

## Artistic organisations

Transcript of interviews with Borut Vogelnik and Miran Mohar, Group IRWIN

Ljubljana, October 2018.

### Local context, forming of the group IRWIN

**Borut Vogelnik:** What was the context? It was the context, de facto, of alternative artistic scenes in Ljubljana at that time. Not only that it was talked about, but it was also a sufficiently developed, sufficiently strong environment that functioned at that time. ŠKUC was one of the focal points of that functioning at that time. I must say that the whole scene was sceptical, at least suspicious of art events at that moment. What happened? One became sceptical of the standpoint that was still sufficiently general at that time, and especially in all the past decades, probably since 1945.

This was the standpoint - the art scene in Yugoslavia, Socialist Yugoslavia, was part of the international art scene. As such, it allowed communication, and not only that, but transition from local to global. World-class. That this was not happening, most likely because the situation was not suitable enough regarding the quality. It was not good enough to be internationalised. And our point of view was opposite. We deeply doubted the truth of such an attitude. We suspected that the difference between the particular and the local and the international was the difference in quality, or a quantitative difference, smaller/bigger. It was rather a dialectical one. Our point of view was that these were two separate circuits that did not communicate.

Establishing communication with the international requires a certain break in the particular. And the examples that we had then spoke in support of that claim. If we take Marina Abramović and Braco Dimitrijević as good examples of this departure to the West, at that time, from this area, and establishing communication at the international level, at the same time it meant that they interrupted communication with this area. They stopped being part of this space; they were not counted on any more.

So our perception at the time was not just ours, it was the perception of the alter-scene. The alter-scene was dissatisfied with the impossibility of functioning in a more optimal way. There were many very strange perceptions of what it should look like.

What was another important element there? Unlike the alter-scene that still worked in the manner and according to the principles of the Western model, it was based on resistance, on some individual sharpening of relations with the established environment, and so on, With some kind of transgression in these traditional senses, known from the history of art. Along with the art developments in the West, *Laibach* set a new paradigm about how it worked in relation to the situation, the concrete situation. They swayed the necessity of parallels with Western models, at least on some levels, and they swayed any interest in communicating with the inner scene. With a radical break up with what was acceptable within the frames of Yugoslavia.

That TV interview in 1983, was a very good indicator of where the core of the problem was. They were then invited by a very well-known journalist, a professor, an "old fox" to bring them to their end, to publicly portray them as bluffers, as young arrogant incompetents, who probably did not know what they were talking about and what the matter was. And he did it by, maybe you know this - You were given a journalist who would do a dirty job. He started with accusations, with a series of them, which was supposed to end in an excommunication at least.

*Laibach* were supposed to fall, but did not. That's the trick, they survived. And not only did they survive, they outwitted him. We watched it live. What did we see there? Someone who was in a losing position against a vast system won. And this happened in front of all of Slovenia. We all watched it. It was a brilliant duel, a fantastic duel. And they opened up space for all the others early on. A space out of nothing, out of the victory in that duel. Where one could enter. And then you look at NSK's further moves. What were they? How did they really differ from the alternative scene? It's just that we did not want to match the "isms" of the West that we denied them. And secondly, that we were interested in the East from the start. To say directly, we were interested in the conceptual scene in Yugoslavia. Dušan Mandić had already, (he was assistant to Taja Brejč when she established ŠKUC (*Student Cultural Centre in Ljubljana*) and then she was its first director, after an exhibition), Taja Brejč made an *OHO* exhibition, famous and significant. She spent all the money allocated for one year. She goes on,

and Dušan Mandić becomes art director. And at the moment when there was no space in the middle where the conceptual artists from other republics of Yugoslavia would exhibit - Dušan opened the space for exactly this art. So everyone came to Ljubljana with Dušan's help. *The Six Group*, Mladen Stilinović, Goran Đorđević, he is now here and has become a local artist in Ljubljana. But it started with Dušan. And that all happened in three years, because in 1983. Dušan already became a member of *IRWIN*. You had the circular transmission of this very short history, the possibility of exhibiting this kind of art in Slovenia. So our interest in establishing communication in the territory of the former Yugoslavia was there from the beginning. We had a good "condition" there, Dušan was there.

