

HMKV

Hartware MedienKunstVerein

WAS IST
9.9.2023—
28.1.2024
KUNST,
Irwin?

WORK DESCRIPTIONS **EN**
+ FLOOR PLAN

WAS IST KUNST, *Irwin?*

9.9.2023–28.1.2024

An exhibition by HMKV Hardware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund

HMKV

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www.hmkv.de

Curators: Inke Arns, Thibaut de Ruyter

Authors of the texts: Inke Arns (IA), Thibaut de Ruyter (TdR)

English translation: G&C Art Translators, Katie Hardy (Texts IA)

German translation: Patrick Boris Kremer (Texts TdR)

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The exhibition is held under the motto „Artistic Collaborations“. This is the annual theme for 2023 that the institutions of the Dortmunder U have jointly set for themselves.

More at www.dortmunder-u.de/jahresthema

This exhibition focuses on the Slovenian artist collective IRWIN (Dušan Mandič, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, Borut Vogel-nik), which is celebrating its fortieth anniversary in 2023. In 1984, IRWIN – alongside the music group Laibach and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre – became one of the founders of the meta-collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK).

Since 1983, IRWIN has been grappling with the art history of Eastern Europe, specifically the ambivalent legacy of the historical avant-garde and its totalitarian successors – in other words, the dialectic of avant-garde and totalitarianism. Since the 1990s, the group has concentrated on a critical, iconoclastic examination of the art history of ‘Western modernism’. They playfully and cryptically juxtapose this with the ‘retro avant-garde’ of an ‘Eastern modernism’. In the 2000s, NSK State in Time becomes relevant: a state without territory that nonetheless issues passports as a “confirmation of temporal space”.

The exhibition consists of two major chapters. The first exhibition chapter explores the black humour that is always present in IRWIN’s works. The other chapter is dedicated to questions of state – and how IRWIN uses them to comment on contemporary issues such as migration.

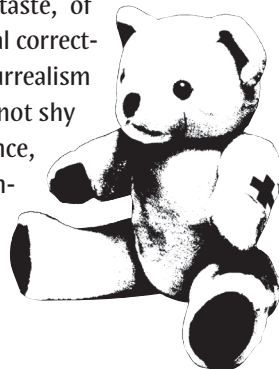
- On Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, visitors can apply for NSK State in Time passports at the *Transnacionala* installation (fee: €32.00).
- In the vertical space on level U3, posters advertise tourist travel to NSK State.
- In the vertical space on level U4, IRWIN’s new production *Was ist Kunst, Bernd und Hilla Becher?* is presented in the window of the Museum Ostwall. The new production was created using the nine-part series *Fördertürme* (1973–1989) by Bernd and Hilla Becher (from the MO collection).

The exhibition is accompanied by a ‘source book’ that systematically breaks down the image sources of IRWIN’s works and situates them in their (art-) historical context.

Curated by Inke Arns and Thibaut de Ruyter

BLACK HUMOUR

The term *black humour* became widely used after the publication of André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* in 1940. Breton focused on literature, but black humour is now common in films, Internet memes, cartoons, art and family jokes. Like every form of humour, it is difficult to define – what makes me laugh might not work for someone of a different age, social background or culture, etc. – but generally we can say that it is underpinned by a serious, even desperate and pessimist stance. It observes the world as it is and, instead of passively accepting it, makes a joke of war, death, depression, oppression, ideology. It often mocks itself rather than attacking others. It is a provocative kind of humour that pushes the boundaries of bad taste, of permissible thoughts and political correctness. With roots in literature, Surrealism and the interwar period, it does not shy away from absurdity and violence, from connecting seemingly unconnected events or facts, or from political criticism. The very definition of IRWIN's art, you might say. **TdR**



