

INSIDE THE

NSK

BY CHARLIE KRAFFT

A small group of Slovene artists who came to maturity in the 1980s set out to parody contemporary Yugoslavian society and, in the process, developed a self-consciously nationalist Slovene school of art. Drawing inspiration from everything taboo in Yugoslavia, yet which, ironically, appeared to have so much to do with its society, the collective movement became known under the deliberately provocative German title *Neue Slovenische Kunst* (New Slovene Art). The more discredited communist rule became, the more the communists harped on their epic defeat of fascism and the more the totalitarian aspects of their society appeared to mischievous minds to mirror those of the Third Reich.

On April 26th, 1983, five men in their early twenties delivered a combination ideological provocation and art action in the form of an interview broadcast to Yugoslavia's westernmost republic from the state TV station in Ljubljana. Dressed in ambiguous matching military uniforms and arm bands, these members of the "rock" band Laibach presented a deadpan synthesis of totalitarian visual and rhetorical tropes that brought into prophetic focus the increasing uncertainty of the future of Eastern Europe after Tito. The subversion they set in motion was accomplished by explicitly presenting the iconography and methodology of what would eventually become the tragic new Balkan myths. Laibach's action anticipated the outbreak of war

throughout the region, the collapse of Slovenia's "self-managing" socialism and helped push the country towards its declaration of autonomy in the Spring of 1991. The vast majority of TV Slovenia's viewers, however, simply concluded that a group of neo-Nazis had appeared in their midst.

A ban was imposed on Laibach performances in Slovenia for the next four years. During this time the name Laibach (the German name of the city of Ljubljana) was kept circulating in the public consciousness through a series of further actions, art exhibitions and theatrical events undertaken by the NSK collective. They made a point of declaring everything they did "Laibach art" until the ban on performing in

public was grudgingly lifted in 1987. Capitulation came with the international popularity of Laibach's records and tours and outside critical acclaim for the brilliant *Sturm un Drang* of the NSK collective's visual propaganda. Suddenly, tiny Slovenia found itself on the contemporary culture map as the birthplace of a slippery new art phenomenon called Retrogardism.

In his amusing book *All the Trouble in the World*, PJ O'Rourke quips, "Yugoslavia, like the rest of Eastern Europe, has more artists, writers and teachers than it has art, literature or schools. In the resultant mental unemployment, idealism



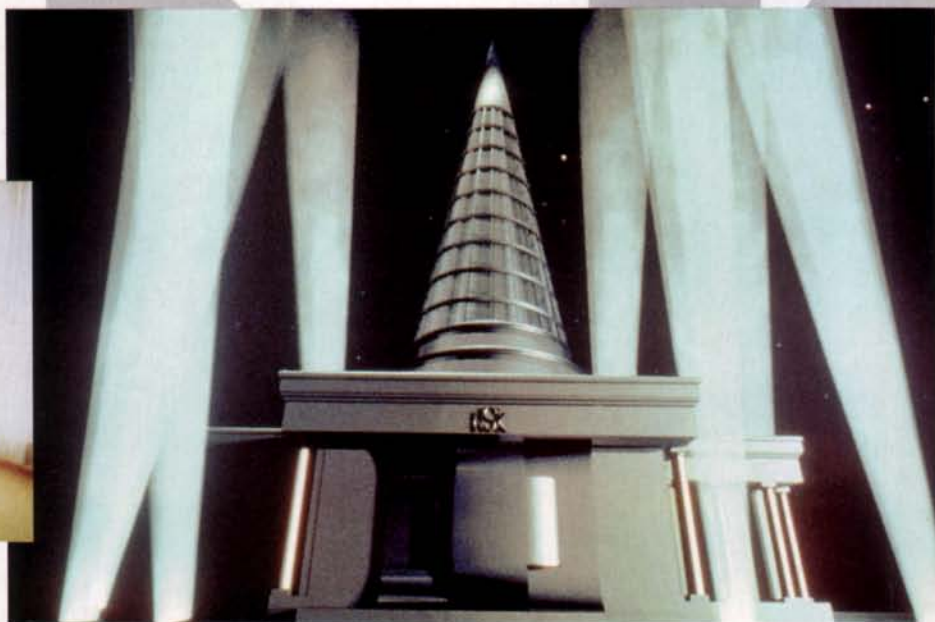
NSK Embassy Berlin at the Volksbühne Theatre in East Berlin, 1993. (Inset) NSK Passports.