**Miran Mohar:** We were actually interested in internationalisation. What was in Yugoslavia was our place. It was not internationalism for us, it was a local space. Local area. And *Laibach* was very important here, since *Laibach* started in 1980, *IRWIN* in 1983. *Laibach* already actually entered the story; it was already on one of the best label of independent music publishing, Mute Records. And they helped us with contacts in London, where we made some first contacts. Precialis worked with *Laibach* and they just met us with her. So, that was very important in terms of help and communication with the West. In the beginning, there was no communication with the East. Yugoslavia was a local space, but we had no contact with Eastern Europe and Russia, and similar. We made the first contacts in the mid-80s. And then, as far as contacts with the West was concerned, we noticed that experts from Yugoslavia and Slovenia did not have the capacity to do it, so we established our own communication with America and the international scene.

And that was very important for us, because we realized that it was not going. And at the same moment when we were going westwards, we had a clear stance not to neglect this space. We were actually going and also staying here. So, for a while, we even had the situation that two *IRWINs* left for America, and three of us stayed in Ljubljana. It may have lasted a year or more. A year and a half. That was one thing. The other thing that was important at the beginning is this radical copyleft. Not only within *IRWIN* but also among groups. One could do something; take as a motif from the other group to process, and also within the group. That fact was in fact very important for us, that we ourselves constructed a socius, a group that could function in relation to some reality, to some lack in art system, which in fact did not exist, or existed in some form that was not functional. So we were aware of the fact that in this way we could actually establish ourselves.

Alternative, it was against the institutions, against the state as such, and we stood for functional institutions. There was a big difference between us and some other artists. So, from this position we were on neither side. The state observed us wondering what it was that we wanted from the institutions. On the other hand, we were criticised by the alternative scene asking why we were talking about functioning institutions.

### **Selfactualization trough conflicts with existing art system.**

**Borut Vogelnik:** I think it was due to the fact that this space which was opened by *Laibach*, based on an open, complete, absolute conflict. That it existed from there. The stance on this side, the stance of a complete negation of any relevance of the existing art system. It meant that you entered a completely open conflict with the art scene. And we found ourselves in that situation. Everyone said that we were nothing much. That it was out of the question. This was the exact situation that made sense if you claimed that the distinction between the systems, the Western and the Eastern, was precisely dialectical. Then, through a conflict, you establish the possibility of constituting yourself and establishing yourself through the feedback you receive through this conflict. That was exactly what we did.

Imagine, this happened through the feedback we received all the time from the most relevant places in the art system, and not just in the art system. *Laibach* received feedback directly from the highest political places. You can imagine the situation, you have kids, twenty something, commented on by professional representatives of both art system and political situation all the time. So we did not need to be said anything because they set us up. They made us. Through our feedback we defined our work, for the public and for us. I claim that *IRWIN* is the first art formation, the first artiste in the former Yugoslavia to do it. We did not have to leave to communicate internationally.

Secondly, we knew that we should be independent for this. We were totally sceptical about the position of art financiers in the former Yugoslavia. This has been dragging on to this day - the independence of the producer. Independence, which was completely dependent on one financier. - One doorknob. That was this autonomy. And

you know how politics is made through history - if you have the financial means. In fact, it was the politics, the financial policy of the Ministry of Culture. That's the same thing. You do not need to control the whole field with this policy. And we really did work independently of that. From the beginning.

**Miran Mohar:** It's just that the way of financing determines the content. I think it's pretty connected. But we need to say something, we were not economists. None of us studied it. We knew some of them. I think a lot of our calculations were quite naive. It's like that scene in Rublev, sometimes I remember when they make the bell. That young guy comes in and he sees something, uses a little intuition, a little wit, and in the end, they make it. So it still tolls in the end, and if does not toll, who cares. They would understand. So it was just that moment of economy and knowledge. *IRWIN* was education for me, I entered *IRWIN* as if I had just entered the academy. For, for example, Dušan Mandić was already somewhat older. He knew a lot about art. He had his network. He knew about technology. I learned. I've learned a lot of things from my colleagues, technologies in terms of theory and so on. Every meeting was a lesson.

### **Est Europe as a context after Yugoslavia break up**

**Miran Mohar:** Just to add, we have raised the question, be included. How to construct ourselves. How to construct your own space and oneself, in fact. In this way, for us Eastern Europe was, El Dorado, in fact, a gold mine. It still is. And regardless of whether they us gallerists invited us, we did not go, and they did not know why. And we did know why.