A MATTER OF TASTE AND THEORY

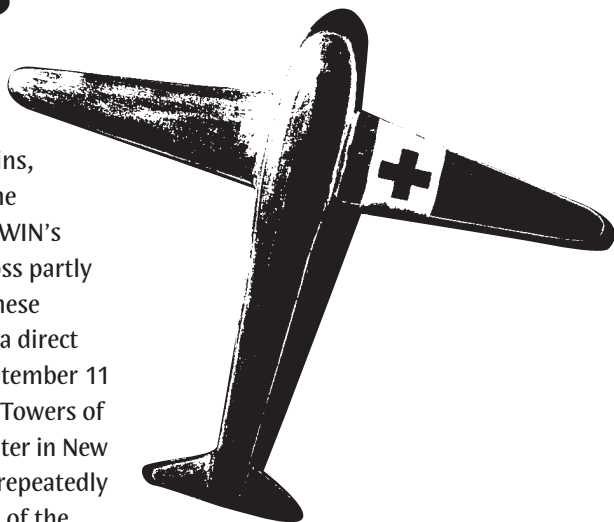
The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offered a new definition of the Marxist concept of capital by adding the adjectives 'cultural', 'symbolic' and 'social' to the term. But he also made it clear that (bad or good) taste, access to culture and understanding of art are determined by social class and family background. Whether we appreciate something or not is influenced by external factors and education. By manipulating the idea of (good) taste and explicitly quoting Bourdieu, IRWIN question not only their own geographical, historical and social origins but confront the world at large with its contradictions. But Bourdieu is not the only theoretician referenced in their art: IRWIN have famously dedicated pieces to the likes of Slavoj Žižek, Hugo Ball and Lenin. The notion of kitsch – which is supposed to distinguish



the clever and educated from the ignorant – plays a big role in their work as well, which uses popular traditions and tropes (mountains, deer, folk costume...) to provoke the establishment and the globalised contemporary art world. **TdR**

TWINS

On 1970s studio photos of young twins, a metal toy aeroplane emblazoned with IRWIN's trademark black cross partly covers the image. These works are of course a direct reference to the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. All of us have repeatedly watched the images of the two planes hitting the buildings, yet none has ever seen the victims. There exist a few terrifying videos showing falling bodies from afar, but historical documentation focuses on the burning buildings and crumbling towers – abstract depictions commonly found in Hollywood films. In IRWIN's artworks, the children on the photographs become the casualties of the terrorist attack. The focus thus shifts to the human aspect of the tragedy, reminding us that besides the towers, human destinies have



been shattered. The works' (black) humour is provocative, yet its message is clear: several hundred people who were once smiling children lost their lives on that day.

TdR

THE POWER OF THE FRAME

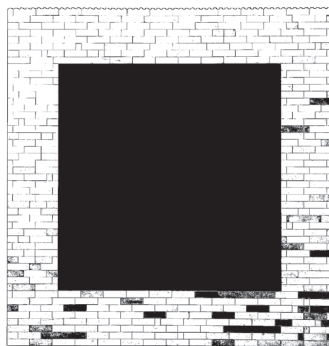
Frames are an integral part of IRWIN's aesthetic and artistic production. They function as tools for appropriation but also as an identification or signature. In some works, IRWIN push the concept even further by creating a 'frame in a frame', or mise en abyme. Recently, they applied their iconic black frames on the

windows of a house in Ljubljana, supporting the suggestion that IRWIN could frame *anything* to make it their artwork. This echoes Marcel Duchamp's observation that if you put something on a plinth in a museum, it becomes an artwork. By doing so, they invite us to reflect on what makes an artwork. The fact that it is framed, signed and exhibited in an institution? What do we identify and recognise first: the frame or the painting? And once the concept of frame has been established, does it even need to 'contain' something? **TdR**



HOMMAGE(S) TO THE (BLACK) SQUARE

The *Black Square* – originally painted by Kasimir Malevich in 1915 – has been a recurrent motive in IRWIN's production since the collective started working together in the 1980s. It is not only a reference to the long history of avant-gardes but also an icon in the spiritual sense of the term. By painting the *Black Square* printed on a tote bag of an American museum, IRWIN make fun of its appropriation for global merchandising. They have shown that you can also use Lego bricks to make a black square (suggesting that art can be child's play sometimes) or use it as a moustache reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin/Adolf Hitler. What has the (black) square to do with (black) humour? The black square is an invitation to look beyond



the surface, to reflect on the intellectual, conceptual or spiritual existence of artworks. To understand that even the most abstract of works is charged with thoughts and emotions – those of its author but also those of historians, critics and viewers – and therefore becomes a matter of interpretation. **TdR**

'IT'S NOT ME, IT'S HIM ...'

