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Polona Tratnik

Author(s): Polona Tratnik
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Deconstruction of Political Memory through Art

Polona Tratnik
Translated from Slovenian by Tadej Turnšek

“In the 1980s, the art group Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) employed postmodernist artistic techniques, eclecticism and pastiche, with which they evoked political and artistic memories through music, painting, design, theatre and statements and deconstructed these political memories. For Laibach in particular, the treatment of National Socialist iconography and totalitarian rhetoric was central, but not in service of politics. The totalitarianism they imitated was a simulacrum. In their manifesto the artists claimed to strive towards politically independent artistic activity. However, in the second half of the 1980s, the collective operated with the support of the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia, the youth sector of the Communist Party. In the article, the author examines the complex relationships between art and politics or how the performances of Laibach and NSK in the 1980s were related to the political situation in Slovenia. She is interested in the social integration of Laibach and also NSK, their rhetoric, appearances and artistic-political interventions in Slovenia in the 1980s, especially in relation to the development of events related to Slovene nationality. Laibach and NSK evoked a repressed but essentially present self-image of the Slovene nation's ever-present subordination to other nations, which co-created a collective political complex about Slovene subservience and inadequacy. The evocation of this political representation by the artistic collective, especially Laibach, in the way of reviving and dismantling iconography and rhetoric was not pleasant, but triggered a revision of collective remembering and an assessment of Slovenia's current position, as well as the Slovene nation's potential for national liberation.

Keywords: Laibach, Neue Slowenische Kunst, collective memory, political memory, totalitarianism, Slovenia, poster affair

“To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them.”

Gustave Le Bon
Introduction: 1 RetroAvantGarde and RetroUtopianism

The work of the art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in the 1980s, when the collective was founded, is testimony to the strong presence of remembering through culture in that period. The NSK’s practice of remembering involved documenting a variety of signifiers that were particularly relevant to the twentieth century, but which, in the 1980s, it was felt would quickly fall behind the horizon that separates the present from the past, remaining part of the past. The period was marked by major social shifts: communist regimes were collapsing, the age of modernity marked by grand narratives and historicity was coming to an end, capitalism was on the rise globally, and societies were transitioning into different regimes. As Eda Ćufer, a member of the NSK’s Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre, would later comment:

We understood very well that this was a period of transition, that this period of rupture between two systems was something that was going to disappear, and a new system was going to be constituted very quickly, which was going to blur the memory of what the cultural dynamics were like in this late socialist period. (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 39:20–38:50)

In the Missive to the Slovenske Atene (Slovenian Athens) project in December 1985, the Irwin Group, the visual arts department of the NSK collective, wrote that the project was a “reconstruction of Slovene modernism” (Irwin 1991, 2). Irwin urged Slovene painters of all generations and orientations to paint a single motif – the sower, which had inspired important Slovene painters in the beginning of the century.

The 1980s was a period that the famous American art theorist Arthur C. Danto called the time “after the end of history” and “after the end of art,” when pluralism begins and every artist can do what she or he wants, with no style or artistic direction being obligatory or more important than others (Danto 1984, 34–35). After the end of modernism, artistic projects nomadically wander through history, combining, recombining and rewriting it in different ways, which is in line with theories of postmodernism in art. But it is also a time of revision of the past. As Marina Gržinič (1991, 30) explains, “IRWIN’s

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1 The NSK collective was founded in 1984. It was initially composed of three founding groups, i.e. the music group Laibach, the visual arts group IRWIN and performative arts group Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice (Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre), as well as of the design and advertising “department” Novi kolektivizem (New Collectivism). Later on NSK established also departments for film, video, philosophy and architecture.
Figure 1. Irwin, *Rdeči revirji (Sejalec)* (Red Districts [The Sower]), silkscreen print of a linocut of an industrial landscape by the painter Janez Knez, father of Dejan Knez, a member of the group Laibach, and an image of a sower in silkscreen technique, on coloured paper, 1989. Source: Irwin.
'historiography' appears as a new form of historicity and/or (anti)history.” Inke Arns studied orientation of art towards the past and the future in Slovenia at the end of the twentieth century, and she identified three phases in this regard: retro-avant-garde, retro utopianism, and media activism. Of these, only the retro-avant-garde emerged as an artistic movement in the 1980s, which I am analysing here (the retro avant-garde orientation was explicitly emphasized with the exhibition Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Monumentalna retro avant-garda (Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Monumental Retro Avant Garde) in 1983 at Galerija Škuc). In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s (through Peter Weibel, Marina Gržinić, and the Irwin Group), the term retro-avant-garde, or “retro-garde” also came to refer to the revision of art history. In this sense, it represents an alternative to the dominant grand narratives of the West. Irwin thus develops the concept of “Eastern Modernism.”3

