

ed up becoming the accomplices of
re, their main concern is not to fight
REAL is taking pictures of a shop win-
berwursts, of pathetic beggars or old
a potential export of our Supreme
esting blend of guilt and pride makes
ers against the betrayal-by-image.

ools for exploring the chaos of the
f images is the characteristic of the
t of archive entered our vocabulary
he new fashion for archives, wide-
reality was there from the beginning
ize a random mass of information.
ed subREAL are issued from a pro-
of information a structure is always
e massive mess of facts and images.
non, taking the shape of the space

se the situations, the institutions —
t us back to the initial issue of the
archives as a creative resource is a
tly with them; artists are easier to
o stimulate through interaction.
he last (but not least, I'm afraid) São
t, using the private archives of six
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ich developed a nonresponse at the

ect. Developed in Berlin, with the as-
re concerned with history than the
y-made archive, inherited from the
ian art scene between 1953 and 1993.
ration. subREAL IMPEX. saved the
of the former publishers by placing
ccess are potentially possible. Sec-
ng people from various disciplines
rt, as proved by media users. What
photography, after the marriage of
cal collapse of modernism, Commu-
ves, at a time when digital compres-
ion of the deep frozen space?

Some interesting conclusions leap to the eyes when confronted with such material—going from the pre- to the post-history of the arts and from the national (Romanian) to the global areas. Some sad (?) evidence [exists] of the authority of figurative vs. aesthetic—on the unexhausted force of bad photography to compete with life on its very (sub)REAL ground.

Finally, AHA is the research field for a definition of subREAL-ity, as all accumulations are, potentially. Finally, photography, as life itself, is just a mass of unclassified information, waiting for the proper software and the proper operator. The (al)ready-made things are stronger than the inventions—at least at the end of the arts era.

Written in 1995. Originally published in *Imago: Another European Photography* (Bratislava: FOTOFO) (winter 95/96).

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Slavoj Žižek was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1949 and received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and a doctorate in psychoanalysis from the University of Paris. He is more widely known as a specialist in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan than as a critic of the visual arts, although much of his work utilizes Lacanian thought to analyze popular culture. Žižek was politically active in the dissident movement in Slovenia throughout the 1980s and was a presidential candidate during the first multi-party elections held in 1990. Since 2000 he has directed a research group at the Kultur-wissenschaftliches Institute in Essen, Germany.

In the following essay, Žižek writes about the difficulty of deciphering the intentions of the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), an art collective that gained prominence in the early 1980s, and the fascistic imagery used by its musical branch, Laibach. According to Žižek, the typical NSK supporter assumes that the group treats the transgressive imagery of Nazism and fascism with ironical distance, despite the fact that the NSK offers no explicit admission of such. Žižek, however, contends that the opposite is true: the NSK plays the role of an utterly unironic supporter of what their imagery stands for, hoping to reveal publicly the difficult truth that transgression is acceptable when it is part of a private ritual or unspoken mandate.

Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?

Superego is the obscene "nightly" law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the "public" Law. This inherent and constitutive splitting in the Law is the subject of Rob Reiner's film *A Few Good Men*, the court-martial drama about two marines accused of murdering one of their fellow soldiers. The military prosecutor claims that the two marines' act was a deliberate murder, whereas the defense succeeds in proving that the defendants just followed the so-called "Code Red," which authorizes the clandestine night-time beating of a fellow soldier who, in the opinion of his peers or of the superior officer, has broken the ethical code of the marines. The function of this "Code

Red" is extremely interesting: it condones an act of transgression — illegal punishment of a fellow soldier — yet at the same time it reaffirms the cohesion of the group, i.e., it calls for an act of supreme identification with group values. Such a code must remain under the cover of night, unacknowledged, unutterable — in public everybody pretends to know nothing about it, or even actively denies its existence. It represents the "spirit of community" in its purest, exerting the strongest pressure on the individual to comply with its mandate of group identification. Yet, simultaneously, it violates the explicit rules of community life. (The plight of the two accused soldiers is that they are unable to grasp this exclusion of "Code Red" from the "Big Other," the domain of the public Law: They desperately ask themselves "What did we do wrong?" since they just followed the order of the superior officer.) Where does this splitting of the Law into the written public Law and its underside, the "unwritten," obscene secret code, come from? From the incomplete, "non-all" character of the public Law: explicit, public rules do not suffice, so they have to be supplemented by a clandestine, "unwritten" code aimed at those who, although they violate no public rules, maintain a kind of inner distance and do not truly identify with the "spirit of community."

