

## Minor Compositions

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As well as a multitude to come...

IRWIN, State in Time Lagos/Nigeria, 2010

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Edited by IRWIN

State in Time



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**State in Time**

5	Introduction
7	NSK State in Time <i>IRWIN</i>
13	NSK State in Time <i>Eda Čufer &amp; IRWIN</i>
17	Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa <i>Slavoj Žižek</i>
21	NSK: The State which Ran Away with Itself... <i>Alexei Monroe</i>
31	Emergency Ambassadors to a 'State of Emergency': The NSK Embassy and the Moscow Art Scene of the 1990s <i>Viktor Misiانو</i>
45	The State as a Work of Art <i>Tomaž Mastnak</i>
53	Contextualisation of the Notion of State and of Contemporary Art in Global Neoliberal Capitalism <i>Marina Gržinić</i>
71	The Eye of the State <i>Avi Pitchon</i>
81	The Real Wince of the NSK State in Taipei <i>Huang Chien-Hung</i>
91	The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as Escape and Entry Vehicles <i>Inke Arns</i>
97	Public discussion following Inke Arns' presentation
109	The 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' in Berlin: A Summary <i>Conor McGrady</i>
119	NSK: Allegiances, Ambiguities, Politics, Process <i>Ian Parker</i>
133	Interview with Ian Parker <i>Eda Čufer</i>
139	Temporary Hegemonic Zones <i>Stephen Shukaitis</i>
147	The Self and Its Double: How I Use the NSK Passport <i>Eda Čufer</i>
159	Contesting Utopias: Individual Collectivity and Temporal Hybridity in the NSK State in Time <i>Jonah Westerman</i>
173	Biographies
177	Illustrations

## Introduction

We are pleased that this publication, which we began to contemplate five years ago, has finally seen the light of day. We have taken our time over it. As a matter of fact, we like to, and actually often do, allow ourselves the indulgence of constructing our projects gradually, working on them until they are ripe and ready for presentation. The reason we tackled work on this book is simple. The NSK State in Time project, in which IRWIN has been engaged continuously for two decades, has raised a number of questions that need to be answered. In response, we have resorted to the practice which we introduced in 1992 with the NSK Embassy in Moscow: we have turned to experts to help us elucidate particular issues.

The NSK State in Time has a double position – designed as an artwork, it is at the same time a social formation – and even though the focus of this publication is on the non-artistic dimension of the NSK State in Time, on its relationship with a state occupying a territory, we cannot avoid its artistic aspect. In short, we are interested in the functional value of the artwork.

Some of the texts presented here were written before the book was conceived, and are included in it due to their contextual relevance. The majority of these texts, however, have been written specifically for this publication and are published for the first time. Some of the topics raised, particularly the surge in NSK passport applications from Nigeria, deserve further analysis, and we are keen to address this in a future edition.

We would like to thank all the authors for their contributions to this publication. Their deliberations are vital for the further development of the project.

*IRWIN*



Neue Slowenische Kunst, Ljubljana, 1986

## NSK State in Time *IRWIN*

1 Besides these three, the following groups were also active within the framework of Neue Slowenische Kunst: design group New Collectivism; Department for Pure and Applied Philosophy; a group of architects, The Builders; and music groups Dreihundert Tausend Verschiedene Krawalle and Germania. The first two groups continue to be highly active, the appearances of Dreihundert Tausend Verschiedene Krawalle are not so frequent, and The Builders and Germania have disbanded.

The NSK state came into being in 1992 as a result of the transformation of the Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art) collective into the NSK State in Time. The collective was formed in 1984 by three founding groups – IRWIN, Laibach and the Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice theatre group<sup>1</sup> – and within the framework of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Although each group was autonomous in its activities, we shared a free flow of ideas, a copyleft declaration (unlimited by individual authorship), we offered mutual assistance and engaged in joint planning of particular moves and actions. Collaboration was key, and awareness of the specific conditions in the field of art in Yugoslavia, which was at that time largely defined by a closed valorisation process adapted to local needs, led to the concentration of a critical mass, and direct confrontation with the art system. This antagonism subjectivised each group and delineated the contours of NSK as a whole. In these conditions of strained relations with the art establishment, the responsibility for art production and its critical reflection lay solely with us, and it was therefore precisely through this confrontation that we established our independence. In short, collaboration and the sharing of common resources were both the basis and the inevitable consequence of Neue Slowenische Kunst's position in relation to the cultural and political reality of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

With the collapse of socialism in the beginning of the 1990s and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia, the conditions of our operation changed radically as well. Along with the emergence of a multitude of new states, some of which, among them Slovenia, achieved the status of an independent state for the first time ever in history, NSK too objectified itself in the form of a state. Instead of to a territory, however, NSK assigned the status of its state to thinking, which alters its boundaries in accordance with the movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body. At the time of its formation, the NSK State in Time was defined as an abstract organism, a suprematist body, installed in a real socio-political space as a sculpture consisting of body heat, the movement of spirit, and the work of its members. In fact, the NSK state exists primarily through appearances in a variety of projects, which follow one another through time, drawing out its image and content. These projects establish and multiply relations among NSK citizens, which gradually enable the articulations of specific needs and state initiatives.

Thanks to the particular circumstances of the beginning of the 1990s, it was possible for us to produce NSK state passports in cooperation with the Slovenian Ministry of Interior Affairs. As a result, with regard to the mode and quality of production, the passports do not differ from the usual standard for such products. So far,

several thousand people have applied for and obtained NSK passports and thereby become citizens of the NSK State in Time, while also retaining their previous citizenship. Most of them come from the developed countries of Western Europe or the USA, and thus the majority of NSK's population is from the so-called First World. Their reasons for attaining NSK citizenship are linked primarily to their understanding of and participation in the field of contemporary art.

Although numerous, participants in the 'art world' are not the only social group among NSK passport holders. In the first half of the 1990s, when new states were emerging on a daily basis and we started issuing NSK passports, the war in the territory of former Yugoslavia was still going on. As such, a lot of interest in NSK passports came from precisely this area. The largest number of passports was issued in Sarajevo at the end of the war in 1995. Again, we issued the majority of passports to people associated with contemporary art, but the interest in our passports was not only art-related. At that time, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina had serious difficulty travelling outside their country, and there are many stories of how NSK passports helped people to cross territories more easily than if using a Bosnian passport. Aware that the NSK passport would not entitle them to cross national borders, that it cannot be a replacement for other documents, many individuals nevertheless took the risk of using it as a functional replacement of their official passports.

So, while NSK passport holders have so far been closely related to the field of art, and although the reasons for possessing the passport differ according to the position and status of particular passport holders, it is possible to maintain that the NSK passport is understood as an artefact which has, in certain cases, and out of necessity, been used for non-artistic purposes. Several years ago, applications for the NSK passport began coming from Africa, from Nigeria in particular, and specifically from Ibadan. It started slowly, but over time the number of applications from Nigerians exceeded 1,000. Since most of the applications came from the same city, it is possible to conclude that the information spread from person to person by word of mouth. The cost of the passport is not high but for inhabitants of the so-called Third World it is hardly insignificant. It is also doubtful that the interest of people from Ibadan in getting the NSK passport is related to art. It seems more likely that, in the Third World, NSK passports have ceased to be artefacts and have become useful documents. What is interesting is why, where, for whom and how they are useful.

How did a symbolic object, that had been sold in the First World for fifteen years and is recognised – regardless of its ambiguity or precisely because of its ambiguity – as an art object, become a functional document in the Third World? How did the word become flesh? How are we to understand the close encounter of two totally disparate worlds: the comparatively complex and abstract space of contemporary art in the First World, and the politically, culturally and deeply economically destabilised Third World, where mere survival is often a key issue and from where people emigrate in masses driven by a desire for a better life? Europe is the most coveted destination, and year after year the media report on the terrible tragedies experienced

primarily by victims of shipwrecks during expensive and dangerous illegal sea voyages. Two worlds so far apart from each other that their encounter can only be understood as a result of modern technologies, which enable the flow of information where there was none before.

On a completely different level, though still in keeping with the above, the results of the self-organisation of NSK citizens are increasingly visible. It is important that NSKstate.com, the key domain where one can find information about NSK, is organised and managed by NSK citizens and not by the original Neue Slowenische Kunst collective. The communication among the citizens of NSK has developed around and through this site, and has recently grown into joint campaigns and projects. On noting this level of self-organisation, we proposed to the citizens that they hold an NSK Citizens' Congress and share responsibility for the state's future development.

The 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' was held in October 2010 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Thirty delegates and twenty observers from all over the world, along with invited experts, analysed the operation to date, formulated conclusions and made decisions about the future of the operation. The Congress has since triggered a series of events, the impact of which is already noticeable. While future developments are uncertain, it is clear that the Congress findings have concrete consequences for the history of the NSK State in Time. If we keep in mind that the NSK State in Time was conceived as an art project, then it is necessary to admit that is most unusual that an 'artefact' has become emancipated to such an extent as to formulate findings – a written declaration in which a high degree of agreement with the principles of its own coming into being is affirmed – and that the social body, at least so it seems, to a significant extent recognises itself as an artefact.

*Ljubljana, 2010*

*Translated by  
Jean McCollister*



IRWIN, *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 1992



IRWIN, *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 1992



NSK Embassy Moscow book, edited by Eda Čufer, 1993

Retro avant-garde is the fundamental artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst. It is based on the premise that past traumas continue to affect the present and future, and can only be healed by returning to the initial conflicts. One such conflict is that which was brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements into the systems of totalitarian states, a conflict that modern art has yet to overcome. The widespread perception of the avant-garde as a fundamental phenomenon of twentieth century art is loaded with fears and prejudices. On the one hand the avant-garde is glorified and mythicized, while on the other hand its abuses, compromises and failures are recounted with bureaucratic pedantry to remind us that this magnificent delusion should not be repeated.

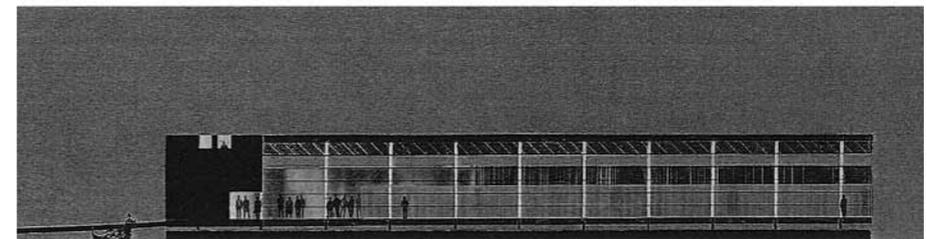
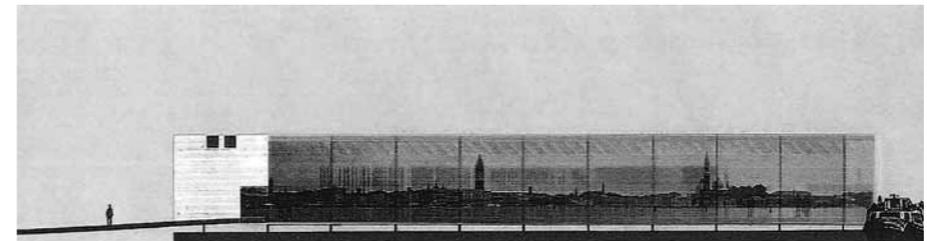
Neue Slowenische Kunst – as Art in the image of the State – revives the trauma of avant-garde movements by identifying with them at the stage of their assimilation into the systems of totalitarian states. The most important and at the same time most traumatic dimension of avant-garde movements is that they operate and are created within a collective. Collectivism is the point where progressive philosophy, social theory and the militarism of contemporary states clash. The question of collectivism, i.e. the question of how to organise communication and enable the coexistence of various autonomous individuals in a community, can be dealt with in two different ways. Modern states continue to be preoccupied with the question of how to collectivise and socialise the individual, whereas avant-garde movements tried to answer the question of how to individualise the collective. Avant-garde movements tried to develop autonomous social organisms in which the characteristics, needs, and values of individualism, which cannot be comprised in the systems of a formal state, could be freely developed and defined. The collectivism of avant-garde movements had an experimental value. With the collapse of the avant-garde movements, social constructive views in art fell into disgrace, which led to the social escapism of orthodox modernism and consequently triggered a crisis in basic values in the period of postmodernism.

The group Neue Slowenische Kunst defines its collectivism within the framework of an autonomous state as artistic actions in time, to which all other spatial and material procedures of artistic creation are subordinated. This means that the procedure of deconstructing and analysing past forms and situations functions as the creator of new conditions for the development of the individual within the framework of a collective. One of the aims of Neue Slowenische Kunst is to prove that abstraction, which in its fundamental philosophic component – suprematism – explains the political language of global cultures and expels it from the language and culture of art,

contains a social programme adequate to the needs of modern man and of community. The NSK State in Time is an abstract organism, a suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not to a territory but to the mind, whose borders are in a state of flux in accordance with the movements and changes in its symbolic and physical collective body.

*Ljubljana, 1992*

*Translated by  
Jasna Hrastnik*



IRWIN, NSK posters at Venice Biennial, 1986

Official plaque of the NSK State Pavilion at XVL Venice Biennial, 1993

Robi Lesnik, Marko Peterlin, Aleš Prijon, Jernej Prijon, in collaboration with IRWIN, The NSK Pavilion, 1996

## Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa *Slavoj Žižek*

For many long years in left-wing (and not only left-wing) mythology the State appeared as the original source of Evil, as a living dead sponging off the body of the community. The repressive, particularly ideological machinery of the state was presented as the process of supervising and maintaining discipline, as armour shaping the healthy body of the community. The utopian perspective, which henceforth opened up towards both the radical left-wing as well as the antiliberal right-wing, was the abolition of the state or its subordination to the community.

Today's experience, summed up in the word 'Bosnia', confronts us with the reality of this utopia.

What we are witnessing in Bosnia is the direct consequence of the disintegration of state authority or its submission to the power play between ethnic communities – what is missing in Bosnia is a unified state authority elevated above ethnic disputes. A similar tendency can be observed in Serbia where we are again dealing with a state which is not based on the modern concept of nationhood, but has fused with the pre-state ethnic mix, and thus in Kosovo paradoxically in the same territory two states coexist: the Serbian state authority and the para-state agencies of the Republic of Kosovo. The old left-wing disinclination towards the rule of law and order has thus come face to face with its own truth, manifested in Bosnia and Serbia where unsupervised local warlords are plundering, killing and settling private scores. In contrast to expectations it has become clear that there is nothing liberating about the breaking of state authority – on the contrary: we are consigned to corruption and the impervious game of local interests which are no longer restricted by a formal legal framework.

In a certain sense 'Bosnia' is merely a metaphor for Europe as a whole. Europe is coming closer and closer to a state of non-statehood where state mechanisms are losing their binding character. The authority of the state is being eroded from the top by the trans-European regulations from Brussels and the international economic ties, and from the bottom by local and ethnic interests, while none of these elements are strong enough to fully replace state authority.

Thus, Etienne Balibar has altogether appropriately labelled the current situation in Europe with the syntagma 'Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa' ('There is no State in Europe').

From all this it is thus necessary to draw what at first glance seems a paradoxical, yet crucial conclusion: today the concept of utopia has made an about-face turn – utopian energy is no longer directed towards a stateless community, but towards a state without a nation, a state which would no longer be founded on an ethnic community



and its territory, therefore simultaneously towards a state without territory, towards a purely artificial structure of principles and authority which will have severed the umbilical chords of ethnic origin, indigenesness and rootedness.

As far as art, according to definition, is subversive in relation to the existing establishment, any art which today wants to be up to the level of its assignment must be a state art in the service of a still-non-existent country. It must abandon the celebration of islands of privacy, seemingly insulated from the machinery of authority, and must voluntarily become a small cog in this machinery, a servant to the new Leviathan, which it is summoning like the genie from the bottle.

*Ljubljana, 1993*



IRWIN, *NSK Embassy Ghent, 1993*

## NSK: The State which Ran Away with Itself...

Alexei Monroe

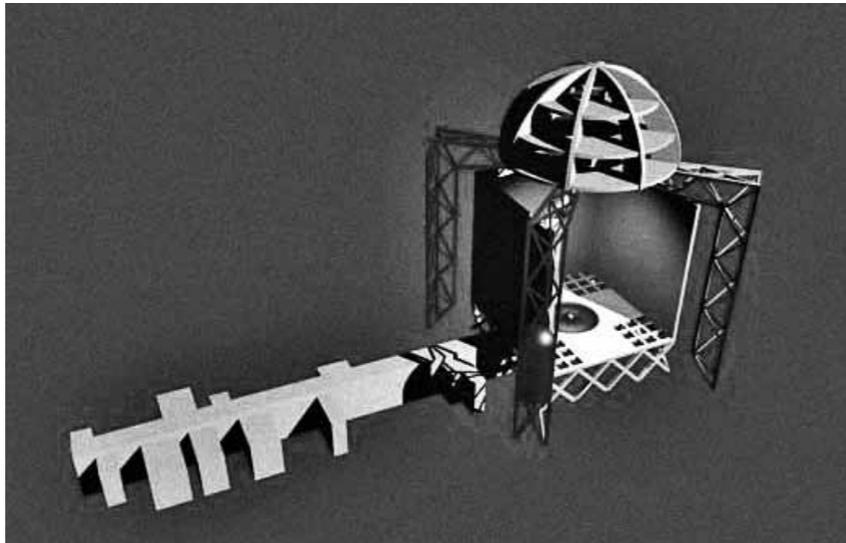
### How is it possible?

This text exists because in 1984 a small group of marginal artists gathered in Ljubljana, a provincial capital in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and created the conceptual movement *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK). Through NSK, artists from the groups Laibach, IRWIN and the *Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice* (Theatre of the Sisters of Scipion Nasice) have shaped not only the politics and culture of Slovenia and (ex)-Yugoslavia, but also influenced numerous individuals (including the author of this text) in radically varied and improbable contexts.

The outline of 'the story of NSK' is becoming well-known: a series of increasingly monumental and ambitious actions generated some spectacular political and cultural scandals and excitement, first in Slovenia, then in Yugoslavia, and then across the rest of Europe and beyond. Rather than re-telling this story, this text attempts to trace a parallel history of NSK via some of the unforeseeable reactions it has generated in the most unlikely and improbable contexts.

Improbability was hard-wired into NSK from the outset. While an extremely prescient observer might have foreseen that something like NSK could have emerged from the (already improbable) Slovenian sub-cultural scene and the elements that influenced NSK members (Fluxus, Bruitism, Pop Art, Totalitarian Art, Religious Art, Folk Art, Punk, Industrial Music, Yugoslav ideology, and more), it seems very unlikely that anyone could have foreseen the eventual result (and no-one seems to have done so). Examined coldly, a Slovenian formation calling itself *Neue Slowenische Kunst*<sup>1</sup> and combining these elements is inherently improbable. Its subsequent development and global spread is even more so (it's easy to forget now that in the early 1980s few people outside Yugoslavia and the Slovenian diaspora were even aware of Slovenia's existence). The fact that initially NSK wasn't taken that seriously in the Western art world allowed an unmonitored subterranean development, at least partly free of the usual 'guiding' influences that might have diluted its Sloveneness and so, paradoxically, made it less internationalist and less globally resonant. Yet another de-nationalised form of contemporary art would not have had the same type of impact.

It was following Slovenia's break-away from Yugoslavia in 1991 (a process NSK both commented on and contributed to)<sup>2</sup> that the most radical and improbable step was taken. NSK re-launched itself as the NSK State in Time. It was established as a response both to NSK's own activity to date and to post-1989 political events. It designated its own conceptual territory and began to issue passports and create citizenship upon its own authority. In the 1994 text 'Concepts and Relations' Eda Čufer and IRWIN retrospectively claim that the creation of NSK already foresaw the establishment of a 'state':



<sup>1</sup> German for 'New Slovenian Art'.

<sup>2</sup> NSK played a paradoxical but important role in opening up historical debate within Slovenia and in the development of civil society and alternative viewpoints from the mid-1980s onwards.

The aim of the association was the constitution of a transnational paradigmatic state, in which Laibach represented the ideological, the theatre, the religious and IRWIN the cultural and historical impulse. The element shared by all three groups is the scientific factor; a tendency towards a formative, not only verbal, but also physical analysis of concepts on the basis of which states had been constituted or dismantled throughout history. The 1980s were a period when the NSK body was formed, through a selection of concepts and symbols, relationships and structures. The body of the NSK state was built when an equilibrium was established between the syntax of images, musical and theatrical texts in relation to their media with the syntax of the NSK body in relation to the social, historical and state context.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1980s IRWIN had already stated 'We believe that our [NSK] structure is a twin of the state, a revised repetition of the state.'<sup>4</sup> Yet NSK was not just a repetition but a massive and distorting *amplification* of the utopian and dystopian potentials contained within both the actual state they lived under (or which lived under them) and within the notion of the state as such.

NSK's literally monumental deception was to seduce the state and the public into believing that it wished to possess, or was able to grant access to such power, even while contaminating it and taking it away from the sphere of actual daily politics. This statist *gesamtkunstwerk* was a supreme example of the Soviet military doctrine of *maskirovka* – destabilising your enemy by creating the impression that you possess far more power than you actually do. NSK suggested it possessed more power than it actually had (or wished to have), and in effect demonstrated that the declining Yugoslav state lacked but still coveted such power. Similarly, the Nazi S.A. or the Bolsheviks had to embody more power than they yet (legally) possessed, acting as if already in possession of full state authority in order to present the actual government as illegitimate. Laibach have described their performances as '... a ritualised demonstration of political force'<sup>5</sup> and the NSK state structure represents the ultimate (abstract) embodiment of NSK's symbolic power display (Laibach's 'systematic ideological offensive').

The emergence of the NSK state was already spectacularly unlikely, and this destabilising quality of radical improbability is more relevant than ever in the present period of systematically programmed 'kleptoculture', which is designed either to prevent or to pre-assimilate the unplanned emergence of cultural initiatives. Since utopianism is now often seen as suspect and unfashionable, NSK's continued existence represents a defence of the right to an *escapist* imagination that critiques reality and refuses to recognise the limitations imposed by any *actually existing* cultural, political and economic regimes.

3 Eda Čufer, IRWIN, 'Concepts and Relations', *Zemljopis vremena*, Umag: Galerija Marino Cettina, 1994.

4 NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, Los Angeles: AMOK Books, 1991, p.123.

5 *Ibid.*, p.44.

7 See Laibach *Neu Konservativ* (Cold Spring Records CD, 2003). This is a re-issue of the limited edition vinyl 'semi-official bootleg' which for many years was one of the most sought-after items among collectors and fans.

8 See <http://www.gla.ac.uk/%7Edc4w/laibach/laibach.html> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

9 See [www.reanimator.8m.com/NSK/readingroom.html](http://www.reanimator.8m.com/NSK/readingroom.html) (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

10 See <http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/LAIBACH-NSK/> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

11 Some examples are seen in the Laibach film *Divided States of America*, Sašo Podgoršek, 2005. Fan tattoos are also discussed on the Laibach-NSK online discussion group.

## Volk Art

Although it has only become apparent gradually, NSK's inherent, catalytic improbability has always been present, determining both NSK's actions and, crucially, people's reactions to them. Even now that NSK is far-better known, and its state has several thousand citizens, it continues to generate unexpected responses, some of which have been especially surprising to the artists themselves. These uncoordinated initiatives and responses are all inspired by the aesthetics or the concepts of NSK. As early as 1985, non-members were producing their own unauthorised NSK artefacts and tributes (for instance the retrospectively authorised Laibach live release *Neu Konservativ*).<sup>7</sup> In 1989, Donald Campbell produced the first printed edition of a Laibach fanzine and in the mid-1990s created an unofficial Laibach website.<sup>8</sup> In 2000, Haris Hararis initiated the Athens-based website NSKstate.com. As well as providing information on NSK activities, the website soon began to feature both NSK-style graphics and un-sanctioned texts by fans and citizens. Some of the most active of these writers are Nikica Korubin (Macedonia), Hanno Reichel (Berlin) and Christian Matzke (U.S.). While none are 'professional' writers or critics, and all are openly pro-NSK, their texts do contain insights and new perspectives and perhaps draw conclusions that art-historians, curators and critics might not be capable of. In other words, some perspectives may be accessible only to those with an intimate relationship with the works. The site has grown to the extent that it is now viewed as the primary NSK information resource (a view shared by NSK). Also acting on his own initiative, Christian Matzke has created the website Retrogarde Reading Room.<sup>9</sup> This is a type of 'library', listing NSK publications, interviews and more. It also solicits the help of other fans in solving some of the mysteries and inconsistencies surrounding NSK (for instance identifying figures in photographs or listing bootleg recordings).

Besides these semi-authorised information sources, NSK has also inspired a secondary strata of pseudo or meta-NSK actions and objects. Acting in response to an online discussion on the Laibach-NSK mailing list,<sup>10</sup> Christian Matzke created a Laibach stage tableau using Lego figures (this demonstrates what to outsiders might seem a surprisingly playful streak among NSK aficionados). Haris Hararis created graphics and screensavers for his website in the style of NSK, combining NSK symbols with other imagery. Amongst American fans there is a disorganised but frequent 'sub-genre' of Laibach and/or NSK tattoos.<sup>11</sup> Other para- or pseudo-NSK items produced by fans include jewellery, posters and shirts. To promote NSKstate.com Haris Hararis has produced a range of licensed 'NSK Virtual Embassy' shirts, as well as others using NSK and Laibach motifs.

One of the most unlikely and improbable responses to NSK emerged from Reykjavik, where a small group of long-term NSK followers took the initiative to organise a series of events, outside the usual structures. In 2006 they brought Laibach to perform in Iceland for the first time. They subsequently declared the anniversary

of this date (22nd March) as the annual state holiday of NSK in Reykjavik. In 2007 they opened a one-day NSK Embassy event, featuring a lecture, a display of NSK artefacts and video screenings. This was the first (authorised) NSK Embassy event at which no original members of Neue Slowenische Kunst members were present. It also featured two unauthorised artefacts. The first was an NSK Embassy shield in Icelandic, based on the official NSK Embassy shields used since the Moscow Embassy in 1992. This same image also appeared on a commemorative bottle of wine sold at the event. More audaciously, the organisers displayed a previously prepared image based on IRWIN's *NSK Garda* series. In these actions, IRWIN take photographic portraits of members of national armies, wearing black cross armbands and standing to attention below the NSK flag.<sup>12</sup> In the Reykjavik version, three uniformed members of the Icelandic Fishery Protection service stand at attention by an NSK banner. This image is more dramatic than the IRWIN originals in that it was shot during a fierce blizzard and a visiting Danish warship is visible in the background. It is perhaps the most elaborate and ambitious example of a para-NSK work, which received a very positive reception from IRWIN when they were presented with it after the event.

At this point, the British artists Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's concept of folk art seems relevant. In their exhibitions based on a continually developing archive of contemporary British 'folk art' they present a wide range of unauthorised and non-professional work ranging from folk festival objects to trade union banners to prison art and more.<sup>13</sup> The NSK objects and actions discussed here represent a kind of NSK folk art, which, borrowing from the title of a Laibach album, could better be termed 'Volk Art'. Moreover, the range and growing extent of this activity also suggests the need for a Deller/Kane-style 'Volk Art Archive', which might take the form of an exhibition and/or online resource.

The definition of [NSK] Volk Art would simply be un-authorised and unpredictable works and actions made in response to NSK, which are produced primarily (but not exclusively) by NSK citizens. However, it is important to stress not just the wide range of ability and motivation but, above all, the inherent improbability of the Volk Art style. Even after many years of exposure to fan and public responses, the members of NSK are still surprised by examples such as those from Reykjavik, which could hardly have been imagined at the start of the present decade, let alone when NSK was created in socialist Yugoslavia.

## Geographical Displacement and Improbability

'Territorialities, then, are shot through with lines of flight testifying to the presence within them of movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.'

– *Deleuze and Guattari*<sup>14</sup>

If we trace examples of Volk Art to their sources we can see an interrelated *geographical* as well as conceptual improbability. NSK's work generates 'lines of flight', not just

12 Since 1998 this action has been staged in locations including Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Georgia and Montenegro. See photographs here: <http://irwin.si/works-and-projects/nsk-garda/> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

13 For more information see <http://www.british-council.org/arts-aad-folk-archive.htm> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

14 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi), London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p.62.

15 Personal video statement prepared for IRWIN, 2007.

16 Christian Matzke, 2008 video statement on his NSK citizenship as exhibited at the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, 2010.

17 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *op. cit.*, p.24.

18 Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007, p.43.

out of the specific conditions, which generated NSK's art, but out of NSK as a system in itself and into new and unforeseen zones of (un)reality.

In a filmed statement on his NSK citizenship,<sup>15</sup> Christian Matzke compares the NSK state to the land of Oz, as described in the famous children's story. For its citizens NSK can act as a fantasy zone which allows greater conceptual freedom than is available to them through their 'given' national or state identities. The Oz comparison is apt because of the fact that, as in the story, the imagined 'Wizard' is an empty and deceptive figurehead who has no 'programme' to be implemented (and in NSK's case there is not even a 'wizard' figure). The moral of the two 'stories' is that even if the fantasy zone described exists, or is accessible, there is no solution except that which the visitor-citizen can implement for themselves, and the lack of any programme to follow leads people to generate their own narratives in relation to NSK.

For Matzke, the NSK state met a pre-existing 'urge to find citizenship outside of the land I was born in'<sup>16</sup> and many citizens have expressed similar sentiments. This urge connects with the way that NSK acts upon pre-existing nomadic impulses and activates them, and it is this that has carried the NSK meme to so many improbable locations and generated even more improbable responses. To use another Deleuzo-Guattarian metaphor, the NSK state is a type of 'assemblage that makes thought itself nomadic'.<sup>17</sup> It activates unforeseeable associations and disassociations, setting the imagination (including its citizens' imagination of what the state might be) onto new trajectories. As a projective apparatus the state is actually dependent on this process, and on generating speculation and intrigue among those casually exposed to it. There are many possible NSK states in the minds of those it encounters. Its cryptic core facilitates this and functions as a symbolic condemnation of programmed culture, and an incitement or even compulsion to go beyond the usual conceptual and geographic channels.

NSK works as a nomadic *interrogation machine*, which mutates and proliferates to bring *everything* into its scope; interrogating the systems that manipulate at every level, from the psychic to the national. It attempts to transcend alienation using the very codes of alienation, and to create a line of flight away from the apparent inevitability of oppression. So both by active interventions and simply by its continued presence (inexplicable to many, irritating or perplexing to more), the NSK State in Time creates momentum and illustrates previously unimagined trajectories. It suggests that no matter how fixed or closed a regime/system/machine appears to be, it always contains within its coding possibilities of escape, superseding, obsolescence, disintegration or mutation.

This interrogative dynamic can be seen as a version of what Gerald Raunig describes as a 'technique of permanent questioning' employed by the Zapatista movement to prevent itself reifying into an oppressively hegemonic revolutionary movement.<sup>18</sup> Something similar, though more implicit, is at the heart of the NSK dynamic and has helped to keep it in flux. However, this same open dynamic also entails the possibility of an uncontrollable overflowing into reality: the opening up of the line of

flight, which takes NSK beyond its own comfort zones or conceptual ‘home territory’ and into unknown and unfamiliar territories.

### Reality has sharp edges (When appropriation is re-appropriated by (sur)reality)

‘Which state you belong to can be a matter of life and death...’

– Christian Matzke

Just as NSK took utopian and dystopian elements of the state more seriously than the state does itself, so the NSK state is (and will probably continue to be) taken more seriously by its citizens than by the originators themselves. This applies both to ‘the initiated’ (those who ‘get’ the idea and produce ‘Volkish’ responses) *and* the uninitiated. In this second category are those who have encountered the NSK state as an *apparent reality* rather than a consensually constructed conceptual space: as a fully-functioning rich Western state rather than an Oz-like autonomous zone.

In recent years, the NSK state has collided with the sharp edge of reality. The perception of NSK as a physical European state has been spread virally to the extent that NSK has received hundreds of applications for passports from Nigeria. Many of the applicants refer to the NSK citizenship being equivalent to, or granting access to, Slovenian and EU citizenship, with attendant employment, social and travelling rights. The Slovenian authorities also received numerous queries and had to place warnings on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explaining that the passport did not confer rights to visit or reside in Slovenia.

In order to understand the phenomenon, and in an attempt to explain that the passport was not actually what so many Nigerians wished it to be, members of IRWIN met with several applicants in London in May 2007. These encounters raised questions about whether people genuinely understood that they were dealing with a (semi)-virtual conceptual project rather than a ‘real’ state. While claiming to understand this, many were incredibly grateful to receive the passports and seemed still to harbour dreams that it would grant them access to a new life.<sup>19</sup>

There are various factors behind this deliberate (mis)-perception. Firstly, NSK has created something so implausibly plausible that it has achieved a kind of reality. By now it has a sufficient reputation and history for it to seem credible. Secondly, the accumulated improbability and surreality of the NSK state seems as nothing compared to the structural unrealities of life in our ultra-spectacular klepto-democracies, and this is even truer for those looking on eagerly from ‘peripheral’ territories. Is the idea of a European state selling ‘citizenship’ over the internet really any stranger than the day-to-day realities of globalised consumerist culture as experienced through the prism of the specific conditions present in Nigeria? (Endemic corruption, poverty, violence and ethnic tensions). Some of these applicants’ *desperation to believe* has almost-fatally intersected with the initiated citizens’ *intention to believe*, which in turn

19 Some of these encounters were filmed and shown in the IRWIN *State in Time* exhibition in Aarhus, Denmark in winter 2008. Examples of Nigerian emails enquiring about NSK were incorporated in the web-based installation *Words from Africa* by Haris Hararis, also shown in Aarhus.

helps sustain the NSK state as a paradoxical reality. A reality which is both not real enough and too real for those who dream of it as a physical territory, which will grant them access to a life in Europe for 24 euros.

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari we can see this not as a Deleuzian re-territorialization (a moment when the destabilising dynamic ossifies) but as an unpredictable re-*de*-territorialization (in other words as a moment when the line of flight unexpectedly veers off into even less controllable territory). Like the capitalist klepto-culture within which and against which they operate, conceptual processes of the type unleashed by NSK are so thoroughly improbable and surreal that they carry the danger of producing a kind of delirium. The NSK passport as a symbolic device allows for the crossing of conceptual borders between daily reality and self-constructed reality. As the improbability of daily life and of the NSK state accumulate, it becomes harder for some to believe that it will not guarantee the crossing of physical borders between marginal and favoured territories.

What NSK has encountered in Nigeria is prophetic and symbolic of the ever more improbable encounters between ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds which globalisation produces. The NSK state is by its nature universal but it is the product of extremely specific local cultural and historical conditions. The question of what happens when an audience with no knowledge of these nuances, and perhaps no understanding of Western concepts of irony, encounters a project like this is one that more and more artists are going to face. Once a project is online it is already global and the possibilities for improbable, destructive and creative misunderstandings are massively multiplied. In a sense, the Nigerian response to NSK is utopian. It is based not purely on desperation but on the absence of Western cynicism. It asks ‘*why wouldn’t this be real?*’ and so *perhaps* demonstrates the possibilities of sincere and utopian responses to First World culture emerging in the most unexpected contexts and forms. As unpredictable as that of the Zapatistas to Western revolution, or of early 1980s alternative artists in Slovenia to punk, industrial or conceptual art. If the type of improbable cultural-political response that NSK represents was possible in Slovenia, and if this response could then trigger even more improbable responses globally, then it can happen in other equally unforeseeable ways in even more improbable locations.

London, 2008



IRWIN, *NSK Office Graz*, 1992  
IRWIN, *NSK Passport Office Taipei*, 2008



NSK, *NSK Passport*, 1993  
IRWIN, *NSK Consulate Florence*, 1993





IRWIN, *NSK Consulate Umag*, 1993  
 IRWIN, *NSK Electronic Consulate e-flux*, New York, 2013

## Emergency Ambassadors to a 'State of Emergency': The NSK Embassy and the Moscow Art Scene of the 1990s

*Viktor Misiano*

The NSK Embassy opened its doors on 10 May, 1992, in a private apartment at 12 Leninsky Prospect in Moscow. Carried out in the framework of the programme 'APT-ART INT', this NSK project was coordinated by Elena Kurliadseva, Konstantin Zvezdochetov and myself; the gallery Regina, created shortly before this event, also took an active role in its organisation.

The success of any project largely depends on its synergy with the time during which it materialises and with the ideas that are concurrently being explored. IRWIN happened to be in Moscow at a moment when the history of a new Russia was still being counted in months rather than years; when the mighty reality of the USSR had suddenly evaporated into the past, and the future overflowed with pure potentiality. This was also a moment of collapse of public foundations and norms that could have legitimately been described as catastrophic, with the caveat that during that time many understood that this was the cost of renewal. In those days there was no routine – any gesture or word carried an instigating tone, it held the status of a proposal, it asserted something, which inevitably laid the foundation for an entire chain of cause and effect, stretching into the future.

In September 1991, several months before the opening of the NSK Embassy and around the time of the defeat of an anti-Gorbachev putsch, I organised a project titled 'Aesthetic Exercises'. Artists that were receptive to a situation of renewal were brought together to work in the open air at the Moscow Kuskovo Museum, an eighteenth century palace and park, and a monument to the epoch of Enlightenment. In this context I attempted to outline a new post-underground artistic perspective and to make a call for art in Moscow to return to the open space of European history – to overcome its rootedness in the everyday, so characteristic for the conditions of the underground – with the goal of achieving its own autonomy. Somewhat later, in early May 1992, during the time IRWIN was preparing for the opening of the Embassy at 12 Leninsky Prospect, I took part in 'Molteplici culture', an exhibition organised in Rome by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Ludovico Pratesi. Many international curators of different generations were summoned to engage with the realities of the multicultural world through modest projects. In my project, I continued my critique of the underground culture of the Soviet epoch by stepping into a direct dialogue with its adherents. I implicated them in a collective sociological game and named the project 'Experimental Investigation'.<sup>1</sup> These 'experimental interactions' with the participants of the Moscow underground revealed that what had made it inadequate in relation to the new state of affairs, was its unreadiness to accept the figure of the Other – not as an intimate Other, with whom one would share sorrows and woes, nor

<sup>1</sup> See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ludovico Pratesi, *Molteplici culture: Itinerari dell'arte contemporanea in un mondo che cambia* (exh. cat.), Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992.

as an enemy, whom one must destroy or from whom one must be safeguarded, but as an Other with whom one must enter into a dialogue. From this moment on, I began working with the idea and form of performative curatorship.

Finally, in order to fully explain my authorial position during that period, I should describe 'APT-ART INT', the programme within which the NSK Embassy was produced. Despite my polemics toward underground Soviet culture during those years, I attempted to continue in its tradition by organising apartment exhibitions, ironically and commonly known as 'APT-ART'. During the same period that former underground artists actively participated in the life of an international artistic infrastructure, riding the wave of trendiness of Perestroika art, 'APT-ART INT' invited international artists to avoid institutional infrastructures and to make exhibitions in private spaces – in the studios of Moscow artists. Thus, this project attempted to valorise and preserve the primary legacy of the Soviet underground – the experience of culture existing outside of the institutional context, its association with anthropological spaces of personal relations, connected by a collective, quasi-religiously-secular plea for common principles.

The Regina gallery, co-organiser of the NSK Embassy project, understood the potentiality of this transitional epoch somewhat differently. Founded by Vladimir Ovcharenko, a successful pioneer of Russian business, Regina – which, by the way, successfully exists to this day – was one of the first, and undoubtedly most ambitious, private galleries in post-Soviet Russia at that time. Despite the fact that his sphere of expertise was far removed from the art market, and the art gallery was more a passion for him, Ovcharenko refused to give Regina the status of a non-profit organisation. And despite the fact that large-scale and vibrant projects put up by the gallery required significant investments, and the prospect of a profitable contemporary art market in Russia was far away on the horizon, Regina was conceived by its creator as an exclusively commercial venture.

Such an understanding of Regina's mission was further developed by its art director, or, as he was officially called, its 'exhibitor', the artist Oleg Kulik. In his public statements on the large-scale activities of this private institution – the likes of which Russia really did not have at the time – Kulik gave it the status of a state gallery, and proclaimed himself a 'state artist'. At the same time, the nature of the projects carried out in the gallery was of a provocative and even transgressive nature. In March to April, 1992, shortly preceding the NSK Embassy, Kulik carried out his most programmatic project, an ostensibly titled, 'Animalistic Festival'. The festival was a series of actions by different artists involving live animals in their work and concluded with Kulik's own work, a deliberately scandalous piece, which caused a stir in the media. *Piglet Makes Presents* had two professional butchers slaughter a live piglet in the space of the gallery, and its meat, cut up into pieces, distributed to visitors in plastic bags with the Regina logo stickered onto them.

Thus, Regina's activities supposed that what was uncovered during the fall of a fettered state and what was also its 'obscene underside' (to use Slavoj Žižek's favorite

expression), was not the stream of human interaction that I attempted to show in my projects, but the pulsation of life and death, the world of instincts and animal desires. It is significant that on proclaiming himself a 'state artist', and in this way presiding over the idea of a rebirth of the state, Kulik stages a ritual sacrifice. The right to make a verdict of life or death is of utmost importance for a sovereign, an attribute of their state power – and what better way to represent sacral power than ritual, moreover, ritual depriving life itself? Equally significantly, the place of sacrifice was a private gallery, which declared itself the power engine for the future of the contemporary art market in Russia. For Regina, the end of an ideological government did not so much signal a society of social dialogue in which the subjects are brought together in the face of history by a collective search for values – which would have followed from the argument drawn out of my projects – as an encroachment of an economic state, in which desires and instincts are channelled by the market; in which the right to life or death is privatised by the commanders of businesses; and in which the autonomy of art is ritually sacrificed to the media industry. If, in describing the formation of a modern state, Émile Durkheim once contended that having reached the final process of its rationalisation, religion becomes politics, then the experience of artistic processes in the Moscow scene shows that with the crisis of the modern state, the process inverts – politics returns to the sacral in order to identify either with economics or with the social.<sup>2</sup>

The unique role that the NSK Embassy played in Moscow in 1992, was predetermined by the fact that at the centre of its attention were the same problems that so deeply concerned the local art world. As a communitarian project oriented towards direct dialogue with the actors of the social and cultural process, IRWIN's initiative identified with the Muscovite artists' ambitions to construct the foundations of a new art scene through direct public action. My curatorial projects were headed precisely towards this problematic, and precisely this problematic engaged the liveliest artistic minds, including the leaders of the Regina gallery. The effectiveness of the NSK Embassy pivoted on the fact that it revealed a well-articulated and constructed model of project work, with problems and tasks that were hitherto unknown to the Moscow scene. To be more precise, the Moscow scene knew of something similar, but it chose to omit it from memory. Almost a decade passed before the art circle of the 1990s, having created the foundations for a post-Soviet art scene, rediscovered the artistic and social creativity of the artists of the so-called Moscow 'conceptualist circle' of the 1970s and 80s.