We can still work in contexts in some areas, which have already been structured and you cannot work. In the West, art history has turned every pebble, so to speak, every piece of paper. - It is the most protected field. There are no more wild bears there, in fact.

**Borut Vogelnik:** What is still happening in the East now is unbelievable how much it offers. And it's amazing how poorly it is managed.

**Miran Mohar:** And this was one of the reasons why *IRWIN* and *East Art Map* did a project. It was simply a challenge. It's not that we know how to do it best, but we opened that issue, that possibility with a book, a project in fact, which ended with one part as a book, where we said in the end that we had done it. But now we expect and would like somebody to do it better than us.

**Borut Vogelnik:** You need to look at all these developments, when you go through our history, you see that a direct relation to the specific, to the concrete, from which we worked and in which we worked, is always here. This "shift" with *East Art Net* was also made for us specially. We needed that. And if no one else wanted, we urged the *Soros Institute* here in Ljubljana to make it happen.

First members: Roman Uranjek, Andrej Savovski, Dušan Mandić, Mare Kovačič, in the first couple of projects, and me, after a break. And this went successively. I came only for the second or the third project they worked on, to cooperate with them. Then, it was also Voja Štoken for some time, a sculptor. The idea was to have sculpture included in the group. Initially it functioned as a group. We were thinking of how to organise a group that would be functional when making exhibitions, our exhibitions. That was the idea. The movement occurred. This momentum of the movement occurred later, only after joining together, with the theatre and with *Laibach*. We were more or less acquainted and had been friends with some before. We were close, especially Roman with *Laibach*. He was from that form that *Laibach* emerged from. These were people from the same form in graphics secondary school. Many of us knew many people. Ljubljana is a small place. People of one generation knew more or less everyone on the scene. At first, they were three separate groups that worked separately, and then we joined forces. And what does that mean?!

**Miran Mohar:** People always think that there is a *NSK* (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*) production. *NSK* production does not exist. *NSK* is the only product of *NSK*. That's right, and then there was that myth that "the Cross at the Foot of Triglav" was some kind of joint work of *NSK*, which is not true. It was not a joint work, but the groups were involved in the project. *Laibach* made the music, *IRWIN* painted the set, but he did not do the set design, except with my help.

**Borut Vogelnik:** Miran, you were not yet a member of *IRWIN* at that time.

**Miran Mohar:** Yes, it was with my help. And *NSK* had a scheme taken from *Laibach* in fact ... We jointly decided to take *Laibach* scheme and adapted it for *NSK*. And if we now want to buy to exhibit *NSK* artefacts, we cannot, because there are no *NSK* artefacts.

And the state and "the State In Time" and everything that came out: passports, people who used passports, all this later... "The State In Time" was in fact a transformation of *NSK* from an organization into a state in 1992. We worked at that time, the *IRWIN* project involved the *NSK Embassy* in Moscow and based on this experience, *IRWIN* suggested to other groups to transform the *NSK* into the *NSK State In Time*. So, that was it, it was our common context, our common organization.

**Borut Vogelnik:** You had projects that were initiated by different actors within that framework of the *NSK State*. The truth is that *IRWIN* worked on it most.

Then you had some projects that were joint, for example, the *NSK State* of Sarajevo-Berlin. *The NSK State* was our joint project, it was agreed upon by all three groups that it was our joint project.

It is widely understood that the shift from *NSK* to *NSK State* was a shift from a pre-political to a political party. It's not true. It was true the other way round. In fact, the move to the state was a clear formalization of something that was precisely because of that, what we were talking about at the outset, deeply political. It functioned with its existence as a purely political force in the society of Slovenia and Yugoslavia of that time. And we were aware of that.

And the trick is that at the time of 1992 we lost the field that we established through the 1970s. We had already been used to working in a system. The system of complete relaxation of the 1980s. You will hear from us later that we talked about that time and about the time of transition as of a golden period. Why. Because there was no ideological grip that would control every move. Then, if you dared, you could usurp the field that they could only dream of in the West. One cannot even think about these dimensions.