In their art projects from the 1980s, the NSK collective performed a kind of remembering through culture. In the artistic sphere, it is about recalling historical avant-garde movements.4 The work of Irwin contains strong references to past Slovene art. In the NSK as a whole, and especially in the work of Laibach, it is about recalling the iconographies and, above all, the rhetoric of totalitarian regimes. Cultural memory, as defined by Aleida Assmann, is mediated through the media, in contrast to the individual, as well as experience-based social memory, both of which are embodied in those who remember. Political memory is also mediated through the media; it is

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2 Arns understands Dragan Živadinov’s cosmoskinetic cabinet Noordung (1995–2045) as a hybrid link between the retro avant-garde of the 1980s and the retroutopianism of the 1990s. Arns understands retroutopianism as an intermediate stage between retro avant-garde and media activism, when contemporary practices still clearly look back to the historical archive of avant-garde contributions, seeking to realise in the present what might once have been recognised as utopian (hence their important relationship with utopia).

This artistic grasp [retro-utopianism] of the historical avant-garde, in a kind of retrospective, media-archaeological examination of the utopias of the avant-garde, investigates the media-technical possibilities that are present in the avant-garde but are not realised. [...] In contrast to the other three orientations [retro-avant-garde, post-utopianism, neo-utopianism] [...] it is characterised by an pronounced media-archaeological interest in the reactivation of the media and technological utopias of the historical (mainly Eastern European) avant-garde(s). (Arns 2006, 265)

3 Borut Vogelnik states:

Retrogarde is the act of situating a specific artistic practice that has a 50-year tradition in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and which until now has not been understood as a coherent whole. Retrogarde makes visible the continuity of the activities of artists of different generations, each of whom was considered avant-garde in their own period. (Vogelnik in Arns 2006, 97)

4 Historical avant-garde movements as defined by Peter Bürger (Bürger 1984).
a memory created for the needs of a particular community. But there is an important difference between political memory and remembering through culture, as Assmann defines these two categories of remembering. While political memory is highly homogeneous and has an attractive appeal – the symbolic signs of political memory have distinct features and are charged with high emotional intensity – remembering through culture is more complex, as works of art contain a greater degree of ambivalence, and therefore allow for more diverse interpretations (Assmann 2006, 221, 218). IRWIN employs the techniques of eclecticism and pastiche, which are characteristic of postmodernist art, as identified by the American Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson in his theory of postmodernism as the cultural dominant of the late capitalism (Jameson 2001). The iconography of IRWIN consists of images of socialist realism, images of Slovene and Western modernism, and images of working-class and hunting cultures. Eclecticism is also characteristic of the New Collectivism and Laibach. Laibach, in particular, studied the content of the Third Reich from the very beginning, since, according to Dejan Knez, a member of Laibach and New Collectivism, the Third Reich was one of their inspirations (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 7:30–8:00). It was through these evocations and the technique of counterpointing that Laibach and the NSK deconstructed political memory in the 1980s.

Laibach: Collectivism and the Simulacrum of Totalitarianism

From the very beginning, the NSK recycled the rhetoric of political propaganda in its projects and performances. Gustave Le Bon, a psychologist who studied the behaviour of the masses already at the end of the nineteenth century and who inspired the propaganda services of political regimes, knew that the imagination of the masses is struck by that which manifests itself in a brilliant, very distinct image, free from further explanations. “To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them” (Le Bon 2002, 37). The NSK has adopted precisely that part of propaganda rhetoric from various political systems, and especially German National Socialism, which impressed the “masses” through emotional appeal. Another question here is what this rhetoric, as developed by the NSK

5 Aleš Erjavec responds to Jameson with a theory of post-socialist postmodernism, as he calls art in communist regimes, especially in the 1980s, before the fall of the Iron Curtain, when artists responded to major socio-political changes with a unique revolution (Erjavec 2003a, 1–54).
in the 1980s, serves or served in the first place. At this point, a fundamental difference arises between political systems and the artistic practice of the NSK collective, which was, after all, supposed to produce pure art.

