

Irwin & Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)

Have you ever considered what, exactly, it means to identify yourself in terms of your nationality? A nation's self identity is complex and often provokes heated debate. For example, being an "American" must mean something other than being a citizen of the United States of America since citizens are sometimes accused of acting in an "un-American" way.

In the early 1980s, questions of national identity came to the forefront of politics in an area of the northernmost part of Yugoslavia that is now known as the Republic of Slovenia. At the time, "Slovenia" was not—nor had it ever been—a country. Rather, "Slovenia" had always been a part of something else. In the early 1980s, it was a part of Yugoslavia. Before that, it had been a part of the Nazi Reich, France, the Hapsburg Empire, Greater Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and so on. So 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?

In 1984, the visual arts collective Irwin and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater Group joined with the inter-media group Laibach to form a collective enterprise known as Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), or "New Slovenian Art." Using German (rather than Slovene) for the name of the collective conjured images of German domination of the region during World War II and made it clear that the group did not plan to create nationalist art to be exploited for the cause of Slovenian liberation. Rather, NSK was most interested in questioning the very essence of nationalism.

NSK noticed that to stir feelings of patriotism it is necessary for governments to use images and symbols to foster a sense of group cohesion. The symbols become identified with the group so that attacking the symbol is synonymous with attacking the group itself. This is why it is illegal in America to kill a bald eagle and why flag-burning has been seen as the ultimate denunciation of one's country. Yet symbols are open to varying meanings. For example, one person might look at a flag and think of freedom from religious persecution, another may think of capitalist opportunism, while still another may be stirred simply by the rituals associated with the flag from childhood.

As artists, Irwin and NSK became interested in how symbols have been used—and misused—and how any given symbol can have multiple meanings that shift depending on context. The key artistic concept developed by NSK is something called "retroavantgardism" (or, later "retrogardism"). As the name implies, retroavantgardism is somewhat paradoxical because it calls for simultaneously looking backward ("retro") and forward ("avant-garde"). As Laibach stated, "We believe in the future, and we will look for it in the past if necessary." In essence, retroavantgardism consists of the recycled use of past symbols, images and philosophical ideas, particularly those that have been used by governments and other institutions to accumulate and hold power.

So how does the work on this card embody the concept of retroavantgardism? Let's start by looking at the bottom where one finds words printed in Slovene on a metal plate. On top of the Slovene words are the German word "Kapital" and the Irwin group's monogram.

Significantly, the title isn't written on a blank background but over other words; it's written on top of a sign for the People's Board of Folk Art.

The choice made by Irwin to "write over" existing text is significant, as it clues us into an important dynamic of their works—that they operate as "palimpsests." A palimpsest is what results when one set of writing is placed directly over an older set (the term comes from the re-use of manuscripts by monks in the medieval period). The result is that the meanings of

the two texts become intertwined. But the palimpsest also marks the passage of time because the viewer cannot help but notice what was written first and how it was later modified. It is here that we see the workings of retroavantgardism. Irwin reaches back in time for the bureaucratic sign and the Marxist term “Kapital,” but creates something new by mixing the meaning and values of the two together.

So what might this particular painting mean? The word “Kapital” is an unmistakable reference to Karl Marx’s famous book “Das Kapital.” This word is written over only the Slovene words for “folk art”—not the words for “people’s board”—thereby suggesting that the People’s Board of Folk Art is really a governmental agency for exploitation. The central image of the work—the deer—is purposely chosen for its multiple meanings, all of which are “written over” each other (by being presented simultaneously). The deer has long been identified with the peoples of the region now known as Slovenia. But the deer was also a symbol used by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which ruled the region of Slovenia. Indeed, Irwin takes this particular image of a deer from Sir Edwin Landseer’s painting titled “Monarch of the Glen” (c. 1851). Later, as a ready-made symbol of power, the deer was adopted in the twentieth century by Communist Party bosses. Finally, in the move for Slovenian independence, wildlife was again used, this time as a symbol of the unification of the people. So which version of the deer is being presented: a portrait of an animal, an historic symbol of the people of Slovenia, a symbol of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, an historical art reference (that in turn celebrates monarchy), a Communist symbol, a symbol advocating Slovenian independence? All of them? None of them? In addition to these associations, Irwin has placed a dish with a small painted cross between the horns of the deer, thus adding religious nuance to the image. Irwin invites the viewer to consider the image’s myriad connotations.

By using images in this ambiguous way, Irwin’s work resists being reflective of only one world view. This quality, termed “Post-Utopian” by the philosopher Boris Groys, gives their works relevance in a world marked by multiplicity. As a result, Irwin and NSK have become a major force in contemporary East European art production and have staged major exhibitions world-wide including at the Venice Biennale and, most recently, the Swiss Sculpture Exhibition Biel/Bienne.

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