### **Strategies and modes of operation of IRWIN**

**Borut Vogelnik:** This was obviously an appropriation. It is appropriation, familiar, goes from conceptual art. The same is one of the circuits initiated by conceptual art, already in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Direct work involved Goran Đorđević and the entire *NSK* relied on it. He also had an impact on *Laibach*. And Mladen Stilinović likewise. This situation was very articulated in Yugoslavia, this should be said. And articulated well very, very early on.

The first texts were written from *IRWIN*'s point of view and published with our opening exhibition, "Back to the USA". Before that we had done something, but not under *IRWIN*. I think that under the *IRWIN*'s name a small first exhibition *ran xerox* was made, very minor, but it was not bad. And then the big show was "Back to the USA", because *IRWIN* began to work as a group on some independent projects already in 1983 but not as *IRWIN*. The name *IRWIN* was only created in early 1984.

With the exhibition "Back to the USA", which was constitutive to us, seriously constitutive, a fanzine came out with three different texts. Different by items. You have a text that was then received as a kind of manifesto, which was based on appropriation. Retro principle with memory manipulation. Then there is a text that dealt with the very significant movement of graffiti art at the time, which spoke of that possibility. And then there was a text that dealt with the context of artistic production in the middle of Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia. Three texts were written, which directly accentuated the position of that moment from the three points of view.

The text retro principle, principle with memory manipulation was received as a manifesto concerning the formal procedure. No one thought in the beginning that it would take long. These were projects that were for one night, where we were hanging out in a joint action. But then, in time, things swayed a momentum. The success of our moves established some continuity then. At first it was not clear how long it would take, and later that ...

**Miran Mohar:** That's interesting, I came to *IRWIN* later, two years later. Borut said that there was this name, or there was not... But I had worked already in *Scipion Nasice*. We made a super theatre with Dragan Živadinov. And I worked in *Scipion Nasice*, so I was a member of three groups you know. My entire experience involved working in groups. And I think *IRWIN* was changing through intensification. *IRWIN* had this process, and what

Borut says is that retroactively we saw something as a manifesto, and then it lasted. Because *IRWIN* found it interesting to bring together some knowledge, the contexts and a network that Dušan Mandić had had with Yugoslavia, and the economy joined in, and these three things were very important to me, because we, as Individuals had no chance at all.

A lot of people in the *NSK* came from smaller towns, and in *IRWIN* there were two men from Ljubljana. And we were already aware that it was very dangerous to be tied to the economic model of Slovenia, or the ministries and the city. So, at that time, we were thinking of creating an economic model that would be tied a bit to the market, a bit to grants, to the sponsors. And so from the beginning, we started to work, and the way we functioned was unclear in Slovenia.

*Laibach* had it from the beginning with *Mute Records*. They had their own economy, they did not need anything. Since I worked in the theatre, the theatre did small performances at the start, and when they became bigger, we were completely dependent on the Ministry of Culture. So we had very different economic models that were very important. For a group that wants to function for 35 years, *Laibach* even 40, these models are very important.

### **Methods of signing the production**

**Borut Vogelnik:** That's really important. Getting back to what we talked about: What was our starting point? Our starting point was as follows, and this can be read in many of our interviews: First, to establish enough critical mass to independently cross the border of former Yugoslavia. So that we can be in a position to communicate with the international scene independently, without state mediators. That is what we wanted

**Miran Mohar:** Let's say, the anonymity with *IRWIN* was not *not* to use the name, in some ideological sense. Because if we consider some early works with *IRWIN*, some paintings were signed, *IRWIN's* signatures spoke. That can be seen. But it was clear to us that if we communicated with each other, we wanted to communicate as individuals, only the name *IRWIN* protected us from external media that could divide us. Any external media, or critics, could say that Dušan's Mandić work was better than Andrej's Savovski or Roman's Uranjek and so on. In this way, since the group actually communicated via one name, we had that freedom of personal communication. And a safe space.

For example, in the past 20 years, these works that are here in my studio, they are signed as *IRWIN*, with the artist's name in . And we say that the work in the series is not *IRWIN* if it is not signed this way. With *IRWIN* and name in brackets. We used the internal reserves. Not using the name had a different logic, for example, with *Laibach* and the theatre, because the theatre is essentially a hierarchical medium, it has a director, a playwright, actors and so on.

