

Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)

What is an American? Your first answer is probably that an American is a citizen of the country of the United States of America. But beyond country citizenship, what is an American? Are there certain national characteristics, certain traits, that somehow define and describe the people who live in this country and that make us uniquely “American” and not, for example, German or Australian or Chinese?

In the early 1980s, a handful of artists, musicians and theater performers from the northernmost part of Yugoslavia, an area known as Slovenia, began to ask similar questions about their national identity. These questions had particular relevance because “Slovenia” was not—and had never before in the history of the world been—a country. Instead, “Slovenia” had always been a “virtual state” and a part of something else. In the early 1980s, it was a part of the country of Yugoslavia. Prior to that, it had been a part of the Nazi Reich, France, the Hapsburg Empire, Greater Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and on and on. But what did it mean to be Slovene when “Slovenia” was merely an idea of a nation that consisted, essentially, of layer upon layer of assimilated outside influences? Since the questions were asked by artists, the questions were posed in art terms: what should “Slovene art” look like? But the questions were fundamentally about identity, about an attempt by the artists to understand who they were—as individuals and as groups of individuals—and how they related to the world around them.

In 1984, the visual arts collective IRWIN, the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater group, and others joined with the multi-art group Laibach to form a collective enterprise named Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), or “New Slovenian Art.” The use of German (rather than Slovene) for the name of the collective and the use of the word “Laibach,” the hated German name for Slovenia’s major city, made it clear that these were not nationalists fighting for the sovereignty of Slovenia. Rather, NSK was questioning the very essence of statehood itself. The Slovenes had been subjected to numerous totalitarian regimes, from both the right and left, and they saw first hand that those regimes had much in common. They saw that from a purely rhetorical point of view, speeches by Hitler and by Stalin, and, for that matter, by speakers at any political convention, are very much alike. NSK began to carefully examine the rhetorical, propagandistic and theatrical devices used by states and other institutions to accumulate and hold power. NSK then sought to free these devices from serving a “political” end and, instead, to use them to champion the freedom of “Art.”

The key artistic concept developed by NSK is something called “retro-avantgardism” (or, later, “retrogardism”). As the name implies, retroavantgardism is somewhat paradoxical because it calls for simultaneously looking backward (“retro” indicates a return to something from the past) and forward (“avant-garde” art movements are cutting edge and point toward the future). As Laibach said in the statement included in this card, “We believe in the future, and we will look for it in the past if necessary.”

Retroavantgardism consists of the recycled use of past symbols, images and philosophical ideas, particularly those that have been used by governments or other institutions to accumulate and hold power. NSK seeks to strip away the specific use made of those symbols,

images or ideas and to reclaim the universal, “eternal” meaning that lies beneath. For example, one of Laibach’s first public posters in 1980 consisted of a simple, plain black cross on a white field. The appearance of this poster caused a great deal of anxiety and confusion because it was impossible to know what the cross meant without knowing who was using it. Was this a religious group? A neo-fascist group? (Hitler had adopted the symbol of the cross). A call for political neutrality? (Switzerland’s national symbol is the cross). A critique by artists of the Socialist government? (A black cross was a leading symbol of an early 20th Century Russian art movement called Suprematism, which was crushed by the Soviet government). Although each of these particular meanings is different, the essence of each group’s usage—as a symbol of eternal and mystical power—was the same. By adopting a simple, black cross, Laibach sought to claim it as a pure universal symbol, freed from all past particular uses, and to use it to champion the freedom of “Art.”

The painting by IRWIN shown on the cover of this card, “Left, Right, Up, Down” (1994), is an excellent example of retroavantgardism. The most central image—a black cross on a disappearing white square in a blue field—is a copy of a Suprematist painting from the early 1910s, and thus is a reference to a particular way the cross had been used in the past by artists. IRWIN initially painted a copy of this Suprematist image in the mid 1980s, putting the image in the black frame with reddish corners, as shown. For the NSK collective, this old Suprematist image had been recycled into an icon, a reminder of the revolutionary spirit of the Suprematists and how that spirit related to what NSK was doing. But as the NSK collective grew, early works by IRWIN also came to assume iconic status as they were continually used in NSK gatherings as a reminder of the spirit of the earliest days of NSK. Thus, in 1994, IRWIN painted a copy of the IRWIN painting of the Suprematist image. The 1994 painting—on a wooden panel of painted gold leaf—was purposefully painted using the same techniques used by Russian icon painters. Thus, “Left, Right, Up, Down” is an icon of an icon of an icon of a revolutionary artistic spirit, each depicted on a different angle. The title seems particularly appropriate given these dizzying sequences of iconic depictions.

As the Soviet Union began to crumble in the late 1980s and nationalistic hatred started to resurface, NSK saw the need we all have to form groups and build empires. Whether taking the form of Serbian nationalism or pride when “our team” wins a football game, there is something within each of us that responds to calls for group building. Knowing how dictators, past and present, exploited these yearnings, the NSK collective wanted to channel them into a safer, less destructive, form of expression. In addition, in 1992 “Slovenia” became a country, and the members of NSK realized that the name “New Slovenian Art” might cause people to think they were championing Slovenia rather than an abstract idea. So in 1992, NSK transformed itself into an NSK State (a “State in time, a State without borders”) and began issuing passports and stamps and opening embassies and consulates worldwide. Information about the NSK State and its current projects can be found on the web, at www.ljudmila.org/embassy, and a major exhibition of artworks and artefacts by NSK is currently being organized to tour the United States.