsest is a handwritten surface on which the original writing is removed and replaced by a more recent one: in the case of papyrus, by rubbing it off, and with parchment by erasing it with a pumice stone. The eradication of the previous writing is never, however, so complete that earlier texts disappear completely. On a more abstract level, the concept of the palimpsest stands – along with its classical meaning – for a concentration of historical layers that are simultaneously present. These consist of “superimpositions of divergent, conflicting historical texts” which confront the reader or viewer with “such massive resistance” that a “self-reflection in reading switches over to a commenting archaeology of historical strata and their fissures, interferences, and erosions.” (Lobsien 1995, pp. 81–82).

transport, in addition to their original utopian meaning, a second denotative level that announces the failure of precisely these artistic utopias: along with the retention of the original text, the signs become traumatic texts.

When a sign, image, or text of this kind is repeated, all the meanings and connotations stored in this sign are simultaneously invoked along with the original meaning. It is precisely this enrichment with immaterial layers, this transporting of additional meaning accumulated throughout time, that allows the “texts” in Irwin’s repetitions to become iridescent with ambivalent signs containing multiple denotations that endlessly change color between their various, often contrary levels of meaning and connotation.

On the one hand, the resulting “connotation accumulations” are a criterion for the selection of certain images; on the other, Irwin both reconstructs and visualizes these layers of (actually invisible) connotation in their paintings, which could also be termed “theoretical objects”.²⁴ Initially by unraveling and decompressing the mutually contradictory, layered texts and making them spatial, and then by rendering these historical layers and connotations visible in image montages, and thus bringing them into dialogue with one another. As a result, the juxtaposition of diametrically opposed signs in the action *Black Square on Red Square* or on the painting *Malevich Between Two Wars* demonstrates the ambivalent meanings of images quoted from the historical avant-garde by explicitly formulating these conflicting meanings of the avant-garde. In rendering the palimpsests “spatial,” Irwin makes the conflicts between the various historical discourses visible.²⁵ For this reason, the New York art critic Kim Levin has rightly said about Irwin: “Their paintings are full of conflicting pasts.”²⁶

This becomes clearest in Irwin’s series *Was ist Kunst (What is Art)*, since 1985), which consists of over 500 oil paintings. In 1996, in the installation *Irwin Live*, the group began distilling single motifs out of an image inventory they’d amassed over more than ten years. Since 1998, they have been calling the six motifs they’ve gleaned in this way *Irwin Icons*, together with their concomitant iconographic series. The two catalogue essays by the art historians Daniel Spanke and Igor Zabel are dedicated to this new work complex. With the installation *Was ist Kunst Slowenien* (2001), the group switched to exhibiting pictures that were no longer painted collectively or quoted images from European art history, but were originals by various artists from private and museum collections, framed in typical Irwin frames.

For the exhibition *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, the installation *Was ist Kunst Deutschland* (2003) will be realized for the first time with loans that represent German art history of the 20th century. Together with the third and last version of *Was ist Kunst Russland*, which is scheduled to be produced shortly, Irwin is creating a panorama of the cultural influences and references that have been crucial to the group.

Creating Connections

For artists who, like Irwin, work in groups or collectives, the theme of “creating connections” (third chapter) is without a doubt particularly important. In the process, two larger phases can be differentiated from one another: while Irwin and the NSK became their own social context

²⁴ Peter Weibel: Probleme der Neo-Moderne, in: Peter Weibel (ed.): *Identität : Differenz. Tribüne Trigon 1940–1990. Eine Topographie der Moderne*, cat. Graz 1992, pp. 3–21, here p. 20.

²⁵ Cf. Inke Arns: *Objects in the Mirror May be Closer Than They Appear: Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel*, phil. diss., Humboldt University, Berlin 2003 [unpublished manuscript].

²⁶ Kim Levin on Irwin, in: Michael Benson (dir.): *Predictions of Fire*, documentary film on NSK, 16 mm. film (production: RTV Slovenija & Kineticon Pictures), 90 min., Ljubljana 1995.

in the 1980s, as a result of which their interest was directed to the inside – the collective communicated solely through a “non-communication” with the “outside” – throughout the 1990s, the group (and particularly Irwin) increasingly opened up and invited external participants – curator colleagues, but also artist friends – to work on projects with them. While the perspective was primarily local throughout the 1980s, it became global in the 1990s, with a particular eye to the situation in Eastern Europe.

In this regard, works that became central for Irwin’s network strategy of the 1990s were *NSK Država v času (NSK State in Time)*, founded in 1991, and the *Transnacionala* project of 1996. The concept of the immaterial *NSK State in Time* leads away from NSK’s self-image from the 1980s as a hermetic and static entity. On the contrary, it emphasizes the aspects of communication, open interaction, movement, exchange of experience, and networking. In the framework of *NSK Embassy Moscow* (1992), for instance, the members of NSK traveled to Moscow and set up a temporary “embassy” of the *NSK State in Time* in a private apartment. Over the course of a month, in the context of lectures by Irwin as well as by invited theoreticians and artists, discussions took place on the function and meaning of art of the 1980s in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The project was documented in the publication *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*.²⁷

In the summer of 1996, an international group of ten artists (Alexander Brener, Vadim Fishkin, Yuri Leiderman, Michael Benson, Eda Čufer, and the five artists of the Irwin group) embarked on a month-long trip through the United States in two trailers. This project, which required the travelers to live together in extremely close quarters (ten persons in one hundred square feet), became an “experimental, existential situation” (Eda Čufer) for the participants. The goal of this journey was to talk about art, theory, and politics in the context of contemporary art. Throughout the trip over American highways, rest areas, motels, the Mojave Desert, and the Grand Canyon, the group discussed these themes as well as the (im)possibility of an Eastern European identity in art. Along the way, they stopped over in Atlanta, Richmond, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle, where they debated with representatives of local artist communities. The travel project was documented in the publication *Transnacionala. Highway collisions between East and West at the Crossroads of Art*,²⁸ edited by Eda Čufer in 1999.