The field of the law is thus split into Law *qua* "Ego-Ideal," i.e., a symbolic order which regulates social life and maintains social peace, and into its obscene, superegotistical inverse. As has been shown by numerous analyses from [Mikhail] Bakhtin onwards, periodic transgressions of the public law are inherent to the social order, they function as a condition of the latter's stability. (The mistake of Bakhtin — or, rather, of some of his followers — was to present an idealized image of these "transgressions," while passing in silence over lynching parties, etc., as the crucial form of the "carnevalesque suspense of social hierarchy.") What most deeply "holds together" a community is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's "normal" everyday circuit, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law's suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment). Let us return to those small town white communities in the American south of the twenties, where the reign of the official, public Law is accompanied by its shadowy double, the nightly terror of Ku Klux Klan, with its lynchings of powerless blacks: a (white) man is easily forgiven minor infractions of the Law, especially when they can be justified by a "code of honor"; the community still recognizes him as "one of us." Yet he will be effectively excommunicated, perceived as "not one of us," the moment he disowns the specific form of transgression that pertains to this community — say, the moment he refuses to partake in the ritual lynchings by the Klan, or even reports them to the Law (which, of course, does not want to hear about them since they exemplify its own hidden underside). The Nazi community relied on the same solidarity-in-guilt adduced by participation in a common transgression: it ostracized those who were not ready to assume the dark side of the idyllic *Volksgemeinschaft*, the night pogroms, the beatings of political opponents — in short, all that "everybody knew, yet did not want to speak about aloud."

It is against the background of this constitutive tension of the Law between public-written Law and superego that one should comprehend the extraordinary critical-ideological impact of the *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, especially of Laibach

group. In the process of disintegration of socialism in Slovenia, they staged an aggressive inconsistent mixture of Stalinism, Nazism, and *Blut und Boden* ideology. The first reaction of the enlightened Leftist critics was to conceive of Laibach as the ironic imitation of totalitarian rituals; however, their support of Laibach was always accompanied by an uneasy feeling: "What if they really mean it? What if they truly identify with the totalitarian ritual?" — or, a more cunning version of it, transferring one's own doubt onto the other: "What if Laibach overestimates their public? What if the public takes seriously what Laibach mockingly imitates, so that Laibach actually strengthens what it purports to undermine?" This uneasy feeling is fed on the assumption that ironic distance is automatically a subversive attitude. What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary "postideological" universe is precisely the cynical distance toward public values? What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: *it "frustrates" the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it — by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.* (In order to clarify the way this baring, this public staging of the obscene fantasmatic kernel of an ideological edifice, suspends its normal functioning, let us recall a somehow homologous phenomenon in the sphere of individual experience: each of us has some private ritual, phrase [nicknames, etc.] or gesture, used only within the most intimate circle of closest friends or relatives; when these rituals are rendered public, their effect is necessarily one of extreme embarrassment and shame — one has a mind to sink into the earth.)

The ultimate expedient of Laibach is their deft manipulation of transference: their public (especially intellectuals) is obsessed with the "desire of the Other" — what is Laibach's actual position, are they truly totalitarians or not? — i.e., they address Laibach with a question and expect from them an answer, failing to notice that Laibach itself *does not function as an answer but a question*. By means of the elusive character of their desire, of the indecidability as to "where they actually stand," Laibach compels us to take up our position and decide upon *our* desire. Laibach here actually accomplishes the reversal that defines the end of psychoanalytical cure. At the outset of the cure is transference: the transference relationship is put in force as soon as the analyst appears in the guise of the subject supposed to know — to know the truth about the analysand's desire. When, in the course of the psychoanalysis, the analysand complains that he doesn't know what he wants, all this moan and groan is addressed to the analyst, with the implicit supposition that the analyst *does* know it. In other words, i.e., insofar as the analyst stands for the Big Other, the analysand's illusion lies in reducing his ignorance about his desire to an "epistemological" *incapacity*: the truth about his desire already exists, it is registered somewhere in the Big Other, one has only to bring it to light and his desiring will run smoothly. The end of the psychoanalysis, the dissolution of transference, occurs when this "epistemological" incapacity shifts into "ontological" *impossibility*: the analysand has to experience how the Big Other also does not possess the truth about his desire, how his desire is without guarantee, groundless, authorized only in itself. In this