One strategy to unsettle spectators consists of sowing doubts about the authorship of an artwork. During their long career, IRWIN have repeatedly collaborated with, or re-enacted works by, other artists. A photograph showing the collective alongside Marina Abramović was produced as an edition of three, signed respectively by the photographer, IRWIN and Abramović – the price of each work dictated by the renown or market value of its signee. But their play with references and names goes further: a Suprematist composition is painted in Gerhard Richter's trademark blur while a Mondrian-like composition serves as the backdrop to a coffee cup or is associated with the Christian cross, emphasising the iconic power of early twentieth-century abstraction. IRWIN also pay homage to their prede-

cessors, recreating important performances from the Slovenian OHO group, the original black-and-white documentation now appearing in colour. In all these works, what could be a simple joke becomes a critique of the art market or a way to shed light on lesser-known or forgotten practices. **TdR**



IRWIN

Corpse of Art

Installation, mixed media, 2003

Dimensions variable

Gregor Podnar, Wien

Kazimir Malevich died in Leningrad on 15 May 1935. His body lay in wake for several days in the House of the Artists' Union before it was cremated and his ashes were buried under a tree in Nemchinovka, near Moscow. Nikolai Suetin, another Suprematist artist, organized Malevich's funeral and designed his coffin – a cross-shaped tin box decorated with a black square and a black circle. The artist's corpse was surrounded by a selection of his paintings and white lilies. Family and friends came to pay their last respects – not only to the person but also to his art. The mourning became an exhibition in its own right, albeit a slightly uncanny one. In 2003, IRWIN built a perfect copy of Suetin's coffin and exhibited it with a wax-work dummy as the *Corpse of Art*, a work that speaks of art history, but also of the absurdity and cruelty of exhibitions. A restaging of a famous exhibition, it is an 'exhibition of an exhibition' that retains all the bizarre and eccentric qualities of the original. **TdR**

STATE ARTISTS

Why do artists who originally came from the punk and graffiti scene in Ljubljana call themselves "state artists"? One event examined in this chapter is the poster scandal that shook Yugoslavia in 1987. A poster devised by New Collectivism (Novi kolektivizem; NK), the design division of NSK, confronted the Yugoslav state with a very unpleasant truth – almost landing the artists in court in the process. Since the group's foundation in 1983, IRWIN has explored issues of national identity and history in Central Europe, examined through the ambiguous motifs of the cross, the sower, the stag, the coffee cup, the little drummer, and industry. Shortly after Slovenia's declaration of independence (1991), NSK State in Time was established in 1992: a state without territory that materialises in the form of temporary embassies (the most notable of which was in Moscow in 1992) or consulates, and issues passports on request. Today, this state has more citizens than the Vatican City – and Nigerians constitute its largest group. The state also appropriates the institutions of existing states such as the church, army, and tourism. **IA**

NSK EMBASSY MOSCOW

In 1992, NSK members travelled to Moscow and opened a temporary NSK State in Time embassy in a private flat at 12 Leninsky Prospekt. From 10 May to 10 June 1992, it hosted lectures and discussions on the function and significance of 1980s art in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. This project marks the beginning of the examination of the East, or rather, the beginning of Eastern Europe examining itself in IRWIN's work – the NSK Embassy Moscow documentation is appropriately subtitled “How the East Sees the East”. It includes the *Black Square on Red Square* action that took place on 6 June 1992: together, the participants spread out a 22 × 22 metre square of black fabric on Red Square in front of the Kremlin. Uninvolved spectators on Red Square were transformed into actors by spontaneously



helping the twenty-five or so participants to spread out the fabric. As the action was not stopped by the militia as expected, the participants wrapped up the square of fabric again after twenty minutes and left by bus. **IA**

TIME FOR A NEW STATE

NSK State in Time was founded in 1992 – almost at the same time as Slovenia's declaration of independence (1991). It is an artistic state structure without territory or a state nation, materialising in the form of temporary embassies or consulates. The state issues passports on request, which are regarded as a “confirmation of temporal space” (NSK) and can be acquired by any individual regardless of nationality or citizenship. NSK passports are deceptively realistic and are printed by the same company as the official Slovenian passports. NSK State in Time now has more citizens than the Vatican City. Since the early 2000s, the majority of them have come from Nigeria. This huge wave of applications from Africa not only provoked a nervous response in