Die Liebe by Irwin, oil on board, 1988.



Counterclockwise from top: Video still from the Laibach video *Kapital*, 1993. NSK Propaganda Plate by Charlie Krafft, 1995. Irwin members at the NSK Embassy, Florence, 1993. Another scene from the Laibach video *Kapital*, 1993.



flourishes. Idealism is based on big ideas. And, as anyone who has ever been asked, 'What's the big idea?' knows, most big ideas are bad ones." He's referring, of course, to the idea of a Greater Serbia and the complicity of Belgrade intellectuals in stirring up the lethal trouble that destroyed Sarajevo.

The absence of revolutionary idealism in the art of this century is what distinguishes Postmodernism from Modernism.

At first glance, Retrogardism appears very postmodern, but it's actually an idealistic modernist movement based on the examination of the repression of traumas that occur whenever avant-gardism is co-opted by power and capital. Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism and German Expressionism are prime examples of how modernist art movements in the service of totalitarianism have contributed to socio-political catastrophes. Retrogardism's manipulation of the iconography of ideological domination attempts to subvert the cycle of co-option, not by developing any critical potentials, but through organizational fetishism and mimicry of the dominant system itself. It's a big idea cooked up by unemployed Eastern European intellectuals that seems to be a valuable one.

In 1993 the NSK collective upped the ante on its "meta-totalitarian absurdism" by declaring itself a State. Installed in real social and political space as an abstract sculptural body, the NSK State in Time now functions as a borderless transnational state of mind open to anyone who wants to join its citizenry. The main NSK groups are Laibach-Music Department, Irwin-Painting Department, Noordung-Theatre Department, New Collectivism-Design Department, and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy. Each of the groups works primarily within its medium, often collaborating on campaigns together or with others who share their way of thinking or similar styles of expression. Temporary NSK Embassies have been opened in Moscow, Ghent, Berlin and most recently in Sarajevo where Laibach performed two free concerts at the Bosnia National Theatre that coincided with the announcement of the Dayton Peace Accords.

I happened to have been on hand there assisting in the presentation of embassy activities in the lobby. These included a poster exhibition, Net links with the NSK Electronic Embassy in Tokyo/Ljubljana and the processing of NSK passports to the first three hundred Sarajevans who applied for them. This may sound like a Pete Seeger song, but keeping

culture alive in a situation that severe becomes a means of observing and sharing in the dignity of purpose that is the real spirit of art after its pretensions are all stripped away. NSK delivered a musical and conceptual payload that couldn't have been anymore perfect for that time and place. They turned the city's trauma into a laboratory where the audience, without being patronized for its plight, was invited to engineer their own understanding of the multi-media event they were participating in. Outside the theatre, the media voraciously harvested sound bites from war victims about the news from Dayton. Inside, new citizens of an alternative mental territory were busy digging the loaded irony of Laibach's techno deconstruction of Serbian army anthems.

The NSK enterprise defies the glibness of magazine journalism. A substantial amount of literature and media coverage has been generated from within and outside the collective.

Accessing it requires some perseverance because information is scarce in the US and much of it isn't in English. A new 90 minute documentary that places the NSK movement within the historical framework of well-known events in the Balkans (something that didn't happen for any other of the artistic avant-gardes) will be making the

American Film Festival circuit this year. Directed by Yankee journalist Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire*, a film about art, war and politics, skillfully mixes archival, reportorial and fictional scenes to show how NSK's clever "Retro-principal" found its direct analogue in post-communist politics in Yugoslavia and what that can mean for the West.

Returning from Eastern Europe via Amsterdam, I was separated from the herd disembarking in Detroit and subjected to a thorough drug search. In the course of that futility, my NSK "diplomatic" passport was seized by US Customs agents who couldn't grasp the fact that the document represented exercising diplomacy in all one's affairs, not citizenship in a second country. Unfortunately, citizenship in the NSK State in Time ceases with the expiration, return or confiscation of the passport. Until I can convince the authorities to return it to me, I remain a man without an art movement. ☐

Video copies of *Predictions of Fire*, as well as current news about NSK's worldwide activities, can be obtained by writing to the NSK Information Center, PO Box 75, 61117 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The author, Charlie Krafft, recently spent several months living and working with the NSK Collective, producing an official NSK Embassy version of his unique Disasterware™ delft plates.



Kapital, object/installation, 1989.