precise sense, the dissolution of transference designates the moment when the arrow of the question that the analysand pointed at the analyst turns back toward the analysand himself: first, the analysand's (hysterical) question addressed to the analyst supposed to possess the answer; then, the analysand is forced to acknowledge that the analyst himself is nothing but a big question mark addressed to the analysand. Here one can specify Lacan's thesis that an analyst is authorized only by himself: an analysand becomes analyst upon assuming that his desire has no support in the Other, that the authorization of his desire can only come from himself. And insofar as this same reversal of the direction of the arrow defines drive, we could say (as Lacan does say) that what takes place at the end of the psychoanalysis is the shift from desire to drive.

Written in 1993. Originally published in *M'ARS* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija), vol. 3/4.

BORIS GROYS

Boris Groys (see biographical information on p. 162) wrote the following text about the IRWIN group, the visual-arts component of the Neue Slowenische Kunst, for an NSK publication. In it he argues that the predominant notion in the West that contemporary avant-garde art is, by nature, opposed to the establishment is complicated by some Eastern European artists, including IRWIN. He contends that the historical situation of Slovenian artists and all Eastern European artists offers no easy explanation of motives. Although the West prefers to regard them as "other," East Europeans were not, in fact, so isolated, nor were they eager to accept the total promise of utopia that the first historical avant-garde envisioned for themselves during the early decades of the twentieth century.

The IRWIN Group: More Total than Totalitarianism

When confronted with the works of the IRWIN group, most—and primarily Western—viewers and commentators immediately raise one characteristic question: with what aim and in what context do these artists make such extensive use of symbols of fascism or totalitarian Communism? On the one hand, they employ these symbols side by side with signs of contemporary modernist art usually associated with opposition to totalitarianism, thus making it impossible to suppose that the IRWIN group actually wants to engender an aesthetic of totalitarianism in its original form. On the other hand, their quotations from totalitarian propagandist art are not used according to the usual devices of modernist estrangement, distortion, or the visual "critique of representation" which would allow the position of the authors to be unambiguously identified as critical. Nor does reference to the programmatic statements of the group provide a way out of the initial bewilderment: in all of their programmatic documents the artists of the IRWIN group employ direct quotations from totalitarian rhetoric and combine them with references to modernist or postmodern criticism in exactly the same way they do in their artworks, so that the corresponding texts, if anything, double rather than disperse the initial bewilderment. Such parallelism of formal

devices between purely artistic and interpreted practices is, incidentally, not at all characteristic of contemporary art. Inside this system it is usually assumed that the artist or critic will honestly decode, on the level of the text, that which is coded in the artistic work.

The uniqueness of the artistic practice of IRWIN lies, however, precisely in the fact that it questions the twentieth-century habit of assuming an opposition between the critical and the affirmative positions in art. The critical position is usually connected with the aesthetic of the artistic avant-garde: in this sense postmodern art can also be regarded as a continuation of avant-garde criticism, but only addressed to the avant-garde itself. The affirmative position is associated, by contrast, with the traditionalism and triviality of artistic means, and the apotheosis of such traditionalist affirmativism is often considered to be the totalitarian art of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, which persecuted and suppressed the avant-garde. This (in the context of Western culture entirely natural) breakdown looks rather different, however, in Eastern Europe.