Consonant with Muscovite artistic dispositions, so sensitive to the problem of the dialectic of art and power at the beginning of the 1990s, it appeared that IRWIN's project worked with the idea of state representation, presenting, through the embassy, the NSK State in Time. Moreover, once again the problematic was presented so programmatically, and formulated in such a focused manner, that the embassy's influence was felt in much of what subsequently appeared in the Moscow art scene. For example Oleg Kulik's previously mentioned contention for the status of 'state artist', technically followed the conclusion of IRWIN's project by several months.

<sup>2</sup> See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Joseph Ward Swain), London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1915.

In presenting the idea of the state and all its attributes, IRWIN's artists were extremely particular. The coat of arms of the NSK state, as well as its state flag, was festively hung on the façade of 12 Leninsky Prospect. The respectable address, the elegant appearance of the building, as well as the rigid black suits and white shirts adorned by the Slovenian artists residing in the space of the embassy – all this could not have been any more persuasive to provoke an unwilling reverence from the godless and impoverished Muscovite art-intellectual public of those days. NSK's whimsical heraldry, as well as IRWIN's icons displayed on the walls of the embassy, were suggestive of a 'political theology' of state power (to borrow Carl Schmitt's term this time). In other words, the 'embassy' – in its entourage, in the behaviour of its founders and in its programme – lacked the irony that had informed the habitual outlook on life, as well as a method of interaction with ideologised power, for the artists of the Moscow underground.

Nevertheless, the politics of over-identification with power, to use Žižek's term, or of its subversive affirmation, to use Boris Groys' term of a similar meaning, and the goal of critiquing and deconstructing power, were well known to Moscow artists of the conceptualist circle.<sup>3</sup> However, in 1992, when neither communism nor a united Yugoslavia existed anymore, the politics of subversive affirmation had lost its meaning for IRWIN. It had also lost meaning to the artists of the former Moscow underground; although this was not fully evident to many of them at the time. It could be said, paraphrasing Žižek, that there was already no system which should be considered more seriously than it considers itself.<sup>4</sup> But the seriousness that was evident in the NSK Embassy project was of a different nature – it was the seriousness with which NSK members were creating their own state. Irony in attaining such a goal seemed inappropriate, not only in terms of ethical considerations, but also in sheer practical ones. Throughout the Moscow scene a similar turn was happening, only in artists' studios it was described in different terms: there was talk that instead of deconstruction, the politics of reconstruction were the most pertinent, and that instead of irony, an epoch of 'a new sincerity' had begun.

However, in the NSK State in Time project, there is an extremely important peculiarity, which does not have any analogues in Moscow art, and which was not fully recognised during the encounter with the NSK Embassy. What was at stake was IRWIN's investment of reconstructive politics towards the project of constructing a 'sovereign' state. In fact, my interest in the phenomenon of community and in its collaborative artistic creativity, budding in my curatorial projects of that period – in many ways synonymous with the social interaction undertaken by the NSK Embassy – had completely ignored the idea of state sovereignty. Moreover, the idea itself, of a clearly localised figure of authority – its disciplinary normative, its visual décor and attributes – was at the opposite end of my goal of dissipating and decentralising power towards unsteady and slippery norms. As for the Regina gallery, the idea of the state and of power relations, as mentioned above, were of particular interest. However, Kulik did not intend the artistic community to demand their own

3 Slavoj Žižek applied the term 'over-identification' to NSK and Laibach in his text 'Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?', in *M'ARS: Časopis Moderne Galerije Ljubljana*, Vol.3.4, 1993, p.4, while Boris Groys refers to 'subversive affirmation' in 'More Total than Totalitarianism', IRWIN, *Kapital* (exhib. cat.), Ljubljana: NSK, 1991.

4 S. Žižek, 'Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?', *op. cit.*

5 During its last years the former Soviet Union witnessed what has been described as the 'Parade of Sovereignties', when 41 constituent units declared themselves to be sovereign states. But only 16 of these actually aspired to independence beyond sovereignty.

6 Author's translation from Russian. For further reading in English see Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George Schwab), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 – originally published as *Politische Theologie: vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1922.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

sovereignty and to assert their own, autonomous power. He encouraged the return of a real political power, a real state, preparing himself towards its service, and seeing therein a source of his own, powerful authority.

All this being said, it seems that the idea of sovereignty at this particular historical moment was absolutely apparent in Moscow! Marching in the 'Parade of State Sovereignties'<sup>5</sup> was not only the dissolved state of Yugoslavia, but the USSR as well. Boris Yeltsin's quip, 'take as much sovereignty as you can carry', directed towards the regional subjects of the Russian Federation, grew wings, and it seemed to define not only the state construction of a new, sovereign Russia, but the orientation of its citizens, gaining autonomy as post-Soviet subjects. And, truly, as it is known in political theory, it is not only a sovereign declaring itself that introduces a 'state of emergency', but also the conditions of catastrophic disruption to the state of affairs creates the chance to obtain sovereignty by those who were previously deprived of it. Significantly, the proclamation of sovereignty is not at all a judicial act, alienated from the life of a community. According to Carl Schmitt, if sovereignty is gained during the conditions of a 'state of emergency', then it is a result of a 'combination of multiple, heterogeneous, organic factors, belonging as much to tradition, to the historic past, and to cultural constants, as to spontaneous consent, heroic achievement, passionate impulse, and a sudden manifestation of deep existential energies'.<sup>6</sup> And thus, to erect and strengthen this dynamism through the declaration of sovereignty was entirely logical in the conditions of that epoch, branded by vigorous community dynamics erupting from under the lock and key of the state of affairs. Precisely the act of accepting sovereignty in critical situations, or, the situation as defined by Schmitt using his romantic lexicon, the True Decision, stems from a community's awareness of its 'historical essence, its core, its hidden nature, which makes it what it is'.<sup>7</sup> The NSK Embassy made an evident appeal to art history, to the history of the avant-garde so foundational for contemporary artistic creativity. In effect, IRWIN's 'avant-garde icons' displayed on the walls of the embassy, were signs of 'historical essence', recognised by the artistic community after accepting sovereignty. The most programmatic example of the manifestation of a sovereign community with a 'passionate impulse towards acquiring essence', and with 'a manifestation of deep existential energies' is IRWIN's legendary performance, Black Square on the Red Square. In this case, without acquiring official permission to carry out the action on the most sacred space in Moscow – on its Red Square – the citizens of the NSK state declared their sovereignty publicly, 'tearing up judicial and social norms'.<sup>8</sup> In the process of this act, there was seemingly so much inner confidence in their sovereign right, that even the militia guard who were on duty at the Red Square helped the artists unfold the 'black square', and to place it on the sacral cobblestones of the Red Square.

What is characteristic of governments borne out of a 'state of emergency', is their capacity to preserve connections with communities that conceived them in a passionate impulse. They do not transform into judicial-legal or administrative-bureaucratic bodies, removed from the social creativity of the masses. State power does not break

away from the social mass, from *potenza*, to use Spinoza's term in this case, which has recently reappeared owing to Antonio Hegri and Michael Hardt. Consequently, the NSK State in Time focused on the sustenance of the life of a community, on its reproduction and expansion. For that reason, it was radically different from many other European and American art projects of the 1990s, working in one form or another with the idea of the state. The NSK project was utterly devoid of decorativeness and simulatedness: it really was reflexive; it recreated and adapted the experience of life of a sovereign social community.

Essentially, the substance of what was happening on 12 Leninsky Prospect, at the premises of the NSK Embassy, stems from this. A scrupulously constructed programme of events was meant to present Ljubljana's intellectual world and the life of this rousing community. Discussions and presentations that were happening in the embassy were not just an act of representation; they were important for NSK citizens themselves. Through collective work, through dialogue and confrontation with others – subjects and communities – the NSK people recognised themselves, and consolidated, isolating themselves from others. Here, consolidation presumes a strengthening of principles, as well as legal norms, since the proclamation of sovereignty through an act of transgression of rights, does not mean that an unlawful situation contradicts a 'state of emergency'. As Schmitt pointed out, new rights emerge within the parameters of a 'state of emergency', which then acquire habits and memoranda, and which are then elevated to law.

The tendency of the group IRWIN to understand law creatively and, simultaneously, their readiness to unflinchingly follow it from the moment when it becomes conventional and accepted, appeared most emblematically in the Stockholm exhibition 'Interpol' in 1995-96. As is well-known, in the course of this project, which presumed several stages of interaction between its participants, one of the artists, Aleksandr Brener, declared his transgressive right to physically attack other participants and their artworks. In fact, that is what he did at the opening, destroying an installation by Wenda Gu that was central to the exhibition. Following Brener's gesture, IRWIN disagreed with the ensuing criticism, which was, first and foremost, criticism from the other participants of the exhibition. IRWIN acknowledged Brener's right to the destructive gesture owing to the fact that it was announced prior to the exhibition, was not contested by anyone, and thus was accepted by the participants of the project: the 'Interpol' community.

The fact that the conflict of 'Interpol' participants has geo-political symptoms was fully comprehended and widely discussed by IRWIN.<sup>9</sup> If one is to translate its message into legal terminology, then it could be said that behind the conflict of Eastern European participants of the project and their Western colleagues, there is an unsolvable contradiction between sovereign rights borne out of the framework of a 'state of emergency', and neoliberal rights, based on the ideas of universality of human rights. Otherwise, as the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has written: 'Undoubtedly, there exists a polarity between the liberal "grammar" of equality, which asserts

9 See Eda Čufer, Viktor Misiano (ed), *INTERPOL: The Art Exhibition Which Divided East and West*. Ljubljana: IRWIN; Moscow: Moscow Art Magazine, 2000.

10 Vanesa Cvahte, 'On the Communicational Art of the Group IRWIN', *IRWIN: Retroprincip 1983-2003* (Inke Arns ed.; exh. cat.), Frankfurt/Main: Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, 2003, pp.163-167.

communality and appeals to "human nature", and the practice of democratic equality, which requires a political moment to distinguish between "Us" and "Them". The creators of the NSK state as well as the Russian participants of 'Interpol' who had previously actively participated in the life of the NSK Embassy in Moscow, had all experienced the dissolution of a seemingly unshakable political community and the rigorous process of constructing sovereignties – to them it was obvious that political democracy could not be founded on the commonality of all humankind, and that it needed to belong and be created by certain people through collective practices.

Thus it follows that the initiators of the NSK Embassy naturally accepted the figure of the Other, which was apparent at first glance during discussions at 12 Leninsky Prospect. Any type of criticism, however ill-mannered, caused a neutral, or even pleasant reaction from the NSK founders, which baffled Russian visitors to the embassy more accustomed to confrontation and conflict. To IRWIN it was obvious that civil society is constituted through dialogue, and a disassociation with the Outsider. It follows from this that the first thing that took place after the foundation of the NSK state was an NSK Embassy in Moscow, and subsequently in other places as well. It could even be said that because every 'Us' is born at the moment of discovering 'Them', the NSK Embassy was indeed the real form of constituting state sovereignty.

In spite of all this, in reality, the interaction of the NSK Embassy with the surrounding context was somewhat more complicated and dialectical. The understanding of sovereignty was not exhausted by Schmitt's brutal modernist counterpoint of 'enemy – friend'. Being the children of a different epoch, the Muscovites thought of their sovereignty as part of a complex system of relations.

In part, as has already been mentioned, IRWIN absolutely did not see the figure of the 'enemy' as an object of irreconcilable conflict followed by its certain and final obliteration. Quite the contrary, recognising the constituting role this figure played for the NSK community, they understood it as part of the political structure of their state. Vanesa Cvahte noticed that in search of a new artistic paradigm on the cusp between the 1980s and 1990s, IRWIN introduced the theorist Eda Čufer – whose strong individual position complicated their established internal communication, but precisely because of this, broke its routine character, and made it extremely productive – into the context of their communal work.<sup>10</sup> Evidence for this may be found in the NSK Embassy project itself, developed by them collectively. Thus, with the same insistence and meticulousness that the artists of IRWIN were seeking associates who would become part of their inner community, they also sought the 'other', with the goal of keeping them on the line of an external horizon. Aleksandr Brener belonged to such 'admired enemies', despite his position of extreme estrangement from NSK's moral and creative catechism, and regardless of his public criticism and even attacks directed towards IRWIN, he nevertheless invariably received their support and solidarity.

However, another point is important. On confronting 'Them', NSK citizens did not only construct their own associations, but also created new communities. In other words, 'Us' confronting 'Them' stimulated them to recognise themselves as a new 'Us'.

Thus, on 12 Leninsky Prospect, an entire group of Moscow artists, who had not earlier identified with each other, reached an agreement on their collective responsibility and position. It was there that the consolidation of the first post-Soviet generation of artists occurred, onto whom the mission of taking the first steps of art of a new epoch was bestowed. In a span of several months, Yuri Leiderman, Vadim Fishkin, Anatoliy Osmolovsky, Dmitry Gutov, Oleg Kulik, and some other distinct individuals, became involved with the work of Regina gallery. Later on, they were the main figures involved in my projects of the 1990s, in which we were collectively developing the 'APT-ART INT' paradigm. Thus, having finally constructed their sovereignty in Moscow during the span of their first international mission, NSK citizens were also simultaneously constructing the Moscow art community of the 1990s.

Finally, a third point of significance. The sovereignty of the NSK State did not close the loop of the NSK community on the circle of its founders. Quite the contrary, from embassy to embassy, from project to project, the population of a new state was growing. Having provoked the initiation of a new community in Moscow, IRWIN later included it in their work, inviting Yuri Leiderman, Aleksandr Brener and Vadim Fishkin to be participants in their subsequent project, *Transnacionala*. Overall, the recruitment of new citizens did not only happen through the experience of personal interaction, but also following rational, bureaucratic and publicly accessible legal procedures. This led to the situation where the possessors of an NSK state passport, having acquired autonomy from the founding fathers of the State, initiated the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress'. As a result, IRWIN had to acknowledge that their project had suffered paradoxical collisions:

If we keep in mind that NSK State in Time was conceived as an art project, then it is necessary to admit that it is most unusual how an 'artefact' has emancipated itself to such an extent that it formulates congress findings, a text in which a high degree of agreement with the principles of its own coming into being is declared, and on the other hand, how a social body, at least seemingly, recognises itself to a significant extent as an 'artefact'.<sup>11</sup>

However, the contention that such a dialectic of the sociopolitical and aesthetic qualities must be seen as a paradox can be debated. In reality, the state identification with a work of art has a long history: skipping over Jacob Burckhardt, it transcends to Aristotle. According to him, a *polis*, a state, manifests itself because of free communication between individuals who find themselves on the other side of economics, the family and all base necessities. Aristotle called that kind of interaction between individuals striving to the top, to perfection, to immortality – the kind of communication reminiscent of the one taking place on 12 Leninsky Prospect — political. This is communication during which each individual ambition towards a common good, becomes everyone's good. As a result, the common good becomes the sun around which everyone is centered, but in distinction to the sun, which everyone can see,

11 IRWIN, 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, October 2010.

this is a mentally conceived and invisible sun of their communal existence. From this approach, it follows that a state is what citizens create in the process of their interaction when they communicate because of a beautiful goal, and in the form of beautiful activities. This signifies that there are no initially imposed canons; that the state is not an example from some series, or a private case of a bunch of laws. Rather, it is an initial, beautiful reality in and of itself in whichever form people create it. In other words, it is a work of art.

Finally, in conclusion, I will note that the NSK state could also be evaluated as a complex, dialectical and, in this case, largely paradoxical case. Created in order to form and strengthen friendship and collegiality, it initially exemplified what Max Weber defined as a patrimonial state. However, a rationalised procedure of handing out citizenships and ambassadorial representation, a pre-built programme of events of the embassy and other initiatives of the NSK state, reveal the characteristics of a contemporary rational state. Moreover, by affirming itself through external dialogue, and by free inclusion of other actors and communities, the IRWIN project can be recognised in the ideal of a participatory state.

The complex nature of the sovereign community of the NSK state has prompted its distinction from those communities with which it collaborated in Moscow in 1992. If, back then, at the very beginning of a post-Communist evolution, these distinctions did not catch the eye, then subsequently, they became more and more obvious, drawing these communities further and further apart. Kulik's projects in the Regina gallery, having laid the foundations for the contemporary art industry in Russia, had predisposed its investment towards rationalised-industrialised production and representation in art, which gained centre stage in the subsequent decade. This line of development, pushing the belief of the effectiveness of alienated rational procedures to its very limit, was ready to preserve elements of patrimonialism, although, narrowed down to a system of backdoor strategic decisions and concealed under the superficial layer of formalised norms and procedures. Free participation was absolutely ruled out of place in this paradigm. The public was not imagined as an active participant in artistic dynamics, but as a mass formed from the outside, imputed the role of a passive consumer. The subsequent evolution of this paradigm predisposed its initiators to withdraw from an exploring culture, and to subsequently disperse in the machine of industrial art production.

Concerning those dialogical projects in which I was interested, along with other artists unified by the NSK Embassy, what distinguished them from the experience of the NSK State was a programmatic refusal of forming their communities through external formal-rational procedures. In my text, 'The Institutionalisation of Friendship'<sup>12</sup> written in 1998, I did not simply sum up the experience of IRWIN's project, on which the publication centered in the first place, but summed up the experience of Moscow artists. An apologia of friendship as a constitutive force of social-artistic activities proposed in this text, was, in substance, an attempt to join the elements of pre-modern patrimonialism and post-modern participation, thus avoiding involvement in a modern state altogether. It is obvious that such a model of

12 V. Misiano, 'The Institutionalisation of Friendship', *Transnacionala* (exh. cat.), Ljubljana: Studentska založba, Ljubljana, 1999. pp.182-192.

project-based work could not recognise itself in the act of declaring sovereignty, preferring to stay in the sphere of fluid, self-perpetuating formation.

For this reason, in the subsequent decade, cultural production in Russia began to be co-opted by art corporations, and the community once-consolidated in the NSK Embassy, not protected by state sovereignty, could not foster an equitable diplomatic dialogue with them, preferring to depart into alternative zones – the zones of ‘exodus’ and ‘disobedience’. Such a choice was a political one, and new dialogical communities of the 2000s – for example, the platform ‘*Čto Delat?*’/‘What Is to Be Done?’, were consolidated by an activist practice. However, collaborative work in creating political discourse could not be considered – in the Aristotelian sense – political, since people participating in these works do not strive towards new heights, towards perfection and immortality. As such, an association of political activists is not a political community, and therefore, it is not a work of art. And that is why, if for IRWIN, the creation of a political community was, in fact, their work of art, then in the 2000s, in the pursuit of activist communities, political and artistic practices became watered down in order to attempt to unify again, with renewed force, in the future.

*Ceglie Messapica,*  
2011, *Moscow/*  
*Bangkok,* 2012.

*Translated by*  
*Gregory Gan*



NSK, *NSK State Berlin,* 1993  
NSK, *NSK State Sarajevo,* 1995



New Collectivism, *NSK Post Office Ljubljana*, 1994



New Collectivism, *NSK Passport Office Dublin*, 2004

## The State as a Work of Art *Tomaž Mastnak*



New Collectivism, *NSK Information Office Helsinki*, (Men's choir Huutajat), 2003

1 Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch*, vol.3 of J. Burckhardt, *Gesammelte Werke*, Basel: Benno Schwabe & Co, 1955, p.2.

2 J. Burckhardt, *Über das Studium der Geschichte: Der Text der 'Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen' auf Grund der Vorarbeiten von Ernst Ziegler nach den Handschriften* (ed. Peter Ganz), Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, p.173 ff., p.254 ff.

3 See Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002, p.149.

4 J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, op. cit., pp.2-3.

5 *Ibid.* pp.3-4.

6 Machiavelli used the term 'arte dello stato' in a letter to Francesco Vettori, 10 December 1513, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere* (ed. C. Vivanti), Torino: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997-99, vol.2, p.297.

7 J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, op. cit., p.5.

8 Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1526-1651*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.xvii.

The state came into being 'as a work of art'. This is Jacob Burckhardt's famous dictum in his classic study of Renaissance culture or – as the English translation has it – 'civilization'.<sup>1</sup> The Swiss historian, however, did not want to say that the state was a work of what we call 'fine art'. In his lectures on the study of history, Burckhardt incorporated art, in the sense of fine art, into culture, which he in turn understood as one of the three great forces of history, along with the state and religion.<sup>2</sup> Art, in the current and common sense, was therefore not inherent to the state.

Under the heading 'Der Staat als Kunstwerk' ('The State as a Work of Art'), Burckhardt discussed a number of pre-Renaissance and Renaissance Italian principalities, which were inspired by Emperor Frederick II and Ezzelino da Romano. Frederick II was bitterly denounced by his papal enemies as the 'baptized Sultan of Sicily'.<sup>3</sup> The kernel of truth in this accusation, as acknowledged by Burckhardt, was that Frederick appreciated the administrative expertise of the Saracen former conquerors of Sicily and turned it into one of the resources of his own power. For Frederick II, the measures of effective administration were an accurate census, methodical exaction of taxes, monopolisation of the means of violence, and the crushing of any dissent. According to Burckhardt, Frederick II annihilated the feudal state (characterised by overlapping jurisdictions and a plethora of privileges, exemptions, rights and liberties) and transformed the people into a disciplined multitude: bereft of will, unarmed and tax-paying. The entity that came into historical existence was the state as a calculated, consciously-made creature:<sup>4</sup> the state as a work of art. A throne was now founded neither on an actual or presumed hereditary or some other right, nor on the pretences of faith, but on the conscious use of all available means with the exclusive regard to the end: the acquisition and maintenance of power. Ezzelino, whom Frederick II helped to firmly seize power in the March of Treviso (just across the border of today's Slovenia), was a pioneer in founding power on mass murder and endless atrocities.<sup>5</sup> This was art in the sense of the *arte dello stato*, in which Machiavelli advised the prince:<sup>6</sup> the art of power. The power of art, on the other hand, was quite limited. Artists in the fine sense of the word had a subsidiary role to play: tyrants loved to have a few of them in their entourage to increase their own fame;<sup>7</sup> they were an ornament, not the source, of power.

The Baroque, too, knew of the state as a work of art. Thomas Hobbes was rightly called the foundational philosopher of our – modern – political institutions,<sup>8</sup> and his *Leviathan* (1651) one of the greatest works of political philosophy. In the introduction to *Leviathan*, Hobbes wrote:

NATURE (the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World) is by the *Art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal. For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principall part within; why may we not say, that all *Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the *Heart*, but a *Spring*; and the *Nerves*, but so many *Strings*; and the *Joynts*, but so many *Wheels*, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer? *Art* goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent work of Nature, *Man*. For by *Art* is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended.<sup>9</sup>

The state is a work of art, and again, this art is not ‘fine art’ but rather craft, the skilful employment of principles and methods gleaned from nature. But art, here, is the opposite of nature. Artificial is that which is not natural. And the meaning of the state as a work of art is that the state is the creation of man; that the state is the other of nature the opposite of the state of nature. The state is a man-made ‘Artificial Man’, and since there was no higher authority on earth than the state, Hobbes also likened it to a ‘Mortall God’. To that mortal god, he said, ‘wee owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence’, that is, security, and hence obedience.

Hobbes called the immortal god ‘the Artificer’, but he gave no name to the man who, ‘by Art’, generated the state. He certainly did not call him an artificer, neither did he call him an artist. But when he discussed the unmaking, the destruction of the state through civil war, he wrote that that destruction was brought about by ‘artifices’. The word figures in the title of pirated editions of his *Behemoth: the history of the causes of the civil wars of England, and of the counsels and artifices by which they were carried on from the year 1640 to the year 1660*.<sup>10</sup> Hobbes also used the word ‘artifice’ in the book itself.

‘Artifice’ has a Machiavellian air to it, but unlike Burckhardt’s interpretation, where the state-makers were ‘Machiavellians’ (*avant la lettre*), the Machiavellians in Hobbes were the un-makers of the state.<sup>11</sup> In Hobbes’s explanation of the ‘Generation of that great LEVIATHAN’,<sup>12</sup> that is, of the making of the state, there is no artifice, and actually no (fine) art either. If art is the imitation of nature (of God’s creation of the world and its governance), the social contract through which the state is created is an exit from nature: the leaving behind of the absolute freedom and total war of the *status naturalis* for the artificial world of state-guaranteed safety (and of obedience owed to the sovereign).

Hobbes, however, called on art for help with impressing on his audience his idea of the state. In the best tradition of emblematic title pages, Hobbes commissioned the engraving of *Leviathan’s* frontispiece, which he almost surely helped design. (The frontispiece’s visual symbols were a second language in which writers of the period expressed themselves.)<sup>13</sup> It features a gigantic man, who towers over a cultivated land-

9 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (ed. R. Tuck), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.9.

10 Hobbes failed to obtain royal permission to publish the work, and in the last year of his life a few pirated editions appeared.

11 See T. Mastnak, ‘Making of History: The Politics of Hobbes’s *Behemoth*’, in *Oxford Handbook of Hobbes* (ed. K. Hoekstra and A.P. Martinich), New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

12 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, *op. cit.*, p.120.

13 See Margery Corbett and Ronald Lightbown, *The Comely Frontispiece: The Emblematic Title-page in England, 1550-1660*, London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1979 (introduction).

14 See, for example, Keith Brown, ‘The artist of the *Leviathan* Title-Page’, *The British Library Journal* 4 (1978); Corbett and Lightbown, *The Comely Frontispiece*, chap.20; Reinhardt Brandt, *Das Titelblatt des Leviathan und Goyas El Gigante*, in *Furcht und Freiheit: Leviathan-Diskussion 300 Jahre nach Thomas Hobbes* (ed. U. Bernbach and K. Kodalle), Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982; Marco Bertozzi, *L’enigma del Leviatano*, Bologna: Italo Bovolenta, 1983; Reinhardt Brandt, *Das Titelblatt des Leviathan, Leviathan, Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* 1 (1987); Horst Bredekamp, *Thomas Hobbes visuelle Strategien. Der Leviathan: Urbild des modernen Staates, Werkillustrationen und Portraits*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999; Noel Malcolm, ‘The Title Page of *Leviathan*, Seen in a Curious Perspective’, in *idem*, *Aspects of Hobbes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, chap.7; Dario Gamboni, ‘Composing the Body Politic: Composite Images and Political Representation, 1651-2004’, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel), Karlsruhe: ZKM, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005.

15 See Quentin Skinner, ‘Hobbes and the Purely Artificial Person of the State’, in *idem*, *Visions of Politics, Volume III: Hobbes and Civil Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; cf. Jean Terrel, *Le vocabulaire de Hobbes*, Paris: Ellipses, 2003, p.35.

16 Carl Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes: Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols*, Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1938. On the aestheticisation of politics, see Rainer Stollmann, *Ästhetisierung der Politik: Literaturstudien zum subjektiven Faschismus*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978.

scape, his torso composed of countless small human figures facing his crowned head; he is holding a sword in his right hand and a crozier in the left; in the right and left column of the tripartite lower half of the page are symbols of secular and spiritual power, and the title of the book and the author’s name appear on a curtain draped between them. Above the giant’s head, at the very top of the page, a biblical verse is written in cursive: *Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei*. It is verse 41.24 of the *Book of Job* (in Vulgate’s numbering), and a description of Leviathan: There is no power on earth that equals him.

There is probably no visual image in, or of, modern political philosophy that equals this frontispiece of Hobbes’s in impressiveness, power, profoundness or fame. Scholars have worked on determining the identity of the artist, compared the engraving with the original drawing, studied the frontispiece within the history of art and developed ideas about Hobbes’s ‘visual strategies’, and speculated about the relationship of this emblematic title page with Hobbes’s political philosophy, epistemology or his views on art.<sup>14</sup> But what matters here is simply that the frontispiece is a visual representation of Hobbes’s theory of public authority as laid out in the pages of *Leviathan*. As such, the frontispiece images are not, strictly speaking, an artistic rendering of the state but of Hobbes’s notion of the state. The state as a work of art is to be sought and found in Hobbes’s words, not in their visual representation on the title page. This visual material is ancillary; art is the maidservant of philosophy. The title page is a work of art that depicts the philosopher’s notion of the state as a work of art. Since central to Hobbes’s theory of the state in *Leviathan* is the concept of representation (and the related concept of the person),<sup>15</sup> the artificial person dominating the frontispiece is a representation of representation.

Unlike these illustrious precedents, the NSK state *is* a work of art in what is today the common meaning of the word art – though it is not a common work of art. It is a work of art, not of *techné*; made by artists, not by artisans or craftsmen. That a work of art has come to be a state calls for attention and analysis. It may tell us something about art as well as about our contemporary state.

The artists, here, have outgrown their Renaissance role of a legitimising ornament of princely power. They are neither executing a political philosopher’s idea in a visual medium nor are they aestheticising the brute political power (as some artists paradigmatically did in that time when Carl Schmitt laid his dirty hands on Hobbes’s *Leviathan*).<sup>16</sup> Rather, to the extent that their state is a conceptual construction, they have undertaken a work of political philosophy; and to the extent that this work of art of theirs has produced political effects, they are politicians. They are, one may say, statesmen.

In a sense, this is not surprising. These particular artists have always spoken the language of the state; and those words, that were there in the beginning, in due course become a state. But the state that was there in that beginning, as one of the externalities of the NSK – the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia – ceased to exist. The NSK state is not the heir of that deceased state; it does not relate to that

state that is no more, like the papacy related to the Holy Roman Empire. (In the memorable words of Hobbes, the papacy 'is no other, than the *Ghost* of the deceased *Romane Empire*, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof'.)<sup>17</sup> In its relation to the state as it exists today, the NSK state is, rather, the heir of what the pre-state NSK was in relation to the then existing state: an enactment of its vital principles, a spotlight on its blind spots. This time not on stage, but 'in time'.

In its creators' nod to absolutism, the NSK state bears relation to Hobbes's state: the absoluteness of power is the key trait of sovereignty. But as 'artificers', the artists did not need to work out the mechanism of authorisation of the sovereign power, which in Hobbes marks the exit from the state of nature. Here, it was not the citizens-in-the-making – men exiting the state of nature – that created the state, and in the act of creation authorised the sovereign; just the opposite, the state began to generate its citizens. As the authors, the artists acted by authority directly, *ab initio*. And as such, they bear responsibility for their action.

These traits of the NSK state apply to existing states – with qualifications. Sovereignty is a trait that is being eroded. What comes together with this erosion, or deconstruction, of sovereignty is a petering out of a clearly located and defined authorisation of supreme power. This, in turn, creates irresponsible power.

Nominally, the fundamental authorisation mechanism in our time is elections. Through deliberation and exercise of their fundamental political right and responsibility as voters, citizens constitute public authority, while the elected authorities are responsible to the citizens' electoral body. In fact, elections are being increasingly managed by campaign money, marketing and PR virtuosos, and are losing their civic meaning. On the one hand, citizens are being turned into smart shoppers, who spend their currency in the act of voting without having much say in the making of political vendibles and still less in influencing what comes out of the chosen merchandise. (Voters are strange consumers since they are not choosing what they themselves will consume – beyond the periodic consumption of their right to vote – but are choosing the consumers of their choice and trust. Elections are clearly not modelled on trading or transaction.) On the other hand, politicians who run for offices are being turned into 'tradefull merchants',<sup>18</sup> who primarily (but not transparently) owe their responsibility not to those who have bought into their campaign but to the donors who made the campaign possible. Citizens' votes are thus becoming negligible and the authorisation process (or act) inconsequential.

The authorisation process is not becoming inconsequential only from within, through the political evacuation of elections, but also from without. Elected governments are getting more willing or more easily coerced into acting by apparent or obscure higher powers. Such higher powers may be stronger states, or associations of states, or personified invisible powers such as 'financial markets'. Elected European governments have been, for the past ten years, a prime example of acting way beyond the mandate given in elections, whether one thinks of entering unprovoked and undeclared foreign wars or appeasing big finance. As of writing this essay, in the

<sup>17</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, *op. cit.*, p.480.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti XV: Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle*, in E. Spenser, *Amoretti*, London: H.L., 1617. For the broader context, see John McVeagh, *Tradefull Merchant: The Portrayal of the Capitalist in Literature*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

late autumn of 2011, either in the newly democratised Tunisia or in Italy, as well as elsewhere, the elected or imposed powers that be are turning to financial markets for legitimacy, not to the people. Worse still, the authorisation process has been simply sidestepped. Two European countries, Greece and Italy, have unelected governments with emergency powers.

The lack of authorisation is something the NSK state shares with the real and existing democratic states. There is, however, a key difference between them. The NSK statesmen are authors; statesmen in what counts as the core of global democracy are not. The former do not need authorisation, since their very act as artists is authorisation; the latter do. Since they are not authors and act without authorisation, they are usurpers. As to the NSK, one could say that political theatre is their *métier*; as to the latter, their political theatre is replacing the legislative and judicial process.

The NSK state and the 'really existing' democratic states may be made of the same stuff. Ultimately we come to realise that they are all made by artists. But a difference remains. The NSK state, a creation of the artists who, as authors, cannot shed their responsibility, makes it clear that the elected usurpers of the real and existing democratic states are to be seen not as artists but as con artists. The difference is crucial. Since the real and existing democratic states are not works of art but rest on artifices, we are witnessing dictatorships emerging from the democratic chrysalis.

*New York*, 2011



IRWIN in collaboration with the:  
 Albanian Army, *NSK Garda Tirana*, 1998  
 Kosovo Army, *NSK Garda Prishtina*, 2002  
 Montenegrin Army, *NSK Garda Cetinje*, 2002  
 Bosnian Army, *NSK Garda Sarajevo*, 2006

IRWIN in collaboration with the Croatian Army, *NSK Garda Zagreb*, 2000

# Contextualisation of the Notion of State and of Contemporary Art in Global Neoliberal Capitalism

Marina Gržinić

I have been following the work of Irwin and the NSK from the moment of their very first appearance in 1980. I have written several books with chapters dedicated to their work and published numerous texts on different topics related to it.<sup>1</sup> For me, the question now is this: is global capitalism – prone as it is to circulation of texts and information – capable of dealing with (and does it want to deal with) interpretations that were elaborated in the spaces where the productions first took place? Although we live in a world of communication that seems to be without borders, there are strong hegemonic processes of control by the First capitalist world on art, critique and also production coming from worlds that are not the First one. Centres of power (wherever money circulates; private, semi-public and semi-private) that control the spaces of art, theory and criticism within the western institution of contemporary art, and as well the organisation of big events of contemporary art (where power and capital coincides), are made visibly hegemonic. Servitude to these centres is high; money matters, power matters, circulation matters. Of course, those in power change, power shifts, nevertheless the western power centres remain firm, and as such so does the institution of contemporary art.

The key to understanding the changes in contemporary art, not least the contemporary art institution, and also to rethinking, historically and presently, NSK State in Time – resides therefore in the analysis of capitalism. It is necessary to consider the changes of capitalism not only historically, politically and economically (in terms of a shift, proposed by Santiago López Petit, from the past unity of capital and power to the present co-propriety of capital and power), but to also analyse the changes manifested at all levels of neoliberal global, capitalist, social and cultural structures.

Thus the following text will not describe NSK State in Time but will focus instead on a set of changes regarding the state and its ideology within global neoliberal capitalism, in order to conceptualise and contextualise these changes and their effect on Irwin's project.

## 1. Financialisation

In his book *Global Mobilisation: Brief Treatise for Attacking Reality*,<sup>2</sup> Santiago López Petit states that if we think of globalisation as the result of a process, we imply a development and a progression (also, temporarily, a regression, a crisis), and therefore, we are not capable of understanding the way capitalism functions. In such a situation we are ready to accept, almost naturally I would say, fake discourses of morality in which capitalism tries to cover up the outcome of the crisis (the financialisation of

<sup>1</sup> See Marina Gržinić, 'Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK): The Art Groups Laibach, Irwin and Noordung Cosmokinetic Theater Cabinet: New Strategies in the Nineties', *Slovenian Studies Journal*, vol.15, no.1/2, Edmonton, Canada, 1993, pp.5-16; M. Gržinić, 'IRWIN & die Retro-Avantgarde Bewegung = IRWIN & the retro-avant-garde movement', *Cooperativ : Kunstdialoge Ost-West : Stadthaus Ulm, 7. Juli - 3. September 2000* (ed. Friederike Kitschen), Ulm: Stadthaus, 2000, pp.46-55; M. Gržinić, 'IRWIN: 1983-2003', *Art-ist*, no.7, Istanbul, 2003, pp.5-39.

<sup>2</sup> Santiago López Petit, *La movilización global: Breve tratado para atacar la realidad* (Global Mobilisation: Brief Treatise for Attacking Reality), Barcelona: Editorial Traficantes de Sueños, 2009.



IRWIN in collaboration with the Georgian Army, *Was ist Kunst Tbilisi*, 2007

capital) by stating that it was all just some sort of a mistake; as capital is noble, financialisation – making money from money without investing in production – is just a single perversion, a mistake. No! Capitalism, as elaborated by Petit, is not an irreversible process but a reversible and conflictual event. The core of this reversibility is presented in the following way. Petit states that in the world today all is brought back to one single event, and this is not the crisis, but what he calls the *unrestraintment* of capital (in Spanish *des(z)bo(ka)amiento*), that can be more colloquially grasped as *unrestraining* or *unleashing* of capital. Neoliberal globalisation is nothing more than the repetition of this single event, that is, the unleashing of capital. The unleashing of capital creates a paradoxical spatialisation that requires two repetitions: on the one hand, a founding repetition in which a system of hierarchy is *re-established*, leading to the constant reconstruction of a centre and a periphery; and, on the other hand, a so-called de-foundational repetition that presents itself as the erosion of hierarchies, producing dispersion, multiplicity and multi-reality. As argued by Petit, the unleashing of capital implicates both repetitions at once. The unleashing of capital is the only event that – being repeated in any moment and any place – unifies the world and connects everything that is going on within it. According to Petit, repetition is also de-foundational to the degree in which capital repeats indifference for equality. Thus, not only does repetition produce the *jouissance* of minimal difference, but repetition is also a mechanism of control, subjugation and repression.

I can put forward, therefore, three major fields in which Petit tackles global capitalism: reality, capital/power and democracy. These segments are linked together through two almost old-fashioned mechanisms that are evidently still operative today: circularity by way of self-referentiality and empty formalism, on the one side, and tautology that produces obviousness, on the other. This tautology, as argued by Petit, presents itself today as the complete and total coincidence of capitalism and reality. To say that capitalism and reality totally coincide means that today reality is reality. This is precisely the result of a deadly obviousness of the tautological format (that capitalism and reality totally coincide) on which is based our life in neoliberal global capitalism.

The date of the event that made reality and capitalism coincide totally is, according to Petit, 11 September 2001. Petit states that the outcome of what occurred on '9/11' was the excess of reality; it was the moment when reality exploded. Petit warns us that in the global era, the debate between modernity and postmodernity has become obsolete. The global era is a break with modernity and with the postmodern radicalisations of modernity that were developed by Giddens, Beck and Lash. Petit states that the classical concept of modernity is about modernisation. It is presented as an endogenous process; in other words, it is caused by factors within the system. Modernity is presented as the work of reason itself. Likewise, modernity constructs a rationalist image of the world that implicates the duality subject/object, and the distance is, says Petit, that of man and the world. Postmodernism abolishes this distance and situates man inside a world that is made of signs and ahistorical languages. The global era oscillates this distance between zero and infinity. This is why we may feel

the absence of the world and simultaneously witness its overabundance. So it comes as no surprise that most of the theoretical books that have been published recently deal with this oscillation. The limit of the postmodern discourse resides in the contemplation of reality as neutral; that it has reached political neutrality. But what it is necessary to do today is to call for the repoliticisation of reality and to de-link ourselves from its political neutrality.

Modernity continues to be important, as it allows us to rethink two emancipative projects that failed: the Enlightenment and communism. For the first project the failures are historically clear, not only do we have the brutal history of colonialism but also, in the recent past, we have the Shoah and Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We could go on and make a list of repetitions: Rwanda, Darfur, Chechnya, Gaza, etc.; it is certain that colonialism led directly to Nazism and fascism. The second big project of modernism, communism, has not been reflected well enough either (as a revolutionary project that involves specific and radical changes in economic institutions and relations of power, and not just an abstract idea of revolution), due to the past failure of Stalinism. The future of communism is paradoxical therefore, as it is today emptied of its historical context in order to be presented as an infinite playground model of *jouissance* for emancipated Western intellectuals. I suggest, in relation to Alain Badiou, a political act of *forcing*; an approach that insists on a continued analysis of knowledge/coloniality/modernity. This forcing should focus on the demand to de-link contemporary art and theory from contemporary forms of epistemological coloniality, as defined by Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova.<sup>3</sup> Why? Because contemporary epistemological coloniality emphasises and supports only the Western matrix of the present (post)Enlightenment and (post)Historical world and does not take into consideration the epistemological breaks and shifts taking place in the so-called 'exterior', or rather, at the 'edges' of Western European scientific thought.