Political systems that build internally strongly cohesive communities, with a tendency for homogeneity and the search for a clear common identity, which is particularly characteristic of totalitarian systems, deliberately produce communal attributes that recruit individuals – this recruitment is to be understood in Althusser’s sense of the ideological interpellation of the subject – into the totality of the community. In their conception, the NSK systematically represented the formation of such a community as a totality, as we may understand the formation of a national community in the totality of the state. Therefore, the idea of the artistic state, later founded by the NSK in the early 1990s (NSK State) – which the collective borrowed from Kazimir Malevich, a Russian avant-garde artist of the early twentieth century – is inscribed in the very beginnings of the NSK’s work. In the first paragraph of their manifesto, first presented in 1982 at an exhibition in Zagreb and first published in 1983 in *Nova revija*, the group Laibach, which co-founded the NSK collective, wrote that they work “as a team (the collective spirit), according to the model of industrial production and totalitarianism, which means that the individual does not speak; the organisation does” (Laibach 1983, 1460). The organigram of Laibach Kunst was first published alongside the manifesto, explaining the principle of the organisation and functioning of the group with its different centres and objectives, which was later used as the basic model for the organigram of the NSK. “In its work, LAIBACH adopts the organising system of work of industrial production and the identification with ideology” (Point 4 of the Covenant; Laibach 1983, 1460). The Laibach Kunst collective and later the NSK put the collective before the individuals, a fact which the members explicitly emphasise in their communication with the public and even by their naming of the part of the NSK responsible for design and advertising New Collectivism. Collectivity implies the internal cohesion of the community, internal solidarity, and is also established through relations of outward differentiation, making it crucial for nation-building as initiated by the state, especially in the case of totalitarian regimes. In the context of the post-war Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), collectivism also represented the spirit of the industrial age with an emphasis on workers’ identity, thereby providing the basis for the concept of communism. Laibach and later NSK appropriated the regime’s dominant idea of collectivism, but the manner of their appropriation, the aesthetics of their collectivity, raises doubts
about its compatibility with communist ideology. This effect occurs for several reasons, which I discuss below. One of these is the linking of communism and National Socialism, precisely through the construction and representation of collectivity. In both cases, collectivity turns out to be at the service of the regime’s totalitarianism. As analysed by Jože Pučnik, the totalitarianism of the Yugoslav regime was manifested in the party’s monopoly on power and its repressive attitude towards individuals, the strength and form of which could be arbitrarily regulated by the political leadership. This intimidated the people (Pučnik 1987). The political leadership of Slovenia denied the accusations of the totalitarianism of the regime, as is evident, for example, in the reactions of the Socialist Alliance of Working People (Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva – SZDL) to the “Contributions to the Slovene national programme,” published in 1987 in the famous 57th issue of Nova revija, which also addressed the issue of Yugoslav totalitarianism.

If Laibach exhibited a rhetoric and iconography of totalitarianism that could also be read as a criticism of the existing regime, this does not mean that their actions were in support of another political option. Laibach’s critique of totalitarian and repressive politics of the 1980s was built precisely on the affirmation of the appearance of totalitarian aesthetics and rhetoric, which were, however, emptied of meaning. Initially, Laibach also criticized art that placed itself in the service of politics, even though it was their art that was political in its appearance, even though it was not supposed to be political in its content. I address this question below. Laibach set itself the task of analysing the relationship between ideology and culture as manifested through art (Point 2 of the Covenant, Laibach 1983, 1460). It used political language – precisely because, as they write, all art is subject to political manipulation, “except the one that speaks the language of this manipulation” (Point 3 of the Covenant). Therefore, if their art speaks the language of political manipulation, then it is not subject to political manipulation. Accordingly, their artistic tactic is to avoid serving politics as art.