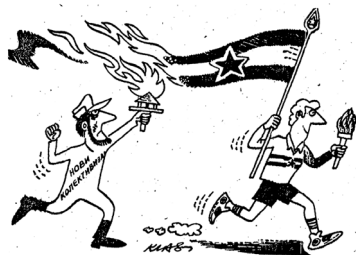
Slovenia; it also led to the artists taking a research trip to Lagos in 2010. While there, IRWIN discovered huge Coca Cola adverts bearing the slogan “Time For a New State”. The phrase was immediately declared the motto of NSK State. **IA**



DAN MLADOSTI

(YOUTH DAY), OR: HOW TO BRING DOWN A STATE

Youth Day was one of the most important holidays in Yugoslavia, celebrated annually on the birthday of President Tito. New Collectivism (Novi kolektivizam; NK), the design department of NSK (which includes members from Laibach, IRWIN, and the Theatre), had submitted a poster to the 1987 design competition, which was subsequently awarded first prize by a jury of representatives from the Yugoslav People's Army and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. The winning poster shows a young man striding confidently into the future with a flag and a relay baton. The reason given by the jury for choosing this poster was that it "expresses the highest ideals of the Yugoslav state." Shortly before the poster went to print, however, it was discovered to be based on the painting *Das Dritte Reich – Allegorie des Heldentums* (The Third Reich – Allegory



of Heroism; 1936) by Richard Klein. The only differences in NK's award-winning design were that the swastika flag had been exchanged for the flag of Yugoslavia, while the original Nazi eagle and the swastika emblem on the standard were now a dove of peace and the six torches representing the Yugoslav nationalities. This caused a nationwide scandal at the end of February 1987, which almost led to a political trial against NK. Youth Day never took place again after that. Some say that this was the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia. **IA**

APPROPRIATING INSTITUTIONS

NSK State in Time appropriates state emblems and institutions such as embassies, consulates, passports, flags, and other insignia. Under the title of the *NSK Garda*, soldiers of various armies pose next to the NSK state flag, effectively becoming its security forces. Through its paradoxical (non-)existence, NSK State in Time challenges the logic of existing state entities – by imitating and infiltrating them. IRWIN also appropriates church rituals: for example, the work *Malevich Between the Two Wars* is integrated into Catholic and Orthodox ceremonies as a kind of "icon". In this way, IRWIN not only alludes to the close ties between church and state in (Eastern and Western) European history, but also to the status of its own image production: similar to icons in the Orthodox church tradition, these are



copied from models to allow the divine "archetype" to shine through. This in turn is reminiscent of Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*, which he presented at the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10* in 1915 in the space normally reserved for an icon in the devotional "beautiful corner" found in many Orthodox homes. **IA**

BIRTH OF A NATION

Ever since IRWIN was founded in 1983, the group has been artistically exploring questions of national identity and history in Central Europe. If the pictures in their heavy frames are initially reminiscent of homeland kitsch, the recurring motifs of the cross, the sower, the stag, the coffee cup, the little drummer, and industry prove to be multifaceted and ambivalent. The stag, for example, is not Slovenian but Scottish, painted by Sir Edwin Landseer. The coffee cup motif recalls the painter Ivana Kobilca's "coffee drinker" and thus references the period when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The sower evokes peasant folk art, but also fascist "blood and soil" ideology. The cross is probably the most ambiguous symbol: it oscillates between Kazimir Malevich's *Black Cross* and

the Christian cross. In Europe in particular (both West and East), the foundation of states has been associated since the early Middle Ages with the adoption of Christianity and the baptism of the ruler, thus attesting to the close connection between church and state. In some of IRWIN's works, the cross even becomes a swastika – although this is often an allusion to the work of the Dadaist and anti-fascist artist John Heartfield