## 2. Abnormal content, normal form

I have presented the system of global capitalism, and its reality, to expose a logic of repetition, that has as its outcome, circularity, obviousness and formalisation. These exist at the core of the institution of contemporary art today. I name such a mechanism that simultaneously produces and eschews content, leaving us with an empty form, a *performative repetitive mechanism*. This mechanism will help us to understand what it is that makes more or less all large contemporary exhibitions and projects obsolete in terms of resistance and critique. To explain this differently: what we have today within exhibitions, especially big powerful exhibition projects (biennials, documentas, manifestas, etc.), is a myriad of art works that present unbelievable features of contemporary capitalist exploitation, expropriations, as content. These 'features' are more and more visible, they show it all, *tout court*, without any mediation and are increasingly intensified. They present art works that show capitalist corruption, police repression, massacres of people and animals, all made visible with more and more

<sup>3</sup> See M. Gržinić, 'De-Coloniality', *Reartikulacija*, Issue No. 6, 2009, <http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=114> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

drastically elaborated dimensions, reasons, connections of exploitation, expropriation, executions, etc., though all stay, so to speak, impotent.

A perfect example of the above is the 11th International Istanbul Biennial (2009) curated by What, How & for Whom (WHW), a non-profit organisation / visual culture and curators' collective formed in 1999 and based in Zagreb, Croatia. The biennial had as its title 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?' which is also the title of the song that closes the second act of the play *The Threepenny Opera*, written in 1928 by Bertolt Brecht in collaboration with Elisabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill.

As WHW's introduction to the 11th International Istanbul Biennial states,<sup>4</sup> Brecht proposed with *The Threepenny Opera* a transformation of the 'theatre apparatus' through an alteration of the existing notions of theatre 'genres' and the play's relationship with the audience. This transformation was based on Brecht's assertion that 'A CRIMINAL IS A BOURGEOIS AND A BOURGEOIS IS A CRIMINAL'. This assertion was also at the core of WHW's concept for the biennial. WHW not only affirmed that they were 'working for the criminals', but in doing so constructed a framework around the biennial that took away the possibility to intervene critically; it transformed the critical discourse 'working for the criminals' into a normalised fact, into a constative.

Global capitalism colonises life by appropriating language, not only at a colloquial level but also in its discursive formulations on which society and its different institutions stand. Moreover, this 'truth' today is not hidden behind any global conspiracy; on the contrary, it is brutal in the banal simplicity of its pseudo-logical surface, precisely as it is stated: 'A CRIMINAL IS A BOURGEOIS AND A BOURGEOIS IS A CRIMINAL'. We could say: so what? Though with reference to Brecht, the profit is less banal, and more divinized. Actually I could argue, paradoxically, using Boris Groys's thoughts, that what we get is contemporary art as pure commodity. Groys stated that commodity is a paradox that has lost its paradoxical quality.<sup>5</sup>

The content is, at the same moment of its presentation, made impotent through the mechanism that I term performative repetition, which functions as a process of voiding, emptying, extracting the meaning from content. What is left out of the discussion is precisely the ideological form in which the mentioned art works and projects are presented. I claim that this form presents, or encapsulates, a process of not only diminishing, but also in many cases completely nullifying what in terms of content was made visible. In the past, the social reality was presented as 'normal'; it was displayed precisely differently from the violence and dispossession that was occurring in everyday life. Therefore, in terms of its reflection, on the level of (art) form, it was necessary to produce something 'abnormal'; as a formal invention or as an excessive surplus (in accordance with the social and political system in which they appeared, be it socialism or capitalism), in order to say that what was in fact normality on the level of content, was a lie. But what we have today is precisely the obverse; on the level of content the world is captured as it is, in its full extension of abnormality, monstrosity, exploitation, expropriation, while on the level of form, this abnormality is normalised; is presented in such a way that the meaning of powerful content becomes empty, obsolete.

4 See What, How & for Whom (WHW), 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?' [http://www.iksftp.com/11b.iksv.org/icsayfa\\_en.asp?cid=6&k1=content&k2=conceptual](http://www.iksftp.com/11b.iksv.org/icsayfa_en.asp?cid=6&k1=content&k2=conceptual) (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

5 See Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, London: Verso, 2009, p.4.

Content is abnormal and the form is normal; and moreover, form-misrecognition is today presented consciously, snobbishly stylised, so to speak, out of all proportion. In such a situation, the knowledge that is 'captured' through scientific, or art, work is transformed through a performative politics of repetition into a pure ideological knowledge, but with a proviso saying that therefore we should not be preoccupied as it's all anyway just a pure process of performativity. As a result, what we get today is not just (turned) upside down, but an ideology made 'unconscious' and presented in the form of a game or a joke that is given a life of its own. To put it another way, what is clear on the level of content is on the level of form not sexy or obvious enough, to the extent of being redundant. What we have today is another misrecognition that is not misrecognition at all, but a reflected cognition that takes as its basis the ideological misrecognition of the 1970s, and repeats it in a way to make it ridiculous. The materiality of ideology is taken as raw material to be integrated in performative representations where this materiality is consciously set back to the level of the imaginary.

Making reference to Petit, we can state that the repetitive performative mechanism functions as indeterminacy, indecision, irresolution or what he calls *gelatinisation*. The materiality of intervention is now a process of multiplication that removes, empties, the ground from its materiality. The repetitive performative mechanism becomes opaque precisely through a process of transparency that is performed through repetition. Gelatinisation corresponds today, as argued by Petit, to global capitalism as reification corresponded to modernity. If reification existed in relation to the distinction between the living and the dead, gelatinisation requires a triadic model, according to Petit, of the living, the dead and the inert. Gelatinisation means giving an account of reality that presents itself as being occulted, abstract and transparent. Reality is at the same time alive and dead and, therefore, it is multi-reality. I will claim that gelatinisation is the solid surrounded by the liquid that is the repetitive performative mechanism. As stated by Petit, it is a double process, of opening and closing. What is even more horrifying is that closing effectuates obviousness. Gelatinisation means reality is covered with obviousness. Politically it presents, as argued by Petit, a catastrophe.

### 3. The control of migration in Europe

In its most basic sense, Europe, according to Angela Mitropoulos, is today constituted by 'the problem of the legal form of value, of its imposition and perseverance', as well as by the problem of 'origin and lineage'. Or, as was pointed out by Kwame Nimako, director of The National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee), Amsterdam:

Now that the Berlin wall (in 1989) had fallen, Western Europe had Eastern Europe to go to and they could do away with Africa. Africa was no longer relevant. African migration started to be controlled. This is the major

preoccupation of Europe today – how to prevent Africans from coming to Europe; now Eastern Europe has become the source of full agricultural production. Another factor is the civilization mission of the ‘former’ Western Europe in Eastern Europe. They are going to civilize the Eastern Europeans, to teach them democracy, to teach them how to treat the Roma citizens, to teach them about race relations and human rights. Western Europe ‘solved’ all these problems – the problem of education, the problem of development, the problem of freedom – and it is the rest that has to be taught. From the point of view of race relations, it also marginalises the black community, because once Europe becomes larger, the black community becomes small.<sup>6</sup>

6 See Kwame Nimako's talk at the workshop on 'Education, Development, Freedom', Duke University, Durham, USA (25–27 February, 2010), workshop organised by Walter Mignolo at the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities, Duke University, <http://trinity.duke.edu/globalstudies/education-development-freedom> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

If we do not take into account this substitution of roles – or to be precise, this repetition of roles – the replacement of Africa by the former Eastern Europe (as a paradoxical and obverse repetition) – we cannot understand decoloniality in the European context. Why? Because decoloniality functions as/in/at the frontier where past colonialism and the neoliberal colonial present meet. It is at this meeting place where slavery, wage labour, aesthetics and political economy take place. In other words, as stated by Mitropoulos, ‘origin and lineage are nowhere more disputed and uneasy than in the frontier’, or, it is ‘at the frontier that the boundaries of property law and its tenure unfold, that legitimate labour (the very distinction between wage labour and slavery) and authorised reproduction (as with the master’s legally recognised and bastard children) are decided.’<sup>7</sup>

7 See Angela Mitropoulos, ‘Legal, Tender’, *Reartikulacija*, no.7, Ljubljana, 2009. <http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=698> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

The European Union functions in precisely such a way today by transforming mostly migrant labour into pure slavery (and not only in Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Slovenia, etc.). In Slovenia, migrant workers coming from the former republics of the common state known as Yugoslavia are today working in conditions of slavery; excluded from the law, they become ‘non-existent’, lacking the most basic human rights. Or even more precisely, what occurs at the Schengen border (that is, the frontier between the European Union and the rest of Europe) can be put in parallel with another border, the Tijuana border (32 km from downtown San Diego, the busiest point of entrance into the USA from Mexico). At the frontier, according to Mitropoulos, that is ‘a violent positing of the frontier as a space of exploration, cultivation and extraction of wealth – in the scarcities that are obliged as precondition and condition of a market in labour, in the criminalisation and recapture of fugitive and wayward (re)production ... there would be a periodic recourse to the naturalising magic of genealogy to settle matters of orderly progression and authenticity’.<sup>8</sup>

8 *Ibid.*

9 See Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur and Belinda Kazeem, ‘Cafe Dekolonial: “Sag Zur Mehlspeis’leise Servus...” [Decolonial café: ‘Say goodbye to the pastry silently...’]. *Reartikulacija*, no.1, Ljubljana, 2007, <http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=418> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

Europe is reborn through a genealogy that excludes all those who are seen from its Western perspective as unimportant. Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur describes the situation in Austria as twofold.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, we have migrants who were invited into the country by the government in the 1960s to aid the post-war reconstruction, and secondly, we have a new, vast group of refugees, fugitives, asylum seekers and deportees (as in August 2010, when France – supposedly legally, as it was based on EU laws

– deported hundreds of Roma back to Romania and Bulgaria) who find themselves caught in the ever-changing immigration laws established and reinforced daily by the EU and implemented and adapted nationally.

On the one side, through the foundational repetition, the system of hierarchy is being constantly reestablished, leading to a repetitive reconstruction of a centre and of a periphery. On the other side, the de-foundational repetition presents itself as the erosion of hierarchies, producing dispersion, multiplicity and multi-reality. This is why, when somebody from let’s say Ukraine or Moldavia (I cannot say Slovenia, as here we are the model of servitude to EU and global capitalism), talks about a centre and periphery, the well-educated Westerners laugh about what they term ‘the old division’, as what they see (as the French would say) is ‘multiplicité, multi-réalité...’. But from time to time, amidst this multiplicity and multi-reality, the police come, as they did in Greece when the students protested, and, without any openness towards the multiplicity of the students’ multi-reality, imprisoned hundreds of them at the university campus; and look – we could see the foundational repetition working quite mercilessly, and even more being backed up by, yes, hundreds of EU laws from Brussels that are then ‘democratically’ used to advise the EU member states. In the case of France, the EU ‘protested’, but the point is that precisely because of the EU’s multiplicity of hegemonic directions that support and reinforce EU institutional racism, France was able to deport hundreds of Roma families to the, as it is termed ‘non-existent’, periphery of the EU.

Some of the processes of ‘vanishing’ Eastern Europe parallel the Latin American situation. Instead of recognising larger social, self-organisational and communal possibilities for new politics, Latin America was ‘sold’, sacrificed to the infrastructure of a capitalist mode of production.<sup>10</sup> With such a move, a critical power was taken from communities and a passage from public to private took place. In such a way, a perverse process of capitalist modernisation took over, one that expropriated the social space and nullified indigenous revolutions and other systems of knowledge. The modernity in Eastern Europe has been and is still passing through similar capitalist visions of modernity that are seen only as a historical repetition of Western modernism in the local (Eastern) framework. What ‘we’ have managed to bring to the present is the old and dead conceptualism from the 1960s/70s, now rediscovered in the former Eastern European context, but not as a political demand to change the ossified institutions of art, but as an individual ‘existential ethos’. Therefore, the social space of socialism is nullified through a Western individualism; Rambo politics is repeated in the former Eastern Europe through the figure of the existentialist conceptual artist that fights for freedom in the totalitarian society.

10 See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York: Picador, 2008. In this book Naomi Klein challenges the popular myth of Milton Friedman’s free-market economic revolution movement’s peaceful global victory. Klein examines free-market ideologue Milton Friedman’s connections to the dictatorship of Pinochet, who overthrew the democratically-elected leadership of Chile with the help of the United States, which regularly took part in coups throughout South America.

#### 4. Former East and ‘Former’ West

Former Eastern Europe and present Western Europe are no longer in opposition, but in a relation of repetition. An excellent case of such a repetition is the project ‘Former

West' that was started in The Netherlands as an international research, publishing and exhibition project, for the period 2009–2012, curated by Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova and Kathrin Rhomberg.<sup>11</sup> 'Former West' is not at all a joke, although it could be seen as such, but is a perfect example of repetition as the key logic of global capitalism today. What does the project do? It makes a claim on a perverse demand for equal redistribution of 'responsibility' and 'positions' between the East and West of Europe. That is, it answers specifically to the demand, urgently imposed by Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that East Germany and West Germany become 'equally' outdated. This is of course substantially funded by new European cultural financial institutions. In the case of Eastern Europe, the 'former' means that the processes of evacuation, abstraction, expropriation, imposed by the West are actually 'over'; as it was proclaimed by Germany in 2009, celebrating its twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the slogan: 'Come, come in the country without borders' (and, I suggest, without memory as well). But in the case of 'Former' Western Europe (as it should be written), it implies a purely performative, empty, speculative gesture. While the East is excluded more and more from the materiality of its history, knowledge, memory, etc., the West is just performing it. It plays with a speculative version of itself; it wants us to think that its roots of power and capital are fictional! But this is not such a strange move today, considering it comes at a time when we talk about financialisation; the word 'former' in front of West, presents a speculative matrix that gives the West the possibility to not be conscious of its own historical and present hegemonic power – and, therefore complicit with the neoliberal capitalist speculative hegemonic matrix. This speculative character of 'Former' Western Europe resembles, with perfect accuracy, the speculative character of financial capitalism at the present, as well as its crisis. Be sure that in the future we can expect projects, symposia and statements in which the imperial colonising forces of Britain, France, Netherlands, etc., will try to prove how they were also colonised in the past, and that what is happening to them in the present is the result of some strange force that has nothing to do with the internal logic of capitalism itself, which has two drives only: making profit at any cost and privatisation.

'Former West' is presented as an unquestionable fact, not even as a thesis. Former Eastern Europe is not an adjective, but a placeholder in time that is accelerated to such a degree that the politics of memory presents itself as a memory of what was once political. To put it another way, what was important at the level of content (the materiality of a certain history) is now made simply obsolete, ridiculous. Alternatively, the now reborn Former West, the old colonial power, wants to convince us that it is *capable* of a process of decolonisation, but, as stated by Achille Mbembe, without actually self-decolonising itself. Similarly to financialisation this new decolonisation is a fictive decolonisation: without contesting its own infrastructural exploitation, inequality and racism, these structures remain in the EU, in fact they are reinforced; the consequences are disastrous.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.formerwest.org> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

## 5. From nation-state to war-state

At this point we have arrived at our penultimate stop. All these transformations, presented in a very schematic way, have brought us to the main question: what are the changes that are present in the current constitution of a contemporary state within global capitalism?

The *proliferation* of new states after the fall of the Berlin Wall (in the so called post- post-Cold War era) was only possible because of the simultaneous *disintegration* of the Westphalian principle of the sovereignty of nation-states. What the 1648 Peace of Westphalia treaty had established was a way of working and managing the world almost until the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Westphalian model is recognised by international relations scholars as the modern, Western-originated power principle that established an international system of states, multinational corporations and organisations as sovereign subjects. This 'proliferation-disintegration' mechanism took place with the fall of the Berlin Wall and is based on the two processes working simultaneously but not necessarily visibly linked. Though entangled, these two processes are perceived as disconnected, and it is this logic that enabled big international powers to succeed in maintaining *order* in the mass of new states 'reborn' with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The uneasiness provoked by the proliferation of new states therefore was not solved as in the past with world powers' direct and brutal force of control. Rather, it was resolved through an intensified process of disintegration of the Westphalian principle of nation-states' sovereignty and the transformation of the imperial nation-states into war-states.

It is at this point that *global justice* enters the equation. *What does global justice* have to do with these changes? It facilitated, initiated and implemented the transition of imperial nation-states to war-states and allowed for the proliferation of numerous new states without the old nation-state sovereignty. In the trajectory of capitalism's development we can grasp the notion of a transition of sovereignty from nation-state sovereignty to transnational institutions of power and war-state politics. This transition has curbed the sovereign nation-state since the 1990s. Until that moment the old nation-state prevailed, but today nation-states can no longer give amnesty, at least theoretically, to those who have committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.<sup>12</sup> In fact, we can clearly see the development of a new sovereign entity – the war-state.

Transitional justice and the demand for 'universal' respect of human rights played a key role in this process. Global justice was the framework in which these processes were conceptualised and naturalised. This is why, within such a context, the question posed by Hazan – whether the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, with the subsequent de facto partitioning of Kosovo, and the 2003 Iraq War reflect higher principles, or are simply the US and the West's promotion of their political and economic interests – is of primal importance. Those without economic and military power have to accept the global capitalism protocol of international justice that does not apply,

<sup>12</sup> The following book is important for this section of the text: see Pierre Hazan, *Judging War, Judging History: Behind Truth and Reconciliation*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010. Cf. p.152.

however, when the interests of major power forces/war-states (the US, Russia and China) are at stake. In the case of Srebrenica it is therefore accepted by the international community that the Dutch soldiers/UN have no need to show repentance.<sup>13</sup>

Pierre Hazan points out the genealogical shift in the principle of universal justice from the 1990s to the present day, resulting from the second major reshuffling in the international community brought about by the events of 11 September 2001. The major difference between post-1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and post 2001 (the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers in New York) is that the majority of cases listed in the 2000s – unlike the 1990s ‘ethical wars’ (as they were called) – remain in open conflict or prosecuted on the basis of acts of terrorism. The 1990s cases therefore involve societies themselves in transition: the ex-dictatorships of South America, the ex-communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, the post-apartheid of South Africa – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – and the Rwandan holocaust. In 1995, the victims of gross human rights violations were invited to go before the South African TRC and give testimonies about their experience. This transition, as Hazan says, was less about ‘criminalization’ than about a certain social reconstruction. In the 2000s, Belgian, British, New Zealand and Spanish national courts, which act under the principle of global jurisdiction, hold tribunals and commissions of enquiry for international crimes (war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of terrorism).

According to Hazan, the history of transitional justice has three principal stages that frame a world we have been witnessing over the last twenty years. In these two decades we talk about the post-Cold War period that has changed the world radically. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, globalisation shaped a new world order to allocate capital and privatise public goods as well as to make profit.

The first period described by Hazan focuses on the steps that satisfy the post-Fordist model of labour mobility and connects to waning dictatorship(s). It began with the Argentinean truth commission’s establishment and ended with the 1995 South African TRC. If the first stage had a clear division, with perpetrators on the one side and the victims on the other, the second stage was marked by a transition and multiplication of ethnic identities. Occurring in the 1990s, the second stage overlaps with the first, but radically differs from it. It covers the former Yugoslavia and the construction of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993 that failed to stop the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

The second period stretches from 1992 to 2001. It is characterised by the governmentalisation and judicialisation of international relations, placing post-Cold War politics into administrative, legal forms. This period is described as multiculturalist, but it hides its judicialisation of the entire global capitalist society, and even of culture, as the lawsuits against US artists from Andreas Serrano to Critical Art Ensemble illustrate.<sup>14</sup> The second period ends in 2001, when global capitalism is enthroned with a new format of the nation-state – the war-state (the US, Britain, etc.) that demands and shapes justice. If the first and second stages deal with the fall of the Berlin Wall, now it is time to get rid of the iron curtain and open up the full

13 In the Bosnian silver-mining town of Srebrenica in July 1995, one of the most notorious modern acts of genocide took place. While the international community and U.N. peacekeepers/Dutch soldiers looked on, Serb forces separated civilian men from women and killed thousands of Muslim men *en masse*, or hunted them down in the forests.

14 On being exhibited in 1989, U.S. artist Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* (showing a small plastic crucifix supporting the body of Jesus Christ submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine) caused a scandal. U.S. Senators Al D’Amato and Jesse Helms expressed outrage that the piece was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, since it is a federal taxpayer-financed institution. Steve Kurtz is a founding member of the theatre collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE has been frequently invited by cultural institutions to exhibit and perform projects around issues on bio-technologies. In May 2004, Kurtz called 911 to report the death of his wife, Hope Kurtz, from congenital heart failure. At the time of her death CAE were working on an exhibit about genetically-modified agriculture for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Police deemed these materials suspicious and notified the FBI, who detained Kurtz for 22 hours without charge on suspicion of ‘bioterrorism’. What followed was 4 years of torturous law-related mischiefs. In 2008, the various indictments against Kurtz were ruled ‘insufficient’.

15 P. Hazan, *Judging War, Judging History: Behind Truth and Reconciliation*, op. cit., p.152.

16 *Ibid.*, p.36.

17 *Ibid.*, p.38.

18 *Ibid.*, p.33.

19 *Ibid.*

setting of a newly elaborated capitalism that needs markets, cheap labour and administrative frameworks.

After 2001, criminalisation replaces the reconciliation and restoration that characterised the 1990s. The war-states represent great power while the new nation-states are transitional in their restricted (or lack of any) sovereignty, artificially constructed through a biotechnological process of military intervention and capital allocation. The state of Kosovo was born in vitro, without any self-determination, but by a decree of international power(s), i.e., the U.S.

What Hazan describes with these stages is, in fact, the change of the biopolitical into the necropolitical, where acts of genocide and human rights violations are managed by ‘administrative sciences’. As Hazan notes, separating transitional justice into different periods also emphasises its successive reorientation. It reveals a purely instrumental vision – that of the ‘toolbox’ – that tends to hide the ideological changes: the intervention of new actors, the role of Great Powers – in other words, transitional justice’s relation to politics.

If we look closely at South Africa, it presented the promise of restorative justice in the 1990s and the new social engineering of transitional justice. In this context, the contradictory demands for justice and amnesty – namely – resulted in a compromise, and ‘it was a process with which the incapacity of rendering justice was transformed into the affirmation of a higher truth and justice’.<sup>15</sup> In the South African case, complete confession was necessary to get amnesty, and so suddenly amnesty was equivalent to a certain acceptance. Victims’ families obtained the information regarding the murdering of their family members through the perpetrator’s testimonies that would not have been available in a normal trial, and they did so without spending as much money as in a typical trial situation. The result was a coordinated national healing, occurring through the remembering of crimes as part of elaborating a new social contract.<sup>16</sup> Another result was the association of Christian forgiveness with African *ubuntu* (the very essence of being human). Unlike during the Cold War, amnesty was considered the catalyst for reunification *par excellence*.<sup>17</sup> As South Africa illustrated, the truth commission was no longer a default solution but, on the contrary, a positive choice – as much in moral terms as in political and strategic ones.<sup>18</sup> Practically, the confessions and testimonials were concluded with the obligatory point of a certain social reconstruction. Truth, as emphasised by Hazan, is already part of the political and ideological mechanism, presupposing the adjustment of memory.

This is why in 1996, Margalit and Morzkin, as reported by Hazan, suggested that the process through which ‘people are made to vanish has become a distinctive feature of the post-war conceptions of what memory is’.<sup>19</sup> But in the post-Cold War era, sacredness is transferred from the state to the victims. This shift very much follows the functioning of a global capitalism, grounded in hegemony on one side and fragmentation, multi-reality and multi-dispersity on the other. Following the 1970 shift from Fordism to post-Fordist capitalism, this shift articulates a different relation between capital and power. If there was a unity between capital and power in Fordism,

today they stay in a co-propriety relation. Unity meant silence instead of justice that is now changed into truth instead of justice, where truth is the proliferation of victims' stories, measured by co-propriety of capital and power. This transition from silence to speech, from forgetting to recounting, is, according to Hazan, translated into the resurgence of international relations' morality, which seeks to expel violence from history.

The political is fragmented, while geopolitical influences grow unchecked, as we can see by considering how the 2001 Durban Conference conceptualised transitional justice. A world conference 'Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance', the Durban Conference held on 31 August, 2001, was largely overshadowed by 9/11 – a premonitory sign of the move from restorative justice toward criminal justice that began to occur around 2000.

In short, if the South African process of reconciliation offered the last hope of judicialisation as a restorative mechanism for a new social contract, then the Durban conference was a flop and represents the accelerating logic of criminalisation. It signals a radically changing perception of the whole judicialisation of international relations from reconciliation toward punishment. Hazan terms this process 'amer-iglobalisation', which indicates 'the political weight of the American superpower and the attractiveness of the cultural model of the "benevolent hegemon"'.<sup>20</sup> The result is an Agambenian state-of-exception in which international justice becomes an act of perverted benevolence, an exception of the law, yet guaranteed by the law.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

Therefore I can propose a final thesis (based on Hazan and Petit) that if education and religion were exported during colonialism, the time of (neo)coloniality evinces another process. The West exports concepts of justice and the universal order to smoothly safeguard its economic interests with a system of legally framed procedures. Culture and religion can be, as is the case with reform in present-day universities (the Bologna agreement to create European Higher Education), formalised and borderless at the same time. What we have today is the 'international community's neo-Kantian vision of universal values defended by supranational legal institutions'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

It is important to recall that this process impacts the role of NGOs in global capital. If judicialising international relations was spearheaded by the 'new entrepreneurs of norms' – the NGOs – these missionaries of humane globalisation have become moral guardian referees and mediators to the states that have developed a niche market in international relations, such as Switzerland, Sweden, Norway and Canada. Their exemption from WWII and lack of a colonial past privileges them as players on the field of international relations and human rights.

It is obvious that transitional justice with its judicial framework has served the purpose of protecting the interests of global capitalism. International justice has dual, integrated aims: reconciliation between two violently opposed groups (between the civil society and the state) and reconciliation between capitalism and its persistent exploitation. Hopelessly entangled with economy and culture, the future within the logic of the war-state and its established global judicial framework is far from promising.

## 6. The 'missing' link: the racial-state

I have tried to rearticulate in this genealogy of the state in neoliberal global capitalism its major shift and this is the shift from nation-state to war-state. This is connected with the new role that the nation-state plays in the current global system of capital accumulation. Global capital presses on the nation-state in order that it removes the legal-political barriers that prevent unconditional mobility of transnational capital. This is one of the major functions of the European Union legislation that is made operative onto the whole space of the EU. The civilization mission of the old bourgeois Western Colonial European indicates that at the core of the EU is not a benevolent mission to help the Former Eastern European state to 'progress', it is the way new regulation is made effective. It worked in the past through 'gentlemen agreements' that kept concealed outlawed transactions and violent processes of colonisations, and this is what is to be understood and implemented as well today. Capital within global neoliberal capitalism specifically presses onto the legal-political state barriers. The fact we live in this so-called neoliberal global world, is not that we are exempted from borders, but that they are 'removed' in order that the mobility of transnational capital flourishes, while at the same time other borders are reinforced.

The process started already in the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism. During the time of Fordism (whether we talk about capitalist Fordism of a Keynes type or about Fordism in the socialist countries) the state was protecting national capital. In doing this it had to establish a sort of class compromise with the trade unions (the syndicates). This was seen in Fordism as a unity between capital and power that established a jurisdiction and a system of general employment, free public education, public health systems, social security and old-age care. In capitalism this was the case of the welfare state in the Western European space. It is possible to also identify, with Foucault, a nation-state biopolitics that was meant only for the population seen as 'natural' citizens of the nation-state. The others inside the nation state and outside meant simply nothing. Racism was a specific inclusion with exclusion; it was a situation of apartheid within and outside the nation-state. Rastko Močnik has argued that the function of the nation-state and its state apparatuses was to 'coordinate' the interests of national capital (with state coercion, of course) and provide life benefits to those being recognised (in blood and soil) as fellow nationals of the respective nation-state.<sup>22</sup>

But what do we have today? As I have elaborated we have not only a transformation of the nation-state but a development of a new form of state that is the war-state. Now it is the opposite (but not a binary) that we have in front of us. The task of the war-state is how to maintain the illusion of society despite the more and more brutal logic of capital exploitation and expropriation (which was also brutal in the 1970s, but in a different way). Using the machinery of war to profit just 1% of the global world while 99% of the population is increasingly pushed into poverty – although it must be made clear that this 99% is still very much differentiated in its poverty and

<sup>22</sup> Rastko Močnik, 'The End of University, the Triumph of Higher Education: Will Theory Remain Without Institutional Support?' (unpublished manuscript).

misery. This is why the unity of capital and power is no longer viable and instead we have to expose the co-propriety of capital and power. The attack on the banks is not enough. It is necessary to also change the political structures that are caught in the relation of co-propriety with the centres of financial capital. So if we see a radical difference between the 1970s and today, we can reformulate it as having to do with two different biopolitics, the classical one of the 1970s and the other that changes into a necropolitics.

In the war-state the state apparatuses exist only to maintain the illusion of social harmony and not to take care of the life of a proper population. This measure means that from its biopolitical perspective (the politics of taking care of the population while systematically controlling it) the contemporary state changes into a necropolitical regime (into a politics of the state, which is only taking part in the war of transnational capital – abandoning the citizens to find a way of their own how to survive). Therefore, as described by Rastko Močnik, the state in the past took care of the socio-economic level of society, today it is only concerned with the socio-political one.<sup>23</sup> Though the political in such a case is but the management of keeping order in society and presents therefore a total ‘de-politicization’ of politics. In reality, the agents of capital monopolise the political apparatus: a modern state policy, therefore, receives an appearance of ‘general management’ and uses, as stated by Močnik, strategies of show business and mass media advertising, in order to manage the status quo.<sup>24</sup>

The relation between capital and the state is therefore central to an understanding of the developments from the relations between the superpowers in the aftermath of the Cold War toward what is currently going on in the European Union and its relation with Russia and the U.S., not to mention the new players in the world: China, India and Brazil. Therefore the project by Irwin is an important one, especially if it will develop its future critical potential with analysis of the changes from the nation-state to a war-state, taking into account the ‘missing’ link that is the racial-state. The missing link is not missing at all, in fact, but it is not pronounced or named clearly! I owe most of what follows to the brilliant analysis on this topic by Ann Laura Stoler.<sup>25</sup>

What is the racial-state? We can take the the formation of the Slovenian state as an example. At the foundation of the state that in 2011 celebrated twenty years of its short existence there are 18,305 *erased* people. Who are they? They are the internal immigrants from other republics of the former common state of Yugoslavia. They were removed from the register of permanent residence in 1992 when Slovenia had already declared its independence and was not under threat. What happened to them under the auspices of the new state can be termed as a ‘particularly brutal’ policy of dispossession and ‘regroupment’.<sup>26</sup> The Slovenian state also has an absence of a history of internal-immigration from and to former Yugoslavia. It is necessary to acknowledge the existence not only in Slovenia but also in the EU (in the passage of the EU from a biopolitical to a necropolitical regime) of these ‘invisible’ workers of the world. They are migrants, again from the former ex-Yugoslav republics, put under harsh procedures of exploitation, discrimination and segregation and completely abandoned by

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France’, *Public Culture*, no.23., Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134, note 39.

the Slovenian state, though all the time threatened by deportation. Benjamin Stora calls this ‘ethnoracial regulation’.<sup>27</sup>

Or, as in 1987 as reported by Ann Laura Stoler, when she sought with Frederick Cooper to consider the ‘tensions of the French empire’ we could say that it resides in a network that ‘joined liberalism, racism, and social reform’.<sup>28</sup> Similarly we can say for Slovenia that it acquired quasi-bourgeois EU identity as a malfunctioned copy of the European colonial state, where Slovenia in a turbo way (in just two decades) joined neo/liberalism and racism, and moreover forgot about any social reforms.

What is necessary is to put racism as a central category within the parameters of the abstract state. This is not about making denunciations of racism and then saying that the repressive apparatuses of the state exacerbated the regulations against migrants and youth of the second and third generations (though the consequences of the war against terror launched in 2001 imposed a radicalised discrimination procedure against those identified as Muslims). It is to acknowledge that in Europe we have a fully constructed entity of a racial-state and global capitalism. Our task is therefore to raise the question of what kind of political, economic, social and cultural (as well discursive) dispositions have made the racial coordinates of the nation-state and the racial epistemic coordinates of contemporary neoliberal global capitalist governance so legible. What has changed, perhaps, is not only what is known about racist politics, but how normalised they have become in Slovenia and Europe today. The un-recognised, but palpably visible, though denied, racist history is then normalised within other topics of security and protection policy of the EU, that is nothing else in the end than the fortress of Europe with its racist epistemic context.

Therefore the nation-state resides today on an infrastructural racism and it is a racial-state that has to be put at the centre of the analysis. So any kind of a performative symbolic edifice that conceptualises the contemporary state has to deal with these implications. Also we have to be alert to the fact, as stated by Stoler, that, ‘the racial states can be innovative and agile beasts, their categories flexible, and their classifications protean and subject to change. They thrive on ambiguities and falter on rigidities. (...) Racial formations have long marked differences by other names.’<sup>29</sup>

It is necessary to take a distance from the nation-state and its bourgeois sensibilities that are not capable of making proper reference to racist histories. But when these histories are looked at in relation to the imperial colonial pasts of Western European states in the EU, they have to include at their centre analysis of colonialism and contemporary forms of coloniality.

## 7. Conclusion

I presented the shift or transformation from nation-state to war-state to warn, similarly as Ramón Grosfuegel pointed out, that focusing on the conquering power over the juridical-political boundaries of a state, also over its cultural and artistic premises, is not sufficient when we talk only about a nation-state. This became obsolete

after 9/11. This means that it is necessary to open the whole analysis to different parameters, even when it is about art projects that tackle the boundaries of such a nation-state. As Grosfuegel said, 'projects that focus on policy changes at the level of the nation-state are obsolete in today's world-economy and lead to developmentalist illusions'.<sup>30</sup>

In such a situation it is necessary to incorporate in every art and cultural project an analysis that deals with the conceptualisation of the three formations: nation-state, war-state and racial-state. As I have tried to show in the case of Slovenia, although the state is only twenty years old, racism is at the core of its organisation. It is employed in exclusions, violations of basic human rights and discrimination together with exploitations – think of the violated rights of the erased people, the invisible workers of the world, and the exploitation of migrants and other precarious workers. Racism is also central in the way Slovenia acquired its national history by silencing histories of art and culture made by migrant intellectuals, by gay and lesbian groups and alternative movements.

Therefore it is necessary to include a systematic presentation of racism and anti-Semitism within the genealogy of a contemporary neoliberal state and all the projects that counter it. This should be the next focus of the NSK State in Time project that has the knowledge, history and potential to activate the positions, elements and forms that will question the racial-state being the central link in the shift from nation-state to war-state.

30 See Ramón Grosfuegel, 'Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality: Decolonizing political economy and postcolonial studies', *Eurozine*, 2008, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-07-04-grosfuegel-en.html> (last accessed 15 November, 2012).

*Ljubljana, 2011*



IRWIN, *Procession Skopje, 2008*

## The Eye of the State *Avi Pitchon*

'Art is fanaticism that demands diplomacy.'

– *NSK State*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the NSK collective faced a paradigmatic challenge. After the war broke out, Slovenia was the first to declare its independence in June 1991, leaving the battlefield ten days later. What NSK did concurrently was to declare itself a state existing in time rather than in geographic space. The state was to rely on the memories and actions of its subjects, who are not supposed to belong to any given nation or ethnic group. It was to furnish time with visibility; time defined through experience and movement rather than through blood and soil. Against the backdrop of Yugoslavia's dissolution into states fanatically based on national and ethnic affiliation, the NSK state prophesied the grave results of the absence of an ethnically impartial regulating organisation due to which the region deteriorated into a blood bath. The NSK state introduced an alternative model that sharply criticised the disastrous naïveté of libertarian emancipation theories striving to dissolve the foci of authority, leading not to a free utopian society, but rather to a much more dangerous and barbaric type of centralisation. Furthermore, one may extract from this model a prophetic critique on the loss of liberties involved in the transition to a political format operating within global (or pan-European) capitalism, which supervises and controls in an ostensibly different, dynamic, flexible, mobile and boundless manner. A mode of behaviour that aims to enable the market to flow undisturbed, and harnesses the state apparatus in its full force to confront disturbances when needed (as opposed to constantly). In the dramatic transition from socialism to blatant nationalism and all-encompassing capitalism, NSK tried to rescue the baby lest it be thrown out with the bath water, implying the possible existence of a positive state structure.

The logic of over-identification,<sup>1</sup> which made NSK notorious, also implemented itself in the context of the artistic proclamation of independence; it was manifested in the totality with which NSK adopted all the aesthetic, ritualistic, gestural and symbolic features of states. NSK began to declare every event of the organisation as the materialisation of a transient state territory manifested in the shape of a full-fledged embassy and consulates which issued passports to anyone willing to fill out a form and pay the necessary fee. The passports appeared perfectly authentic, and could easily mislead a weary or slightly ignorant passport control officer. The NSK logo became the state's flag. What has happened with previous acts of over-identification, repeated itself in the new context: it was reported that an unknown number of citizens fled the war zone in Bosnia-Herzegovina and crossed the border using the fictive passport. In recent years, NSK found itself in a new front of the European stronghold as it began to receive thousands of passport applications from African citizens who thought

<sup>1</sup> Žižek defined NSK's strategy as 'over-identification'. He maintained that overt criticism of the regime was not as effective as an act of masquerading which radicalised the values of the hegemonic centre, while planting aesthetic and ideological booby-traps in them. To be 'more stately than the state', thus, is a more subversive act than to criticise it directly, since this radicalisation exposes the 'hidden reverse', namely, the bare, real intention behind the ideological guise, the transgression which is not discussed explicitly, but nevertheless allowed as a behavioural norm (just as the Ku-Klux-Klan lynchings and the pogroms which culminated in Kristallnacht were not overtly supported by the authorities, yet were an outcome of the official ideology, the 'hidden reverse'). The strategy of responding to the language of the system by using this very language, of being more totalitarian than totalitarianism, this radical affirmation is subversive, embarrassing the regime much more than manifestations of criticism and opposition, which are easier to deflect. (By the same token, this may explain why the IDF was embarrassed when the affair of the T-shirts printed by IDF squadrons bearing slogans and caricatures depicting the killing of women and children was exposed.) The hidden reverse has a vampire-like nature: its bringing to light alone can kill it.



IRWIN, *Procession Graz*, 2008

they had found a loophole and a legitimate admission ticket to the European Union. In addition, IRWIN initiated the NSK Guards (*NSK Garda*) project – a photographic documentation of rituals during which soldiers of various armies (mostly from East European countries) wear an armband bearing Malevich’s cross, and stand to attention at the foot of the NSK flag. This perfect emulation of a political apparatus and the temporary conceptual conquest of real territories (embassies) and armies hint at the fictive element inherent to every state, centred on an accepted mythology based on symbols and forms. At the same time, it conquers a slice of reality as it tricks actual bodies, groups and individuals into acknowledging NSK’s legitimate existence. When an army agrees to be conquered by a foreign flag and emblem, just because they are ostensibly imaginary, this indicates the arbitrariness of the rules, values and flag which it swore to defend. An absurdity inherent in all national aesthetics; nations whose struggles are based on a somewhat neurotic, narcissistic concentration on nuances of difference. In an act of total theatre, which dissolves art and life, IRWIN make armies perform voluntarily what in any ‘real’ situation they would have done only following surrender at the conclusion of a bloody battle.

NSK’s first embassy was inaugurated in a private apartment in Moscow in 1992. Since then, the NSK state has transformed into a parasitical, colonising spirit no longer focused on its foundational homeland, but rather generating its temporal heritage via the real and dynamic movement of its citizens in the world, and through encounter, dialogue and interaction. From East Europe to West, from there to America and, most recently, to the Middle East. In the opening of IRWIN’s first retrospective in the region, at the Israeli Centre For Digital Art in the city of Holon, a ceremony was held during which the Israeli performance group Public Movement greeted IRWIN as if it was the state of Israel greeting the state of NSK, complete with marching drills, raising of respective national flags and playing of respective national anthems.

‘The explanation is the whip and you bleed.’

– *Tomaž Hostnik, Apologia Laibach*

As long as we bear in mind that NSK is the outcome of an avant-garde tradition that triumphed and prevailed, and therefore shifted from opposition to coalition, an experience which is totally foreign to us as Westerners (but not as Israelis, a point which will be elaborated below), it will be easier to understand that its retroprinciple<sup>2</sup> and over-identification differ not only from approaches adhering to direct protest/criticism, but also from ironic, parodic, or satirical estrangement. They are truly and effectively subversive precisely because they do not purport to destroy, overcome, evade or scorn ideological systems as such; NSK does not rely on mere negation and repudiation because the memory of victory renders them optimistic (even if the modern victory was short-lived and doomed to collapse into catastrophe, it was still worthwhile). As an art collective, they are placed firmly within history, within culture, within civilisation, not outside them. Neither iconoclasts nor anarchists (even if

<sup>2</sup> ‘If we were to define the retroprinciple in a nutshell, we might say it refers to an eclecticism and a utilisation of works by other artists as a way of reinterpreting and, at the same time, reactualising them. Each time, however, the process re-establishes itself on the basis of a concrete task and new reflection. The retroprinciple is, then, the endless process of re-establishing one’s own position by reinterpreting, rejuvenating, and transforming both the tradition and one’s own work.’ Igor Zabel, ‘Icons by Irwin’, <http://irwin.si/texts/icons-by-Irwin/> (last accessed 18 November, 2012).

their strategy embeds such inclinations), NSK indicate the fragile, traumatic moment of transition from utopia to apocalypse because there is something to lose in that moment, and therefore there is also something to salvage. They strive to enfeeble or even neutralise apocalyptic forces threatening to repeat the pattern of the brutal past in the here-and-now, and they do so by indicating the aesthetics which sets them in motion, and the fact that their power stems from that aesthetic, and not from any other source. NSK’s gaze is far-reaching, pointing not at power relations based on coercion, law and obedience, but rather at the aesthetic-mythological glue holding these power relations together, enabling them a-priori. This indication conceals a possibility both tempting and threatening, of harnessing this aesthetic and reclaiming it for the sake of a new utopian element.