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Figure 2. Members of Laibach posing at their exhibition in Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, 1984. Photo: Jane Štravs (Badovinac, Čufer and Gardner 2015, 155).
Laibach achieves this goal through the technique of abandoning meaning. In accordance with the postmodern principle of eclecticism, signifiers are abundantly placed or juxtaposed. In Laibach, each signifier that is placed, taken from a collective political memory in which it is associated with a specific signified, stands in an unbearable relationship with another signifier – unbearable because it is not compatible with it in a way that it would support it with its expected meaning. By using such a counterpointing technique, the signifiers do not support each other towards a clear and unambiguous message – which is, on the other hand, expected from the advertising image as analysed by Roland Barthes (Barthes 1967; 1977a) – but rather decompose each other. Therefore, the definitive meaning of the syntagm cannot be determined. Instead of a final signified, the reader finds himself in a process of unlimited semiosis. This technique leads to a systematic abandonment of meaning. Due to the use of this technique, the iconography of totalitarian regimes used does not mean what the signifiers copied here meant. What is being manifested is therefore not what it seems to be proclaimed as a result of recalling associations from collective memory. The appearance of totalitarianism in Laibach is therefore not full in terms of meaning, it is emptied. It is, in fact, a thoroughly imitated simulacrum of totalitarianism. The concept of the collective’s structure as a duplicate of the state (from 1988) also sounds something like this: “We consider our structure a duplicate of the state, a corrected reiteration of the state” (NSK 1991b, 123). Alternatively, we can understand the state that was founded at the time of Slovenia’s independence and into which the collective was transformed – but which is not effectively a true political state – as the artistic state, which in this case means the liberation of art from other services, including the political function in the service of the nation-state. In this way, the artistic state means the final, real autonomy of art. At the same time, art resembles an autonomous political formation, i.e. a state that is not a state in the usual sense of the word, but rather a simulacrum of a state. The NSK State has passports and establishes diplomatic relations with the Republic of Slovenia.

According to Slavoj Žižek, Laibach does not offer an answer to the question of whether they are totalitarians or not, because they do not act as an answer, but as a question, which is why “Laibach forces us to take a stand and decide what we want.” This means the end of psychoanalytic treatment (Žižek [1993] 2006, 40). If Laibach forces us to take a position, while Laibach itself does not, this explains why different fans of Laibach also interpret its connotations in extremely different ways, and why the various appropriations of Laibach even have opposing political foundations. In order to explain this phenomenon, it does not
help to understand what Laibach is ultimately saying, what their messages are really conveying, what the correct reading of the NSK is. An important question that has not yet received research attention, and which I am interested in here is how their activities in the 1980s were related to the political situation at the time. I am interested in the social involvement of Laibach and also of the NSK, their rhetoric, performances and interventions in Slovenia in the 1980s, especially in relation to the developments related to Slovene nationality at the time.

Laibach and NSK have always stressed the importance of the autonomy of art, so the possibility of linking art with politics, which, after all, lies beyond the field of pure art, but which is also their key content, is interesting to explore with this art collective, because it leads to various contradictions inherent in the work of this artistic collective – such as the establishment of a state, which represents the highest political act, but in the case of NSK state in time represents the establishment of the most complete artistic autonomy. In this paper I argue that in the 1980s Laibach and NSK used an original culture of political remembrance to evoke political memory, including from collective trauma, and deconstructed it through art.

**The Slovene Question**

Laibach stated: “Politics is the highest and all-embracing form of art, and we who create contemporary Slovene art *consider ourselves politicians*” (Monroe 2005, 132). This statement has been made in several variations. According to Alexei Monroe, who has analysed Laibach and the NSK comprehensively, such statements by the collective are modelled on National Socialist aesthetics, but their aestheticization of politics and force differs from actual totalitarianism in that it is not in the service of a political formation or national cause” (Monroe 2005, 132). In their acknowledgements for the Golden Bird cultural prize, Neue Slowenische Kunst state they “understand politics as part of culture and as the highest, all-encompassing art, and ourselves who create contemporary art, we consider politicians” (NSK 1991b, 7). In an interview for Delo, the main Slovenian printed daily and the bulletin of the SZDL in the 1980s, Laibach said: “We say that politics is the highest and all-encompassing art, and that we, who create contemporary art, consider ourselves politicians” (NSK 1991b, 53).
In this sense, their art is not in the service of politics, although they speak the language of political manipulation. In the following, I will analyse their statements regarding their identification with the national spirit. When asked explicitly by Radio Študent whether Laibach Kunst is Slovene, they replied:

The creative ability of the artist identifies with the national spirit. Every artist carries within him certain (ethnic) characteristics, which are the result of a common origin and kindred lifestyle of a group of people over a longer historical period. [...] Every artist comes from the depths of his nation, from the dark, subterranean workshop of the national psyche, and through its creation illuminates its basic, typical features, the essence of spirit and character.