These projects of the 1990s concerned with networking and exchange – Viktor Misiano called them “confidential projects”²⁹ – attest to a fundamental transformation in the concept of communication, to the extent that communication no longer merely takes place within the group (as a substitute of an “outside” that is not available), but, on the contrary, the group’s entire sense of self has transformed towards becoming a manufacturer of communication.

Eastern Modernism

The fourth chapter of the present anthology is dedicated to the attempts of the group Irwin to actively intervene in the “grand narratives” of a Western-dominated art history that continues to prevail to this day. Thus, for example, Irwin’s installation *Retroavantgarde* construes a fictive art movement for the geographic space of Yugoslavia, the “retro-avant-garde” whose roots can be traced back to various images and the artists allegedly belonging to this movement back to the 1910s and 1920s. *Retroavantgarde* “is a complex artistic statement reflecting

²⁷ Eda Čufer (ed.): *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*, Koper undated. [1992/93].

²⁸ Eda Čufer (ed.): *Transnacionala. Highway Collisions between East and West at the Crossroads of Art*, Ljubljana 1999. On Irwin’s installation *Transnacionala* cf. Inke Arns: *Transnacionala as lieu de mémoire*, or: *Ceci n’est pas un monument*, March 2000 [unpublished manuscript].

²⁹ Cf. Viktor Misiano’s text “The Institutionalization of Friedship” in this catalogue.

on the absence of a stable historic narrative on modern and contemporary art in Slovenia, Yugoslavia, and in Eastern Europe in general. The artistic achievement of these places never managed to become a part of the Western canon, or even develop its own consistent meta-narrative.”³⁰

As a reaction to this two-fold lack, the group refers, with a gesture typical for them, back to an entity that was central to the definition and derivation of modernism: Alfred H. Barr’s *Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935*.³¹ This diagram, developed in 1936 by the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), lists the European avant-garde movements as precursors – almost in the sense of an aesthetic evolution theory – of the abstract art of modernism, both geometric and non-geometric. With a similarly arrogant attitude, Irwin transfers this scheme onto Yugoslavia, here in the form of a reversed genealogy of the “retro-avant-garde,” which extends from the neo-avant-garde of the present back to the period of the historical avant-garde. In addition, as an alternative to the grand narratives of the West, Irwin develops the strategy of “Eastern Modernism,” which the group formulated for the first time in 1990 in the context of the exhibition series *Kapital*.³² In asserting the existence of an “Eastern Modernism,” the group polemically attacks Barr’s and Greenberg’s modernism, which posits itself as being universally valid. By qualifying the concept in this way, Irwin indirectly suggests that modernism is actually a “Western Modernism” that does *not* possess universal validity, after all.

As a new “Eastern Modernism,” this retro-avant-garde is pitted against Western particularity, which considers itself to be universal. The installation *Retroavantgarde*, which was shown for the first time in the Kunsthalle of Vienna, is both an independent work of art and a pragmatic, cartographic instrument; in this work, Irwin transforms that which it was barred from for a long time, both locally, through the specific political situation, and beyond Eastern Europe, through the above-mentioned international discourse: its own independent art historical chronicle. By postulating the existence of a fictive Yugoslavian retro-avant-garde, Irwin (re)constructs and posits a modernism intrinsic to Eastern Europe. This “Eastern Modernism,” however, turns out to be just as construed, fictive, and artificial as its Western counterpart.

Along with artistic installations, another instrument Irwin favors for actively intervening in art history are art collections in general and the politics of collecting in particular. Because the “logic of collecting”³³ has been made responsible for the invisibility of contemporary Eastern European art in the West,³⁴ it is not merely a question of criticizing the Western logic of collecting, but of countering it with a “logic of collecting” of one’s own. For this reason, the group has been collaborating on founding various art collections since the late 1980s (*FRA-YU-KULT*, *Sarajevo 2000* and *2000+ ArtEast*); in one of its most recent projects (*East Art Map – A (Re)Construction of the History of Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, 2002) un-

³⁰ Roger Conover/Eda Čufer, Irwin, in: Roger Conover/Eda Čufer/Peter Weibel (eds.): *in search of Balkania. A manual*, Graz 2002, pp. 66–70, here p. 67.

³¹ Cf. Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt: The Barr Effect. New Visualizations of Old Facts, in: Branislav Dimitrijević, Dejan Sretenović (eds.): *International Exhibition of Modern Art featuring Alfred Barr’s Museum of Modern Art*, New York, Belgrade 2003, pp. 49–59.

³² Irwin: *Kapital*, cat. Ljubljana 1991. The first exhibition in the context of *Kapital* took place in December 1990 in the Eurna galerija in Ljubljana.

³³ Cf. Boris Groys: *Logik der Sammlung*, Munich/Vienna 1997, p. 159.

³⁴ This invisibility is chiefly connected to the “Western gaze,” which transfigures its own particularities into universally valid criteria: if contemporary Eastern European art production deviates from the patterns known to us, then they are provincial and thus uninteresting. If, however, they measure themselves according to the models we know and appear to resemble them, this becomes proof to the Western eye that they are unoriginal (cf. Groys 1997, p. 159).

der the motto “History is not given. It has to be constructed,”³⁵ it initiated a critical (re-)construction of the art history of Eastern Europe between 1945 and the present, which is meant to move beyond (ex-)Socialist official chronicles, national “legend formation,” and fragmented information available in the West.

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³⁵ Irwin: *East Art Map – A (Re)Construction of the History of Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, poster, 2002.