And with *IRWIN*, the logic was different, because projects entered the space through debate. Simply someone should have the first idea, the ideas are not made out of thin air. They are not collective. Ideas can be developed collectively, but are not collective.

**Borut Vogelnik:** They can be received, others can say okay.

**Miran Mohar:** We believe that it is a creative work and how you agree with someone. Because you recognize, you go through some psychology and follow an idea that is better than yours. And maybe you do not have it, but it does not mean that this project can then be elaborated. It's always elaborated, the group works on it. Or, someone had an idea and someone actually did a fantastic work from that . And these were the basic principles of work.

I would say that the things are more complex. Let's say when I joined *IRWIN*, *Was ist Kunst* series had already been formed. I entered and did things inside the system. It's like getting into a band that is already playing some pieces. When I entered, I needed some time. And there were some deals, e.g. for some series and for some of the pieces that were done together. Then the space of the *Was ist Kunst* series was the space of some personal work, and related to agreements that were frameworks, contexts, motifs and so on.

Some 20 years ago, some people signed their names on paintings, and some did not. It was a transitorium, but since then we have decided that we would extrapolate final iconic motifs, constellations. Because we were

there six motives, which we agreed to between *IRWIN* framework, then came *Monochrome* as a new one. And so... in relation to the frame. And then we agreed, as I said before, that all the works made, should include name in brackets.

Because the group, on the one hand, pushes you forward, and on the other hand you can hide, in it. And this idea with the addition of a personal name, has tightened things, you immediately saw some lines. When you put it on the wall, you are behind it. I believe that this was the right decision and that we went forward with it.

**BorutVogelnik:** I can add something here. Miran is absolutely right when he says that *Was ist Kunst* was all the time a field where personal production was there from the beginning. And consciously at that. What we did we do when we opened this field? This opened up the opportunity that everyone has some basic ground. Because one very significant problem of functioning in a group is the organisation of intersubjective dimensions. It's a complicated thing. And you really needed to take care of what elements are needed to keep the matter sustainable for longer periods of time. So that personal work was not only used at all times but was supported on the way.

We'll have that signature. It's not about what's really written, it's about what you say. It turned out like that. It is interesting to make rules, laws. They function altogether abstractly, this is incredible. They are valid for us, even if nothing has changed. And now you can refer to them, to a year when something was included, without changing anything. And it works in an intersubjective circle. And specifically about that, people signed before. I did not and do not sign, more or less. Dušan signed works all the time, and now it is necessary, then it was not.

**Miran Mohar:** Now when we ask for Borut's painting, and it is not signed. we say now that it is not *IRWIN*.

#### **Communication within the group and movement, the absence of a leader.**

**Borut Vogelник:** And that is not the issue. The issue is in being responsible regarding your work. The issue is that you have seen the work of the other as your work, de facto. And your work in one moment became so much yours that you could not tell it was bad. That's the problem.

**Miran Mohar:** Let's say, then we built a method of saying that a work is bad, in fact. We said it was bad, but in some sense when it goes through communication, then that's another thing. When someone comes and says, it's a little symbolically open or using the English word "interesting", or something like that. That's how we built it. Let's say the reason is why a group like *IRWIN* can work together even now, and we are 35 years old, is that we have stuck to the deal. That's the most important thing. Sticking to the deal means that you have made a deal and when you see that something is good, you keep it. You go ahead.

We do not deceive one another. Maybe we are not the best friends, but that's what I mean. But we do not deceive one another. We never deceive. We are very tolerant; it's also true, all the time. If someone does not want to do something, or cannot, that is it.

**Borut Vogelник:** The question is whether we have a boss. No, *IRWIN* was never about someone taking a position of a boss. Nobody was powerful enough to be one. It has never happened. Some could, though. Roman began to establish order, but it was not that.

**Miran Mohar:** It was a coincidence that *IRWIN* does not have a boss, in fact, there are no owners, it did not even begin like that. Let's say like *NSK*, there's not a single piece of paper, no note where they have some signature, so *NSK* cannot finish because it did not start. In fact, there are a couple of *NSK* paintings in the media, and now those paintings that are in some places in some books, on the Internet and so, they live their artistic lives. And so, the *NSK* is getting bigger yet smaller.

**BorutVogelnik:** *NSK* was established after members of all three groups had voted. We were sitting in Dušanov's kitchen and voted.