The importance of this not all-negating approach is emphasised against the backdrop of the prevalent cynicism of the ideological discourse in the postmodern era. The exposure and deconstruction by post-modernism’s prominent thinkers of the blind power-seeking and all-too-human interest underlying political views, ideological narratives and founding myths have (mostly unwillingly) contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of widespread public heartbreak, bitterness, helplessness, passivity and a-politicism. Instead of neutralising or decentralising power, deconstruction has awarded it the license to cynically admit that it is indeed motivated by self-interest, without paying the price. (In Silvio Berlusconi’s case, for example, his image as a person who unwaveringly looks after his own interests is precisely part of what constructs his popular masculine image. In Israel too, the criminal allegations against Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman combine with his nationalist aggression to generate a positive image of a man’s man and no fluffy, lefty weakling. And of course, advocates of bank bailouts and austerity measures are faceless experts and not neo-con evangelists, justified by cold, rational ‘necessity’.) The subjects of power implement egoism in their everyday life, excluding themselves from any political involvement or discourse, since the centre is but another interest-motivated sector, devoid of values and care for the public at large, for the nation. Hence not only is it irrelevant as a sphere of action, worse still it has de-facto become one of the groups with which the citizen competes for a piece of the pie. The daily administration of many Western capitalistic regimes no longer bothers to correspond with lofty ideals or some shared ideological solidarity, but rather with a frosty, alienating dystopian-Robocopesque jargon of maintaining order and nothing else, while cutting off manifestations of extremism that may interrupt the flow of market forces. In this atmosphere, the sole expression of solidarity is nostalgic and voracious, and as such it is radicalised, hysterical, fanatical and racist. It is the traumatic panic of the fall from the Eden of belonging and justice. The international Occupy movement (which recently infiltrated the art world) can seem like a proactive reaction to Robocop rule, however it is using the same hegemonic language of rational prioritising that leaves itself open to the emerging of rampant, fundamentalist regionalism and xenophobia as evident in France, Switzerland and Greece.

The power of the retroprinciple and of over-identification lies in learning the historical lesson and avoiding repetition of the aforesaid destructive Marxist avant-garde processes of negation and deconstruction. There is something misanthropic, gloating and anti-social about the act of disrobing the system of its ideological Emperor's clothes, as carried out by the Marxist and postmodern left, a tendency (possibly a neurosis) translated into a defeatist political programme. Rational deconstruction alone cannot bring about a change because the very idea of change is romantic by definition, and as such, it draws on the same mythological origin that the centre originally grabbed for its own use. The alienation from the apparatus so central to Marxist lore is in fact experienced by the deconstructivists alone, obliviously operating as a differentiated, extraterrestrial elite. The masses do not share this alienation in the first place. They feel a belonging, they enjoy and take pride in it, and the eating from the Tree of Knowledge offered by the alienated scholarly elite only breaks their spirits instead of mobilising them. The call for the superiority of reason over emotion and the patronising labelling of the yearning for flags, slogans, anthems and heroism as an opiate of the masses, guarantee that the status quo will remain intact. Worse still the deconstructivists ensure an accelerated, hysterical recruitment of the masses to the centre's aid precisely at the moment when it is laid bare. The centre is the public's enemy on the material level, but it is its best friend on the mythical level (or, at least, it was so in the 'past', in the good old days, a golden age for which the public apparently pines). The retroprinciple does not patronise or estrange itself from that ostensibly naïve past era in which there existed a cohesive collective made of a public that believed in something. Over-identification exposes the system, but does not leave us empty-handed in the process. It snatches the aesthetic-mythical power from the centre, disarms it, and hands it over to us. Namely, it generates a cultural, artistic, social space in which we can rekindle and re-celebrate the paradise of a collective sense of justice, and of belonging to a movement which is greater than we are individually and larger than life; we already know that the original utopia led to trauma and heartbreak, that the dream was flawed, but we emerge stronger because over-identification leaves us in a space which acknowledges and respects the utopian moment of grace. Since NSK does not stand outside, balanced on some theoretically abstract Archimedean vantage point from which to criticise, they have no problem with being partners in this yearning, and with the fact that human history will always be inspired by it.

The hidden reverse of every ideology is epitomised by the ultimate transgression – war – as part of which people are sent to kill and be killed in its name with elation, boundless devotion, an amazing outburst of superhuman stamina and unending solidarity. Those who survive the blood bath will remember the experience as a formative, once-in-a-lifetime peak. NSK take this murderous, barbaric, bestial excitement, combined with feelings of inner enlightenment and purifying, absolute, religious truth. They hold onto that collective orgasm, but instead of emptying it – as does the alienating, individualistic, urban-bohemian-decadent-erudite-misanthropic-patronising-megalomaniac-Judeo-Christian left – they snatch it from the banal political centre (which is

embarrassed by this act of informing and exposing of the hidden reverse and washes its hands of the whole affair) and from the fascist and nationalistic heritage in general (since the symbols and insignia this heritage used existed before and continue to exist thereafter; they are eternal, and as such, they are never originated or introduced as a monopoly in the hands of a given regime, but rather wait in their sacred orbit as a potential vessel for any regime that encounters it), and offers it to us. The accomplishment is double because it changes something both in the public sphere and in the ruling consciousness. Primarily, the orgasmic experience is made possible in a ritualistic space – the artistic space – and therefore does not involve bloodletting. At the same time, one should emphasise that this is not a simulated, representational, mimetic space, because the potential and will-to-power inherent to symbols and aesthetics is real, and therefore always carries a promise for the future: otherwise there wouldn't have been an orgasm erupting out of it. NSK's absurd and contradictory combination of symbols indeed empties the existing ideological promise, exposes it as corrupt/decadent, or simply neutralises it by the very use of mishmash; the paradoxical mix-up (remix, mashup, cover version) neutralises the formula and the specific, momentary compound chosen by the existing order, but it does not neutralise the symbols themselves on which the compound is based. The symbols continue to emit the aura of the eternal flame, which cannot be dimmed or extinguished. Along with the abduction of an eternal essence from the heart of a decaying apparatus and its handing over to the public, NSK does not hesitate to retrace its steps, to look back into the apparatus's eyes and smear that essence in its face. This gesture embarrasses the centre because it reminds it of the time during which it was convinced, and swept itself after the myth it had constructed to control us. This is the profound reason why when Laibach and NSK met with repression, banning and prohibition, they expressed their satisfaction with the regime's awakening from its degenerate complacency, from the automatic pilot, determined to defend itself and its vitality. To get to the bottom line, what NSK achieve is a remobilisation of all parties involved towards the flag of myth, for remembering a belief in something beyond capital and coercive power. The centre is embarrassed and loses balance because it remembers that there is always a greater power around the corner, threatening/promising to sweep us all off our feet. And us? We are forced to choose whether we stand outside or inside the human experience, and whether we join the party or condemn the hosts; this is the permanent risk taken by NSK, since this is precisely the sole feature of totalitarian regimes left as an empty square – the scapegoat, the root of the problem, the propagator of the disease, the one betraying the revolution, the inferior race.

'similia similibus curantur' ('likes are cured by likes')

– *The Homeopathic Axiom*

The aesthetics and world view held by IRWIN and NSK are vital not only as a lesson in the history of art colliding frontally with a lesson in world history, but also because

they offer a model for thought and action in Israel. It is a relevant and challenging model because it proposes a new perspective barely examined in Israeli art – a third position which interrupts the paralysing duality of coalition and opposition, approval and criticism, integration and rebellion (most of local contemporary artistic practice may be divided into two camps: pragmatic globalist careerism versus political activism, both of them quintessentially post-Zionist) – while Israel is passing through a sensitive and fragile intermediate state very similar to the situation into which IRWIN and NSK emerged, and in which they operated, provoked reactions and made waves. The State of Israel was spawned by a utopian, modernist, European idea – the roots of which go directly back to the Volkist national revival of Eastern and Central Europe in the mid- and late nineteenth century. To put it in somewhat more dramatic terms, I shall say that in today's world there remain two political experiments which emerged from the modernist heritage: Israel and NSK. I shall further add that in the early days of a national movement, that strove to gather its citizens from all over Europe (only much later did Zionism turn to the rest of the world), take them to another continent as inspired by the bible, and set up a state there, the idea most likely sounded far-fetched and imaginary at least as much as the idea of a 'state in time' sounds today. Considering the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', which took place in Berlin in 2010 and subsequently led to a proliferation of citizens' activity and initiatives, there is room to speculate on 'what if', while looking back at the chaos created by the implementation of the objectives of the Zionist Congresses.

What's important is that NSK's aesthetics and symbols echo something distant in Israel, something blurred yet familiar, and that is because they originate in the same background and employ the same heritage. What is doubly important is that NSK's philosophical approach, strategy and modus operandi can contribute to Israel's zeitgeist due to the aforesaid analogies. The most crucial being the one involving the activity of NSK being made possible and scoring achievements because it took place in a paradigmatic transition period nearly identical in nature to the one experienced in Israel, a time typified by the erosion of the original utopian idea and the solidarity it created, giving room to fanatic nationalism and vulture capitalism. Israel, like Slovenia, stood between East and West, between socialism and democracy, between mobilised collectivism and free-market individualism. NSK's lesson is akin to a gauntlet thrown down to artists in Israel; picking it up implies reconsideration of the collective past and the aesthetic and mythological toolbox of Zionism. (And not only its history in a hegemonic or post-Zionist interpretation. NSK proposes a third footing, which carries the potential of liberating the region from the dualistic loop in which it is stuck.) Picking up the gauntlet means recognising the privilege of living through a fateful transition period, when one ideological system becomes weakened, loosened, corrupt and another ideological system capable of replacing or improving it has not yet emerged. It is a privilege facing both inwardly (more inward possibilities and spheres of action vis-à-vis a degenerating centre), and outwardly (the world observing us attentively, awaiting a loud and clear new voice). The tactic of over-identification

fulfils its maximum potential (and is perhaps only possible) in a time of the hegemonic narrative's waning; it is precisely this fateful time span that allows for the creation of a replica more beautiful and enthusiastic than the disintegrating original. Since the original has not yet collapsed, and since the governmental centre still speaks its language (more and more grotesquely, and oblivious to the fact that for the younger generation this language has long dissolved into the mere empty intonation of over-zealous television promos), the question begs itself: what disintegration exactly do the buds of the over-identification tactic in Israel prophesy, and what future synthesis do they herald?

Over-identification has long existed in Israeli art, its roots possibly lie in Michal Na'aman's conceptual work in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> The state monumentality of the 1990s installations by Erez Harodi and Nir Nader was designed and shaped to expose the centre by mimicking its aesthetics of authority. Concurrently in Jerusalem, Anat Ben-David used Laibach's music in her extrovert multi-media performances, which led her over time to a conceptually-devised infiltration into the world of the rock/pop concert based on an ongoing study of the totalitarian character of the stage performer. Her brother, Yoav Ben-David, painted homeland vistas and historical Zionist figures, using an impersonal technique of icon painting similar to that of IRWIN, producing postcard-like landscapes that are disturbing in their strange neutrality. Ilya Rabinovich acted similarly in his photographs of haunted, deserted public and national institutions. One may call the tactic employed by both these artists 'over-objectivity': their cold gaze exposes cracks in the official aesthetics; the disconcert and dread simmering under the surfaces of their works are somewhat reminiscent of the way filmmaker David Lynch extracts horror from every inanimate element of the space appearing in his frames.

The aforementioned performance group Public Movement is currently the most vociferous and quintessential example of Israeli artists employing over-identification tactics. Their use of ritualistic aesthetics originated and enacted by the Zionist youth movements, the IDF, and various state apparatuses is reduced into a salute to an ideological vacuum centred around a flag that represents itself alone, the idea of a flag. When the list of collective aesthetic legacies courtesy of Zionism whose mobilising power diminishes is supplemented with the only contemporary experiences which generate a sense of togetherness – sex, terrorist attacks and road accidents (an array of triggers cherry-picked by the group like a football scout's freshly acquired stars) – the resulting spectacle establishes an elusive, wild and intricately unnerving system of over-identification which laments the evil at the core of the mechanism, but also the loss of the ability to take part in its rituals out of love and identification.

Public Movement does not operate in a vacuum. Artist Yael Bartana reconstructed photographs of pioneers from the early Yishuv days, but replaced some of these Jewish role models with Palestinians (as part of the exhibition 'Never Looked Better' curated by Galit Eilat and Eyal Danon, which invaded the Diaspora Museum like a Trojan horse of subtle over-identification), and became internationally acclaimed for

3 After the occupation of Mount Hermon in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Israeli Television correspondent, Micha Limor, arrived on location and interviewed Golani Brigade soldier Benny Massas, who explained that his commander had told them that the Hermon outpost was vital because it was 'the eyes of the state'. One year later, Michal Na'aman installed a signboard bearing the same metaphorical expression on the Tel Aviv beach. In the catalogue of the exhibition 'Artist and Society in Israeli Art, 1948-1978' (The Tel Aviv Museum, 1978), curator Sarah Breitberg-Semal maintained that Na'aman's use of the national verbal ready-made indicated the nation as a living, yet monstrous creature.

her spectacular mobilising of Zionist pioneering gestures (most notably the ‘wall & tower’ settlements of pre-independence Eretz-Israel) in order to make utopian statements regarding the entangled future of Israel and Europe. Most recently she pushed her fictitious organisation, The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, one level closer to reality and further from art by initiating a congress in Berlin that discussed current political issues. Pil & Galia Kollektiv landed at the Israeli Herzliya Biennial (2009), and erected, in the duration of a futurist performance narrated in revolutionary Russian dialect, a Real-socialist sculpture of a capitalistic yacht, mounted by a crew dressed in Dadaist costumes. In his exhibition ‘Uzi’ (2010) in Tel-Aviv’s CCA, Yochai Avrahami looked back at a personal story oscillating between Germany and Israel, between the Bauhaus and the Taas (Israel Military Industries) factory, mediated through an installation which imitates settlement and Zionist museums, centred on the circumstantial argument that the Uzi sub-machine gun was shaped according to the values of the German Bauhaus. Participating in the 2012 group exhibition ‘Where To?’ at the Israeli Centre For Digital Art, the author curated and produced a compilation album entitled ‘Zion Sky’, collecting cover versions, interpretations and meditations on the Zionist music and folk legacy.

Prior to the group’s arrival in Israel to mount their retrospective, IRWIN invited the IDF to enlist its soldiers in the NSK Guards. The IDF flatly refused, echoing the relationship between Laibach and the Yugoslavian regime in the early 1980s. Who are the Israeli artists who will analyse the IDF’s refusal and draw operative conclusions? Who will appropriate the aesthetic heritage of Zionism and thereby construct a model that will change the past and remember the future? Who will prepare us for the imminent dark recesses of the Kali Yuga, for the birth of a new cycle of life, emerging from oblivion?

*London, 2010*



Statement by Zoran Thaler, Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1995/96), for Slovenian TV (Studio City), 23 November, 1995, in which the Minister expresses his view that it is time for Slovenia and NSK State in Time establish mutual relations.

Presentation of NSK diplomatic passport to General Agim Çeku, Prishtina, 12 December, 2003

## The Real Wince of the NSK State in Taipei

Huang Chien-Hung

### Virtual Frontiers

The Slovenian art group IRWIN, part of the larger art collective and virtual state called NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), rode into Taiwan on its reputation for taking applications, conducting interviews and issuing passports. Given the fact that Taiwan cannot be called a concrete national entity, or at least cannot be represented as such in the world, and that the NSK state has existed for a while in a unique conceptual space, there are parallels between the two that are worth exploring. It could be said that Taiwan is similarly a quasi-state in flux, or a 'state in time' as NSK fashions itself, and furthermore the identity, if not the actual document, conferred by an NSK passport embodies a common Taiwanese desire to adopt a third identity beyond 'Chinese' or 'Taiwanese'.

Although the NSK State in Time is generally interpreted as an art project, its significance extends beyond art and imaginative construction, approaching real nationhood. NSK's frontier with reality reveals alternative notions of nation – both possible and impossible – and suggests relationships between the individual and state that are beyond existing systems. As a state in time, NSK manifests instability by juxtaposing an art practice, which operates via virtuality and deploys dynamic imaginative states, with an operation that verges on reality, namely the issuing of an NSK passport, which is a symbolic document with ambiguous function. NSK uses art strategies to create a nation that can change its own significance, has a fluid community base and eschews symbolising any specific territorial borders. Comparatively, Taiwan has not been conjured out of the imagination; it has, following its long and complex colonial and post-colonial relationships, a definite territory and a genuine and independent government. Also unlike NSK, Taiwan possesses a very real history of political and economic development, and this has been continually hindered by a lack of international recognition and the impossibility of declaring independence within the historical context of China. Nonetheless, we can still draw parallels, as the Taiwanese people are haunted by the perception that their country is merely floating somewhere in time, and cannot be represented as a country existing in a real place. It is for these reasons that in September 2010, IRWIN's deployment of its art practice in Taiwan constituted a meeting of two states in time: NSK, which approaches the limit of national recognition through artistic imagination and provides an opportunity for its citizens to occasionally come together; and Taiwan, which has had no choice but to toss the reality of its existence into an imaginary black hole. While NSK is continually in flux, Taiwan is forever forced to maintain the status quo.

Since martial law ended in 1987, identity in Taiwan has been an either/or concept, with China and Taiwan representing the two poles. Struggles between

KULTURA



NACIONALNI SVET ZA KULTURO O USODI KULTURE V PREDLOŽNIH PRORAČUNOV DRŽAVE ZA PRIBODNIJ DVE LETI TER PAKETU PREDLAGANIH VLADNIH REFORM

### Kultura je integralna sestavina družbe

Čeravno skromno rast državnega proračuna za kulturo v prihodnjih dveh letih so člani NSK s kritičnimi pripombami podprli, bolj zadržani pa so bili do reformnega paketa vlade, ki izraža podcenjevalno razumevanje družbene vloge kulture

Nacionalni svet za kulturo (NSK) je na včerajšnji 5. seji po živahni razpravi v splošnem podpril vladna predloga državnega proračuna za prihodnji dve leti (državni zbor je bo sprejel decembra) in po obdobju upadanja deleža za kulturo v njem pozdravil njegovo ponovno, četrtno skromno rast od 1,96 odstotka (letni) na 2,99 odstotka (v obeh prihodnjih letih). Razpravo o paketu predlaganih vladnih reform z najbolj razpito mnenjsko enotno davično stopnjo pa je NSK prekinil in nadaljevanje preložil na naslednjo sejo, saj terjaja za utemeljeno presojo dodatne strokovne ekspanzije in stabilizacije NSK ter ustreznega pojava predstaviteljev odbora za reforme oz. vlade.

http://www.mzz.gov.si/en/consular\_services/latest\_information/

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Government of the Republic of Slovenia  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Consular services / Latest Information /

#### Latest Information

**Important notice!!**  
**NSK Passport is not an official passport of the Republic of Slovenia**  
We inform that official passport of the Republic of Slovenia is **not NSK Passport**. The official passport of the Republic of Slovenia is only available for citizens of the Republic of Slovenia (more info: on the [web page of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia](#)).

NSK Passports is sort of a cultural project and has nothing to do with the official passports of the Republic of Slovenia.

**7 May 2007 - Obligation of vaccination against yellow fever entering Costa Rica**  
[More](#)

**6 November 2006 - The European Commission regulation restricting the liquids that passengers can carry past screening points and onto aircraft**  
As a reaction to another threat to civil aviation security stemming from home made liquid explosives, on 6th November 2006 the European Commission, adopted a regulation restricting the liquids that passengers can carry past screening points and then onto aircraft.  
The new regulation prevents passengers carrying liquids past screening points, whether on **their persons or in their cabin baggage** (the regulation affects **cabin baggage** only, as hold baggage is inaccessible once checked in). It applies to **all flights departing from airports in the European Union**, regardless of their destination and the nationality of the carrier, so that there is the same level of protection throughout the European Union.

**Location**  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia  
Prešernova cesta 25  
SI-1001 Ljubljana  
P.P. 481  
Slovenia

IRWIN, *NSK (Nacionalni Svet za Kulturo - National Board for Culture) meeting, 30 November, 2005, Delo newspaper, 1 December, 2005*

#### (Culture is an integral part of society)

With some critical comments, the members of NSK backed up the projected, although modest, growth of the state budget for culture over the coming two years, but expressed their reservations on the government's package of reforms, which reflects an underestimation of the social role of culture.)

IRWIN, *Latest Information, 2007*

Taiwan's Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) over the last twenty years have never been productive, nor have they resulted in a feasible position for Taiwan as a political entity. Rather, each party has exploited Taiwan's extremely tense political atmosphere to create support for their election campaigns. Due to feelings of indeterminate identity and long-term polarization, the desire for a third place, perhaps symbolising a refuge or escape, arose in Taiwanese society to shake off anxiety.

Prior to Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan in 1949, alternative places in the Taiwanese popular imagination were China, representing an ancestral home, and Japan, representing progress. Having these alternatives, however, did not divide society, nor at this point did the need for a third place as a destination for refuge arise. After Chiang Kai-shek's arrival, however, Taiwan was squeezed between two political entities, namely the communist party's People's Republic of China and the Kuomintang (KMT)'s Republic of China. Both political entities claimed all of China as their territory: the first, the PRC, certainly achieved symbolic and geographic unity; but the ROC was just a China based on ideas and claims. In other words, the KMT made Taiwan their temporary physical base for operations merely to suture the tear in what is normally the seamless integration of the symbolic and geographic. Taiwan, under these conditions, as a purely practical choice, has been forced to embrace its symbolic representation from a geographic distance, and for many years now, people who make their lives in Taiwan have felt compelled to either gloss over this contradiction or obfuscate not having a governmental identity.

The combination of an unresolved position and continual political struggle has not only formed the political consciousness of Taiwanese people, but also created anxiety over their name. Long-term ambiguity has resulted in a weakened concept of nation, even to the extent that people are willing to abandon both political entities (PRC and ROC) to find refuge from anxiety in a third place – even though such a place rarely confers a sense of national identity. For these reasons, when NSK came to Taiwan, a unique relationship between the two became evident. First of all, the NSK passport raised national identity issues because Taiwan is not a country proper (perhaps it is a double country). The NSK passport did not immediately appear to be a critique; it seemed to overlap with Taiwan's situation, thus provoking desire for a third place or reminiscence of that desire in the people of Taiwan. Secondly, as an art action, NSK did arouse public response in Taiwan, but it was not regarded as politics floating between the real and imaginary, and therefore we could say it was not regarded as contemporary art as such, nor as a global measurement of Taiwan's international political relations. Most people simply offered evasive assessments of the NSK project, such as 'interesting' or 'very good'. Finally, on account of their real concerns and pragmatism based on uncertainty over safety and beneficial results, Taiwanese people for the most part did not want to play NSK's passport game, and so it was very hard for the NSK passport project to challenge the frontiers of Taiwanese reality. Of course this situation reflects a temperament that wishes to uphold

political authority along with an open political atmosphere and acceptance of avant-garde art.

## An Operation of (De)nomination

By taking a closer look at IRWIN's art practice in Taipei, specifically the process of holding interviews and issuing NSK passports, we get a clearer picture of the circumstances of life in Taiwan, the political awareness of the Taiwanese people, and complex interactions between art and life. For the Taiwanese, following such a long period of passively accepting the political status quo, the arrival of IRWIN and the NSK passport might have provoked new ways of thinking. The project certainly raised a pertinent question: When used to look more closely at gaps in reality and its frontier, what kind of mechanisms are imagination, simulation and re-identification for producing social action and trends?

When establishing their group, IRWIN initially made reference to Marcel Duchamp's self-adopted feminine pseudonym Rose Sélavy by adopting the name Rose Irwin Sélavy. The name Rose Sélavy suggests that love is a symbol for life – since it sounds like *eros, c'est la vie* – and is also a figuration for the physical appearance of gender, and thus a *mise en abyme* appears between the two. Rose Irwin Sélavy was later shortened to R Irwin S, which is pronounced as *real wince*. Real wince, with its self-mocking pain and discomfort, stands in ironical contrast to *eros, c'est la vie* and, following the fall of the communist party, irony became a new and political means of expression in IRWIN's home of Slovenia. According to Duchamp, effecting the pronunciation of written words is an ironic manipulation as it leads us away from their meaning, thus constructing a different relationship between pronunciation and meaning. Duchamp used an irony similar to Søren Kierkegaard's, but replaced logic with poetry. The pronunciation of Rose Sélavy did not form a contrasting or oppositional relationship with the written word, but rather constructed a poetic fissure. This fissure reoccurs in other works, such as the deferral created by transparency in *The Large Glass*, or even the attempt to construct a fourth dimension with *Étant donnés (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas)*. So we could say that Duchamp's ideological focus was on a conceptual dialectic rather than political issues embedded in social or historical contexts. Duchamp's work produces its significance through an imaginative transition over a gap between two unstable meanings, or even between meaning and no meaning. In this way, the importance of the Duchampian does not lie in visual expression, but in how it liberates us through transitions. As Theodor Adorno put it, when the work of art is finished the process is always erased and the transformation of one thing into another, or *deplacement en soi*, is complete. In Duchamp's case, however, the traces of nominalism in his work do not constitute a clean break between the process of creation and finished artwork; they suggest a shift in consciousness, suspension of cognition and ambiguity, and temporal fluidity. Furthermore, there exists a strange metonymic relationship in the ambiguity which

produces imaginative space, so that what is referred to by the two poles becomes unattainable desire (*objet a*).

In IRWIN's case there are also traces of this Duchampian irony, but the group does not rely on conceptual gaps between words and their meanings, but upon conceptual transitions in symbolic visual elements. Since their 1992 performance/painting *Black Square on Red Square Guerrilla Action*, IRWIN has continually staged art actions based on political parody. The signs they deploy are interesting if not profound. Communist slogans used for ideological manipulation during the Cold War were associated with sensory forms, thus rendering almost all the visual elements of propaganda within a spoken language. Therefore, a change in the meaning of this language could be effected by inflecting the meaning of symbolic visual elements. Also, because visual expression and language had been highly politicised, shifts in meaning became instrumental in dialectics, and meaning was reproduced in the service of the political message of the time. So, in contrast to Duchamp, and due to the group's experience of the Cold War in the Balkans, IRWIN sought to find meaning in symbolic visual elements. To avoid having their concepts linked to ideologies, IRWIN expands the possible gaps produced by their objects, using references to actual historical experience as cues in their art actions. In addition, IRWIN uses visual elements to construct meaning transformations in the gap between symbolic morphology and what this morphology produces. Morphology in IRWIN's projects has various durations, and therefore designated historical symbols manifest loose meaning transfers for these durations and complete the unique irony in IRWIN's political art. For Duchamp, things still had their material existence, which was stored in the essential nature of the everyday and could be made to correspond with our desires and impulses through art. For IRWIN the essential nature of a thing has always been tied to its political specificity, and this nature is released through art by deploying irony on historic constructs existing in a systematised world. Duchamp's utopia lay in a hidden world, while IRWIN's lay in the ability to more freely confront history.

It seems Taiwan has yet to express the emotion *real wince*, which may be because the contemporary art world becomes mired in a dialogue that can only express support or opposition when addressing politics or its own inner conflicts and negativity. Creativity cannot dismantle this framework, nor can it generate a different significance for the production of irony or a gap. It seems we Taiwanese are too serious due to certain losses, and even if these losses provide material for affecting tragedy, they also have weakened our faith, worn away our desire to express our feelings, and left us weary and apathetic. Nonetheless, after encountering Duchamp and IRWIN, and their irony-driven politics, we may wonder if it is possible for Taiwan to find a way out through art. Since 2008, a variety of interesting themes, formats and materials appeared one after another in the Taiwanese art world, including animation, micro-sensible art, political art, frustration art, new media art and lifestyle aesthetics. These have all been produced and consumed by the younger generation of artists and backed by eye-catching new technologies. Animation has promoted the consumption

of art and even transformed the manner in which art is consumed. Micro-sensible art magnifies subtle perceptions of ordinary events. New media art and lifestyle aesthetics, reinterpreted by cultural creative industries, have grown by leaps and bounds. Animation still maintains its commercial appeal by emphasising cheerful entertainment. Like kitsch, new media art and lifestyle aesthetics mostly pander to popular taste and are easy to enjoy. Although micro-sensible art attempts to encompass every possible perception in both internal and social realms, as well as create gaps in these various perceptions, perceptions are customised rapidly and combine with commercial systems. Among these new developments, the dialectic formed by political art and frustration art is closest in spirit to IRWIN's practice, but the former is required by Taiwanese utilitarianism to solve actual problems, and the latter regards the evasion of political problems as a symptom of Taiwanese society. The impossibility of irony in Taiwan, regardless of whether it is the type deployed by Duchamp or IRWIN, is due mainly to the impossibility of gaps arising in an art marketplace that blindly assimilates difference, and in the 2008 to 2010 period of Taiwanese art development, (de)nomination was only deployed to package artwork. Although artists making micro-sensible and frustration art played word games, their works certainly didn't produce the same kind of smile.

### The Third Place

This different smile was the product of being hemmed in by China and Taiwan, specifically their divergent interpretations of history, as well as by the constraints that a consumer society's positivist tendencies place on imaginative projects encroaching on reality. Under the cover of its status as an invited, avant-garde, international art group, IRWIN avoided Taiwanese society's expectation that it might be here to solve political problems with its NSK passport. This avant-garde status actually allowed locals applying for NSK passports to safely fantasise about a third place, thus making IRWIN's visit a turning point in the development of contemporary Taiwanese art. I am suggesting that the commonly repressed desire for a third place among Taiwanese was released by IRWIN, and that putting it out into the open this way required intervention from abroad. It is interesting to note that this unique situation of repression in Taiwan was a necessary precondition for IRWIN's release of desire for a third place, forming a circuit with an extremely dense dynamic structure. We might ask, however, what were the characteristics of this third place? Compared to other regions, what special significance was generated by the Taiwanese reaction to the NSK passport project?

People from the city of Sarajevo have reported on being able to use the NSK passport to cross national borders, which either means the border agents only focus on forgeries or have been unable to identify illegal passports from atypical countries. Carried by these Sarajevo residents, the NSK passport became an art project that permeated reality. At NSK passport interviews in London, which were primarily conducted with Nigerian visitors, most interviewees wanted to know if NSK could

actually provide a usable passport. In Berlin, perhaps since most of the applicants were artists, the position of the NSK project was extremely clear: it was an art project intended to make people think. Of course the descriptions I have provided cannot be considered careful analyses, but these features are present in NSK's documentary videos and provide some interesting contrasts to how the project was perceived in Taiwan. Referring to Alain Badiou's view of inter-subjectivity with topos, we see that the NSK passport interview process casts light on different worlds. In Berlin, for example, we see participants' enthusiasm for art and an extremely precise shared perception. This kind of perception generally arises from the ability of certain art concepts to permeate sociocultural conditions, and is a manifestation of a super-organic art-world. Nigerian participants expressed an intense desire for assurances that the passport was genuine and were anticipating some kind of real utopia, which reflected their need for a place to settle down and was a manifestation of their un-homely world. Sarajevo participants, knowing the NSK passport was not valid, under unique historical circumstances, were impelled to alter the possibilities of this document by trying to actually use it, thus manifesting a chaotic world with a decision full of contingencies.

Taiwanese participants applying for an NSK passport knew that it was part of a biennial art exhibition, but few thought it was a viable choice for an artwork, as they had little experience of art concepts permeating sociocultural conditions. Perhaps the Taiwanese people still cannot recognise the possibility of fabricated reality. Although participants in Berlin acknowledged that the passport was not real, they directly considered it to be a possible ideal or virtual concept. In contrast, Taiwanese people, because of limitations caused by an undetermined foundation – Taiwan is neither an independent organic entity, nor part of a unified, super-organic conception – were inclined to raise more radically fundamental questions when confronted with NSK's project. Questions raised were related to world citizenship, one-world concepts, the necessity of the state, multiple national identities and the possible negation of the significance of politics. While many references to these questions can be found in late twentieth and twenty-first century theory, they are not embedded in the historical fact of Taiwan's conceptual dialectic, but are signs of utopian fantasies or phobias. Questions related to the concept of state or politics mostly arose from the fact that entities issuing directives never acknowledge Taiwan's national identity. Dissociated Taiwanese society has been bound together by media manipulation and the minimising of participation in politics. When it is difficult for a people to enter into dialogue with their government, power is unidirectional and the country only supervises citizens. When the status of a nation is unclear, and there is distance between the government and its people, citizens cannot contact or trust those who govern. Nonetheless, frigid reactions to politics cannot ensure independence, and the torrents of information transmitted by the media based on their supposition of the people's level of intelligence may conspire with consumer culture to make people even more ignorant.

Political parties manipulate national and personal identities to make use of society's resources, such that citizens no longer trust politics and have adopted

self-obscurantist, closed-minded attitudes. This is actually a domesticating strategy that circumvents the necessity of consensus building or typical persuasion. In terms of individual rights and political authority, however, Taiwanese democracy is a kind of orderly chaos, where the people must accept a government that lacks apparent efficiency, and expect disorder that arises from the intractability of political manipulation. In this way, Taiwan's transition differs from the chaos that overtook the region that was Yugoslavia after it dissolved. That is to say, Taiwanese society, which is governed by law that safeguards the interests of the ruling class, does not afford room for so much flexibility; and this, along with the fact that Taiwan is an island nation, contributed to the difficulty people had imagining actually using the NSK passport to cross Taiwan's borders. Because null and void, dispensable or a-political were the impressions given by the NSK passport, Taiwanese people felt interacting with this artwork was an opportunity to release political pressure or address politics in a more lighthearted fashion. Since the situation proposed by NSK's passport was wholly impossible, people felt free to think about politics in ways that were more creative and carefree, and I think this was not only the main significance of the NSK passport in Taiwan, but also a breakthrough for Taiwanese society.

To some extent, this breakthrough has made it more possible for people in Taiwan to discuss current political issues. While Taiwan has consistently modelled its modernization on developed nations in North America and Europe, it differs from them with respect to the stability of its identity in international society. Introduced into regions where secure identity is the norm, the NSK passport is more likely to encourage critical thinking rather than induce experiences of acute confrontation. A passport determines an individual's freedom to move through international society, and passports issued by more powerful countries accord more freedom in passing over borders. Due to Taiwan's dual identity, which is really no national identity in global circles, an intense desire for a third place has arisen among its people. This desire, however, stands in direct opposition to what people have been trained to believe is reasonable under the given circumstances, so people turn to art for escape and amusement, or even to collective fictions, games, multiple identities or the idea of a micro state.

'NSK' looks as if it could be the name of a nation, yet bearing double meaning, is also an acronym for *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (new Slovenian art). IRWIN invokes the topos 'state in time' in defining NSK, creating a nation that has done away with national borders, as well as an image of a nation constructed both in the name of art, and with the name *art*. I hope this image will not remain separate from reality, but will intervene, so that the image manifests a double meaning in reality, becoming a precise concept and language operation. Neoliberal ideology has constructed a world of complete relativism in which the result of struggles between regional communities are the last word, relationships between individuals are increasingly negotiated through consumer products, and interaction among individuals is restricted and monopolised. In a world like this, imagination only survives when it is commodified, and even then is severely restricted because it cannot become latent power when

manifested in reality. Duchamp's semantic system relied on appropriating the language of objects to speak about art, and IRWIN appropriates the language of objects and visual language to create political language. Neither are retinal art, but rather jump into the fourth dimension, and so produce conceptual space and rarefied languages instead of a large quantity of easily digested commodity. Although people in Taiwan can be open-minded and present a wide range of responses to art games, we still allow our liberation to be governed by others. For example, many regions and countries have lifted restrictions on Taiwanese travellers after advances due to globalization. This may signal a new phase for Taiwan in the international community, but this relative freedom to travel may cancel out the imagination that IRWIN and Duchamp have inspired in Taiwan.

*Taipei, 2011*

*Translated by  
Eric Chang*



IRWIN, *NSK Passport Holders*, London, 2007

## The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as Escape and Entry Vehicles<sup>1</sup> *Inke Arns*

In late July 2010, Borut Vogelnik and Miran Mohar, two members of the IRWIN group and representatives of the NSK State in Time, and myself, curator, artistic director of Hartware MedienKunstVerein (HMKV), and diplomat of the NSK State in Time, set out on a trip to Lagos, Nigeria. Invited by the Centre of Contemporary Art (CCA) Lagos, and supported by the Goethe-Institute, we travelled to West Africa for the first time. Our reasons were diplomatic.

For some time, the *NSK Država v času* (NSK State in Time), a state without territory founded in 1991 as an artistic response to the independence of Slovenia and to the subsequent war(s) in ex-Yugoslavia, had received a very substantial number of requests for citizenship, especially from Nigeria. When in 2006/2007 the requests manifested in the form of e-mails and telephone calls to individual representatives and diplomats of the NSK State in Time, and to representatives of the Republic of Slovenia, a general feeling of panic started to arise. What was going on? Why were Nigerian citizens suddenly so desperately eager to get NSK passports – and even to use them seriously for travel? Was it possible that the Nigerian applicants took the concept of the NSK State in Time more seriously than its founders, i.e. that they “overidentified” with it – an artistic/political strategy developed to perfection by Laibach/NSK in 1980s Yugoslavia?<sup>2</sup> What if the Nigerians who already were in the possession of a NSK passport would take the promise of the passport seriously and would *really* start travelling with it? What if they got into serious trouble at the border, possibly leading to their arrest? The NSK passport could either have been considered a fake document, or it could have been considered an authentic document, i.e. a real passport. Using it in either way could be considered a criminal act; in the first case because forged documents are considered illegal and in the latter because carrying two passports could, at times, create problems for Nigerian citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Noticing the rising number of requests from Nigeria from 2005-2006 onwards, the Republic of Slovenia urged the artists to post information on the NSK website saying that “NSK citizenship does not equal Slovenian citizenship” and that an “NSK passport does not allow its holder to enter the Schengen zone”. However, publishing this information on the website did not improve the situation. The demand for NSK passports kept rising

### From Dortmund to Lagos

In April 2009, Hartware MedienKunstVerein (HMKV) located in Dortmund, Germany, participated in the Goethe-Institute’s exchange programme *Cultural Managers from*

<sup>1</sup> Originally delivered to the First NSK Citizens’ Congress at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Oct 2010.

<sup>2</sup> On the strategy of overidentification see Inke Arns: „Mobile Staaten / Bewegliche Grenzen / Wandernde Einheiten. Das slowenische Künstlerkollektiv Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)“. In: *Netzkritik: Materialien zur Internet-Debatte*, ed. by nettime / Geert Lovink, Pit Schultz, Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv 1997, pp. 201-211; Inke Arns: *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) – eine Analyse ihrer künstlerischen Strategien im Kontext der 1980er Jahre in Jugoslawien*, Regensburg: Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie 2002; Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse: „Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance“, in: *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. by IRWIN, MIT Press 2006, pp. 444-455; “Subversive Affirmation”, ed. by Inke Arns / Sylvia Sasse, *Maska*, Vol. XIX/ 3-4 (98-99) / 2006, Ljubljana 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <http://saharareporters.com/column/my-brief-detention-okey-ndibe>, last accessed 15 August 2011.

*Africa in Cultural Institutions in Germany.* For two weeks, Hansi Loren Momodu, curatorial assistant of CCA Lagos, was a guest at HMKV's offices, observing the practical work that is being done at a German Kunstverein with a focus on media based artistic practices. The Goethe Institute is always keen on follow-up projects (a kind of sustainability!) and at the end of Hansi's stay we started thinking about possible options for future cooperations. I said that unfortunately I had no links to Africa, and that there was nothing that connected me specifically to Nigeria. The very moment I said this it occurred to me that this was not true at all. There *was* indeed something that connected me to Nigeria – even if only indirectly. But it made it all the more interesting.

I told Hansi in detail about NSK's 'immaterial state'. In addition to its temporary embassies and consulates materializing from time to time in various places, the NSK State in Time issues passports as a "confirmation of temporal space" (NSK) which can be obtained by any person irrespective of citizenship or nationality. I told her about the fact that these passports were being printed at the same printing house as the real, authentic passports of the Republic of Slovenia, and how hugely popular NSK passports had become especially amongst Nigerians. Holding one quarter of all NSK passports issued since 1991, Nigerians today represent the largest single group (approx. 25%) of citizens of the NSK State. I also told her that the state's founder artists were extremely worried that people might use the NSK passport for purposes for which it was not intended and that people might have great expectations of being able to travel, to leave Africa and to come to Europe. I also explained that there were continuous e-mails and telephone calls from Nigeria asking for information how to organise, where to go and whom to contact once they arrived. Finally, that the state's founding artists were afraid that the NSK passports were traded on the black market and that people paid horrendous sums to shady middlemen who were promising that this document would allow people to travel and that it was their entrance ticket to the First World. What a disillusionment it would be when they found out that this was not the case at all ... Hansi and I agreed that it was time for the state's founding artists to travel to Nigeria and see the situation for themselves – and if necessary take measures to inform the unsuspecting Nigerian NSK passport holders. Provided there were any.

### "Be home before sunset": Lagos, Nigeria

I arrived at Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos more than one year later, at eight o'clock in the evening. It was pitch-dark. A city of 20+ million inhabitants in one of the oil-richest countries in the world with no street lights at night. As I learned later, Lagos is a megalopolis without a functioning electricity network. Eddy, who would be our driver for the entire week, was waiting for me at the airport. He welcomed me warmly. As we drove along the highway from the airport to the city centre, pedestrians were constantly crossing the street in total darkness, suddenly looming up in front of our car illuminated only by the headlights. At one point Eddy said: "See the big cars at the side of the street?" Tank-like armoured vehicles stood half covered at

intervals of 300 meters. "Police" Eddy said, "some years ago it was normal to get robbed on the street leading from Lagos airport to downtown. Things have gotten much better lately." I was very happy to hear this. It took me a moment before I realized the significance of what he just had said.

Miran Mohar and Borut Vogelcnik from IRWIN had arrived some days earlier, and had already familiarised themselves with the surroundings.<sup>4</sup> They were in the midst of conducting interviews with Nigerian NSK passport holders and applicants at the CCA Lagos. The CCA is a truly amazing place – virtually the only place for contemporary art in the entire city of Lagos. It exists thanks to the initiative of one single woman, Bisi Silva, who not only generates the funds to run the centre but who also donated her entire library to the centre, transforming the upper floor into a small public library focusing on contemporary art and theory. The lower floor is usually used for exhibitions and workshops.