The crucial difference lies in the fact that the avant-garde in the East, unlike its Western counterpart, fulfilled not only a critical but also a thoroughly affirmative function. Everywhere the historical artistic avant-garde demanded emancipation from all criteria of quality, tradition, taste, or craftsmanship; or, to put it differently, from any kind of control by the consumer, the critic, or the viewer. It was the aim of this entire artistic strategy to deprive the consumer of art of his independent, external, and comfortable position: the viewer was to be involved in the production of the work of art through aesthetic shock or through the transformation of all his everyday surroundings. No longer would the taste and judgement of the viewer decide the fate of the work of art within the market system of supply and demand; instead the artist would completely transform the taste of the viewer. Corresponding projects for the complete transformation of the world according to the principles of the new and unified aesthetic were advanced by De Stijl in Holland or the Bauhaus in Germany; but they were proclaimed with the greatest radicalism by the Russian avant-garde—through the Suprematism of Malevich, but also the Constructivism of Tatlin and Rodchenko. In essence the demand was now being made for a kind of artistic dictatorship of the artist over the viewer, by means of which the viewer was supposed to be led beyond his accustomed cultural limits into the ecstatic space of his very life, taken as a continuous act of creation. In the West these utopian demands of the artistic avant-garde were never realized, and for this reason they remained merely a basis for criticism of the reigning consumerist society.

In Eastern Europe—at first in Russia, and then everywhere else, including Yugoslavia—developments were quite different. The Communists also declared their aim to be the rule of the producer—of the working class—over the consumer: the market and the usual system of consumption were liquidated. All of society was oriented toward a single process of the creation of a new life and a new human being; an external, purely consumerist position became impossible; and each individual became one element of a unified new world in which life was supposed to coincide with art. The Russian avant-garde, like its Eastern European counterparts, welcomed this realization of its artistic and social ideal. Certain Russian avant-garde artists made full use of the political power that was initially given them for the liquidation of the art market in the country, for the

subordination of all art to control by a single party, and for the centralization and etatism of artistic life: a politically and economically totalitarian state was supposed to become a total work of art, insofar as this was what constituted the avant-garde project from the very beginning.

Of course the avant-garde was soon forced out of power, to the extent that its freedom from tradition was still defined in purely negative terms, as a rejection of traditional artistic forms. The victorious avant-garde demanded full artistic freedom, consisting of the expedient strategic manipulation means of traditional forms entirely subordinated to the artistic will to power. The art of Stalinist Soviet realism was just such a free manipulation. It was by no means mimetic or traditionalist and did not affirmatively reflect life as it is. In fact just the opposite was true: Socialist Realism used traditional artistic forms to create a phantasmagoric, utopian world of the paradisaical future.

The art of Nazi Germany was essentially the same. In both cases there was talk of creating an art without viewer or consumer — assuming one did not include in this definition Hitler and Stalin, who simultaneously appeared as its true creators: the populations of both empires appeared themselves within the art as its material. Here the traditional forms of art were utilized as tools for the most radical critique of the traditional conditions of life — all the way to their radical elimination. This is the source of the ecstatic and psychedelic character of Stalinist and Hitlerist art, which are more reminiscent of the contemporary phenomena of Surrealism or magic realism than the sober mimetic realism of the past.



IRWIN. *Geography of Time*. 1992. Mixed media. Installation view from the exhibition *Molteplici culture in Convento di S. Egidio*, Rome, 1992. Courtesy IRWIN

This brief excursus into the history of the interrelationship between the artistic avant-garde and traditionalism in Eastern Europe allows us to understand the artistic strategy of a whole series of contemporary Russian and Eastern artists, including those of the IRWIN group. When the IRWIN artists, in their works and in their texts, place quotations from European modernism and totalitarian art on the same level, they thus deconstruct the usual opposition between avant-garde criticism and totalitarian traditionalism in reference to the specific cultural experience of the countries. It is precisely this experience that shows the extreme diversity of strategies within whose framework it was possible to use various visual or verbal forms and, at the same time, the extreme closeness of these strategies to each other. Any criticism becomes affirmative as soon as it has attained victory — whether that be socialism in one country or avant-gardism within one work of art or text.