IA



IRWIN *Transnacionala*

Installation, mixed media, 1998

282 × 520 × 120 cm

Courtesy the artists

In the summer of 1996, an international group of ten artists (Alexander Brener, Vadim Fiškin, Jurij Lejderman, Michael Benson, Eda Čufer and the five members of IRWIN) set out on a month-long journey through the United States in two motorhomes. This project, which required the travellers to live together in a very small space (ten people in ten square metres), became an "experimental, existential situation" (Eda Čufer) for the participants. The aim of the trip was to exchange ideas about art, theory and politics in the context of contemporary art. While driving along American highways, at rest stops, motels, the Mojave Desert, and the Grand Canyon, the group debated these topics as well as the (im)possibility of an Eastern European identity in art. In between this, they stopped in Atlanta, Richmond, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle, where they discussed these topics with members of local artist communities.

Several versions of the large-scale installation *Transnacionala* were developed within a year of the actual trip. It also serves as an office that accepts applications for and issues NSK passports

IA

IRWIN

It Is a Beautiful Country

Series of six posters, each 84,1 × 118,9 cm, 2019

Vertical space, U3

Courtesy the artists

At first glance, this series of posters is a spectacular advertising campaign promoting the tourist attractions of NSK State in Time – a state that, it should be noted, has only existed as an idea since 1992 and temporarily materialises in various locations around the world.

The motifs used in the poster series *It Is a Beautiful Country* are genuine ready-mades: all six motifs come from Yugoslavia's last major tourism advertising campaign, which was intended to symbolise a kind of "unity in diversity" in the 1980s. They presented the tourist highlights of the six Yugoslav republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia). In IRWIN's poster series, the original lettering "Jugoslavija" is replaced by "NSK State". The title *It Is a Beautiful Country* is a quote from a discussion about NSK State in Time held at the CCA in Lagos, Nigeria in July 2010. **IA**

IRWIN

Was ist Kunst, Bernd und Hilla Becher?

Installation using the nine-part series *Fördertürme* (1973–1989) by Bernd and Hilla Becher, 2023

Vertical space, U4, window of the Museum Ostwall

Courtesy the artists and Museum Ostwall

This new installation by IRWIN was created as part of the group's exhibition *What Is Art, IRWIN?* at the HMKV (level U3). The nine-part series *Fördertürme* (Winding Towers; 1973–1989) by Bernd and Hilla Becher, which is part of the MO collection, is mounted in IRWIN's typical black frames. In the late 1960s, Bernd and Hilla Becher began to systematically photograph vacant industrial buildings that were often facing demolition. Over the course of more than forty years, the Düsseldorf photographers amassed an enormous archive of serial photographs of the architecture of former industrial regions in the so-called First World (the Ruhr area, northern France, Belgium, USA).

Since 2001, IRWIN has repeatedly presented original works by other artists in their characteristic IRWIN frames, which are made of wood, tar, and gold leaf and feature sculptural details at the corners. These are casts of sculptures by Stojan Batič, which portray miners with their lamps and other figures. These are a reference to the Slovenian mining town of Trbovlje, the birthplace of some of the Laibach and IRWIN members. **IA**

In cooperation with the Museum Ostwall (MO)

WAS IST KUNST, Irwin?

9.9.2023–28.1.2024

SCHWARZER HUMOR / BLACK HUMOUR

- 1 Eine Frage des Geschmacks und der Theorie / A Matter of Taste and Theory
- 2 Zwillinge / Twins
- 3 Die Macht des Rahmens / The Power of the Frame
- 4 Hommage(n) an das (schwarze) Quadrat / Hommage(s) to the (Black) Square
- 5 „Ich war's nicht, er war's..." / 'It's not Me, It's Him...'
- 6 Corpse of Art, 2003

STAATSKÜNSTLER / STATE ARTISTS

- 7 NSK Embassy Moscow
- 8 Time for a New State
- 9 Dan Mladosti
- 10 Aneignung von Institutionen / Appropriating Institutions
- 11 Geburt einer Nation / Birth of a Nation
- 12 Transnacionala, 1998
- 13 It Is a Beautiful Country, 2019

→ 14

Was ist Kunst, Bernd und Hilla Becher?, 2023
Eine künstlerische Neuproduktion, entstanden in Kooperation mit dem Museum Ostwall. Zu sehen im Fenster des MO in der Vertikale des Dortmunder U, U4.