The one week CCA event *Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport Project* which took place from 26th – 31st July 2010 consisted of screenings, lectures and panel discussions. The final panel discussion on 31st July addressed the "Nigerian connection" of the NSK State and discussed the significance of the State created in Europe in the 1990s in contemporary African consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The announcement and outline for this discussion read:

"Since the initial presentations around the world in the 1990s of State in Time the project is currently receiving a substantial number of requests for citizenship of the NSK 'State' from Africa especially from Nigeria. This has resulted in many Nigerians assuming a dual identity as holders of NSK and Nigerian passports. In view of these new developments IRWIN conducted interviews with African/NSK citizens living in London, to ascertain their reasons for applying. Could it be in support of the initial artistic purpose of NSK? Do they see it as an avenue with which to move from one territory to another? Or is it for other socio-political reasons? *Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport project* will allow further debate on both the artistic and political implications of the NSK State in Time action, offering an examination of their original artistic interventions within the Nigerian context. (...) *Towards a Double Consciousness* attempts to interrogate the way in which artists propose and individuals search for alternative – real or fictional – possibilities that goes beyond notions of a fixed identity or geography."<sup>6</sup>

The *NSK Passport project* which took place in the framework of *On Independence and The Ambivalence of Promise*, CCA, Lagos' year long programme celebrating 50 years of the independence of seventeen African countries, proved to be a truly intense and simultaneously ambivalent experience – certainly for the three of us, but also, in different intensity, for the CCA Lagos team (Bisi Silva, Hansi Momodu, Jude Anogwih). Suddenly in Lagos, two of the NSK State's founders who had always thought of the State as an abstract concept and an intellectual tool were confronted with a position that no longer maintained a 'safe', ironic distance to the promise made by a document like the NSK passport. They found themselves in a situation where they felt it was necessary to

4 Our hotel was equipped, like most houses in Lagos, with a high wall topped with barbed wire (or, alternatively, topped with glass splinters), and two power generators running at night in the courtyard beneath the windows. They were pretty loud as were the neighbours' generators. Our hotel was equipped, like most houses in Lagos, with a high wall topped with barbed wire (or, alternatively, topped with glass splinters), and two power generators running at night in the courtyard beneath the windows. They were pretty loud as were the neighbours' generators.

5 Panel discussion on the topic of „NSK State: The Nigerian connection,“ Saturday, 31 July 2010, 3:00 pm. Speakers included Dr Inke Arns, IRWIN members: Miran Mohar and Borut Vogelcnik, and Nigerian NSK passport holders. Moderated by Loren Hansi Momodu.

6 Leaflet produced for the event *Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport project*, CCA Lagos, July 2010. The passage omitted from this quote reads: „This project forms part of CCA, Lagos' year long programme *On Independence and The Ambivalence of Promise* celebrating 50 years of independence by seventeen African countries including Nigeria on the 1st October 2010. It provides an avenue to interrogate notions of nationhood at a time when our ideas of citizenship is continuously being challenged by state policies such as Nigeria's contentious 'federal character' system or through religious and ethnic disturbances such as the recent unrest in the city of Jos, as well as the perennial civic unrest of the oil rich Niger Delta.“

speak in a very clear and direct manner about what their state was and what it was not, and what its passport could and could not do. Ambivalence and irony did not prove to be helpful tools in a situation where the genuine fear was that the expectations attached to a document – acquired directly from the artists or possibly bought on the black market for a huge amount of money – would soon prove to be false promises.

During the two hour discussion at the CCA it became clear that what once had been conceived as an ‘escape vehicle’ has – in the understanding of the Nigerian applicants and passport holders – transformed into something like an ‘entry vehicle’, or at least the promise of such. Originally, the NSK State was founded as an alternative to an exclusively national (Slovene) identity the artists were confronted with when Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia. It was conceived as almost the opposite of the new Republic of Slovenia which had declared its independence in 1991. As an artistic state concept, it defined itself neither through a concrete geographical *territory*, nor through an ethnically fixed *Staatsnation* (nation state). For the definition of a proper ‘spiritual’ territory the concept of NSK emphasises the notion of time. The notion of time was understood as a new productive category for the definition of space. Within this terminology, time was equated with the individual accumulation of experiences. Irwin and Eda Čufer defined this new “geography of time” as follows: “The real (...) ‘fatherland’ of the individual is limited (...) to the circle of his own individual experience, to that which exists and *not that he was born into*.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the “territorial borders of the NSK state can by no means be equated with the territorial borders of the actual state in which NSK originated.”<sup>8</sup> Rather, the NSK State in Time is defined as an abstract body whose borders are in a state of constant flux, depending on the activities of its physical and symbolic body, and whose territory is situated in the consciousness of its ‘members’. Eda Čufer and Irwin define the State in Time as follows:

“The NSK state in time is an abstract organism, a suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not upon territory but upon the mind, whose borders are in a state of flux, in accordance with the movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body.”<sup>9</sup>

The State issues passports as a “confirmation of temporal space”. There are many instances where fiction crosses into reality – like the story about NSK using the same passport printing house as the Republic of Slovenia. Telling this story in Lagos, Nigeria, during the panel discussion, with about twenty-five Nigerian applicants or passport holders eagerly waiting for any kind of proof for the ‘real’ potential of the passport proved to be feeding exactly into the economy of expectations that the NSK state founders originally came to Lagos to discourage. Also, telling these amazing – and actually true – stories about people from Sarajevo who crossed international borders during the second half of the 1990s with nothing other than the NSK ‘document’ would have been problematic.<sup>10</sup> That is why these stories were not mentioned once in the panel discussion in Lagos. Even if these (few) cases really did happen, it just did not feel right to mention them, as they could easily be read as ‘proofs’ of (the

7 Eda Čufer & Irwin, “Concepts and Relations” (1992), in: Irwin, *Zemljopis Vremena / Geography of Time*, exhibition catalogue, Umag 1994.

8 The full quote reads: “The role of art and artists in defining time which belongs to them individually is more effective than in defining territory. The real, not imaginary, ‘fatherland’ of the individual is limited to the circle of the house in which he was born, the classroom or the library in which he acquired knowledge, the landscapes in which he walked, the spaces to which he is oriented, to the circle of his own individual experience, to that which exists and *not that he was born into*. The territorial borders of the NSK state can by no means be equated with the territorial borders of the actual state in which NSK originated. The borders of the NSK state are drawn along the coordinates of its symbolic and physical body, which at the time of its activity acquired objective values and objective status.” Eda Čufer & Irwin, “Concepts and Relations”(1992), in: Irwin, *Zemljopis Vremena / Geography of Time*, exhibition catalogue, Umag 1994.

9 Eda Čufer & Irwin, “NSK State in Time”(1993), in: Irwin, *Zemljopis Vremena / Geography of Time*, *ibid*. Note: NSK makes a distinction between its ‘citizens’ and its ‘members’. ‘Citizens’ in practice are anyone who can scrape together the money for a passport, while ‘members’ are specially fifteen people (paraphrasing Michael Benson).

10 Bosnians did this because Bosnia was not then internationally recognized and so people had no papers that would allow them to cross international borders.

legality of) the passport as a valid travel document which it was worth investing large amounts of money for on the black market.

Miran Mohar and Borut Vogelnik very explicitly discussed the reason for creating the NSK State in Time in the early 1990s, and about what the passport was and was not meant to do. They stressed that the NSK State in Time is not an existing country and that it should by no means should be confused with the actual Republic of Slovenia which in turn is a member state of the European Union since 2004. Towards the end of the event we were convinced that the audience had ‘understood the initial artistic concept’ of NSK. However, at the very end of the panel discussion, two memorable statements were voiced. “A friend of mine,” said a member of the audience, “has a friend who knows somebody who has already been there. He said that it is a beautiful country.” Shame on us who had thought that the roller coaster of emotions had ended! The Irwin members once more explained patiently that the NSK State in Time is a state of mind rather than an existing state one can travel to in the sense that it is possible to travel to Slovenia, with which the NSK State in Time is not to be confused. The ultimate – and positively devastating – statement came from a young man with stylish 1970s sunglasses who had been sitting silently through the whole event. He said: “Listen, I think that everybody in this room perfectly understood what you have been telling us over the last two hours [meaning: don’t you Europeans think we Africans are stupid!]. But, still, I think that holding an NSK passport is a good thing. Because the NSK State in Time could come into being at some point in the future, you know?”

## “Lock your doors, I will not stop”: The NSK passport and Nigerian 419 scam

Lagos Island, located just opposite Lagos Mainland, is a huge gated community for the very rich – the upper class of Nigerian society as well as expats working for big international oil companies exploiting the oil wells of the Niger delta. The property prices are way beyond imagination – way beyond anything you know from Paris, London, Tokyo or the like. The three highway bridges connecting the island to the mainland are guarded by heavily armed police forces dressed in splendid uniforms. One night, we stayed out until after sunset. Leaving the bar around 22:30, Eddy drove us back from Lagos island to the mainland where our hotel was located. It was pitch-dark, again. Suddenly, on Lagos Mainland, lit only by our car lights, we saw a group of young men dancing onto the street in front of our car. “Lock your doors,” Eddy said calmly, as he closed the automatic car windows, “I will not stop.” He decelerated a little, but did not stop. Luckily, we did not hit anybody. A few days after this incident, an artist at the CCA told us that on that very night he had made the mistake of stopping his car at the same spot. He was robbed – the thieves who used the exact same “dancing onto the street trick” and took his money and his photo camera.

Imagine, if only one out of every five hundred cars stops. Possibly one car in five hundred will also hit a body – but that’s the risk, I guess, of what Giorgio Agamben has called ‘bare life’. That one successful car in a sea of failed attempts suddenly

reminded me of the logic of e-mail spam, or more precisely of something called the “Nigerian Letter”, “419 fraud,”<sup>11</sup> or “Nigerian bank scam”. Here, it is millions of e-mails that are sent out onto the Internet – and one of the recipients will answer, and will fall for the advance fee fraud.<sup>12</sup> The 419 scam originated in the early 1980s as the oil-based Nigerian economy declined. Several unemployed university students first used this scam as a means of manipulating business visitors interested in shady deals in the Nigerian oil sector before targeting businessmen in the west, and later the wider population. Advance-fee fraud boomed in Nigeria as government corruption and an economic downturn during the 1990s fuelled poverty and disillusionment in the country, says Insa Nolte of the University of Birmingham’s Centre of West African Studies. To some, Internet scams looked like an easy way to bag some quick cash. Scammers in the early-to-mid 1990s targeted companies, sending scam messages via letter, fax, or Telex. The spread of e-mail and easy access to e-mail-harvesting software significantly lowered the cost of sending scam letters by using the Internet.<sup>13</sup> „The availability of e-mail helped to transform a local form of fraud into one of Nigeria’s most important export industries,”<sup>14</sup> Nolte says.

Is it possible that the NSK passport is read by local Nigerian audiences as some kind of 419 scheme? As some promise of an unexpected fortune waiting out there – which you just have to grab by advancing a small fee? Or, formulated differently, do people believe in the NSK passport because one such passport could hit such a one in five hundred improbable opportunity? Did the Nigerian applicants and passport holders seriously consider the NSK passports – originally conceived as escape vehicles – as entry vehicles which would allow them to cross international borders? Ultimately, we did not find out. But we realized that the power of believing, even if only supported by rumours, is able to move mountains, even against better judgment, and that it is a force to be considered.

On our last day in Nigeria, a Sunday, Eddy invited us to attend church at Redemption Ministries, Lagos. Before the service, a business seminar addressing the question “*Where to find money?*” took place between 8 and 9 in the church made up of half-finished walls and a make-shift corrugated metal roof. When during the service – after the preacher had warned insistently against “witches in the household” – members of the parish got up one after the other with their arms raised and speaking in tongues, it occurred to me that this was a pentecostal church believing not so much in Jesus or God the father, but in the Holy Spirit which takes possession of the community members’ bodies and tongues during the service. And here, it occurred to me that in this context the NSK passport functioned not so much as a “confirmation of temporal space” but as a material vessel for something spiritual that by simply believing in it can transform into something real. It is neither of these – or, rather something in between that does not need to take sides. It exists, simply because people have heard rumours about it and because they are convinced that at some point it might come in handy if they were already in the possession of legal travel documents. A utopian-pragmatic position, so to speak, that trusts in the power of believing.

11 The number 419 refers to the article of the Nigerian Criminal Code (part of Chapter 38: “Obtaining Property by false pretences; Cheating”) dealing with fraud.

12 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advance-fee\\_fraud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advance-fee_fraud) (last accessed 30 July 2011).

13 In the 2000s, the 419 scam has spurred imitations from other locations in Africa, Philippines, Malaysia, Russia, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States.

14 Quoted after Robert Andrews, “Baiters Teach Scammers a Lesson”, *Wired*, 08.04.2006, <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2006/08/71387> (last accessed 30 July 2011).

*Written in late July / early August 2011*

## Public discussion following Inke Arns' presentation

*October 22, 2010*

19:00

**Alexei Monroe:** So, the photo from the Pentecostal Church made me think about belief and the contexts of the NSK State in Nigeria. And actually, if we compare coldly and unemotionally and, not as NSK citizens or people who are interested... Is Pentecostal belief any more ludicrous than the belief in the NSK State? And the new belief in the NSK State in Nigeria is simply another form of desperation, another form for desire for the utopian escape. And it’s actually much closer to religion than to a conscious political expression. That’s how it seems to me. What do you think?

**Inke Arns:** I had the impression that the reasons for people applying for this passport are very diverse. There were certainly people who really misunderstood it for an actual travel document.

There is even a huge black market that developed, so passports are being sold by middlemen that are immediately there. I mean, passports are sold for 250 dollars on the black market, because people don’t know they can become citizens for 24 euros, and then at the same time there were people who seemed to make sense of this passport in a very different way.

So for me, and I think also for Miran Mohar and Borut Vogeltnik, it was a very ambivalent experience. If people are really taking it for an actual travel document, then possibly, they will really face problems when they travel into a neighbouring country; somehow we do not want to be held responsible for it. And it’s really a kind of feeling of responsibility, so that nothing bad happens to people if they use it.

And that’s why there was this very explanatory approach within the seminar. It’s not just that everybody is perfectly over-identified with it - there is really a big variety of approaches.

**Alexei Monroe:** That was actually tried in London in 2007 with Nigerians there. At the ICA, IRWIN spoke to Nigerian passport holders. I saw some of those conversations and again it was this kind of impermeable belief that no matter what you told them, or how you said it to them, they believed or even they knew people who had been there and, again that’s why I see the religious similarity, because it’s like some of us believers know people who believe they know people who have spoken with the Holy Ghost.

It’s that level of mystical belief as it seems to me, that it’s completely impermeable to logic. I mean that’s why it’s also a good recapitulation of a totalitarian belief, a doublethink, or of a true Stalinist who is able to ignore the facts totally, because their

belief is so strong. It seems really unshakable. But Jude, having heard this, what's your view on this?

**Jude Anogwih:** I would like to go back to the statement she made much earlier about people travelling with these passports. The basic problem is still the information that the passport seekers get before applying for this passport. And eventually, after they've got the passport, there is this insistence or message that you can travel with these passports.

And possibly there might be some information about people who have successfully travelled to other parts of the world with these passports. The question is how true are these fictitious stories? How much effort might have possibly been made to inculcate in their minds that this is true, and is real, and it happens.

The information on the passports I saw in Lagos has a bold warning that tells you that this is not a valid travel document. Every Nigerian with a basic sense of reasoning should know and understand that sentence before moving on to the borders or to the airport. Surprisingly, before coming here I also got several calls; someone requesting a cover letter to attend this programme with the NSK Passport and he wanted a cover letter from the CCA Lagos, and possibly from me.

But the truth is that I was much perplexed, I was really surprised and also much worried. I've been worried all the while since we started this project because of the several calls that came, several issues that were raised, both from the security system or authority and individuals. But the truth is that there is some sort of persistent information being related to this gentleman, that something can happen as long as you have this passport. And that is a problem.

**Alexei Monroe:** Is it possible that there are organized criminal groups who are deliberately spreading this misinformation?

**Jude Anogwih:** I wouldn't want to imagine somebody or some group doing some criminal activity with this. But I would rather see a situation where the circumstances surrounding my country, whether political, religious or social, are possibly the major factor that influences people's interest to want to move on to a different place, a different state, irrespective of whether it's true or not.

It's usual and normal for people to capitalize on other peoples' weaknesses. And like we said earlier in our several deliberations, and my colleague Hansi also mentioned there is a prolific use of the Internet in Nigeria.

So most information that you might think is not necessary, people take in, and possibly try to see what they can get out of it, which is a very interesting imaginary state of the user himself.

We can't really control some of these. But it is very important for NSK to come up with a very authentic and obvious statement and structure on how to communicate it to the people that are interested in this organisation.

I am an artist. It's very simple for me to understand that this is an art project. I am possibly clearly involved with the reality of moving into some other possibilities. Yes, I can travel with this if I want to. I mean, I am not doing it because I know it is not a valid travel document, I am doing it because possibly I want to have that sense of enjoyment, to see, to enjoy how it feels, to play on someone else's ignorance, to enhance my creative or artistic feelings, you know and, to actually see how functional this beautiful material is; with the colour, the form, the type, every element of it, how it functions. It's as basic as that. That it is for me as an artist. But for some other person I think it has a different meaning.

**Alexei Monroe:** Okay. So do we have any questions or responses from the audience?

**Björn Quiring:** This is more a question regarding the first talk [Kostis'] because it took me a while to sort it out. You developed that NSK Passport as an incidence of political or totalitarian enjoyment; a sort of nostalgic remnant of the time of seemingly apolitical opposite market ideology.

And on the other hand this passport takes on a commodity form, doesn't it? It's subject to all the qualities of commodity fetishism. I mean it's sold out there, at the desk, and with other NSK merchandise and I can buy it. So, if it's subversive, isn't it also by pushing the market economy to a limit like prefiguring a world in which you can buy citizenship like any other commodity? So it would be not only retro but also futuristic to some degree.

**Kostis Stafylakis:** Thanks. Well, listening to your [Inke's] talk and your replies, I am just rethinking this notion of enjoyment that I attempted to bring into the conversation and I figured out that despite the fact that various, unrelated sometimes, motivations lie behind these people approaching the desk of the [issuing of the] passports: there might be some sort of a common denominator between all these aspects.

This is actually a fantasy, not exactly a fantasy, of something that lies beyond the fictional, a possibility of something lying beyond the veil of the fictional. But this is exactly the structure of enjoyment that I am trying to bring in; it's this kind of surplus enjoyment, in the sense that it can only be attached to something, if there is something else behind it.

And in the sense there is a structure here as a common denominator for me that behind all these disparate experiences can help us to somehow formulate this. There are probably some materialistic reasons for some people to pursue these particular passports.

Another reason might be commodity fetishism as our friend has just described. Another reason might be the artistic inclination of somebody like the one that you [Jude] described for example.

But I think the common ground underneath all these reasons is exactly the idea or a possibility of something, in the future perhaps, lying beyond the veil

of the fictional. This is exactly this form of surplus enjoyment that with Yannis [Stavrakakis] we are trying to bring in, not as the ultimate way to understand this sort of activity we discussed, but nevertheless as an important factor of this process of understanding and deliberating what happened over there and that Inke described in so much detail.

**Alexei Monroe:** If you can conceptualize some sort of space beyond, but you can't yet name it and in a way that's an issue with the whole congress because at present the NSK State has no content, the only formulation of what lies at its heart is this formulation that they created themselves - the immanent consistent spirit -, which some of our delegates were referring to in the discussions.

And the immanent consistent spirit is a very good formulation for the type of belief that we are discussing. So perhaps beyond the enjoyment, is it the belief that makes it possible?

**Kostis Stafylakis:** Yes, but this is completely transcendental and not immanent. It lies in the heart of the conflict between the supposedly immanent bureaucratic state and its transcendental idea which is always somewhere else.

This is a constitutive character of every sort of political, national or community identification in every different context. It's a presupposition, so the reason why NSK is always interesting for me is because it forces us to re-conceive this notion of identification beyond the mere globalist discourse of the moment, especially in the contemporary art field which has turned out to be a globalist ideology in itself.

Of course I am a globalist as well, I don't have much problem with globalization, this is not my problem definitely, but the abstraction of globalism we face in the art field is something that really frightens me and has always frightened me, and I, too, conceive NSK as a vehicle of critique, and at this moment I can see critical roots in NSK that can help me, may help me articulate a critique of this abstract globalism of the art field, this "global romanticism" as Francesco Bonami, another famous curator would like to say.

**Alexei Monroe:** Okay, do we have any other questions from the audience?

**Audience Member:** I don't have a question; I would just like to make a statement. It was this 'fiction becomes reality', which I think is a suggestive phrase. I got my passport four years ago, and to me that was a very exciting move to make. I didn't really know why I did it, but today I am sitting here as a delegate at the citizens' congress, and to me that is fiction becoming reality.

**Alexei Monroe:** Okay. Any other questions?

**Gediminas Gasparavicius:** Not so much a question, but a comment on both, Inke's

and Kostis' presentations. Kostis discussed quite in depth this idea of IRWIN, the early years of IRWIN, the 1980s.

IRWIN embraced limitations very consciously so, that is to say if Laibach is forbidden in Ljubljana, Slovenia, then we are going to exhibit in private apartments. If the themes of the Yugoslav partisans are untouchable, so yes, we are going to include this sort of collaged pictures in a way of cheap reproduction. And so on.

So the embrace of limitations was the very basis of the establishment of firstly Laibach and then eventually IRWIN and then NSK itself. And the State of NSK was established in 1992, when states in Eastern Europe were very much in retreat.

I see, if not a relation, then a certain parallel between what was happening in the last, I guess, 4 years, 3 years with this influx of applications for passports from Nigerians. They embrace the limitation that this passport is not good for travelling, they embrace the limitation that they've never been to that state since it doesn't exist, but they strongly believe that it either does exist somewhere where they haven't yet been or, it will exist in some near future that is to say.

In that respect I didn't like Inke Arns' formulation that they were more over-identifying with the NSK State than the NSK members when they created that state for the first time. So it is not so much of a question, but I am just trying to draw some parallels between these processes that is to say, the establishment of IRWIN, and the establishment of the NSK State and these developments of the last several years.

**Eda Čufer:** In the Nigerian case I don't see that they are over-identifying so much with the NSK State, but they are over-identifying with the status a passport has as a legal document that provides certain rights that citizens in the so-called colonial or civilized world have. And in my presentation today I was trying to show how basically, the passport is an invention of colonial structure, internationalizing and globalizing itself from the early modern ages.

So in that sense the situation actually works like over-identification works in the way Žižek describes it, when for example, also in psycho-analysis, over-identification is described as a situation where you have a child who lives with an abusive parent and because he has no other reference, he starts doubling, imitating that parent, but not only its consistent phase, but also some kind of hidden other side which basically brings out the inconsistency and some kind of demonic or grotesque element.

**Alexei Monroe:** Okay, and another question here?

**Alexander Nym:** Well, I actually do have a question for Inke and Jude. Maybe I have just missed this point, but the Nigerians owning the passports were so convinced they can use it to travel to the NSK State. Was I mistaken, or...they were travelling to other countries and that worked, so is there a certain aspect of a dimension of practical use for that? Or, did you mention that there were people who actually believed that somebody else had travelled to the NSK State as a territorial, an existing

thing that you can actually visit? So, there are two varieties of rumours about the usefulness of the passport.

**Inke Arns:** Yes definitely, you know I mentioned the two remarks that really stuck in my mind. After the discussion we had about the NSK State in Time being non-existing, not being a real state you can travel to, the first one said: 'But I have talked to people who had been there and said it was a beautiful country'. And this is, of course, a rumour that's spreading.

And also what you [Jude] have said earlier, I don't know whether people from Nigeria have actually travelled with the document. I don't know. It's just when we talked about the NSK State in Time, I know that there have been cases of people travelling with the NSK State in Time Passports in the 1990s in Yugoslavia or in Bosnia, at the time when those people, possibly from Sarajevo or from somewhere, didn't have any kind of documents that were internationally recognized, and there were some cases - that's what I have heard, perhaps it's a rumour - who then managed to cross international borders with this passport.

It's really a tricky situation, you know. Because when you tell the story, first of all not being sure whether it has really happened, and secondly wouldn't it be a kind of proliferation of rumours?

**Alexander Nym:** That leads me to a follow up question. These rumours, the stories of friends who have supposedly travelled to - I call it the NSK Country to make it different from the NSK State - but did you actually ask them about how they got that idea from these friends whether it might have been just a simple mishap or mix up with some other really existing country which they visited, maybe Slovenia, and just mistook that for the NSK Country in some way?

**Inke Arns:** No I didn't ask. Possibly you [IRWIN] know, you asked this question in the interviews, I am not sure. I was not present when the interviews were being done. I mean those interviews on the video. We didn't ask the question in the discussion we had.

**Jude Anogwih:** I would like to make a comment on that, before I say something about personal experiences with some of those passport holders...

**Neil Rector:** I've got just a very quick question; I guess it follows the same. Was there also a common understanding as to where the NSK Country was physically located?

**Hansi Momodu:** I also wanted to make a comment on the kind of discussion that we were having. And actually they were really very difficult. Because you are faced with an individual that actually has real emotional investment in something, and

actually you are the person, you're sort of the bearer of bad news, saying 'Oh, the joke is on you'.

So actually there's only so far such conversations could go and still remain quite humane, and actually saying where do you think this place is ...to a certain extent wasn't really appropriate. So, some of these things did come up in the questioning. I think it's a really important consideration and I guess adds to the value of the symbol of this passport, actually how people do have this genuine, very deep-seated emotional attachment they place on this document, whether it's misplaced or not.

And I think in the context of Nigeria as Jude mentioned it; it does relate to wider issues, and somehow the issue of migration has adopted NSK, whether it was part of the initial impetus or not. So now it's time to come into the discussion.

**Neil Rector:** A number of us delegates are trying to think through what the structure of the NSK State should be going forward and, also as a part of that, how to expand the membership.

Obviously, this discussion is very disturbing to me in that I certainly don't want to be part of something where people who don't have much money are hoodwinked out of money under pretences that turn out not to be true.

I wonder if you have any thoughts for us, as delegates, on how we can try to keep something like this from happening in the future as the state expands and as we try to go about our collective business.

**Manray Hsu:** Actually, there are a few issues that actually touch on my lecture tomorrow [internal presentation to delegates only; on the 23rd October 2010]. At this moment I think it's good to kind of bring it up because the context is right.

I think the misunderstandings of the people are not to be argued, the misunderstandings are very important because I think they tell so much about how we relate to a state, and particularly to something called passport. And you can imagine that the passport is something that gives you entitlement for citizenship when you are outside your country, not inside the country. So passport is actually a sign of citizenship, it's actually a sign of protection, the protection that the state promised you to have, and a passport also means - especially if you want to have another passport by some means - another possibility of life or many possibilities of life, whenever your own, an original passport or an original citizenship cannot guarantee what you want.

Nowadays, through globalization, citizenship is getting more and more flexible. A lot of rich people can just buy citizenship very easily and so in this case the NSK Passport is very affordable to the poor.

And what I am saying is the protection that is promised on getting a passport, regardless whether it is an NSK Passport or not. And I think this issue is very important for NSK itself because it's related to what we know about naked life or bare life, about a possibility of having no more protection and actually in Chinese we call passport 'protection certificate' [*buzhao*].

The term protection certificate comes from a very ancient, warring state, where, if you wanted to go to another country, you needed this protection certificate in order to travel. And so it has this meaning; that means that you basically, even in your country, you have the possibility of a bare life, the reality of a bare life. So the passport gives you an extension of this protection and I think this is a very important issue, for when I see an NSK Passport it carries this kind of intention to say okay: it is universally affordable, I mean at the economic and financial level, and in that sense it is also idealistic and, you know, utopian, because it means that we all long for protection, the protection for the naked life and I think the two sides are much related, so we can't ignore these misunderstandings.

**Alexei Monroe:** Okay, we have some more questions, one in the middle there.

**Bertrand Thibert:** Thank you. In addition to what was said: in 1951 a former American idealist called Garry Davis founded the World Government of World Citizens and he's been issuing this World Passport for over 60 years with hundreds and thousands exemplaries for free, for stateless people and refugees. And it costs only 45 EUR for somebody who wants to buy it, but having said that, when rich people buy this World Passport, there are three or four passports issued to stateless and poor people in order to be granted some access.

And it is important to say that six UN member countries have accepted this passport on a *de jure* basis. Other countries recognize it on a case-by-case *de facto* basis, but nearly almost all the UN member countries have accepted this passport at least once in their history. But this is a successor of a passport issued in the 1920s. So NSK is going to be challengers for the World Passport in the effort for recognition and, as you say, protection, because the identity is the most valuable protection for vulnerable people.

**Conor McGrady:** When so much of contemporary art is sanitized, isn't or, is the unpredictability of a situation such as the one that took place in Nigeria not to be welcomed to a certain extent?

I am not arguing for the potential you refer to, of harm coming to people through trying to travel and coming in trouble with authorities because of the use of the passport. More to the point of; is there really any reason for concern if an aesthetic project takes on an unpredictable level that moves beyond the parameters of control?

**Alexei Monroe:** Miran, behind

**Miran Mohar:** My name is Miran Mohar. I am a member of IRWIN and NSK, and I would just like to say a few words about the group phenomenon of NSK passports, when we had such a big request from Nigeria. When we found out what was going on, we had an NSK meeting where we discussed the whole issue very deeply, because

we didn't know what exactly to do. Because how it works it is that people apply for the passports, they pay 25 euros at the bank, and then they send their applications with two photos and the confirmation of the payment to us. That year, in 2006/2007, hundreds and hundreds of applications were coming from Nigeria. And there were discussions of what to do, whether to stop it, or block it, or stop this project, or what... So we decided that to stop it, it would not be fair towards the people who apply for passports. So we decided to inform the people: to every passport that we sent to Nigeria, or to some other part of Africa, we added the information that this passport was not intended for travelling. We sent hundreds and hundreds of mails to various addresses, and we went to London for three days where we were discussing (the situation) with NSK passport holders from Nigeria who were then living in London to explain to them that this passport was not intended for travelling, and that they should send this information to their families. And there were still requests for the passport, maybe three or four a month, not hundreds like before, so people must have got the message. In fact we felt we were responsible, and this was also the most important reason why we so gratefully accepted the invitation from our friends from Lagos, to go there and discuss the situation *in situ*, because then we didn't really have any channels in Africa; so now we are discussing about giving this piece information to some Nigerian media, or even to the ones who have already got the passports, to understand that it would be dangerous to use them for travelling, but we don't know, what this will cause. Maybe just by publishing this information we will make a new wave of passport requests, but basically, I believe that what we decided was right; it was right that we let the Nigerians to decide for themselves if they would like to have NSK passports or not. I think we felt responsible, but we didn't know how exactly to deal with it. But now we know better. Thank you.

**Audience Member:** It's not really a question, but more a remark. For me it's not so complicated: different approaches, different understanding of one object, and different needs from a different group or different people. It's a kind of proof or witness that the world is not global, it is not one, and it is not understood in the same way.

Here's that document, that means of protection document, I think it's quite an interesting term to use for a passport, and the other see it as an object of art, an object as a kind of symbol, and it's quite clear; I think it is not so complicated.

I mean one group of people needs it urgently and they see it more practically, as a document for travelling, because they want to move with it, and the other, like the NSK commune, for you it's part of much more, I mean it's not a document for travelling, it is a symbol for a much wider idea of identity or collective or thinking differently, so I think it is not so complicated.

**Nikica Korubin:** Thanks for making this remark for I would also like to point to the thing of the need. For me as a European citizen I have this passport and I need to buy this passport. I would like to point out that there are two levels according to

the need. Of course I wouldn't say the people in Nigeria are more naïve than me for wanting to have this passport or the power that can come with this passport, because I also want to have it for my own reasons, let's say art thing or something you have in common with other people of this imaginary state, and so on and so on.

But coming to the notion of believing in let's say the power of this passport, I think the people who really need it as a travel document, then they automatically also have to believe in this power. For me it is a luxury if I believe in this NSK State or not, or if I conceive it as an art document or, as a second citizenship or, how I can deal with it in the future or not, for me it is, let's say, a free will if I will believe or not.

But for the people who need it, they have to believe, so that they can use it somehow.

**Naomi Hennig:** I am quite surprised by the level of anxiety that is connected to the question of the large number of Nigerian citizens, because for me this fact, as it happened in the whole history, actually implies a huge promise for the future of the NSK State as a platform where these issues can be discussed, and where through the shared membership in this art project some sort of solidarity could be established, or a lot of bonds for the future can be made. So I think that maybe the misunderstanding is on the other side, maybe it's on your side, maybe we can discuss this further.

**Alexei Monroe:** On the side of the NSK State itself?

**Naomi Hennig:** On the side of those who really have to deal with all these questions where there's lots of insecurity coming up about the prospect of an art project, or the fear of having to excuse for the sort of power that is taken through the invention of such a project. I think there is also a potential for solidarity.

**Alexei:** Okay, I'd like to return to Conor's question about whether it is necessarily such a bad thing when we get this reality/artistic crossovers. And I think you were reaching towards, you know ... that there's always a positive side to these misunderstandings and there is a disrupted potential, but then the question is what's the cost for the individuals who subscribed to the misunderstanding in the way of sharing it.

So it's quite ... it's a double-edged sword and in a way. I personally, I feel I play a small part in this because in my book I always mention the stories about people travelling from Sarajevo etc. [with NSK Passports] so a lot of this can contribute to this mythology which people in Nigeria are taking for real.

But does that mean that we should censor ourselves or, that we should try to demythicize and completely destroy it? And as Miran says to actually stop the project because of this issue would also be incorrect. There is actually no correct ethical path out of this. So all we can do is consider some of these questions.

**Alexei Monroe:** Does anybody have any final questions or remarks on this?

**Avi Pitchon:** Just a thought that perhaps there's another dimension concerning this process which is not strictly just the question of whether the passports are real or not or whether there is a misunderstanding or not.

In a way you could say that the statement that the passport is not real but it's part of an art project is some bizarre and exotic form of bureaucratic difficulty in the sense that it's some part of a naturalization process. And I am not necessarily saying that people who are more naïve might have this misunderstanding, because I can also account for myself that sometimes I am trying to deceive myself to this kind of conspiratorial thinking.

You can always think there might be more to the process than you think you know. But the point is that it is actual, not virtual; the process of naturalization is real, because you are actually familiarizing yourself with a strain or a current of thought or of behaviour, of cultural phenomena from a different civilization. So actually this statement "this is not real" is real in the fact that it exposes you to a cultural phenomenon.

**Stephen Shukaitis:** Earlier today Alexei used the phrase passing temporary hegemonic zone.

Let me connect two histories that hadn't been connected before. In the late 70s there appeared this mysterious travel document called "Visit Port Watson". It described a sort of idyllic utopia somewhere in the South Pacific that due to dodgy clients, capital deals, had managed to create an island with no work.

The publisher of this document started getting all these letters saying "How do I get to Port Watson, how do I get there, where is it?" Now the author of the document was someone called Peter Lamborn Wilson who went on to write a little book called TAZ, Temporary Autonomous Zones and his answer was "Wherever you are when you think that Port Watson can exist, is where it is."

So maybe, the question is now, the people who think they have heard that you can actually visit the NSK Land; maybe whenever they thought it was possible, then, in fact they were there.

## The 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' in Berlin: A Summary *Conor McGrady*

### Introduction

The NSK State in Time emerged at a moment when a radical rethinking of the nation state was necessary, yet this did not manifest itself geopolitically but in the form of an art collective's endeavour. Prior to the creation of the State in Time, the NSK collective grew out of the social and cultural conditions of Yugoslavia in the 1980s. In the wake of long-time leader Marshall Josip Broz Tito's death, Slovenian youth and underground culture clashed with the Yugoslav authorities, while power struggles and rising nationalism across Yugoslavia began to threaten the federation. NSK founders Laibach faced censorship for their visual and aural reprocessing of art, ideology and politics. As events in the 1980s accelerated towards the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in war, NSK emerged as a multi-faceted entity, with Laibach's controversial and provocative presence now framed within a broader collective structure encompassing painting, theatre, design and philosophy. NSK's characteristic embodiment of authoritarianism merged nationalist, socialist and fascist iconography with the language of the early twentieth century avant-gardes. Taking the idea of the state as a Duchampian Readymade, NSK virtually seceded from newly independent Slovenia in 1992 to become a state in time and without borders – a utopian social sculpture embodying a symbolic transcendence of the nationalism engulfing the region. Shortly after its founding, the state began to issue NSK passports and open temporary embassies in a number of locations, including Moscow, war-torn Sarajevo, Berlin, Ghent, Glasgow and Dublin.

Eighteen years after the founding of the state, the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' took place in Berlin. From 21-23 October 2010, delegates, founding members of NSK<sup>1</sup> and congress organisers met at the Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, a signature post-war modernist structure located in the heart of the Tiergarten, a short distance from the Reichstag and new Chancellery building. I attended the congress as a facilitator, chairing presentations by guest speakers and observing the discussions taking place in delegate working groups. The congress consisted of three days of intensive working sessions, augmented with presentations and film screenings open to the public in the evenings. Throughout the proceedings, an exhibition of NSK citizen-generated Folk Art was displayed on video monitors. These works, which mainly reprocessed NSK's aesthetic material, were shown alongside a series of citizen-designed congress posters. Intensive debate amongst the delegates resulted in the generation of a declaration of findings and a list of five innovations to be applied to the NSK state in its current form.

<sup>1</sup> With the founding of the State in Time, NSK ceased to exist as a collective body with a synchronised strategy. Laibach, IRWIN, Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung, New Collectivism and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy (Peter Malkar), the core groups active in the collective up until this point, continued to develop their own trajectories, periodically reuniting for NSK events in Berlin, Sarajevo, Dublin and at the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress'.



## An Overview of the Process

The Congress Delegates represented a broad spectrum of political, aesthetic and philosophical opinion. Predominantly from Europe and the US but also including delegates from Nigeria and New Zealand, they were initially selected through an application process open to all NSK citizens. Ostensibly, their task was to critically examine the formal and conceptual structure of the NSK state as a social sculpture or collective *gesamtkunstwerk*, and to envisage potential avenues for its continuation and proliferation. Working in three groups, two days of discussion culminated in a final day-long gathering when delegates elected to meet together to craft a concluding statement. Despite occasional tension, the dynamic was cordial and comradely, with delegates for the most part taking their role seriously, even if what was expected of them from the outset remained somewhat indeterminate and open ended.

Early in the proceedings, questions were raised on the role of NSK citizenship, and what it entailed in terms of the projection of values into a virtual, utopian social structure. From the passive consumption of the state through the act of owning an NSK passport as an art object, to actually attempting to travel with it, citizenship is currently exercised across a number of platforms. Recent citizen-led initiatives, including the production of Folk Art, maintenance of archive materials<sup>2</sup> and discussions on diplomatic relations, precipitated debate on strategies to further activate citizen involvement. One proposed action was the creation of an NSK Academy. Increasing academic interest in the NSK state was perceived as problematic by some delegates, based on the fear that its incorporation into the dominant art/historical/ideological canons could effectively neutralise its provocative aspects, including its universalist and totalizing aspirations. At the same time, there existed a broad desire to centralise and disseminate theoretical research on the state, and to view academia as a vehicle for the proliferation of ideas that it embodies. This in turn, posed the question of how aggressively the NSK state should present itself to the world. As a social sculpture embodying utopian ideals, the state also manifests aspects of what was referred to during the congress as the 'dark side' of history and politics (totalitarianism, authoritarianism, martial aesthetics etc.). In this sense, the power of the NSK state project exists not only in its ability to provide a point of identification for those who reject what congress presenter and NSK founding member Eda Čufer referred to as 'the cage of national culture', but also to generate a sense of disquiet.

Discussions on the issue of decentralising NSK state power remained tentative. While some delegates proposed an actual transfer of control of the state apparatus (including passport production) into the hands of the citizenry, the idea seemed to generate a lukewarm response for the most part. Establishing accountability and coordination in such a venture seemed to be as problematic as the thought of severing the umbilical cord tying delegates to the state's founders. As was to become clear during the discussions proposing innovations to the state, and later reinforced in the congress findings, the majority of delegates were not in favour of making a clear

2 See Christian Matzke's Retrogarde Reading Room <http://www.reanimator.8m.com/NSK/readingroom.html> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

3 For more on micronations, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micronation> (last accessed 20 November, 2012).

4 Point 8 from the Internal Book of Laws: Constitution of Membership and Basic Duties of NSK Members, reads, 'Each membership candidate must believe in the hierarchical principle and existence of the supreme substance (ICS – the immanent, consistent spirit), occupying the uppermost position in the hierarchy of NSK.' New Collectivism, *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, Los Angeles: Amok, 1991, p.4.

5 A psychoanalytic term attributed to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in the context of NSK overidentification is the strategy of interrogating a particular ideology, aesthetic or political viewpoint through adoption of their tenets in exaggerated form, rather than critiquing them directly.

demand for the assumption of power. As a result, no such demand was formally issued, though indications were present that, should it have been, the constituent NSK groups would have responded positively. In lieu of this, the discussions tended to centre around the need for a more active citizenry, with suggestions that citizens continue to develop a project-based model, organising events and activities in their own locales or online. The question of maintaining a unity of vision across such citizen-led initiatives was partially addressed in the production of the five innovations (see Appendix 1), one of which called for the establishment of a decision-making process in coordinating such activities. Much discussion was also given over to citizen demography and recruitment. While no concrete resolutions emerged as to how to effectively address a perceived gender imbalance amongst citizens (the majority tend to be male), it was suggested (not without humour, given the complex iconography of NSK state aesthetics) that state propaganda be more directed towards the recruitment of women.