For far too long the political dichotomy of the cold war relieved intellectuals and artists of the luxury of trustworthy theoretical oppositions: the consumerist society of the West was criticized in the name of the total utopian project partly realized in the East, while the totalitarianism of the East was criticized with reference to the consumerist individualism of the West. For all of these years the artistic avant-garde of the West relied ideologically, in one way or another, on the ideals of Marxism, while the artistic avant-garde of the East, not much different from that of the West in terms of its external forms, was in one way or another oriented to Western ideals of individual freedom. And when the avant-gardists from the West accidentally met with avant-gardists from the East, both sides preferred to avoid overly close contacts — for the avant-gardists of the West considered the Eastern avant-gardists to be agents of imperialism and the CIA, while the Eastern avant-gardists considered the Western avant-gardists to be useful idiots of the Communist propaganda and the KGB. Today the cold war is over, and the entire world is confronted by the indistinguishability of East and West once hidden behind their obvious oppositions; Western society waited in vain for a glimpse of that long-expected “other” in the newly opened countries of the East. However, the picture which is only today being revealed to all was already presented by Eastern European art itself. Thus the works of the IRWIN group had already appeared, long before the end of the cold war in political life, as an artistic rendition of its end; they showed the total tautology of the world ideological constellation.

At a time when one sees frequent expectations of an influx to the West of new artistic forms from Eastern European art which were preserved untouched thanks to a national tradition which was not integrated into the international artistic process, the artists of the IRWIN group are showing the cultural history of Slovenia — as is characteristic for the other countries of Eastern Europe as well — constantly imported artistic models from the West as well as from the East, by no means considering itself to be some sort of isolated cultural space. The cultural situation in Eastern Europe is not determined by any specifically national or traditional artistic forms, but by the use of defined elements of internal artistic language in the framework of other strategies and contexts, in different combinations, with different intentions, and for the illustration of different ideologies from those that have their place in the West.

Precisely in order to demonstrate this circumstance, the IRWIN artists use quotations from Western modernist art as ideological signs within defined

ideological configuration. This ideological, content-oriented motivation of artistic composition is a distinguishing trait of almost all Eastern art, which has never trusted those appeals, characteristic of Western art, to purely aesthetic formal criteria. For this reason the originality of the art of Eastern Europe consists not so much of a specific repertoire of particular artistic forms as of the idiosyncratic social and artistic-strategic application of already familiar forms and in the special attention directed toward the mechanisms of such usage. Of course, only a few artists of Eastern Europe are in a position to demonstrate these mechanisms in their own art consciously. But the artists of the IRWIN group are among them—and it is precisely for this reason that the works of its artists present a source of particular cultural interest.

Written in 1990. Originally published in IRWIN-Kapital, Co-Laborator (Edinburgh) and Institut-NSK (Ljubljana), 1991.

A CASE STUDY: NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST

The art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK), based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, came to prominence in the early 1980s and has functioned ever since as one of the more complex, charismatic phenomena of the East European culture industry. Using a highly developed system of discursive instruments, aesthetic symbols, and performative techniques, NSK has employed music, video, exhibitions, writing, theater, graphic design, architecture, and public relations to investigate the relationship between art and ideology.

Institutional and transparent in its appearance but mutating and opaque in its behavior, the NSK organism bears traits of both a cult and a corporation. It defies classification by assimilating misunderstanding and incorporating contradiction and paradox into its self-reproductive apparatus. NSK's interventions—which range from establishing temporary NSK embassies on “foreign soil” to conducting Conceptual art experiments in the form of journeys—probe the memory and breakup of Yugoslavia for aesthetic possibilities and insinuate Slav content into the Western cultural sphere. Drawing inspiration from both avant-garde iconography and totalitarian ideology, NSK defines its artistic, methodological, and philosophic practice as “retro-avant-garde.”

The movement began operating in 1984 as a union of three groups working in different mediums. While a number of subgroups have emerged and dissolved as specific needs arose (New Collectivism, Department for Pure and Applied Philosophy, Theater Red Pilot, Theater Noordung), the original groups which came together to form NSK are: the musical group Laibach; the visual-arts group IRWIN; and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater.