A full working group session also examined the question of whether the NSK state should or should not consider itself a micronation.<sup>3</sup> On this issue delegates were unanimous. It was argued that the NSK state transcends micronations, in that for the most part they limit themselves to outmoded forms of government, mimicking fiefdoms, monarchies and other feudal structures. As the 'first global State of the Universe', it was suggested that the state relate to micronations in a paternal fashion, rather than build fraternal ties. As a meta-nation or a meta-state, which is by definition all-encompassing, the establishment of bilateral relations with other macro or micronations would contradict or challenge this status. In highlighting examples of similar social entities, one delegate compared the NSK state to the Catholic Church (again, not without humour) due to its universality, embodiment of some relations with other states, and its embracement of a higher totalising force, the Immanent Consistent Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Yet as a transcendent totalising organism, the NSK state also conceptually encompasses and supersedes religion. In concluding the discussion it was proposed that the state not endorse or formally relate to other states or micronations, but should not prevent citizens from maintaining such relations.

## The Nigerian Question

Throughout the congress, guest presenters discussed issues pertinent to the social and aesthetic function of the state. Students from Berlin's Humboldt University's Anthropology Department questioned whether the NSK state could pose a virtual threat to the existing social order. This in itself raises the question of how real the NSK state actually is in terms of politics. The Nigerian question, which was addressed in a public panel discussion, posed the conundrum of prospective citizens taking the State in Time more seriously than it takes itself – a peculiar twist on the NSK strategy of over-identification<sup>5</sup> used in the run up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The thousands of applications pouring in from Nigeria, in the belief that an NSK passport

can provide entry into the European Union, illustrates that under certain social and political conditions an overlap/interpolation of the NSK state with reality can occur. In Nigeria, the NSK passport is taken seriously as a document guaranteeing access to Europe to such an extent that some Nigerians actually claim to have visited the NSK state. Given the desperation faced by many in Nigeria, there is a utopian belief in the sense of hope that the state represents. But, as referenced in the title of the NSK project in Lagos<sup>6</sup> in response to this situation, this belief represents a 'double consciousness', where the sense of conviction is so strong that the true facts are ignored.

The unexpected response from Nigeria to the existence of the NSK state raises another issue. When so much contemporary art is relatively sanitised and safe for consumption, should the potential social impact of art, no matter how unpredictable, be proscribed or limited? Uncontrollable outcomes of course, do not necessarily imply an abdication of social responsibility. In the case of desperate Nigerians being taken advantage of by unscrupulous passport providers, the aforementioned project in Lagos was both an attempt to understand the motivations of prospective citizens and to reiterate that NSK passports were not valid for travel. The detonations set off in any given social context, and the unforeseeable results generated, test the power and potential of an artwork to intervene in, or generate, its own reality. In this sense the Nigerian situation underlines the initial desire inherent in the creation of the NSK state, in that 'the NSK State in Time is not merely to be understood as an *artistic* project ("it is not a simulation"), but as a *real time* project which leaves behind "the field which is normally defined as art" and which can only be effective as such'.<sup>7</sup> The interaction of Nigerian passport seekers with the NSK state shifted its largely abstract dimension as social sculpture to a concrete and controversial manifestation in reality. If art is to maintain a social function beyond that of luxury plastic or intellectual commodity, an argument can be made for an art that courts uncertainty and retains the potential to be dangerous. In these times art should be radical and provocative, taking risks and challenging assumptions. Perhaps the constitution of a truly radical artistic practice today lies in its ability to intervene socially and to generate unpredictable outcomes.

## Five Innovations

As an initial step towards generating concrete results from the congress, delegates were charged with proposing five innovations to the state. In response to the question of the state's relationship to academia, the formation of an NSK Academy or Department for Temporal Research was proposed to provide a central repository for the accumulation and dissemination of research. Virtual and physical gatherings for citizens were called for to coordinate a greater level of citizen involvement. The creation of a new and all-embracing set of aesthetics aims to expand the visual iconography of the state, appropriating the historical and regional symbolism specific to each citizen's locale. In this light, the relationship between politics and visual culture in a

6 See 'Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport Project' <http://times.NSKstate.com/towards-a-double-consciousness-nsk-passport-project/> (last accessed 8 December, 2012).

7 Inke Arns, 'IRWIN (NSK) 1983-2002: From "Was Ist Kunst?" via Eastern Modernism to Total Recall', *ARTMargins*, 15 August, 2002.

8 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1964, p.154.

number of diverse contexts can potentially be sucked into an aesthetic vortex, reprocessed and redeployed.

Other innovations, some practical, some symbolic, did not make the final list, including a proposal to form a Ministry of Terror, or NSK Guard Force. The delegate who proposed this idea was particularly concerned with maintaining the tension between alienation and attraction that characterises any relationship to authority. For the most part founded through the use of terror, the modern nation state embodies a 'monopoly on the legitimate use of violence'.<sup>8</sup> It was proposed that an NSK Guard Force continue to interrogate the language and aesthetics of power through serving as an indicator of the repository of violence and authoritarianism that the nation state continues to maintain in reserve. While the very existence of the NSK state is in itself an interrogation of contemporary social and political reality, perhaps the symbolic and performative language of militant over-identification may yet find avenues for manifestation in future state activities.

## Declaration of Findings

During the proceedings, founding members of the NSK state suggested that the delegates consider drafting a declaration embodying the historic and symbolic nature of the 'First NSK Citizen's Congress'. Such a gesture would echo the Moscow Declaration, marking the creation of the NSK State in Time with the opening of the first NSK Embassy in Moscow in 1992. Working as a single group to address this task, the delegates produced a nine-point list of findings (see Appendix 2) which for the most part reaffirm the founding principles of the NSK state and its subsequent trajectory. The document was formally presented at the closing ceremony, which was attended by the groups comprising the original NSK collective. Some of the facilitators, myself included, raised concerns about the document, generating debate and an air of tension. One commentator suggested that the meta-narrative of NSK was too prevalent in the wording and framing of the findings, lending the document orthodoxy or conservatism. For the most part the document can be read as conservative in that it restates the historical and conceptual framework of the NSK State in Time, without injecting any new or potentially radical ideas. In reaffirming the identification of citizens with NSK, the document borrows from the language utilised by NSK and Laibach since the state's foundation, prompting another commentator to refer to it as 'Laibach-lite'. In this sense the findings reflect the tension between the desire for the decentralisation of the state on the one hand, and the hyper-identification with the symbolic authority of the founding NSK members on the other.

While embracing the language of the absolute, the spirit of utopianism was largely absent. The radical utopian core of the NSK state, drawn from the historical avant-gardes and representing the potential to envisage and aestheticise alternative social frameworks in both abstract and concrete terms, is largely missing. Yet the document also contains a reference to the potential for political action as a manifestation of the

state. While a definition of how the political might become manifest is left open-ended, ideas of social transformation (the mainstay of the early twentieth century avant-gardes) are not entirely absent. Taken together with the five innovations, which provide practical guidelines for moving forward with the proliferation of the state, both documents constitute a mix of conservative devotion and pragmatism, maintaining a tension between ambiguity and action.

## Conclusion

Part social experiment and part manifestation of the process of statecraft, the congress ultimately represents a temporary distillation of the elements characterising an ever-evolving work in progress. As a lens through which to examine and understand the motivations of NSK citizens it raises a number of points for further discussion. The absence of a radical re-conceptualisation of the direction of the state in all likelihood reflects the power of identification and the complex geometry of belonging felt by the delegates to an imagined community hitherto shaped by the actions of its founders. Perhaps the affirmation of a fanatical (a signifier raised throughout the congress and enshrined in the findings) identification with this collective imaginary was driven by the fear that decentralisation could dilute or remove the orienting framework provided by current NSK signifiers and fixed points of reference. Yet at the same time, the open-ended structure of the project, coupled with the willingness of its founders to encourage its spontaneous and organic growth, actually calls for new initiatives and ideas. In repossessing and reprocessing early twentieth-century utopian idealism as one of multiple elements within its framework, the state represents a conceptual alternative to the politics of alienation generated by contemporary political systems and modern nation states. Somewhat akin to El Lissitzky's *Proun* paintings, which 'denied a fixed perspective and embodied a strong orderly arrangement of elements',<sup>9</sup> it is within the abstract conceptualisation of space engendered by the state that citizens have the ability to collectively re-create or simply create themselves as part of a de-territorialised social organism. At once total and yet devoid of the control mechanisms of the contemporary social order (what Elias Canetti refers to as the 'stings of command'),<sup>10</sup> the unlimited spatial dimension of the state encourages a dissolution of boundaries. In their place is a collective flux of ideas, free to move beyond the constricting parameters of the 'cage of national culture' referred to earlier.

In the final analysis, would more contention and friction amongst the delegates have ignited sharper debate, resulting in the production of a less benign and more visionary final declaration? Perhaps the unifying ethos of NSK citizenship, taken together with the background presence of the founding members of NSK, fuelled the desire to produce something that ultimately echoes the aesthetic and sociological dynamics present in the work of NSK up until this point. Yet perhaps the physical coalescence of forces at the congress remains more important than the documents produced. While it did not result in citizens formally assuming control of the direction

11 Laibach: 10 Items of the Covenant, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (ed. New Collectivism), *op. cit.*, p.18.

*New York*, 2011

of the state, in effect a certain amount of decentralisation is already taking place in its wake. In his closing remarks, congress organiser Alexei Monroe raised the 'principle of work'<sup>11</sup> required for the state to continue to survive and proliferate on a virtual and physical level. Post-congress, such work has already begun, with delegates organising online forums and physical gatherings in Lyon and London, Leipzig and New York. In this sense the congress has breathed life into NSK citizens' sense of initiative. In the final synopsis, can these initiatives ensure that the NSK state will continue to be provocative, radical and utopian? Only time will tell.

9 Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p.33.

10 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, London: Penguin, 1973, p.351.

## Appendix 1

### Proposed Innovations to the NSK State

- The establishment of a charter including a founding myth.
- The introduction of virtual/physical gatherings to include a platform space for citizens.
- The establishment of an educational curriculum – an NSK Academy/Department for Temporal Research.
- The establishment of a decision-making process (dealing with citizen initiatives).
- The development of a new and more diverse symbolism.

## Appendix 2

### Findings (Final Congress Declaration)

The NSK State is a universal state in time, not a state of territory. Whether it remains in potential form or manifests itself in actual form depends on the actions and beliefs of those who are or wish to be its citizens.

The NSK State in Time is consistent with and evolves from the founding principles and strategies of Neue Slowenische Kunst.

The NSK State in Time becomes manifest when the following exist:

- I. The Immanent Consistent Spirit is the all-embracing intangible essence of the NSK State in Time. In it there is everything and even nothing. Citizens of the NSK State in Time express the Immanent Consistent Spirit through artistic, political, philosophical and intellectual actions in both abstract and concrete form.
- II. The NSK State in Time is ever-inspired by the infinite moment of grace of its own becoming. It is the master of all its probabilities.
- III. The NSK State is manifested in time yet at the same time transcends time.
- IV. Manifestations of the NSK State are temporal; they are based on initiatives and actions of its citizens and affiliates.
- V. The NSK State in Time materialises through artistic, political, philosophical and intellectual actions in accordance with the basic principles and internal laws of the NSK State in Time.
- VI. The individual is irrelevant. Therefore the NSK State in Time compels its citizens to work as a collective body.
- VII. The role of the citizens of the NSK State in Time is to fulfill the State's goals with fanatical and artistic devotion.
- VIII. The citizens' commitment to the State machine that organises their activities is unwavering.
- IX. Freedom of choice creates trauma; lack of freedom of choice creates trauma. The NSK State acknowledges the right not to choose.



IRWIN, *State in Time*, Moscow, 2011

IRWIN, *State in Time*, Leipzig, 2011

## NSK: Allegiances, Ambiguities, Politics, Process

Ian Parker



IRWIN, *State in Time*, London, 2012

IRWIN, *State in Time*, Pristina, 2012

The 2010 Berlin ‘First NSK Citizens’ Congress’ was an opportunity to reflect on the articulation of NSK political practice within contemporary neoliberal democracy. NSK, remember, had been forged in the crucible of decaying Tito-Stalinism in the 1980s, and the formation of the NSK State in Time was a radical response to the shock therapy privatisation of Slovenia in the 1990s. An authoritarianism of one kind – Yugoslav self-managed ‘socialism’ that incited competition between different state sectors and national sub-components of the federal republic – had paved the way to free-market wage slavery with the fall of the Berlin Wall. NSK’s ‘over-identification’ with the façade of ‘independence’ – bureaucratised differentiation from the Soviet Bloc before 1989 and fake national independence within Western Europe from then on – was designed to replicate and thereby question what had been offered and what was promised as an alternative.

This strategy of over-identification required two elements held in tension: ambiguity and allegiance. There was, from the start, a necessary ambiguity about intention and effects. This was played out in Laibach’s refusal to drop the mask and reassure the audience that NSK’s collage of Soviet socialist realist and German national socialist images were designed to challenge forms of authority, not endorse them. It has evidently been difficult to hold this indeterminate place for three decades, and a sense of exhaustion was apparent among some of the NSK founders participating in the congress. And then, of course, allegiance to the project as such – which is crucial to the enigmatic depersonalised nature of NSK – is put under strain. Allegiance was always to a space of refusal, of negativity, rather than to a fully-formed alternative ideal, and this also proves difficult to maintain when there is a suspicion that the project has lost its way. Now, to ask ‘What next?’ of followers – our ‘citizens’ – was to turn over the future of the NSK state to an audience constituted at a different time and so bringing some different agendas to play.

### Allegiance

Holding a citizens’ congress meant that the question of allegiance was put under pressure, for these citizens are not at all, and have never been, the same as ‘members’ (as opposed to ‘citizen’ passport-holders) of NSK. The very loyal repetition of the state mantra that this is a ‘state in time’ betrayed something of the difference between the particular political moment at which the state was formed and the moments at which the citizens had engaged with it. One could hear from the delegates a variety of different stories about when they had encountered NSK – five years, ten years ago,

rarely longer than this – and about what had drawn them to it, and there was unease about how they might be viewed. There were, for sure, fans (a label every delegate I spoke to wanted to avoid), collectors (a self-description very cautiously and rarely offered), passport-holders (claimed by the majority of the delegates, though not all) and fellow-travellers (of which some had passports as well). And they all knew, even though some might have counted themselves out of such categories, that all of these kinds of folk were there. What it meant to show allegiance to NSK was refracted, then, through other kinds of life-projects.

What unfolded more slowly over the three days of the congress, were the different political allegiances of the delegates, and it became clear that we were not to experience first-hand some of the most intense ambiguities of NSK practice; specifically, the appearance of anything close to the far right. Anxiety that fascists might be as interested in NSK as NSK is in them – a concern voiced by some NSK founding members – gave way to not a little disappointment that there were rather too many of us gathered that thought the same way. It seemed that, despite the congress taking place in Berlin (and notwithstanding some edgy experiences with uniformed NSK citizens in Bavarian-kitsch beer cellars getting hostile looks from the regulars) we were actually in a little liberal bubble in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Some there had no state allegiance (other than to the NSK state, of course), but quite a few delegates indicated in their online questionnaires and in the working sessions that they were proud of their own nation. Some had no religious allegiance except to the state's Immanent Consistent Spirit (which became a rather empty totem for the delegates by the end of the congress), but others were happy to juggle this alongside other beliefs that they decently kept to themselves.

There were some striking attempts to use NSK to step outside the impossible deadlock of now hegemonic obedient and banal anti-fascism (the idea that you can only be appropriately suspicious of the Nazis if you also repudiate the socialist forces that combatted them, and that you can only be respectful of the Jewish victims if you endorse Zionism). Some such contradictions, however, were only opened up in private conversation; a delegate of German family background showed a tattoo in Hebrew on his wrist that reads 'never forget', a counterpoint to a Jewish Israeli delegate with NSK tattooed around a nipple. These were the most dramatic of many attempts to relate to history that also sidestepped any explicit revolutionary alternative to capitalism and Stalinism and, more so, any organisational forms that have already attempted to transcend nationalism. An 'international' of any kind tended to be seen as suspect as any 'national' body; at one session it was suggested that NSK as a global state was accomplishing an over-identification with international conspiracy theories, effectively dismantling 'internationalism' as a reactionary motif.

This also meant that there was a careful evasion of lessons that might be drawn from similarities between NSK over-identification and such like practices in the trade union and socialist tradition. The strategy of 'work to rule' in industry (in which workers follow to the letter instructions in the workplace and so sabotage the smooth

running of a factory which always relies on a plethora of unspoken rules), for example, has time and again exposed the fact that more is required of an employee than what they have actually been explicitly contracted to do. In addition, we also tended to avoid an explicit discussion of political projects that might coincide or collide with NSK. However, I suspect that skirting around political differences was not what NSK and the NSK state had in mind when, in its early most radical interventions, it forced competing ideological systems to face each other and made explicit some unpleasant mirror-like correspondences between them. Ambiguity is a tool of over-identification that, at its most effective (as in the 1987 'poster scandal') renders visible the contrasting political investments in state practice, rather than providing a polite veneer of false agreement.

## Ambiguity

Again we need to take into account the difference between the specific historical moment at which NSK was formed in the 1980s and the time of the congress in 2010 (that we are a 'state in time' was another totemic phrase that obscured this kind of political reflection in the congress itself). NSK does function now as an ambiguous space that addresses a crisis of allegiance and identity across the political spectrum, though perhaps all the more so on the left (many of those attending seemed uncomfortable with what are termed 'labels', which is a fairly common liberal rhetorical device for those who want to avoid political commitment). This crisis is compounded by suspicion of organisations that claim to represent or speak for a constituency – the working class, women, ethnic groups – and NSK here is also able to key into that suspicion and offer something that is an alternative to organisation as such; it is an organisation that is, perhaps, no more than a semblance of organisation. However, it was apparent that there was a tension between those who were drawn into NSK as a space that politicised them (and in this respect, politicised them to some extent to the 'left') and those who were trying to escape politics altogether (and so were effectively being politicised, we might say, all the more to the 'right').

The most potent indicator of the politically productive effects of such ambiguity concerns nationalism, which appeared as a topic of discussion in the congress around the signifier 'territory' (as in the claim that NSK is a state in 'time' rather than defined by geography). Allegiance to the NSK State in Time is allegiance to a fiction, and so the political logic is to see all other state forms as constructions, as fictions. At the same time, and as a function of this same logic in times of neoliberal globalisation which feeds off specific local cultures in order to commodify what there is of them that can then be exoticised and taken to the world market – neatly captured in some critical accounts of this process as 'glocalisation' – any alternative is also susceptible to being seen as no more than a construction, a fiction. Cynicism about nationalism as an ideal then once again gives way to cynicism about internationalism; another world is possible only to the extent that it is, at the same moment, unravelled as an impossible mirage.

We could see this tension between solidarity and cynicism at work in public discussion at an open session of the congress about 'the Nigerian question'. This erupted in 2006 and 2007 with the arrival of mass applications from Nigerians for NSK passports. On the one hand, IRWIN demonstrated an ethical commitment to those purchasing NSK passports under a misapprehension by not simply suspending production but, instead, visiting Lagos and interviewing those who had applied. On the other hand, despite the speculation about what it might mean for those who fell prey to a scam (with the passport sold on as if it were a European official document), the best that even the delegate from Nigeria could come up with was to say that the application instructions could have been clearer. One of the twenty-five percent of NSK citizens who are in Nigeria was reported as saying in one of the IRWIN research interviews that he knew a friend who had been to NSK state and it was a beautiful country, while another said that while he knew that of course it did not exist now, it might one day. An intervention from the audience suggesting that this called for more effective acts of transnational political alliance with those excluded from Europe caused a mild flutter of interest, but then disappeared in the hubbub of pop-psychoanalytic musing about what 'belief' in Europe might really mean to the Nigerians; this was indicative of the way the Nigerian question was framed (alongside the accounts of Taiwanese passport-holders) as an art-political project that was closer to the art than to the politics.

## Politics

Another motif that was explicitly flagged up for discussion by the organisers and then subsumed under the signifier 'territory' was the question of diplomatic relations with other entities. It quickly became apparent that much more would be at stake than confirming the status of actually-existing if NSK were in any way to engage in dialogue with other states (though a seat at the United Nations was tempting to a few delegates). Diplomacy relies on an interplay of recognition in which each partner legitimises the claim of the other as, at the very least, worthy of address, and it also plays into the problematic of 'identity' which NSK State in Time has, fairly successfully so far, rejected. The much bigger problem concerns how this mutually-reinforcing dialectic of recognition would rebound on NSK being categorised as one of a number of other 'micronations', being classed with pretend countries dreamt up in the bedrooms of various anomic individuals. We learnt very early on in the congress that to refer to NSK as a 'micronation' was a no-no (and that we really should say 'eneskah' instead of 'eneskay'). Exceptions to the rule (and these are not seen as micronations either, note) were the art-project 'State of Sabotage' and 'Elgaland-Vargaland' which claims border spaces (and has recently annexed the state of exile).

What would not be countenanced in the binary 'over-identification' – 'non-diplomacy' ('Art is fanaticism that demands diplomacy' was a phrase from the NSK state passport that was subjected to detailed hermeneutic reading in some of the small-group sessions of the congress) would be an organised 'boycott' of any other existing

state. It would not make sense, for example, to boycott Israel (witness IRWIN's recent exhibition in Tel-Aviv) any more than it would be to prohibit Wagner (as is evident in Laibach's next Volk project); but, by the same token, this means that calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions as part of a fully-political organised response to state oppression would always be sabotaged by NSK (yet another instance where the overall art-political effect lies more on the side of 'depoliticising' than on 'politicising' an audience).

The only reason why there should be any engagement with other states would be as a tactical intervention: to disturb the attachment of citizens to that which they think should define and govern them, that which they think should divide them from those with allegiance to another state. NSK was designed to speed up the decomposition of its own over-arching host-state (Yugoslavia) and then to prevent the crystallisation of a new local state form (Slovenia), but this did not preclude acts of 'transnational' solidarity. Laibach's<sup>1</sup> distribution of diplomatic passports in Sarajevo during its 1994-95 'Occupied Europe NATO Tour', which enabled some to escape the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is one example (cited and exploited with unfortunate effects in the sale of passports outside NSK by those subject to 'the Nigerian question'); another is Peter Mlakar's spell-binding tirade in Serbia before a Laibach concert to, in Mlakar's words at that event, 'a nation abandoned by God because they imagined themselves to be so great'. (Mlakar's Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy in the NSK State apparatus, incidentally, is an example to any academic who would like a domain in which they really are the only sovereign force.)

The key question here is not so much what do we get out of watching this kind of challenge to nationalism, but what is the libidinal investment of those inside Serbia to NSK? If Mlakar's own reference, in a later recounting of the event, to the audience parting like the Red Sea as he walked through them as if he were indeed God is a mite exaggerated, the fact that NSK operates across the old Yugoslav federation (and well beyond it) with many admirers in each region who are supposed to be at each other's throats is still vitally important. There are additional questions here not only about what enjoyment there was in all this for Mlakar (it was clear as he told the story that there was something immensely thrilling about such an undoubtedly courageous act in dangerous circumstances), but also about how the interventions of NSK touch on and disturb a deeper political enjoyment that holds an ideological apparatus like nationalism in place for each of its subjects. Enjoyment of this kind is sometimes pleasurable but also often takes us beyond fascination to something bordering on horror. It functions in this way to bind us to what we like and to attract us, despite ourselves, to something worse. NSK 'art that is fanaticism' takes us to this place so that a different kind of 'diplomacy' might be forged between those who are like and unlike ourselves.

Enjoyment is symptomatic of an ideological formation, but just as symptomatic, perhaps, is the avoidance of enjoyment or even the attempt to avoid acknowledgment of the importance of enjoyment as the murkier more unpleasant side of art

<sup>1</sup> *NSK State Sarajevo, 1995*, was a project by all NSK groups.

practice. It is symptomatic, for example, that an attraction to something dangerous in NSK was seen by some congress delegates as an unfortunate and unnecessary aspect of the past history of the movement, and could now be dispensed with altogether. This argument pretty well held sway, with more fanatical dissenters reduced to their own enjoyment in contained disruptive spaces in a rather too smooth series of small group and plenary discussions. This was an opportunity lost, not only with respect to the political interventions of NSK but also with respect to its internal structure. There is an issue here to do with the immersion of citizens in a state structure – a State in Time anchored in Immanent Consistent Spirit – in which they can feel at home, and what we ended up with was the state as the kind of home that is comforting rather than threatening, homely rather than uncanny.

On the one hand, enjoyment can be the stuff of attachment to leaders and organisational structures, and in its classic embassy and passport office manifestations the NSK state has played with this kind of enjoyment; one cannot obtain a passport in IRWIN installations without being subject to an exasperating routine of queuing and form-filling. In the process one learns something about the nature of the state, and that is precisely why this particular state is not, and does not pretend to be, ‘democratic’. On the other hand, enjoyment today also operates through the fantasy of self-surveillance and transparency, and political subjects are invited to revel in the idea that they can observe each other and enforce the rule that all are included, all are leaders and so maintain the illusion that everyone is free. This fantasy is no less effective in ensuring obedience to contemporary democratic states than was the cult of authority in fascist and Stalinist systems, and it is a fantasy that pervades some alternative movements that cannot conceive that there are dimensions of power that enable some to speak and prevent others from participating altogether. This ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (as it has been termed by anarcho-feminist writers in a critique of the old straight left) can then serve to hold a group together. It is a group fantasy that enjoys itself, and to speak of this enjoyment would threaten to unravel what is going on.

## Process

This brings us to the formation of the congress itself, and the rules by which it conducted its business (and so how it understood what its business was to be). I was asked to facilitate one of the three delegate groups, and there were quite clear ground-rules laid down for this by the congress organisers when I was invited to take part. I was contracted to enable the group to discuss how to address a series of tasks and then report to plenary sessions, and I was to ensure that everyone had a chance to participate. But, I also had to agree not to say what my own views were until the final congress discussion, and I was told not to emphasise disagreements or conflict which might make difficult the formulation of these joint reports. This meant, to give you a flavour of how things went in the small group I facilitated, that I encouraged people to introduce themselves and then got them to agree on a representative who

would report to the main assembly. Our task, I said, was to arrive at common points, or perhaps contradictions, that we could then convey to the other delegates. I also had to tell them that other organisers and a film crew might drop in to the group now and then, but that apart from the sound recording I was making for later NSK work (in which contributions would be anonymous if they were quoted) the discussion was confidential. In short, I was complicit in this process, a particular kind of process that could not but have certain characteristics and give rise to a certain kind of conclusion (in form, if not in content, but in a form that determined to some extent what content was possible).

If this careful construction of a safe and open place for discussion was not already conducive enough to friendly identification between participants in my small group (and, as far as I could tell from discussion with the other two facilitators, things were fairly similar in their groups) we had as our first task to analyse attitudes to NSK based on the pre-congress questionnaire responses, and we did this by going through the responses in questionnaires submitted by members of one of the other groups. The overall aim of the exercise was spelt out in black and white in the Congress Programme, to ‘identify points of agreement in each group’. This was an opportunity for some delegates to notice what they thought were some ‘misunderstandings’ of NSK in some of the questionnaire responses, and there were moments when delegates reached for their passports or other NSK texts to clarify what they imagined to be the nature of the state and the congress, and the real nature of the task they were engaged with now.

The outcome of the small group ‘working sessions’ was guided by the form of the discussion – I helped make this possible as a by now obedient apparatchik – and by the content injected into each group by the organisers. There were many points in the discussion inside and outside the small and large group discussions when delegates voiced suspicion about the ‘real aims’ of the organisers and about whether the delegates really were, as the organisers repeatedly claimed, now in control. The question ‘Citizen control?’ had already been signalled in the Congress Programme, but when this was forced (that is, when a congress organiser, Alexei Monroe, told delegates that they should take responsibility for the process by which a declaration be produced at the end of the congress as well as for what the declaration said), there was some anxiety about what was required. What appeared in the programme as ‘a conclusion of the congress and future steps’ loomed ahead as a task that galvanised the citizens into activity that ran across tea and lunch breaks. For sure, NSK made them work.

Already, however, the kind of control that took shape here was forged through consensual discussion and voting procedures that sought to guarantee a voice for all, and bit by bit we saw the formalisation of what NSK had already been rather than an opening to something entirely new. The delegate sessions were open liberal forums in which liberal or left-liberal sentiments thrived, and yes again I was only following orders and did my bit to make this possible. The ‘vote results’ for a first round of suggestions in which, we were told, ‘each group proposes five innovations to the NSK

State', were indicative. Delegates called for the establishment of a 'charter including a founding myth', for the introduction of 'virtual and physical gatherings to include a platform/space for citizens', for an 'educational curriculum', for 'a decision-making process' and for the 'development of new and more and diverse symbolism'. The ideas that failed to reach this top five included proposals that continued in the same vein ('a citizenship act', 'a new web platform', 'a legislative process' and so on); it was not as if a tyranny of the democratic majority had succeeded in marginalising more radical edgy proposals (though a dissident declaration was also eventually cooked up). In other words, the formal nature of the process – a democratic inclusive discussion which acknowledged different voices and arrived at a common viewpoint – came to frame what could be said, to determine what was said in the eventual discussion and declaration.

One of the flash points toward the end of the congress was around 'choice', and came after a significant transition in group discussion; by the third day the delegates had been thrown into action and the three small groups fused into one big working group to produce the declaration for the concluding session. There was then a shift from the idea that it was necessary to make a choice for or against the NSK state (against one's particular national identity or religion in order to embrace NSK as a State in Time or the Immanent Consistent Spirit that underpins it) to the more ideologically potent idea that one had the right 'not to choose'. This 'right not to choose' was designed to free up delegates from some stumbling blocks in an earlier draft declaration which argued, in more dialectical spirit, that 'freedom of choice creates trauma', that 'lack of freedom in choice creates trauma' and that 'we acknowledge the right to choose the form of trauma'. Even so, 'right to choose' was still not enough, and the eventual claim that it would be possible 'not to choose' speaks volumes about the liberal democratic process that we had together incited our citizens to participate in, and about avoidance of the necessarily traumatic moment of state formation, of the formation of any state.

Every state is founded on violence and repression, on closure around authority rather than through open transparent dialogue and, throughout the 1990s, in its demand for allegiance to an ambiguous symbolic practice saturated with dangerous enjoyment, the NSK state repeated that traumatic moment of state violence. In this way it also repeated some of the most radical moments of the constitution of the bourgeois state in Western Europe. It wiped the slate clean, as it were, and instituted a new order much in the way that the Jacobins in the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century abolished Christianity as the symbolic apparatus of the feudal regime. It was replaced with, in Maximilien de Robespierre's formulation, recognition of 'the existence of the Supreme Being', an existence to be celebrated in feasts and revolutionary justice. A constituent assembly of that kind is always marked by elements of terror, especially for those who are on the losing side. And every state does its level best to cover over this traumatic moment, to reinstate a 'founding myth' that is formulated as if it were a 'charter' that had been agreed on at the outset by all good citizens.

If this congress was a constituent assembly of some kind, it was of the sort that wanted there to be no losers, that wanted to ensure that everyone who signed up (in this case everyone who filled out the online questionnaire before the congress as a condition for inclusion in it) should participate and have a voice. Many delegates did not believe that power was being turned over to them, but they participated anyway, and perhaps there was in this a curious repetition of the supposedly 'democratic' process by which Slovenia became an independent capitalist state in the early 1990s. NSK at that time insisted that this was a fraud, and kept in sight the traumatic moment of the formation of that state. The ideological self-image of the new state and its enthusiastic citizens, indeed, was what the NSK State in Time replicated and challenged. The political ambiguity now seems finally to have been resolved, twenty years after that event, with the triumph of liberal democratic forms. Should we hope that this is not really the case, that behind this democratic façade (as is patently now the case for Slovenia and the other supposedly democratic states in old eastern Europe) there is still a strong and cryptic state in control, ready for the real next step, to surprise us and open up something different?

*London, 2011*



Delegates, NSK members, Congress team members and guests of the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress',  
Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 2010



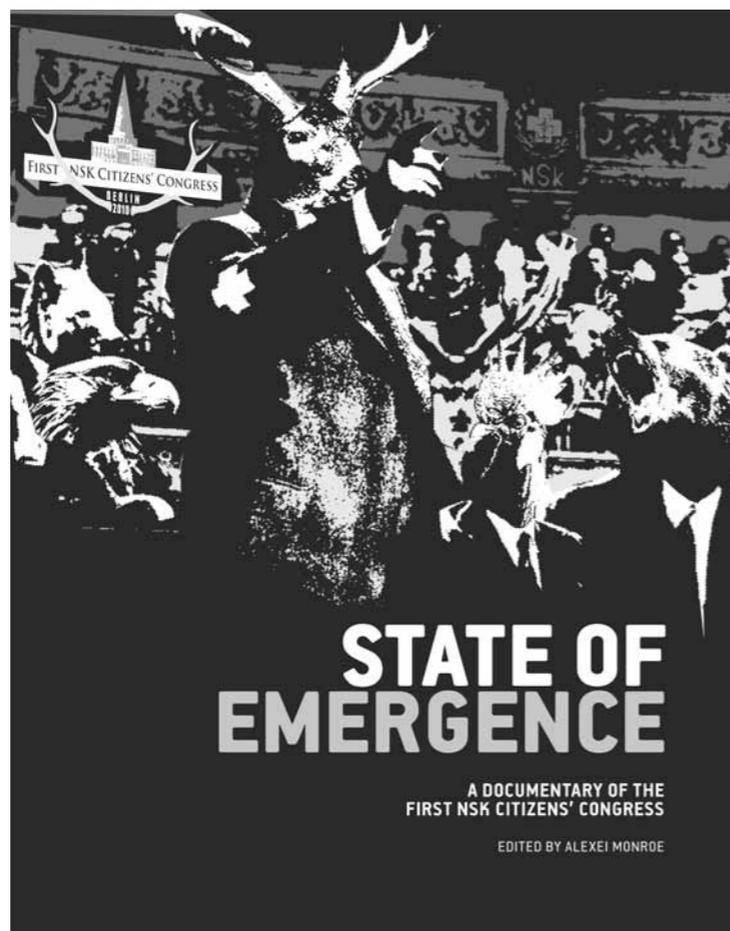
'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 2010



Delegates presenting the findings of the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, October 2010



NSK members at the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, October 2010



*State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens' Congress*, Alexei Monroe, Leipzig, 2011; book cover motif taken from the congress poster designed by Valnoir Mortasonge

## Interview with Ian Parker *Eda Čufer*

**Eda Čufer:** Ian, you are one of the few people at this congress whose name I immediately recognised. I've read your texts about the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek and your writings on over-identification and, with this in mind, I would like to ask you what motivated you to get an NSK passport and to participate in this congress, and also how do you feel in this environment?

**Ian Parker:** I suppose the answer to the first question, about wanting to join NSK, is that before I went to Ljubljana in 2003 I thought that I knew what Laibach was. One evening I met Alexei Monroe and had a long argument in Metelkova<sup>1</sup> about whether Laibach was fascist or not. Alexei made me think again about what connections exist between Laibach and the wider project of NSK, and about the way that the signifying mechanisms in Laibach's work operate. It was from this encounter, and thinking through how Laibach functions, that I decided I wanted to know more about NSK.

The next opportunity was in 2004, when my book on Žižek was published in Britain, and IRWIN visited Manchester at exactly the same time. I spoke to the members of IRWIN about their work and tried to get a better understanding of what the NSK project was. Now it seemed to me that the theoretical work that I had been concerned with through Žižek was actually already being practiced in NSK. The concept of over-identification was being applied through actively recruiting people in a political project, which in some ways was closer to what I was interested in than the theoretical work, so that led me to join NSK.

**Eda Čufer:** What do you expect from this event, here and now?

**Ian Parker:** I come here out of curiosity. I'm curious about the way the NSK state is evolving and I want to be part of the process. But I was also very relieved when Alexei invited me to participate as a facilitator and told me that I should not give my own opinions in the sessions. So that's what I have been doing. I have simply been facilitating other people and listening to them. It has been a perfect opportunity to hear a range of different ideas about NSK.

**Eda Čufer:** I wonder what were Alexei's criteria in choosing facilitators? Your pre-existing knowledge about the wider context?

**Ian Parker:** It is possible. I know something about the theoretical background to the work, but there are many other delegates who also know something about the theoretical background. I can see that there are different theoretical frameworks being brought together by the delegates and they all have something to say.

<sup>1</sup> Metelkova mesto: a centre for alternative culture, Ljubljana.

**Eda Čufer:** I arrived yesterday without any preconceptions and observed that the outlook of many delegates replicates the vision of the NSK in the 1980s and early 1990s. During my talk today this first-glance perception changed. I realise that the delegates are actually a heterogeneous group, and that they think and identify very differently. Would you like to say something about that? Or, to ask you more concretely: what is the dynamic between people who strongly identify with, let's say, mythological aspects of Laibach and NSK, and people who have a more reflective or critical approach?

**Ian Parker:** I think in a way I'm more interested in participants who actively engage in NSK imagery and take it on, rather than those who take an academic or intellectual distance from the phenomenon – who simply want to think about and talk about and use it in an instrumental way. It seems to me that the second group is at risk of disavowing the libidinal attachment to this kind of phenomenon, or to any kind of national or political phenomena. So it's with those in the first group, that are actively immersed, that I think it's possible to have a discussion about how it is that one becomes involved in a movement like this and what one expects of it.

I think running across that there is another tension, which I also find interesting, between those who are entering NSK and are becoming politicised by it and those who perhaps have already been in politics for some years. The former group is learning something about the fragile nature of national identity and national attachment, and they move beyond that – let's say to transnational or international solidarity of some kind – and in that process they become politicised. The latter have already been in politics for some years, left-wing politics, feminist politics perhaps, and in NSK they find a way of escaping from politics. So the tension is, I think, between those two different groups. Those who are finding politics, a radical politics of some kind, and those who are escaping politics and simply want to do the art practice – and it's the first group that I am more interested in now.

**Eda Čufer:** And why is that?

**Ian Parker:** Why is that?

**Eda Čufer:** Actually, partly, you have already answered this question. But I would like to hear more about it because I am personally torn between the necessity of dissolving the whole problem into rational, reflective categories and persisting stubbornly in recurring contradictions, which is exhausting after thirty years. I am curious, what do you think this project opens up in this regard, if anything?

**Ian Parker:** I'd rather say it's pulsating in some way. It's opening and closing; at moments it opens to something, at moments it closes up. You can see it closing up very clearly in some of the discussions about Nigerian NSK passport holders, where you have an attempt to sanitise art-political practice by making it seem as if you can do some kind of risk assessment – to make sure that the passports only go to people

who know exactly what is happening, that they each have full conscious awareness of what the consequences are of obtaining an NSK passport. But it seems to me that the NSK passport process opens up something beyond the subject, it's something that can't be controlled, something that can't be predicted.

So there is an anxiety there, which tries to close things down, and there is another anxiety about the relationship between art and politics, where some people are trying to close things down around art. And it is when art touches politics – and possible political mobilisation – that it becomes problematic. I was very impressed with Miran Mohar's statement about why IRWIN and NSK went to Nigeria. It presented an ethical response, which tried to keep the question open rather than closing things down. So it is that political dynamic that I am interested in, and I suppose it is because generally politics – radical, let's say revolutionary politics – is very difficult these days. Politics goes way beyond the old Marxist organisations. I am a member of one of those organisations, a still-revolutionary Marxist organisation that is very small and isolated, and I recognise that politics is now happening in feminist movements, queer movements, anti-globalisation movements, and I see NSK as one of those contradictory spaces where something is being opened up and I want to support that.

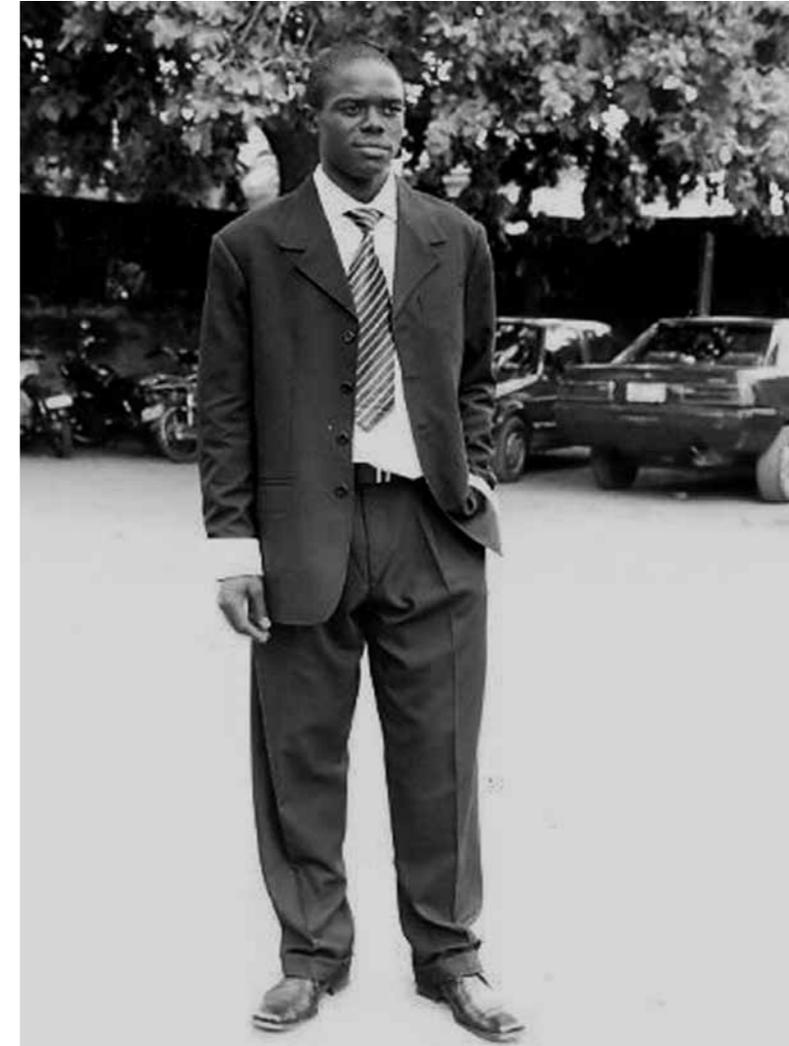
**Eda Čufer:** I most clearly perceive the change in context in which NSK operates, and precisely in regard to the anxiety caused by the so-called 'Nigerian problem'. If Laibach or NSK had caused a similar controversy during the 1980s, there would be no dilemma over whether this was exactly what we wanted to do. There would be no NSK without walking straight into the centre of an anxiety and letting it speak for itself, regardless of transgression of common ethics. But that story was taking place within territories that we knew; we knew the symbolic relations, rules and emotions that governed them. In the case of Nigeria we don't know much about the symbolic or emotional nature of the relations into which we have involved ourselves through global dissemination of the NSK state passport. And this is perhaps a general problem of globalisation and the ethics of our present time.

The NSK state passport looks very much like a real passport but you will get very different things out of it if you use it as a functional, rather than a symbolic, object. NSK is of course interested in playing with this distinction, this border. The Nigerian case points to a controversial global situation, where millions of people have no administrative ID and therefore do not technically exist within modern social organisation. But those who don't exist for us can still desire the same rights as anyone else in the world, which is to be equal, to enjoy the same opportunities as those who can travel, cross borders, go from one biennial to the other, and so on. Who cares if the NSK passport is real, or fake, or art, at this level of excitement, which, on the other hand, produces unbearable anxiety? The anxiety in NSK members and NSK citizens stems from the sudden awareness of the real problems out there, which make our artistic games look so safe and bourgeois. In many ways, the 'Nigerian problem'

works in reverse as it forces us to recognise ourselves as part of the larger problem of a hegemonic, oppressive global enclave.

In short, I absolutely agree that the Nigerian case indicates a new symptom that needs a completely different treatment and discussion. Thank you very much for this conversation.

*Berlin, 2010*



Christain Nnoruga, *NSK Citizen*, 2009

In the book *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Gilles Deleuze outlines an understanding of aesthetics, primarily through literature, where the role of artistic production merges with that of diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> This is a point where the task of literary criticism hybridises with that of critique, leaving both of them renewed, even if a bit unsettled by the process. While it is almost impossible to encapsulate what the Slovenian art movement *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK) has undertaken, in all its manifestations, since forming in 1983, we could perhaps describe it best as an aesthetic apparatus for collective diagnosis. Its work – spanning music, theatre, philosophy, and statecraft – has served to diagnose multiple forms of repressed and sublimated desires lingering in the collective imagination: from the continuing but unacknowledged appeal of totalitarianism operating within the Yugoslav state, to the fascist dynamics found within the dynamics of pop culture.

The activities of NSK over time have evolved towards a more general critique and recovery of the aesthetics of the state form. While NSK's oeuvre involves a high degree of work with state aesthetics, this has been particularly pronounced since the launching of the *NSK State in Time* Project in 1992.<sup>2</sup> The State in Time was declared to be an infinite state existing only in time, and thus lacking any physical boundaries or territories. Thus it was claimed that this would make the NSK State the first 'global state of the universe', existing only in the workings of time, or perhaps in the territories of the collective imaginaries animated by the various events NSK would hold, such as setting up temporary embassies and post offices. Since its inception, the NSK State now involves over 13,000 citizens, where the status of citizenship was conferred by applying for a passport either at an NSK event or through its website. After years of existing primarily as a virtual entity, the NSK State held the Congress in Berlin as a process to examine itself and evaluate its workings.<sup>3</sup>

The congress was held at the iconic Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures), and was accompanied by a corresponding exhibition of materials created as part of the State in Time project and a selection of NSK Folk Art, or materials created by citizens of NSK and those inspired by it (some of which had previously been displayed at the Taipei Biennale). The event was funded by the European Commission Culture Fund (who apparently remarked that they understood the congress to be a rather clever form of irony) along with the Berlin Capital Cultural Fund and the Slovenian Cultural Ministry. Even if the NSK State only exists in time, the territorial basis of its funding support seems to have grown appreciably. The Slovenian state now regularly promotes the work of NSK and Laibach which, aside from the writings of Žižek, is probably their most successful national export. I attended the congress as a delegate, one out of the 30 who had been chosen when all

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

2 <http://www.nskstate.com>

3 <http://congress.nskstate.com>



NSKstate.com, *Screenshots*, 2003-2007  
From the NSK Folk Art collection

NSK Citizens were contacted and invited to apply to participate in the congress in 2009. The application itself consisted of a fairly in-depth set of questions asking for impressions about the role and importance of the NSK State, how it had affected citizens' lives, and possible routes for its future development.

It is difficult to characterise the conference as whole. The days consisted mainly of working sessions for the three smaller groups the delegates were divided into, and the evenings were filled with public talks, film screenings, and other events. While I had no idea what to expect, it quickly became clear that there existed a quite wide array of political and aesthetic perspectives held by those attending the event. The organisers, perhaps all too aware of this, cautioned against making assumptions about the perspectives of others. While this is certainly sensible in a gathering involving attendees from the far left and far right, it may have inadvertently led to an air of excessive civility. The days' debates vacillated between philosophical debate and model UN session, or perhaps between a fan boy event for NSK/Laibach enthusiasts and a cultural theory conference. The constant presence of a Slovenian film crew also injected the proceedings with an air of reality TV, as debates on the future of the NSK State trundled on.

These ongoing sessions, while sometimes strained, also involved a number of quite interesting and (at least for me) unexpected points of debate. For instance, how does the NSK State relate to micronations? Is the NSK State a micronation? While members of the NSK State have previously participated in micronation themed events, such as the 2003 Summit of Micronations in Helsinki, a consensus emerged that the NSK State was not a micronation because micronations by definition are small, limited entities.<sup>4</sup> Conversely the NSK State, being an infinite entity, could not be considered micro. Thus it was argued that to engage in diplomatic relations with micronations would be to belittle the status of the NSK State, reducing it to marginal phenomena, rather than continuing to proclaim its infinite and totalising nature. To some extent, attempting to reproduce such a debate outside its context renders it absurd, although it does provide a small glimpse into the functioning of the kind of totalising, almost involuntarily Hegelian rhetoric that discussions of the NSK State take. Likewise there were extended discussions about the composition of the citizenry and how it breaks down along demographic and geographic lines, and how it might become a more inclusive project. But this begs the question of just how useful it is for an artistic project, whose territory is time and the workings of the imagination, one that rejects the operations of liberal democracy itself, to become more inclusive in any more commonly understood sense.

While a primary purpose of the congress was to produce new directions for the NSK State, perhaps something like crowd-sourced state planning, the outcomes reached were not particularly innovative. The statement produced, the 'Findings' as they were called, were rather tepid, reading rhetorically as Laibach-lite. Is a tepid consensus any better or worse than a false consensus? The main outcome was basically to affirm the founding principles of the NSK State and that there would be further

4 For more information on the Micronations Summit see <http://www.mu.fi/amorph03>. See also the book published after the summit, edited by one of the summit organizers: Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, (Ed.), *Summit of Micronations: Protocols*. Helsinki: MUU Artists' Association, 2005.

5 For more on recent uses of overidentification and strategies similar to that employed by the NSK, see the *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-Identification* (2007) collection edited by the Dutch art group BAVO. Although it is debatable whether some of the examples contained (such as the Yes Men) are indeed based on a principle of overidentification. It is clear in their performances, for instance, that they are not actually advocating the hyperbolic position that appears to be advocated under assumed roles. This was not the case for the NSK and Laibach whose work was all the more unsettling precisely because one could never really be sure if they meant it or not, and thus resisted easy interpretation. See also Stephen Shukaitis, 'Overidentification and/or Bust?' Variant Number 37, 2010, <http://www.variant.org.uk/37texts/10Overident.html>

interest in turning the NSK State from a virtual aesthetic entity into an ongoing project embraced by its citizens, or in turning that heretofore symbolic but empty signifier into something more substantive. Despite the somewhat uninspiring nature of the outcome, the final statement did include several interesting reformulations of the relation between states and time, the conjunction of depersonalized aesthetics and governance, as well as the paradoxically clever idea that 'Freedom of choice creates trauma; lack of freedom of choice creates trauma. The NSK State acknowledges the right not to choose.'

A similar dynamic of cautious but not overly striking innovation characterised the pieces in the NSK Folk Art exhibition and poster competition. While some of the pieces developed new iterations of existing themes, for the most part they stayed close to the aesthetics that NSK has developed for several decades, meshing together imagery from the history of the avant-garde with industrial, fascist/totalitarian and Slovene themes. And while much of this was quite interesting, and perhaps even quite startling for individuals who first come across these re-workings and hybridisations with no background information, it did not seem to produce anything near the constant stream of creativity and innovation that is assumed to flow from crowd-sourced modes of participation and artistic production. By far the most interesting piece in the exhibition was a poster created by Bertrand Binois, which was a map of the world where overlapping perpendicular layers of grey created darker sections that evoked the Rorschach ink blot test. This moves beyond recycling previous tropes and hints toward ways in which the NSK State might function in the future: as a kind of critical-clinical diagnostic aesthetic for assessing the functioning of state imaginaries.

This idea emerged as a theme in a number of the congress sessions, that the role of the NSK State was less important in itself and more in how it developed tools that could be used in different locations and situations to excavate suppressed, obscene shared traumas. While this is an interesting proposition I am uncertain of how far this could actually go outside the original context and historical conditions marking the formation of NSK. For instance, could such a strategy of overidentification be employed usefully within the US?<sup>5</sup> While one argument about NSK's role in 1980s Yugoslavia is that by taking on and pushing right wing nationalist positions to an extreme, particularly while combining them with 'foreign' elements, their performances and aesthetics served to make these positions unusable, would this tactic work in the United States? It might be seen that any attempted ideological monkey wrenching of this kind, far from sabotaging a section of the political spectrum, could just as easily end up creating new platform ideas for the Tea Party.

This also suggests a possible limit to the congress as a format for interaction, particularly as a space for developing strategies for social and political intervention relevant beyond the context of the NSK State itself. Or to put it another way, if NSK applies the principle of the monumental retrograde to tease out the residual potential of aesthetic and political movements long thought dead, how does this lead to

creating tools for intervention aside from keeping alive a constant process of ideological recycling? NSK has often described the State in Time Project, following the idea of Joseph Beuys, as a form of social sculpture. The congress itself could then be seen as a moment of taking the idea of social sculpture forward in an interesting way, creating a space where the virtual relations created the State in Time are transformed in actual form as the project is taken on and run by its participants. This would be the social sculpture coming to sculpt itself, moving from a position of 'social sculpture in itself' to 'social sculpture for itself'. But how far can this process go? What actual innovations and creativity are produced out this move? The outcomes of the congress this far tend to indicate that this might be limited, or at the very least more difficult than anticipated.

While there are interesting examples of how NSK State citizens have taken up and articulated the NSK State in new ways (some examples of this could include Christian Matzke's Maine-based Retrogarde Reading Room or Charles Kraft's NSK dinnerware), the congress also showed how a participatory platform and convergence of varying backgrounds and ideas does not necessarily produce anything new or interesting. Or to put it another way, while the gurus of the post-Fordist creative networked economy might fetishise relationality and participation, the formal process of collaboration emerging from projects attempting to make relational aesthetics genuinely participatory does not in itself guarantee interesting results. While the focus of congress discussion was ostensibly charting new directions for the project, what was actually produced was more a reaffirmation of its founding principles, the groping towards a droll kind of constitutionalism and formal procedural mechanisms necessary to opening up a collective process to those not physically in attendance (assuming that other people would even want to be involved). The problem with this, at least for me, is that it was not very inspiring. What interests me in the NSK State is how it operates to create cracks in state imaginaries and processes of identification, the audacious proclamation of its own infinite and total nature in absolutist terms that had seemingly been left behind, rather than the ability to merge art into everyday life as participatory bureaucracy.

Perhaps one of the most promising, if fittingly ambivalent, signs that the NSK State still has the potential to unsettle and create significant effects in the world, came up through one of the most difficult of the conversational threads running through the congress. It can be summed up in one word: Nigeria. For most of State in Time's development, the number of citizens increased at a relatively slow but steady pace, connected mainly to the activities and travels of Laibach and Irwin.<sup>6</sup> Thus the geographic distribution of citizens was spread mainly across Europe and the US, with the most significant clusters in the UK, Germany, the US, and Slovenia. Starting in 2004, but then picking up in a major way the following year, this pattern changed dramatically. First in small number, but then in the hundreds and thousands, NSK started receiving applications for citizenship from Nigeria and neighbouring areas. It gradually became clear that many individuals were attempting to acquire an NSK

6 One easy but ultimately not very interesting critique that is sometimes made of NSK's work is how deeply it is entrenched in European history, in ways that have long ceased to be intellectually fashionable. In other words that it is Eurocentric. This is certainly true, but only to the extent that it is through a deep excavation of such histories that it becomes possible, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrasing (2000), to 'provincialize Europe'. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. One could argue that by developing intellectual tools for the excavation and interrogation of historical trauma, the NSK turns from an assumed backdrop and measurement to a tool that can be used elsewhere. However, identifying such a potential use of the NSK does not necessarily result in it being used in this way. To give a small example, at the same time as the congress there was an exhibition at the same institution called *The Potosi Principle*, which was about the Spanish colonisation and the continuation of primitive accumulation in dynamics of globalization and labor exploitation. See [http://www.hkw.de/en/programm/2010/potosi/veranstaltungen\\_40707/Veranstaltungsdetail\\_49023.php](http://www.hkw.de/en/programm/2010/potosi/veranstaltungen_40707/Veranstaltungsdetail_49023.php). In many ways this was the ideal complement to the NSK event in that it also excavated a suppressed history and its continuing effects in the world. But it did not seem to interest many of the delegates, although that easily could have been because they were too busy with other things to take the time to check it out. This is only to note that it is through better exploring these related forms of historical and political practice that the work of the NSK and projects like the State in Time become all the more useful.

7 For more about this project see <http://times.nskstate.com/towards-a-double-consciousness-nsk-passport-project>. The CCA Lagos website is <http://www.ccalagos.org>.

8 For more on institutional critique see Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, (eds.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London: MayFly Books, 2009 and Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55, 1999, pp.105-143.

9 Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

State passport in the mistaken belief that it would grant them the ability to travel to Europe, to move to Slovenia or, quite strangely, to move to the 'country' of NSK. Even more problematic was that this was happening not just through people applying directly to NSK, but also through networks of middlemen falsely claiming to represent NSK. These networks of intermediaries often made claims about the ability of the passport's use for travel, in the process raising false hopes and extorting quite significant amounts of money.

But this leaves the question of how to respond to such a situation? Similar dynamics have affected various micronations, some of which, like the State of Sabotage and the Conch Republic, project a façade with a much less passably state-like appearance. While some of the projects confronted with this question decided to stop producing passports as part of their practice, NSK chose a different response. Rather than stop the passport production activities altogether, in addition to taking much more care to stress that the passports were not for travel, they took out radio and newspaper advertisements in Nigeria clarifying the purpose of their project. They also conducted a series of interviews with Nigerians in London to more clearly understand what the passports meant to those who were trying to acquire them for travel. In July 2010 Irwin participated in the *Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport Project*, a project in Lagos.<sup>7</sup> This allowed Irwin and NSK to respond to what easily could have been a quite distressing problem in a more sensible way than stopping the project altogether, or refusing to involve participants in the State in Time from Nigeria. If the goal of the avant-garde was, and perhaps still is, to merge together art and everyday life, it is clear that this does not always go the way that might have been expected or hoped for in advance. The outcomes of artistic projects that spill over into directly political and social forms often do so in messy and ambivalent ways. One could suggest, then, that a politically responsive political-art practice, rather than trying to imagine forms of intervention free of contradictions or unpredictable effects (if that would be possible or desirable) would rather be one that creates ethical relations within the unforeseen effects generated when the artistic, political, and social recombine in unforeseen ways.

If one understands the history of institutional critique as the interrogation of the fields of power and operation of art galleries and museums, the strategy of overidentification could likewise be understood as a form of institutional critique.<sup>8</sup> Yet this would be an institutional critique that takes the state-form itself, in its most absolute and impossible form, as the object of critique. Just as Boris Groys<sup>9</sup> has pointed out that the historic avant-garde, by eliminating the difference between the art work and the profane thing, leads directly to the building up of museums, the monumental retrogarde activities of NSK have led to a building of a Slovenian state from within the Yugoslav state. The State in Time project was itself created during a period when Yugoslavia was falling apart and being torn up by horrendous genocidal tensions and violence. At that moment creating a state without territory, without ethnicity, and which thus sat above all the conflicts of time, was a utopian gesture. While Hakim

Bey's roughly contemporaneous concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone<sup>10</sup> became popular for thinking about the creation of evasive spaces between and outside states, the State in Time project negotiated a relationship through the state not by evading its attraction, but working through and against it. The project arguably forms autonomous zones, but creates them precisely as what Alexei Monroe has quite cleverly termed 'Temporary Hegemonic Zones', or zones of autonomy created from hollowing out state logic from within.<sup>11</sup>

However it is the word temporary in the concept of a Temporary Hegemonic Zone that points both to the potential and the limits of the NSK State moving from a virtual to an actual entity. During the closing ceremony of the congress a member of Laibach commented that during the 1980s they had very much wanted there to be a Slovenian state, but that once it actually came into existence it was much less interesting or desirable. The formation of the State in Time was one way out of this conundrum, shifting these desires to an impossible terrain. Which leads one to ask whether the most disappointing move would not then be to actually try and create the NSK State as an actual entity? Would this not then create another and even deeper level of disappointment in the sense that any actual realisation of a total and impossible state could only be partial? Perhaps the entire congress was doomed, from the beginning, to failure. In that sense the most promising outcome was not the official findings but, rather, the counter-statement that was also read at the closing statement denouncing the whole process, (and paradoxically redeeming it through this denunciation).

While it took the form of a rather caustically humorous invective, this so-called *Atomic Declaration of Dependence* displayed a greater understanding of the event than any other made during that entire event. A constituent assembly for an impossible totalising state, by only being able to partially realise it, would thus necessarily betray it. The only possible fidelity to be found in realising the project of an absolute state would thus have to bring together its constitution and dissolution in the same moment or, better yet, to open a rip in time where the de-structuring force bends time itself so that the State of Time collapses even before it has constituted itself: only through an impossible act of constituent self-negation. And this is what is written in Latin on every NSK passport, 'Ama nesciri', or 'love the unknown, the obscurity'. If the simplest Situationist act was attempting to abolish dead time, the NSK State in Time realises that act by bringing together the absolute state form of time itself with its simultaneous abolition, and by doing so the constituted state never actually occurs.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Alexei Monroe, 'Laibach Kunst and the Art of Total Non-Alignment', *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst Recapitulation 2009*, Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki: 2009, pp.135-138.

<sup>12</sup> This statement is from "Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s," *Internationale Situationniste #3* (December 1959). Available at <http://www.oddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/unitary.html>



Christian Matzke, *Exterior of the Retrogarde Reading Room*, Brunswick Maine, USA, 2010  
From the NSK Folk Art collection



Halldor Carlsson & Olafur Thorsson, *NSK Garda Reykjavik*, 2007  
From the NSK Folk Art collection

## The Self and Its Double: How I Use the NSK Passport<sup>1</sup> *Eda Čufēr*

*I am no longer alone, when I attempt to contemplate the whole of my own life in the mirror of history, just as I am not alone when I contemplate my own exterior in a mirror.*

*Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>2</sup>*

### 1. (Green Leather Box)

My first passport was issued by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. I keep it as a memento of my childhood and of my former country that no longer exists. Growing up in the 1960s, I was very proud that we were socialists; I cherished our friendly and glamorous president, Josip Broz Tito. When I once criticised my grandmother for not having Tito's portrait in her living room, as everyone else did, she was irritated by my comment. Shortly after, she went to her bedroom and brought out a dark green leather box and put it on the table. The box was full of old coins and documents: passports, birth certificates, graduation papers, medical IDs and other things of that nature. I remember being attracted to a medallion bearing the face of a man with a big moustache. That, my grandmother told me, was Franz Joseph, the former emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 'he was like Tito when I was a child' she explained.

My grandmother, Maria Flajs, was born in 1910, four years before Franz Joseph declared war with Serbia, following the assassination of his nephew, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by a Serb nationalist (Gavrilo Princip) in Sarajevo, setting in motion the events that eventually led to World War I. The borders between countries in our part of the world radically changed after that war. Many previously nonexistent states popped up in so-called 'Middle Europe'. Between the two great wars of the last century, my grandparents held Austro-Hungarian, Italian and German passports. In 1945 they received what they called 'a communist's' one. 'Nothing lasts very long around here,' my grandmother pronounced as she shut her box and took it back to the bedroom.

My grandmother lived to see the collapse of Yugoslavia. When she died in 1995, she was a Slovenian citizen, and thus the holder of yet another passport. But needless to say, she could not care less about that. She also outlived President Tito, who died in 1980, just a month before I graduated from high school and moved to Ljubljana to attend university and, four years later, to become one of the founders of an art collective called Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). Between 1989 and 1991, the Yugoslav socialist federation broke down, and Slovenia proclaimed its will to exist as a sovereign national state. Less than a year later, in 1992, NSK also proclaimed the existence of an extra-territorial NSK state. Immediately after the proclamation, NSK began issuing NSK passports, opening embassies,<sup>3</sup> and establishing consulates in different parts of the post-socialist world.

<sup>1</sup> This text is the second part of an essay based on notes from a talk I delivered at the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' in Berlin in October 2010. (The first part, "The State and Its Double" is published in *State of Emergence* (ed. Alexei Monroe), Leipzig: Ploettner Verlag, 2011. Although I am one of NSK's founding members, this is not an official NSK position paper, but an essay representing my own views, as an NSK State citizen, on the meaning and function of our statehood.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', *Art and Answerability* (ed. Michael Holquist), Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p.105.

<sup>3</sup> Issuing NSK passports actually began immediately after opening the NSK Embassy in Moscow – a project initiated and organised by the NSK group, IRWIN, in 1992.

The NSK passport, an object that anybody could apply for and obtain, became a key critical instrument of an artistic and sociopolitical transformation. It was one of the mediums by which the NSK of the 1990s started expanding into an unbounded entity and embarked on the process of becoming a sovereign state, the NSK State in Time.

Ten years later, in the first decade of the twenty first century, NSK passport holders began constituting themselves as a citizenry, initiating new modes of organisation and socialisation. This in turn opened the NSK State in Time up to exploring literally unlimited possibilities in rethinking identity and citizenship in the formative century. This essay is my contribution towards meditating on these possibilities.

## 2. (Who are you?)

Karl Marx and Max Weber believed that modernity was made possible by the expropriation and redistribution of authority and wealth over the four previous centuries. Building the strong centralised authority embodied by the modern state, Weber argued, required the state's expropriation of the 'means of violence' from individuals or unofficial groups. This was most effectively achieved by controlling people's movements. And for this, the invention of the passport was instrumental. Channelling their power through mediums such as ID papers and money, the modern state apparatuses set up exquisite criteria of identity and value. The translation of the active, mobile individual into his or her unresponsive and static administrative double (who gazes back from a standardised photograph in a passport), epitomises the shift towards modern social organisation and the subsequent appearance of a new type of subjectivity commonly referred to as 'alienation'. Marx described the alienation of people from their essential 'human nature' as the result of capitalist productive relations.<sup>4</sup> The alienation increases in reciprocity with social advancement, and functions as a split between life and labour (or between workers' physical activity – that is, what they have to 'do' in order to survive when exchanging labour for wage – and their basic humanity, their human desire). It also functions as a split in identity between the self-aware, living and desiring individual person and his or her administrative, socially inscribed double. 'Who we are' largely depends upon 'what we do' since 'what we do' conditions the majority of relations that we have with each other and 'the Other' – represented by the net of modern institutions through which our lives are organised and maintained.

## 3. (I'm a bishop. I'm a soldier. I'm an artist.)

In the early twentieth century Kazimir Malevich posited a complex structure of identity: he asked the reader of his 'suprematist' theories to imagine his or her life as a theatre piece 'in which non-objective feeling is portrayed by objective imagery'.

A bishop is nothing but an actor who seeks with words and gestures, on an appropriately 'dressed' stage, to convey a religious feeling, or rather the reflection

of a feeling in religious form. The office clerk, the blacksmith, the soldier, the accountant, the general... these are all characters out of one stage play or another, portrayed by various people, who become so carried away that they confuse the play and their parts in it with life itself. We almost never get or see the actual human face and if we ask someone who he is, he answers, 'an engineer', 'farmer', etc.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kasimir Malevich. *The Non-Objective world: The Manifesto of Suprematism*. New York: Dover Publications, 2003, p.94.

Malevich hints that this 'actual human face' (equivalent to Marx's 'essentially human nature') that each of us carries beneath our ever-more specialised utility masks, exists only as a potential (as non-objective feeling). A living person can burn with desire to express himself or herself beyond the determinations of the existing social scripts and their demands for particular, already established and socially-regulated characters. However, unless he or she translates this non-objective feeling into a concrete social act, this desire will live within a person as his or her potential but undisclosed and therefore unknown self.

## 4. (I'm not who you think I am.)

The performative nature of identity and identification, which plays a crucial role in the formation of social classes and in the maintaining of social hierarchies, at the same time allows the possibility of their transgression: one might consciously distort one's identity, or disguise oneself as somebody else. As Valentin Groebner points out in his study of early modern practices of legal identification – artists, spies, criminals and other eccentrics or 'aliens' – all share an interest in evading identification by utilising theatrical means.<sup>6</sup> A person who breaks the law doesn't want to be recognised because her identity connects her to illegal deeds; the spy pretends to be someone else in order to trick and bypass the security of a rival state; 'aliens' might just want to settle down and find (illegal) work to survive. Artists, on the other hand, most often play with performative mechanisms of identification and identity in order to expose their arbitrariness and resist the inscription of 'who they are' that is imposed upon them by an external force.

At the very outset of the modern era, Shakespeare exposed the theatrical aspects of establishing and transgressing the law, and made transparent the structural similarities between the 'deeds' of legal authorities, criminals (terrorists) and artists (activists). But while their disguises, tricks, puns, hoaxes and lies at first might look the same, they have fundamentally different effects and meanings depending on the position (status, identity) that the player occupies in the social hierarchy of the given symbolic order. The tricks of the artists (as Hamlet shows) became most telling when they managed to break through the myths and rituals of their day and expose the hidden narratives and true identities of other notorious tricksters (King Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern etc.).

<sup>6</sup> Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You?: Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: MIT Press (Zone Books), 2007.

<sup>4</sup> In Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988.

## 5. (The Art and Politics of Disguise)

Malevich's proposition to erase all other earthly identities and devote art to the search for non-objective feeling was an expression of a twentieth-century utopian quest. Within a quarter of a century, however, this lofty aspiration was shadowed by images and experiences in utter conflict with the initial vision. Totalitarian states emerged on both the right and the left, and practiced the most horrendous types of alienated collective behaviors that one can think of. Twentieth-century society had developed to such an extreme that citizens were asked to search for their humanity in their most sublime desires – but these desires (for ideal communities based on ethnic homogeneity or absolute equality), especially when grafted to power, proved to be destructive beyond imagination. Nothing could be taken for granted any more, particularly one's own autonomy. State propaganda fed on citizens' inability to deal with the ambiguities of existence and the multiplicity of choices that constantly confronted them. The methods of propaganda and thought-control used to influence and infiltrate the public consciousness employed many techniques formerly developed within art, thus the function of 'art as art' (if we can still speak of it that way) became a kind of counter-insurgency. Art's role was not anymore about facilitating its viewers to experience beauty (to which they had become immune by immersing themselves in over-aestheticised constructed environments) but rather to critically and creatively cultivate the internal experience of alienation. Art provoked feelings of distancing, division, emptiness and loss, and enabled the re-appropriation of these feelings as forms of identity and enjoyment.

It was Walter Benjamin who first noticed and commented upon the internal logic of this significant historic reversal. He described it as, among other things, a structural reversal of the roles of art and politics permitted by new technologies of reproduction and moving images. In 1936, a mere decade before the 'synthetic consciousness' of television entered America's (and later the world's) living rooms,<sup>7</sup> Benjamin anticipated the uncanny future potentials of a world infused by moving images and words by enunciating that: 'all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. ... Self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.'<sup>8</sup>

Art and politics in the twentieth century became fused to the point that it was no longer possible to unambiguously locate the borders between them. The old art that we knew and loved, it was claimed, symbolically died in 1913, when Kazimir Malevich conceived the *Black Square* and Marcel Duchamp introduced his first ready-made to the world.<sup>9</sup>

With World War I, the disintegration of Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires, the October revolution, and the 'spectre' of communism which for decades had already haunted the world, the era of classical colonialism came to an end and an entirely new era of expropriation and exploration began. Just as the *Bicycle Wheel* and *Black Square* marked a turning point in *art history*, so too did World War I represent

10 This idea can be found in John Berger *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1965. pp.60-64.

11 Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (ed. Barbara Rose, *Documents of Twentieth-Century Art*), Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, p.51.

12 This idea was a central subject of Groys's early work *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1988 (see *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Groys's 'Introduction' to *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, pp.1-35.

7 Full-scale commercial television broadcasting began in the United States in 1947.

8 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1988, p.141-142.

9 I'm referring to the thesis of Gérard Wajcman's *L'Objet du siècle*, Paris: Verdier, 1998.

13 The phrase belongs to Allan Kaprow and his conceptualisation of happenings. See A. Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. (Ed. Jeff Kelley). Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

a fundamental point of transition in *world history* – a moment when the world as an object of exploration and colonisation since the fifteenth century finally became depicted, mapped and owned.<sup>10</sup> It would only be a matter of time until capitalism, arriving at its fully developed corporate stage, would discover a use-value of the 'inverted' lands, and perfect the ways to explore and exploit them.

## 6. ('Art is art. Everything else is everything else.'<sup>11</sup>)

Duchamp and Malevich produced their 'empty signifiers' at the beginning of the century, as we have already noted, that introduced an eerie object capable of bringing the spectral presence of the entire globe into people's living rooms. Withholding all content for positivist interpretation and identification, their empty icons shifted the entire discussion about the 'state of art' elsewhere. Instead of depicting an object to be looked at, *Black Square* and *Bicycle Wheel* depicted the dispositive, which would define the visual, fetish and discursive regimes of the twentieth century. Offering themselves more as objects of interpretation than as objects of visual consumption, these two objects accumulated meanings that would fundamentally inform the differences between two dominant and competing types of society as they viewed each other through the mirror of the Cold War.

Boris Groys proposed looking at *Black Square* as if it represented a rite of passage of art, from the sphere of 'positive reality' (objective) into the sphere of 'negative reality' (virtuality), epitomising the immersion of Soviet avant-garde art into the virtual world of Stalinist *gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>12</sup> *Black Square*, according to this interpretation, represents the world objectified in the Soviet totalitarian state known for its absorption of art (as an agency of the subject) and for the state itself becoming a *subject* and an *artist* instead.

*Bicycle Wheel*, on the other hand, marks the absorption of art into an autonomous art system, which worships alienation and feeds on self-recursive criticism and negation. By shifting attention away from the power of meaning and message inherent in the art object to the instrumental power of the value-creating art system, Duchamp's body of work served to open the door to the art of conceptualism in the 1960s and beyond. Living in the saturated tele-information society, artists of the second half of the twentieth century understood that as a consequence of the increased aesthetisation and virtualisation of the living (public and private) environments (through which indoctrination is channelled and by which Western societies manufactured de-alienated and re-alienated identities in unlimited editions far beyond their State frontiers), art could continue to signify as art only by 'blurring the art and life divide',<sup>13</sup> that is by reverting the definition of art and entering into a sphere of 'life itself'.

## 7. (Undercover Politics)

Western post-World War II democratic societies may think they always held a moral advantage in relation to the cultural and scientific experiments of Nazi, Fascist and Communist regimes, but in fact it took a special kind of political genius to figure out

how to translate a programme of twentieth-century avant-garde art into a language of political, cultural and economic hegemony.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the President of the United States from 1953 to 1961, understood the strategic use of subterfuge. During his presidency he not only perfected the operations of what would become known as the 'military-industrial complex', but also warned his 'fellow Americans', (via their television sets) of its horrendous potentials. As a part of these operations, he enacted several programmes and initiatives that were not terribly demanding in terms of infrastructure and budget, but that proved to be highly effective means of spreading American influence beyond Cold War barriers. One of the most dramatic examples was the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, an event which turned out to be as challenging for the American government as for the Soviet Union's. When it was revealed that 34 out of the 67 exhibiting American artists were in one way or another involved in international communist organisations, the House Committee on Un-American Activities asked that these artists be removed from the show. Eisenhower overruled them, allowing the exhibition to proceed as planned. For many American politicians, this was beyond comprehension. How could the United States allow itself to be represented on Soviet soil by American artists sympathetic to communism? On the Soviet side, the message was painfully clear. After Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union began paving the road towards post-Stalinist revisionism, reactivating desires and expectations of artists and intellectuals to regain their liberties. This first direct confrontation of the people embodying the world of real communism with the representatives of American democracy and liberalism was nothing less than the genie of Marxism being released by the body of its evil twin.

## 8. (How do I use my passports?)

NSK transformed in 1992 into the NSK State in Time at a moment of high social anxiety and devastating collisions between the declining models of the twentieth-century authoritarian state (epitomised in Yugoslavian bloodshed), conceptually and historically regressive and outlived models of the national state (exemplified in the inauguration of the independent state of Slovenia) and the hastening policies of pan-European integration with the aggressive invasion of predatory Western neo-liberal economic interests searching for new 'virgin' markets.

Before anybody in Eastern Europe woke up from the hangover of transition, we were already interpellated into a restored globally-imposed class system in which everyone has a clearly delineated place and say. In the newly reified international and global relations, the passport immediately started to function as a brand. ('Made in Slovenia.' You mean Slovakia?) Suddenly we were on the map, but we didn't recognise ourselves in the patterns in which we were recognised by Others.

Like my grandmother's dark green leather box, now I too have a place – a small light grey nylon suitcase – in my room in which I keep my old and sometimes new

passports, school certificates, old coins, paper money and other junk. I'm a holder of Slovenian, American and NSK passports, of which each subsequent version undoes the authority of the previous one.

Legally, passports don't belong to their holders. They are owned by the state that issues them and therefore any mistreating of one's own passport amounts to abusing the property of the state. As Groebner has pointed out, what pictures us always gazes back at us. When I look at my photograph in, let's say, my Slovenian passport, I somehow feel that I don't look at myself but at 'Slovenia' and its mawkish history of domination and marginalisation by its predatory neighbors who still patronise us when they find out 'who we are'. The feeling that emanates from my Slovenian passport affects me in ways that I cannot always predict or control. The identical photo, produced from the same series of images but placed in my American passport, produces a very different feeling of weariness and distance. I became an American citizen during the post 9/11 Bush era when watching television in America felt like watching Yugoslavia disintegrating during the late 1980s. Except that this America is the America that won the Cold War and, like the Soviet Union, its decomposition has the power to contaminate the entire world.

Exactly the same photo in my NSK passport, on the other hand, tells stories about stories, including those that have not happened yet.

## 9. (Nigeria)

One event during the twenty year existence of NSK State in Time deserves a special mention. From 1992 to 2004, most of the applicants for the NSK State in Time passport were people involved with contemporary art, culture and western discourse. The NSK passport's meaning and interest was contextualised in part by the changing map of Eastern Europe, and the new independent states that were formed following the breakup of some of its previous ones (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Soviet Union). The largest number of passports were issued in Sarajevo at the end of the war in 1995, and although some NSK passport holders used their passports (which successfully reproduced the look of standard sovereign state passports) to actually pass state borders in Europe and North America, the majority of passport holders understood its use-value as an art object, even when using it for non-art purposes. But in 2004 something happened that would radically change the meaning of the NSK passport. Thousands of NSK passport applications started arriving at NSK headquarters in Ljubljana from the African state of Nigeria, specifically from the densely populated metropolitan region of Ibadan. For the Nigerian users, the NSK passport was not understood as an object of art, but as a legitimising form of self-identification and self-registration. When interviewed, some of the NSK passport holders from Nigeria later said that they had 'heard' that NSK is a beautiful country and wanted to travel there. The Slovenian embassies in the region began to be overwhelmed by phone calls from these new NSK citizens asking questions about visas and their rights of citizenship.

Eventually the situation grew to the point that the Slovenian Foreign Ministry asked NSK members to write an explanation clearly stating that NSK is not a 'real' state but an 'art' state, and that the NSK passport is not a valid document for crossing state borders or applying for visas. They published the statement on their website and advised NSK to spread the same information through their own channels as well as in the Nigerian media.

After almost two decades of relatively 'peaceful' existence, the NSK State in Time started to produce awkward situations and uneasy relations, and this was precisely at the moment when the borders between art and life were being transgressed one again. The situation was to a certain extent comparable to public responses to Laibach's and NSK's events in the 1980s. The ambiguity produced by early NSK actions, also interpreted as 'real', was often questioned with regard to their unpredictable ideological impact. In the case of the Nigerian passport applications, the ambiguity and moral questioning is focused on the issue of the NSK State in Time *selling* (NSK passports cost 24 euro each) citizenship. The Nigerian applicants, it can be said, were misled into thinking they were buying 'real' passports with which they could travel internationally, while in fact what they got for their money was, in bureaucratic terms, 'fake'. This situation, which is still unfolding (although the number of applicants from Nigeria is diminishing), led some to suggest that within Nigeria the NSK passport functions as a sort of Ponzi scheme.<sup>14</sup> And since Nigeria has a reputation in certain international networks for being involved in black market activities, the next question is whether the Nigerian applicants were the victims of a new trap or whether they perceived the possibility of buying an almost 'real' looking passport as a good opportunity, counting on gaining at least some advantage by virtue of possessing 'real' looking ID?

This case constructively displaced many of the premises and assumptions that NSK and NSK State in Time had been operating under. It shifted the art horizons of NSK citizens and opened the vista towards distressing and controversial but also very true problems of the new, global century. The restriction on travel and crossing borders between the western and eastern parts of the world had been one of the biggest anxieties of the Cold War. For that reason, at least for some of us, the period after 1989 began with the fulfillment of a desire: the promise of a new borderless world. That promise was quickly broken once the war in Yugoslavia began and freedom of movement again very much depended on whether one was in 'the wrong place at the wrong time'. While living in Slovenia through the 1990s, when the possibility of travelling abroad became routine, I was very aware that if I had been born or lived just a few hundred kilometers south-east, my movements would be completely restricted, and I wouldn't care about the anxieties of the European art-world since I would be thinking only of how to survive.

The revival of global terrorism and its new stratifications of warfare make it clear that twenty-first century state security is in total disproportion to the borderless nature of liberal capitalism and telematic technologies. The era of state building

in Eastern Europe (and other countries of the so-called 'second world') and in the post-colonial ('third') world, is over. Many twentieth-century states, which (often at the price of turning into dictatorships) struggled to provide protection and dignity to their citizens who desired equal status, rights and well-being to those enjoyed by the citizens of the 'first world', have already fallen apart. Others are in the process of disintegrating. The winning paradigm of global liberal capitalism truly links diverse people and cultures with an intensity never seen before. The former states' modes of international associations, usually subsidised by the states themselves, are now substituted with new network-centered configurations financed by corporate capital. At the same time, large populations, having lost their status, state protection and ties of membership, are turned in to *homo sacer*.<sup>15</sup>

The Nigerian people's over-identification with the NSK passport as a symbol of rights and privileges – perceiving it as guaranteeing its holder a share in the system of legal protection, mobility and an identity and status that is lacking without affirmation by documents – points to a disturbing absence of such rights and privileges for vast populations inhabiting the twenty-first century world.

Invented in the era of classical colonialism and national state building, the passport might now become obsolete as a form of identification. New technologies and systems permeate secular space and introduce surveillance mechanisms at almost any transactional threshold – cash register, hospital reception, bank machine, commercial website and even the private home. The latest advances in identification, more than any others, exemplify the profound paradigm shift that is on its way. By replacing human authority with the authority of the mechanised network, the character and behaviour of the future state is undergoing radical change. An organ such as the 'eye', which was 'The Organ' of western modernity and its representational dispositive (but in a role of the instrument belonging to the subject), now itself becomes an object to be identified (but with the identification being performed by the authority of the machine, which can 'see' into the darkness of the flesh of which the human eye is made). The merging of political, legal, economic and cultural aspects of identity into one form of digital payment-identification document (a fusion of today's credit card and passport), is imminent. As Deleuze has indicated, in the near future, physical movement may become more complicated and restricted than ever before.

The conception of a control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant (whether an animal in a reserve or a human in a corporation, as with an electronic collar), is not necessarily one of science fiction. Felix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position – licit or illicit – and effects a universal modulation.<sup>16</sup>

15 See Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Cambridge: MIT Press (Zone Books), 2010, p.23. In Roman law *homo sacer* is the definition of a banned person that may be killed by anybody but cannot be sacrificed in religious ritual. Brown refers to Giorgio Agamben's important reintroduction of this concept into 'globalization' discourse.

14 'Ponzi scheme' is a popular term for a fraudulent investment operation.

16 Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, no.59, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, pp.3-7.

The mere facts of existence of the applicants and NSK passport holders from Nigeria are painfully in keeping with this conflicted vision of the future. As the debates that took place during the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' in Berlin in 2010 made clear, the inhabitants of today's world are not yet equipped to navigate between these new forms of control and exclusion. Mirrored by our Nigerian co-citizens and measured by the difference in rights and opportunities we enjoy, we (the people of the so-called art-world) cannot avoid seeing the now globally expanded institution of art, established in the Eisenhower era, as a frightening hegemonic construct which, as Duchamp demonstrated, produces and re-produces the meaning and value of art as a machine. The only way to escape art's institutional 'double', is to search for it in the 'real', as a trader between the *doxa* of the art-world and the general symbolic economy of life. Non art-world people are buying the NSK passport not to enjoy it as a little 'Rembrandt masterpiece' but because they need to use the canvas as an 'ironing board'.<sup>17</sup> These two worlds (art and non-art) are, however, brought together by the same object, which, as Hansi Momodu insisted, indicates that in the final analysis we all aspire for the same ideal and necessity of the redefined future state which will be responsive to the challenges and needs of global citizenship.<sup>18</sup>

The evolutionary function of a sovereign national state is inseparable from its colonial heredity and the violation of the civil rights of those ineligible to its membership. The paradox of the state thus remains achingly real in today's world, especially if contemplated through the urgency of global justice. It is time to rethink the state, and the best way to rethink it is to remake it.