—Roger L. Conover

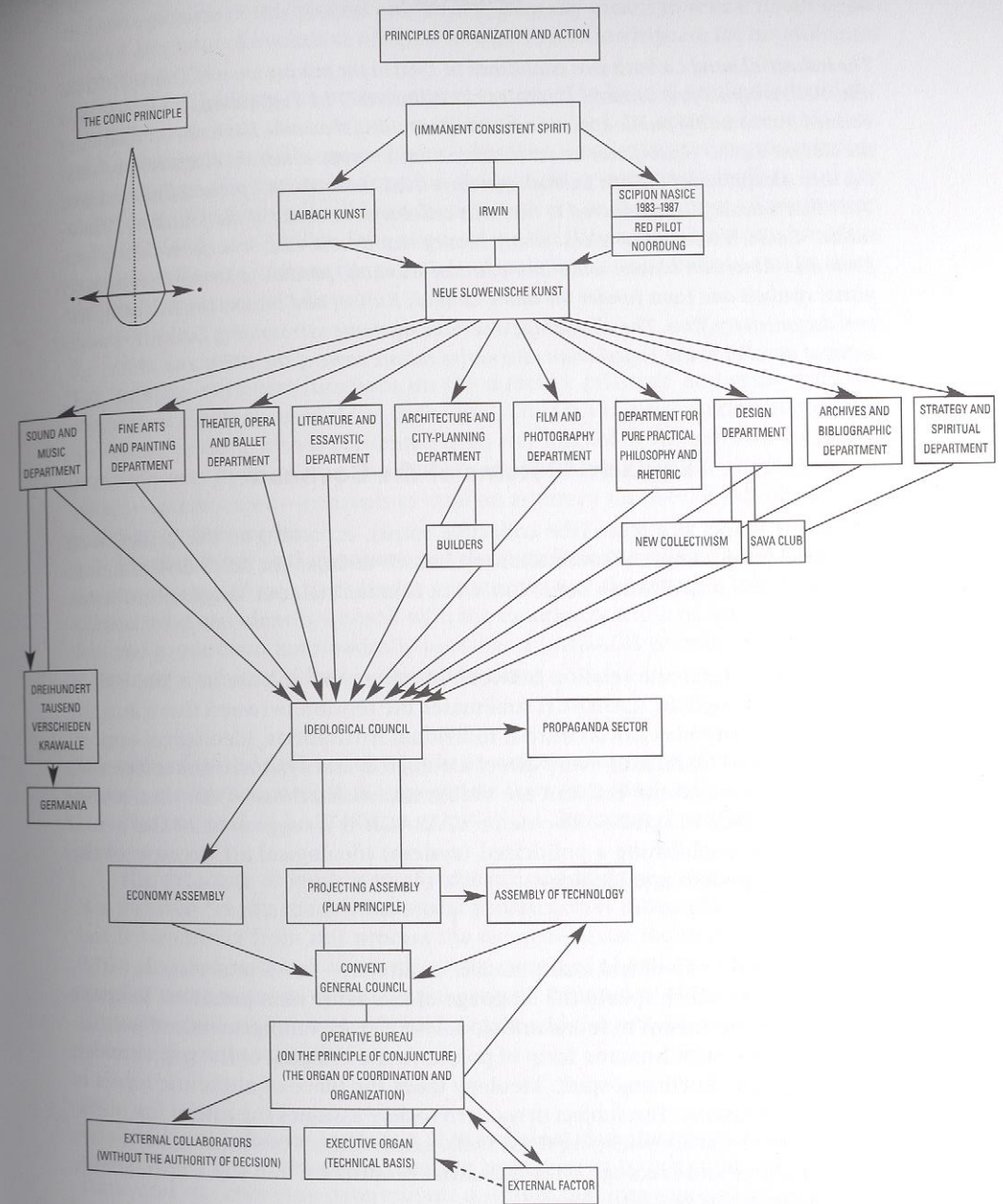


Chart of the NSK organization, 1984. Courtesy NSK