17 I'm referring to Duchamp's example of a 'reciprocal ready made' where he suggests using a Rembrandt as an ironing-board.

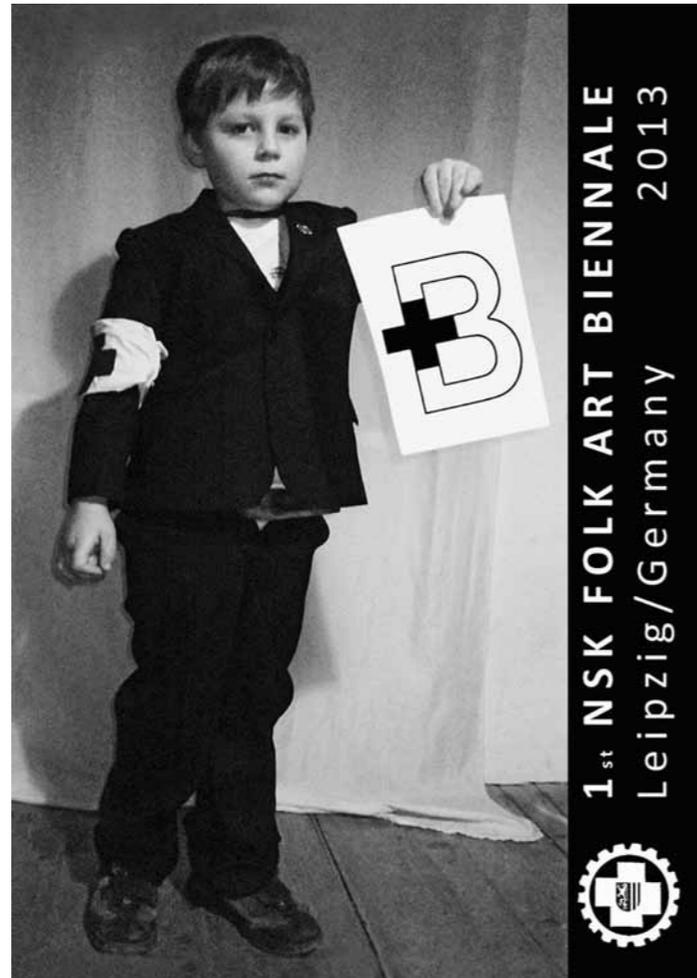
18 Hansi Momodu expressed this opinion in her unpublished interview with Borut Vogelnik at the 'First NSK's Citizens' Congress', Berlin, 2010.

*Freeport, 2012*



*NSK Rendes-Vous Lyon, 2011*

(organised by NSK citizens, NSK Rendes-Vous events also took place in Leipzig, London and New York, 2011-2012)



Poster announcing the '1st NSK Folk Art Biennale', Leipzig, 2013, designed by Carsten Busse in 2012

## Contesting Utopias: Individual Collectivity and Temporal Hybridity in the NSK State in Time *Jonah Westerman*

'Between 1990 and 1992, with the emergence of a new political, ideological and economic reorganisation of Europe ... NSK reinvented itself, changing from an organisation into a State.'<sup>1</sup> This brief excerpt from Laibach's description of how and why the Slovenian artists' collective, Neue Slowenische Kunst, founded a state that exists not in space, but in time, casts the inception of the state as directly responding to a new European society, one built after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The following analysis attempts to understand the structure, process and reception of the NSK State in Time, especially as embodied by the NSK passport, and look to interrogate the ways in which the project articulates the role of Eastern Europe's communist past in the context of what Boris Groys describes as a global, 'post-communist condition'.<sup>2</sup> Through an engagement with Groys's formulation of the specificity of Soviet utopian temporality and Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the exercise of cultural power in a globalised economy should be evaluated through Hegel's dialectic of Identity and Difference, it is possible to see that the seemingly paradoxical mission of the NSK state to 'keep Utopia real'<sup>3</sup> produces the radical individualisation of its citizens, who come into being through the recognition of utopia's impossibility.

In some crucial ways, the NSK State in Time closely resembles the earlier form of Neue Slowenische Kunst. As an artists' collective made of smaller artists' groups the founders of NSK worked deliberately and in concert to achieve an egalitarian, horizontal organisation. This larger collective had no desire to direct the activities of any particular group; rather, it was imagined and used as a practical tactic through which to wrest power and visibility from already established artists and venues.<sup>4</sup> The member groups were also brought together by a shared interest in the historical stakes of art/visual culture and its relation to identity and political imagination. While each approached these questions in unique ways, the fact that the collective gave itself a German name attests to the shared commitment to exploring how a 'native' identity had deep roots in places supposedly elsewhere.

The NSK State in Time would attempt to create, for a wider pool of participants, the same kind of non-hierarchical organisation that made possible their own exploration of the relation between an individual and a collective, but it would also carefully frame this renewed experiment as an analysis of how historical notions of 'the state' inform the present moment. According to Laibach, the NSK state:

has no formal 'government' and no central committee, only citizens, few bureaucrats and some administrators. The last two only deal with technical issues – keeping the State formal. It is based on self-management and non-alignment

1 Laibach, 'Laibach WTC – NSK Passport', <https://wtc.laibach.org/en/product.cp2?guid=41428B1D-71D3-C1B1-3759-A216BE5C888&linkid=15> (last accessed 15 December, 2009).

2 Boris Groys, 'The Post-Communist Condition', *Who if not We Should Try and Imagine the Future of All This?* (ed. Maria Hlavjova and Jill Winder), Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004, p.164.

3 Laibach, 'Laibach WTC – NSK Passport', *op. cit.*

4 Interview with Borut Vogelnik, member of IRWIN, conducted by the author (Ljubljana, 24 June, 2012).

and it coexists as a parasite within existing, already established bodies in the entire area of Time.<sup>5</sup>

5 Laibach, 'Laibach WTC – NSK Passport', *op. cit.*

Existing as what is sometimes called a 'virtual state' or a 'micronation', the NSK state is a voluntary association of NSK passport holders, 'people of different religions, races, nationalities, sexes, and beliefs, people from all over the world. The right to citizenship is acquired through ownership of the NSK passport.'<sup>6</sup> These passports are available at NSK embassies or consulates temporarily established in actual physical places (the state has materialised in Aarhus, Athens, Dublin, London, Taipei, Thessaloniki, to name a few locations) and online.

6 *Ibid.*

The application for citizenship on the official NSK state website<sup>7</sup> is purely formal; one fills it out in order to supply the name, photograph, and so on that will appear on the passport. So in what sense, then, is this a passport to a state? According to the members of IRWIN and Eda Čufer:

7 NSK State, 'The Official Pages of the NSK State Passport Office', <http://www.passport.nsk.si/en/> (last accessed 31 October, 2012).

The NSK State in Time is an abstract organism, a suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not to territory but to mind, whose borders are in a state of flux, in accordance with the movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body.<sup>8</sup>

8 Eda Čufer and IRWIN, 'NSK State in Time', <http://irwin.si/texts/nsk-state-in-time/> (last accessed 31 October, 2012).

Before considering how the NSK state uses terms like 'state', 'borders' and 'collective', note that the language of the NSK State in Time's mission and composition demonstrates a commitment to the 'retroprinciple' or, as the artists put it, 'Retro avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue 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.'<sup>9</sup> The still-reverberating trauma under discussion here is how 'Modern art has not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states.'<sup>10</sup>

9 *Ibid.*

Further, according to Eda Čufer and IRWIN, the specific battleground of this assimilation concerns the nature of collective effort and identity. They write, 'The most important and at the same time traumatic dimension of avant-garde movements is that they operate and create within a collective.'<sup>11</sup> The trauma occurred, on their account, when the state took this work of collective production as a 'question of how to collectivise and socialise the individual, whereas avant-garde movements tried to solve the question of how to individualise the collective.'<sup>12</sup> According to historian Inke Arns, it is exactly this historical inversion that seemed to underwrite Stalinism's assertion that socialist realism was the realisation of 'the ideals and utopias of the avant-garde.'<sup>13</sup> Through its rigidly defined vision of the future Socialist realism attempted to collectivise the individual by claiming to comprehend entirely the essence of the soviet citizenry, the history that had brought it to the present moment

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 Inke Arns, 'Avant-garde in the Rear-View Mirror', *Seven Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow* (ed. Zedenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, Igor Zabel), Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2004.

and informed who they were (and hence who they could *and should* become). Nazi propaganda shared this basic structure while advancing its own calamitous version of the necessary future, which stemmed from an equally forceful, but wildly divergent and delusional historical mythology. The NSK State in Time seeks to individualise the collective, rather than to collectivise the individual, and it does so by voluntary citizenship and adherence to an idea, which is itself understood to be open to all and constantly in flux. Or, again, in the artists' own words:

Neue Slowenische Kunst defines its collectivism within the framework of an autonomous state, as artistic actions in time to which all other spatial and material procedures of artistic creation are subordinated. This means that the procedure of the deconstruction and analysis of past forms and situations functions as the creator of new conditions for the development of the individual within the framework of a collective.<sup>14</sup>

14 E. Čufer and IRWIN, 'NSK State in Time', *op. cit.*

The NSK State in Time is less a corporate body devoted to a mission or programme than it is an umbrella organisation under which – and through which – individuals might explore their own definition. But exactly how might this work? And how are we to understand the kind of utopia this might produce and why it would be different from those of the past?

With this emphasis on the reworking of the literal, historical past with an open-minded belief in the ability to create a new kind of utopia through the retrieval and rehabilitation of avant-garde practice, the NSK State in Time would seem to be exactly the kind of artwork under discussion in Boris Groys's article, 'Back from the Future' which argues for the 'special nature of the post-communist art-context'.<sup>15</sup> For him, 'the true specificity of Eastern Europe can only reside in its communist past'.<sup>16</sup> Groys, however, realises that a statement like this one flirts with tautology, and, for this reason, he looks to move beyond 'the language of trauma'.<sup>17</sup> He dislikes this mode of metaphor not just because, according to him, it is 'the least interesting' but because 'ultimately, the various forms of traumatization all begin to look remarkably similar'.<sup>18</sup> Groys searches instead for 'precisely what kind of past the communist past represents and what distinguishes this past from other pasts'.<sup>19</sup>

15 B. Groys, 'Back From the Future', in *Arteast 2000+: The Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 2001), p.10.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

According to Groys, the unique situation of the newly opening, formerly communist context is that it was not closed to the wider world because it was pre-modern (meaning insular by accident of history), but precisely because it represented an 'outstanding example of modernity'.<sup>20</sup> According to Groys, communist eastern Europe closed itself on purpose as part of its own formulation of modernity, itself modelled on the avant-garde. He writes, 'modernity has persistently spawned its own apocalyptic sects, radical parties or avant-garde art movements that isolated or insulated themselves against their respective contemporary societies.'<sup>21</sup> Groys thus echoes NSK's emphasis on the role of collectives while shifting the focus. He continues, 'ultimately, communism is nothing more than the most extreme and radical manifestation of

20 *Ibid.*, p.11.

21 *Ibid.*

militant modernism, of the belief in progress and of the dream of an enlightened avant-garde acting in total unison, of utter commitment to the future.<sup>22</sup> In other words, for Groys, when formerly communist countries opened up, they relinquished their avant-garde insularity. And when this finally occurred, what was left behind was ‘not the past, but the future.’<sup>23</sup> For Groys, this aspect of communism, its special mode of prospective utopian modernism, is what makes the communist past different from other pasts.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite disputes concerning the usefulness of the language of trauma, these are the very terms employed by the NSK State in Time. The retro-avant-garde reformulation of collectively produced utopia is born of communist modernity’s prospective orientation, which, according to Groys, should be understood as uniquely Eastern. Utopia, the future left behind, returns in the form of a collective whose very borders are always shifting and, therefore, whose very collectivity is itself subjugated to the individuality of its members. This utopia, then, consists in reworking the notions that the modern, the avant-garde, needs to be both universalising (in levelling its membership) and insulated from those who do not belong. Anyone can become a citizen of the NSK State in Time and doing so does not require one to toe a party line or do anything in particular. And just as Groys maintains, we cannot understand all this if we do not take seriously the specificity of the former-communist context and the particular modernity of its unique temporal orientation.

But this is only yet half – and possibly less than half – of the entire constitution of the state. One of the most important aspects of the NSK State in Time is the frequency with which passport holders, in interviews conducted and filmed by members of IRWIN and collaborators, describe their relations to their passports in terms of space; *not* in terms of time. Even as they extol the virtues of a voluntary association of citizens, allowed to be alone in their striving to make something together (even if that something is simply the ‘space’ to be alone), citizens constantly imagine their passport’s relation to physical borders and geographical nations.

In Sarajevo, early recipients of the passports relay stories of actual border crossings aided by the NSK passport. One man used his to travel from Ljubljana to Zagreb during the chaos that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia; another to enter Korea when he arrived without a visa. A younger cohort of cosmopolitan Berliners and self-described ‘nomads’ describe not border crossings, but the way in which the passport itself is a critique of the nation-state and larger systems that fix borders. Taiwanese NSK citizens half-jokingly describe how the NSK passport is like their own national passport in that it is effectively useless for international travel. And perhaps most dramatically, and certainly most poignantly of all, in 2007, IRWIN travelled to London to conduct a series of interviews with Nigerians living there because NSK state had received over 1000 applications from Nigerians acting under the misapprehension that the NSK passport guaranteed citizenship of Slovenia (and hence the ability to travel there and to other places their own papers – if they had any – could not take them). In addition to these interviews, which mostly feature members of IRWIN

explaining to applicants what they mean when they say NSK is an ‘artistic state’ and trying to ascertain how best to correct the rumours, the magnitude of this debacle prompted the removal of the application from the homepage of the ‘NSK Times’ and the presence of strongly worded disclaimers where it could otherwise be found:

The NSK State is not an officially recognised country internationally, and the NSK State passport is not a legally valid document. Holding an NSK passport does not grant citizenship of the Republic of Slovenia or of any other country of the world. **YOU CANNOT LEGALLY CROSS ANY INTERNATIONAL BORDER USING AN NSK PASSPORT!**<sup>24</sup>

The profundity of this misunderstanding should suggest an interpretive warning as well. We should not think of the project as being solely about or as being exhausted by a discussion of the context that informs its inception and its preoccupations with the retro-avant-garde retrieval of utopia. The idea of a state in time is, in fact, much more complex than that. The point is that we cannot underestimate the fact that the *transnational* utopia born of communist modernity’s particular temporality is often understood in the context of *international* relations. And Groys certainly realises that formerly communist countries (and the artworks produced therein) exist within a much broader, global context. He writes, ‘the entire world ... currently finds itself in a condition one could term post-communist.’<sup>25</sup> For Groys, this means that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resultant process of opening up needs to be understood as leading to an exacerbation of Cold War tactics on the part of the West. What’s more, these tactics concern a claim to utopia’s fulfillment. He writes, ‘The communist demand for the fulfillment of utopia on earth dealt traditional politics a blow from which in all probability it will never recover.’<sup>26</sup> He continues, ‘The true challenge posed by the Soviet experiment was the claim ... that the Soviet Union represented the place and earthbound incarnation of utopia – if not in the sense of its total fulfillment, then at least in terms of its practical advancement.’<sup>27</sup> Again, the specificity of communist prospective temporality comes into play – for, ‘none of the former ‘actually existing’ socialist countries ever claimed to have achieved communism, but saw themselves merely as transitional forms.’<sup>28</sup> The Soviet claim to utopia consisted in the affirmation of its closer proximity to an ideal society, an ideal itself designed to be transnational, even if its actual historical articulation resorted to avant-garde insularity, in the forms of both constant internal purges and closed external borders.

As a result, according to Groys, the West’s Cold War rhetoric propounded the counterclaim that it was, in fact, ‘the true place of utopia fulfilled.’<sup>29</sup> ‘To win the competition against Soviet communism,’ Groys asserts, ‘its rivals felt compelled not only to appropriate this claim as their own but even to outdo it – and thereby redefine their own societies as universal political models.’<sup>30</sup> The result (and best proof) of this ‘protracted one-upmanship’<sup>31</sup> is that the Soviet Union’s dissolution did not result in

<sup>24</sup> NSK State, ‘The Official Pages of the NSK State Passport Office’, [http://www.passport.nsk.si/en/important\\_message](http://www.passport.nsk.si/en/important_message) (last accessed 31 October, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> B. Groys, ‘The Post-Communist Condition’, in *Who if not We Should Try and Imagine the Future of All This?* (ed. Maria Hlavjova and Jill Winder), Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004, p.164.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

the abandonment of Cold War rhetoric, but in the West's even more aggressive assertions that it is a utopia of the present, one that exists here and now. We might, for example, think of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992)<sup>32</sup> as an emblem of this post-communist condition. Pronouncements of this kind, coupled with what Groys considers Orientalizing denials of communism's modernity (rooted in its real difference from Western modernity), were always and are still designed to increase liberal-democratic capitalism's share of what Groys terms an 'international political market for competing models of society'.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, Groys might want us to see the varying degrees to which a state in time undergoes spatial translation (or is understood by NSK passport holders as cause for contemplating issues of contemporary international mobility at the expense of the state's prospective utopian dimension) as misreadings where the West's tactics are successful. That is, a focus on how the passport might increase (or simply comment upon) one's own relation within and to the utopia of the present could appear to us as a total failure to identify the NSK State in Time's specificity as a utopian project itself. Further, we might see this translation of time into space as prompted by the rhetoric and sheer economic force of Western-style liberal democracy. On this reading, the NSK passport could serve as a marker of the triumph of the utopia of the present over the utopia of the future, insofar as the former simply eclipses the latter (rather than actually eliminating it).

Fredric Jameson, who develops a more materialist analysis of the advance of liberal democracy, might go even further in suggesting that the forces animating this misreading would eventually erase any local specificity, subordinating it to an amoebic transnational liberal-democratic sameness, or identity, everywhere replacing local difference. For Jameson, the cultural battles of globalisation are fought on the fields of mass culture, and America is the aggressor and inevitable victor. According to Jameson, in an era marked by 'the becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural', globalisation 'is a zero-sum game in which [America's] freedom results in the destruction of other people's national culture industries'.<sup>34</sup> That is, relative ideological market-share is determined by the production and exportation of mass culture. Thus, for Jameson, his perceived global ascendancy of American culture entails the ascendancy of the American way of life. While he pays due lip service to potential processes of hybridisation, through which denizens of the margins might make something new of imported cultural artefacts, the overwhelming thrust is another end-of-history narrative – figured this time as a lament. This strand of Jameson's thinking would have to confirm that the international understandings of the NSK passport granting transnational utopian citizenship are a sign of the increasing inability to think of utopia in its prospective dimension. That ability is replaced by the weighing of relative privilege and access to the so-called utopia of the present.

The real value of Jameson's thinking on globalisation to this discussion, however, comes not from his analyses of America's overpowering cultural-industrial complex,

32 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992.

33 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, p.74.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, p.75.

34 Fredric Jameson, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue', *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, pp.60-61.

38 *Ibid.*

but from his suggestion that the true problems to work out are not so much whether a singular identity replaces local difference, but when and to what effect? If anything, Jameson's account of the condition of East-West relations post-communism is far less compelling than Groys's, insofar as Jameson's overarching centre versus margins model itself levels differences between particular 'marginal' contexts. But Jameson closes his discussion of globalisation by noticing that, depending on context, the prospect of singular identity is accorded different values. He writes, 'everything depends on the level at which a malign and standardising or despotic identity is discerned'.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes identity figures as a hegemonic interloper (as in the case of his diagnosis of expanding Americanism), but sometimes (when, for example, it is aimed against this transnational juggernaut – à la Groys's strategic insistence on Eastern specificity) it can function as a consolidating and progressive political force: 'at certain key moments ... something like an affirmation of federalism is invoked as a future ideal'.<sup>36</sup> And further, at other times, residents from the various different regions of such federalisms might see the federation itself as despotic.

These, of course, are not revelations in themselves. Jameson wishes that individual national cultures would do more to stave off extinction, just as he is aware that each of those nations has its own problems. What is significant here is that these observations suggest to Jameson that there is a flaw, an instability, in the categories we use to conceptualise the operations of globalisation. If a singular identity can be, by turns, both good and bad, politically progressive and too limiting, identity *per se* is not the problem. Rather, it is identity's position within a system of relations that must be formulated in order to understand how a complex global order comprised of individuals, their states or regions, and transnational political models and ways of life operates in any given context. Jameson is searching for a new way to think the relation between the individual and the collective and between a given collective and other collectives of larger orders. Ultimately, however, this line of thinking goes undeveloped, save for Jameson's call for a 'return to Hegel'.<sup>37</sup> The benefit of such a return, according to Jameson, would be its potential to shed some light on 'the categories themselves, the modes and forms of thought in which we inescapably have to think things through, but which have a logic of their own to which we ourselves fall victim if we are unaware of their existence and their in-forming influence on us'.<sup>38</sup>

The remainder of this essay attempts to answer this call through an examination of how the NSK passport itself navigates and activates the formal instability Jameson observes. At this point, the interpretive warning raised by the NSK State in Time's spatial translation should come back to us. In terms of how the various levels of identity and difference function (the individual, national and global), it is significant that the passport holders themselves make the translation. That is, for them, the document granting membership in a utopian collective becomes the fantasised sign of greater mobility within capitalism. The key to moving forward with Jameson's questions concerning categories lies in admitting that this fantastic exercise is not a misreading of the state in time, but rather part of the project's full-throated articulation,

which is of course variously and multiply articulated depending on the varying situations of the passport holders. Each personal understanding of the state (insofar as it is these that comprise the state) merits the careful contextual scrutiny on which Groys insists in describing communist temporality. Further, I would suggest that the Nigerian interpretation is only a difference in degree from the Taiwanese reaction, not a difference in kind.

To take this one step at a time: The passport grants citizenship of the NSK state, a state that exists only in time (and the genesis of this concept needs to be understood as rooted in a particular context). The passport holder, then, finds him or herself a member of a virtual state, the tangible presence of which is a passport, which looks like a real passport (and is even printed using official Slovenian state machines and materials). The physical NSK passport *itself* condenses time and space. Why else create a tangible passport for a conceptual state? The passport as artefact initiates the contemplation of one's own concrete geopolitical situation – in other words, a significant part of what happens in the NSK state is that people individually (and, hence, collectively) think about geopolitical nations. And each articulation of the NSK State in Time varies according to context. Each passport creates its own context of articulation. The state animates and denaturalises history by staging the opposition between the utopia that does not yet exist (because it is always coming into being) and the best case present 'utopia' of real power relations as they exist at the moment. The passport produces and is produced by a kind of hybrid temporality. It forces one to remain open to an unknown future (to which untold numbers contribute) while calling explicit attention to actual conditions of life in the present, and it does so in the name of the individual specificity of each passport holder. The individual made possible by the collective is one who is aware of all these levels of difference and identity, and who experiences this individuality as the awareness of the instability Jameson describes.

Groys points at this hybrid temporality in his vehemence that the post-communist context matters, but his desire to sustain the difference of the East in the face of an advancing West precludes his arriving at such a formulation. He argues compellingly that there are specific attributes of the Eastern context that constitute a real difference from the West, and even though he acknowledges that, in the post-communist condition, the West's share of the political market increases, he does not pursue this collision to imagine what the interaction of Eastern and Western modernities might look like. Similarly, Jameson gestures toward this hybridity when he imagines that someone could simultaneously be troubled by national identity and hold it up as a future ideal mobilised against encroaching transnational homogeneity, but falls short of theorising what this could mean and how it might be experienced as anything other than the end-of-history figured by America's substitution of itself for everything else it encounters. Keeping both of these ideas in mind and in tension by incorporating Groys's notions of communist modernity's prospective temporality into Jameson's observations concerning the instability of the formal categories of globalisation distills an engine that can animate the opposition of East and West while taking each on its

own terms. In so doing, we might begin to develop a picture of the interrelation of East and West. This engine is what Jameson describes as 'the most momentous single reversal in Hegel's entire system' – the moment at which 'Opposition stands unveiled as Contradiction'.<sup>39</sup>

Without reconstructing the whole of how Hegel reasons the engine of history from a reevaluation of formal logic's law of noncontradiction (A equals A; A does not equal not-A); we'll start with what is, for the purposes of this paper, a uniquely well-suited example. Hegel writes:

An hour's journey to the east and the same distance travelled back to the west, cancels the first journey ... At the same time, the hour's journey to the east is not in itself the positive direction, nor is the journey west the negative direction; on the contrary, these directions are indifferent to this determinateness of the opposition; it is a third point of view outside them that makes one positive and one negative.<sup>40</sup>

Because Hegel's two terms (east and west) are equal and opposed, working through the dialectic of this opposition will aid the pursuit of a way to imagine the relations of East and West as a contest of two modernities, each with a claim to utopia. The difference between the terms in Hegel resides in their opposition, an hour in one direction and an hour back – any other difference between them (such as an attached value) is extrinsic to the dialectic. The qualitative difference, however, is real. According to Hegel, this opposition is revealed to contain within itself a contradiction exactly when we realise that the intrinsic values of the terms themselves are actually equal, one hour = one hour. He writes, 'Opposites, therefore, contain contradiction insofar as they are negatively related to one another or sublimate each other and are indifferent to one another.'<sup>41</sup> In other words, through their relation, or confrontation, east and west both confront their own relatedness in the form of equality. The difference between them *depends* on their shared identity – each one necessitates the other in order to maintain its own identity through their relative difference. Each opposed term includes the other in its very constitution.

The point is that the opposition, the difference, relies on identity and vice versa. They are only different in relation to each other and hence constituted by this very interrelation. The revelation of this contradiction sublimes the proposition into ground – on which the real difference of this identity can only be adjudged from a third point (a point of view) – what Jameson calls 'the situation itself'<sup>42</sup> and what I have called the context of articulation. In terms of the NSK State in Time, wherever the passport is and whoever is holding it comprise the context of articulation – the arena in which the oppositions of Identity (citizenship) and Difference (concrete geopolitical location) are framed as opposition and experienced as contradiction at the very moment, as in our example from Hegel, when time undergoes spatial translation (one *hour* to the east, and so on). In other words, the simple elegance of the passport is that it

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

<sup>40</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic* (trans. A.V. Miller), New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., p.428.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.441.

<sup>42</sup> F. Jameson, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue', *op. cit.*, p.76.

re-animates the movement of history through its necessary invocation of dialectical interrelation. This interrelation produces new forms – in the case of the passport, a hybrid temporality – and the experience of hybrid temporality in contemplation of the passport always continues the dialectical movement. The so-called end of history never comes to pass. No such end can occur when the utopia of the future and the utopia of the present collide on the ground of geopolitical reality. The distance to the East and to the West are measured from the location of the passport and seen as equally elusive. The passport holder, through joining a collective, becomes aware of his or her own unique position in the world understood as the difference between where they are and where they want to be (in the present and in the future). And only at this point, when we can incorporate supposed misreadings of the NSK State in Time into our understanding of it as a project, can we truly claim to have a sense of what the state itself looks like, how it functions, and how it might allow us to conceive of the interrelations of East and West in the global post-communist condition.

Given that this opposition of modernities, of East and West, sublates into ground (or, becomes a generalised landscape interpreted from specific points of view), does this mean, paradoxically, that we should understand the post-communist condition in its full dialectical character as a world with something called a Former West<sup>43</sup> and something called a Former East, given their mutual necessity for the maintenance of their difference? Can we say there is no more East or West when their confrontation forms a global backdrop, prompting the proliferation of hybridised forms, none being exactly The West or exactly The East?

If we remember what really enables the dialectic to work, it's clear that the answer is no. What discloses the contradiction at the heart of the opposition is the real, qualitative difference between eastern and western directions in Hegel – just as the close attention to temporality in Groy's analysis (a real difference) allowed us to formulate the dialectic and the NSK State in Time in meaningful and appropriate terms. According to Hegel, 'Something moves, not because at one moment it is here and another there, but because at one and the same moment it is here and not here ... the ancient dialecticians must be granted the contradictions they pointed out in motion, but it does not follow that therefore there is no motion, but on the contrary, that motion is *existent* contradiction itself.'<sup>44</sup> In other words, simply because the terms East and West are disclosed in one another, composed of one another, *especially* in the post-communist condition, does not mean that they disappear. Rather, the existence of the contradiction forms the very basis of the contest. If, then, we are to retain the terms Former West and Former East, we always need to remember their fully dialectical character – in fact, these terms are well-suited to doing this. The 'Former' in front of each should be read not simply as 'the place that used to be' but rather as 'the place that in one moment is and is not'. The modifier 'Former', then, is a signal not of the end of history, but of the exact opposite. It reminds us of the persistence of the past in the present, the way that history continues to unfold in new ways (even while these developing forms respond to parameters rooted in what has been).

43 My thinking on this subject is motivated by a broad-based discussion on geopolitical categories inherited from the Cold War and their effects, conducted under the aegis of the Former West project (see [www.formerwest.org](http://www.formerwest.org)). An early version of the present text was presented at a Former West seminar led by Claire Bishop at the Graduate Center, CUNY in 2009.

44 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic, op. cit.*, p.440.

What the NSK State in Time does is take us one step further and show us that the 'not' in the preceding formulation that designates a relationship to time – 'East' as *no longer* that which it used to be even though in crucial ways it *still is* – also refers to 'place'. The utopia represented by each claim, each modernity, is a non-place. The NSK passport holder feels the difference between their own position and both utopias. The individual confronts their national alignment and that nation's position in relation to the utopia of the present (this is the spatial translation) at the same time as, and *because*, he or she confronts their involvement in the production of a utopia of the future (this is prospective temporality). The disjunction of these two, contained within the passport, provokes the description of the context of articulation, which is both the passport holder's unique difference and something they add to and share with the collective at the level of identity (everyone is having this 'same' experience). Insofar as the passport condenses time and space, produces a hybrid temporality, and induces the simultaneity of all the levels of identity and difference that Jameson observes in his thinking about globalisation, it does nothing so much as produce the citizen as an absolute singularity. In other words, when the passport catalyzes the full articulation of context, the citizen of the NSK state confronts his or her own situation in the world as a node, a point, at which history, its accidents, and its aims intersect to produce an individual. Whether this is experienced happily in Sarajevo as the memory of a ridiculous and fortuitous border crossing or in London as a confrontation with a renewed sense of frustration and helplessness, it is the collision of temporal orientations that produces a sense of location. And location is above all an index of contingent history. The retro-avant-garde strategy used to found the NSK state and 'keep Utopia real' irrevocably alters the nature of utopia. Each citizen stands alone, and this is the point.

*New York*, 2009



Distribution of the NSK State in Time Passport Holders, 2008

## Biographies

**Inke Arns** is curator and artistic director of Hartware MedienKunstVerein (www.hmkv.de) in Dortmund, Germany, since 2005. She has worked internationally as an independent curator, writer and theorist specializing in media art, net cultures, and Eastern Europe since 1993. She studied Russian literature, Eastern European studies, political science, and art history in Berlin and Amsterdam (1988–96) and in 2004 obtained her PhD from the Humboldt University in Berlin. She curated numerous exhibitions at home and abroad. She has been teaching at universities and art academies in Berlin, Leipzig, Zurich, and Rotterdam, and has lectured and published internationally.

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**Eda Čufer** is a dramaturge, curator and writer. In 1984 she co-founded the art collective NSK, based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has collaborated with many contemporary theatre, dance and visual art groups including the Sisters Scipion Nasice Theatre, the dance company En-Knap, the IRWIN group and Marko Peljhan's Project Atol. She has co-curated several exhibitions for museums in Germany, Austria and Italy. Her essays on theatre, dance, visual art, culture and politics have appeared in many books and journals.

**Marina Gržinić** is a philosopher, theoretician and artist who works in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Vienna, Austria. She is a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Art (ZRC-SAZU), Ljubljana and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Over the last 15 years she has published numerous books. She has lectured at universities such as Duke University, Durham; University of California, Berkeley; Goldsmiths, London; and Columbia University, New York. She has been engaged with video art since 1982. In collaboration with Aina Šmid, she has realised more than 40 video art projects.

**IRWIN** is a collective of artists Dušan Mandič, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek and Borut Vogeljik. IRWIN was founded in 1983 in Slovenia and is

one of the core groups within the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) founded in 1984. In 1992 IRWIN co-founded NSK State in Time. The members of the group live and work in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**Tomaz Mastnak** is director of research in the Institute of Philosophy, Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Art (ZRC-SAZU), Ljubljana, and currently a visiting researcher in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine. His research focus is on the history of Western political thought, and his publications include: *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), *Evropa: istorija političkog pojma* (Belgrade, 2007) and *Hobbes's Behemoth: Politics and Religion* (Exeter, 2009). He is currently investigating the reception of Hobbes's political philosophy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Conor McGrady** is an artist from Northern Ireland whose work examines the relationship between ideology and conceptions of spatial control. He has had one-person exhibitions in New York, Miami, Atlanta, Chicago and Zagreb. Group exhibitions include the 2002 Whitney Biennial in New York. Editor of *Curated Spaces* in the journal *Radical History Review*, his writing has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Ruminations on Violence* (Waveland Press, 2007) and *State of Emergence* (Plottner Verlag, 2011).

**Viktor Misiano** is a curator and critic from Moscow. From 1980 to 1990 he was a curator of contemporary art at the Pushkin National Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, and from 1992 to 1997 he was the director of the Center for Contemporary Art (CAC), Moscow. He curated the Russian contribution to the Istanbul Biennale (1992), the Venice Biennale (1995, 2003), the São Paulo Biennale (2002, 2004) and the Valencia Biennale (2001). He was on the curatorial team for Manifesta I, Rotterdam (1996). He is a founder of the *Moscow Art Magazine* (Moscow) and of *Manifesta Journal: Journal of Contemporary Curatorship* (Amsterdam). In 2005 he curated the first Central Asia Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Since October 2010 he is a chairman of the International Foundation Manifesta (IFM). He lives in Moscow (Russia) and Ceglie Messapica (Italy).

**Alexei Monroe** is a London-based independent cultural theorist and author of *Pluralni monolit Laibach in NSK* (MASKA, 2003) and *Interrogation Machine* (MIT Press, 2005). He was programme director of the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress' and editor of the Congress document *State of Emergence* (Plottner Verlag, 2011). His research interests include the aesthetics and politics of industrial and electronic music, and the stag as a cultural symbol. He has written for numerous publications including *Contemporary Music Review*, *Central Europe Review*, *Kinoeye*, *Maska* and *The Wire*.

**Ian Parker**, NSK State in Time diplomatic passport holder, was co-founder and is co-director (with Erica Burman) of the Discourse Unit. He is a member of the

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**Avi Pitchon** is an Israeli writer, artist and curator based in London. Since curating IRWIN's first exhibition in the Middle-East ('The Eye Of The State', Israeli Centre for Digital Art, Holon, IL, 2010) he has been intensely involved in NSK-related initiatives: 'Austellung Laibach Kunst', Trbovlje (2010); the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin (2010); 'NSK Rendezvous London' (2011); and 'NSK Folk Art', Ljubljana, Taipei, London (2010-2012). His recent writing focuses on the importance of the monumental within art.

**Stephen Shukaitis** is a lecturer at the University of Essex, Centre for Work and Organization, and a member of the Autonomedia editorial collective. Since 2009 he has coordinated and edited *Minor Compositions* (<http://www.minorcompositions.info>). He is the author of *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Day* (2009, Autonomedia) and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (AK Press, 2007). His research focuses on the emergence of collective imagination in social movements and the changing compositions of cultural and artistic labor.

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**Slavoj Žižek** is a sociologist, philosopher and cultural critic. He is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, a professor of philosophy and psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, and a visiting professor at a number of American Universities (Columbia, Princeton, New School for Social Research, New York University, University of Michigan). Žižek is well known for his use of the works of Jacques Lacan in a new reading of popular culture. In addition to his work as an interpreter of Lacanian psychoanalysis, he writes on subjects as diverse as fundamentalism, tolerance, political correctness, globalisation, subjectivity, human rights, Lenin, myth, cyberspace, postmodernism, multiculturalism, David Lynch and Alfred Hitchcock.

## Illustrations

- 6 Neue Slowenische Kunst, Ljubljana, 1986
- 10-11 IRWIN, *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 1992. Photo: Jože Suhadolnik
- 12 *NSK Embassy Moscow* book, edited by Eda Čufer, 1993
- 15 IRWIN, NSK posters at Venice Biennial, 1986. Photo: Darko Pokorn
- Official plaque of the NSK State Pavilion at XVL Venice Biennial, 1993
- Robi Lesnik, Marko Peterlin, Aleš Prijon, Jernej Prijon, in collaboration with IRWIN, The NSK Pavilion, 1996
- 16 IRWIN in collaboration with NSK Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy, *NSK Territory Subl*, 1993
- 19 IRWIN, *NSK Embassy Ghent*, 1993. Photo: Opus Operandi archive
- 20 NSK, *NSK Electronic Embassy Tokyo*, 1995
- 28 IRWIN, *NSK Passport Office Graz*, 1992
- IRWIN, *NSK Passport Office Taipei*, 2008. Photo: IRWIN archive
- 29 NSK, *NSK Passport*, 1993. Photo: New Collectivism
- IRWIN, *NSK Consulate Florence*, 1993
- 30 IRWIN, NSK Consulate Umag, 1993. Photo: Franci Virant
- IRWIN, NSK Electronic Consulate e-flux, New York, 2013. Photo: Irwin archive
- 41 NSK, *NSK State Berlin*, 1993. Photo: Diego Gomez
- NSK, *NSK State Sarajevo*, 1995. Photo: Charles Krafft
- 42 New Collectivism, *NSK Post Office Ljubljana*, 1994. Photo: Jani Šporčič
- 43 New Collectivism, *NSK Passport office Dublin*, 2004. Photo: Darko Pokorn
- 44 New Collectivism, *NSK Information Office Helsinki*, (Men's choir Huutajat), 2003. Photo: Darko Pokorn
- 50 IRWIN in collaboration with the Albanian Army, *NSK Garda Tirana*, 1998. Photo: Irwin archive
- IRWIN in collaboration with the Kosovo Army, *NSK Garda Prishtina*, 2002. Photo: Igor Anderlič
- IRWIN in collaboration with the Montenegrin Army, *NSK Garda Cetinje*, 2002. Photo: Irwin archive
- IRWIN in collaboration with the Bosnian Army, *NSK Garda Sarajevo*, 2006. Photo: Igor Anderlič
- 51 IRWIN in collaboration with the Croatian Army, *NSK Garda Zagreb*, 2000. Photo: Igor Anderlič
- 52 IRWIN in collaboration with the Georgian Army, *Was ist Kunst Tbilisi*, 2007. Photo: Bojan Radovič
- 69 IRWIN, *Procession Skopje*, 2008. Photo: Tomaž Gregorič

- 70 IRWIN, *Procession Graz*, 2008. Photo: Tomaž Gregorič
- 79 Statement by Zoran Thaler, Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1995/96), for Slovenian TV (Studio City), 23 November, 1995, in which the Minister expresses his view that it is time for Slovenia and NSK State in Time establish mutual relations.
- Presentation of NSK diplomatic passport to General Agim Çeku, Prishtina, December 12, 2003.  
Photo: archive of EXIT, Peja, 2003
- 80 IRWIN, *NSK (Nacionalni Svet za Kulturo - National Board for Culture) meeting, 30 November, 2005, Delo*, 1 December, 2005 (**Culture is an integral part of society**  
With some critical comments, the members of NSK backed up the projected, although modest, growth of the state budget for culture over the coming two years, but expressed their reservations on the government's package of reforms, which reflects an underestimation of the social role of culture.)
- IRWIN, *Latest announcement*, 2007
- 89 IRWIN, *NSK Passport Holders*, London, 2007. Photo: Haris Hararis
- 108 IRWIN, *NSK Passport Holders*, Berlin, Taipei, Sarajevo and Lagos, (2007- 2010)
- 117 IRWIN, *State in Time*, Moscow, 2011. Photo: Viktor Misiano
- IRWIN, *State in Time*, Leipzig, 2011. Photo: Miško Šuvaković
- 118 IRWIN, *State in Time*, London, 2012. Photo: Wig Worland
- IRWIN, *State in Time*, Pristina, 2012. Photo: IRWIN archive
- 128 Delegates, NSK members, Congress team members and guests of the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 2010. Photo: Christian Ditsch
- 129 First NSK Citizens' Congress', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 2010.  
Photo: Christian Ditsch
- 130 Delegates presenting the findings of the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, 2010.  
Photo: Christian Ditsch
- 131 NSK members at the 'First NSK Citizens' Congress', Berlin, 2010
- 132 *State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens' Congress*, edited by Alexei Monroe; book cover motif taken from the congress poster designed by Valnoir Mortasonge
- 137 Christain Nnoruga, *NSK Citizen*, 2009
- 138 NSKstate.com, *Screenshots*, 2003-2007. From the NSK Folk Art collection
- 145 Christian Matzke, *Exterior of the Retrogarde Reading Room*, Brunswick Maine, USA, 2010.  
From the NSK Folk Art collection
- 146 Halldor Carlsson & Olafur Thorsson, *NSK Garda Reykjavik*, 2007. From the NSK Folk Art collection
- 157 *NSK Rendes-Vous Lyon*, 2011 (organised by NSK citizens, NSK Rendes-Vous events also took place in Leipzig, London and New York, 2011-2012)
- 158 Poster announcing the '1st NSK Folk Art Biennale', Leipzig, 2013, designed by Carsten Busse in 2012
- 170 Distribution of the NSK State in Time Passport Holders, 2008

Works on pages 50, 51, 52, 69, 70, 80, 125, and 126 are courtesy of Galerija Gregor Podnar.

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