(NSK 1991b, 43–44)

Laibach has repeatedly and in many aspects addressed the specific Slovene identity. For example, by stating,

LAIBACH is organically connected to its home; it jealously nurtures the link with the people and its history, and it is aware of its role within the Slovene cultural-political range. [...] However, any opposition to our appearance in public does not threaten LAIBACH itself but acts against Slovene culture itself.

(NSK 1991b, 52)

Every Slovene artist illuminates the Slovene “essence of spirit and character,” and places itself at the level of pantheonic national figures (Monroe 2005, 151). In defining art in relation to the nation in this way, Laibach paraphrases Hegel’s or the Romantic understanding of art as the expression of the (historical) spirit through the artistic activity of the people, with the national emphasis present in Laibach mediated by the later historical experience in the twentieth century, when art becomes explicitly linked to politics and thus serves the processes of nation-building.

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8 In his analysis of totalitarian art, Igor Golomstock argues that the politician’s mission in German National Socialism was similar to that of the artist, only more dangerous, because Hitler saw himself as the architect of the Third Reich who creates according to the laws of beauty. This is why Goebbels paraphrased Hitler in stating that a true politician stands in the same relation to his nation as a sculptor stands to his marble (Golomstock 1990, 166). In this respect, the term nation-building also has a similar connotation.

9 Alexei Monroe interprets such a statement as a clear indication of Slovenian nonconsciousness in the form of populist philistinism and national self-repression (Monroe 2005, 150). Otherwise, Monroe notes that this statement in favour of Slovene nationality contradicts Laibach’s self-denotation as Yugoslavs, since in other statements (for example, NSK 1991a, 54), they refer to Yugoslavia as “our country” (Monroe 2005, 292).
At the end of 1990, half a year before the independence of the Slovene state, Laibach explicitly associated itself with the “Nation-Thing,” as Monroe puts it. Laibach even concluded that the end of Laibach would mean the end of Slovene nationhood (Monroe 2005, 149). The concert celebrating the tenth anniversary of Laibach’s existence was entitled “Ten years of Laibach, ten years of Slovene independence.” This seems to have implied that Laibach was inseparable from the idea of Slovene independence, as Monroe also reads. However, Laibach’s timing of “Slovene independence” is historically inaccurate and essentially linked to something that has no political significance – i.e., the moment of the formation of the Laibach artistic collective. By placing Slovene political independence in the past, when it had not yet happened, the group effectively denies it, just as it minimises political independence as an achievement of the Slovene nation by subordinating its importance to its own existence, which is that of an artistic group. According to Monroe’s interpretation, this case most explicitly shows Laibach’s parasitic attachment to the “national Thing.” Laibach does represent the “Nation-Thing” in symbols such as kozolec (Slovenian hayrack; see Figure 3 – the cover of Laibach’s Recapitulation, 1985) and by referring to mythological figures such as Črtomir, but as Monroe argues, this is not about “supporting nationalism,” because the enormous power of Laibach’s performance derives from the illusion of nationalism. Here, the enjoyment of national symbols is frustrated by the use of tautology, paradox, and contradiction, which function as a type of aversion therapy toward the “national Thing” (Monroe 2005, 149). National identity is structured around the “Nation-Thing” and is accessible only to members of the nation, yet simultaneously constantly at risk from “others.” Although Laibach are not actually foreign, the group’s extremism places them on the other side of the border, on the side of the “others of the nation,” as Monroe interprets, and Laibach was perceived, and could be presented as, “an (implicit) threat to the Nation-Thing itself, despite using some of its most spectacular characteristics and symbolism” (Monroe 2005, 148).

If Laibach is thus constantly perceived as “the other” in relation to the Slovene nation, it is nevertheless significant – as evidenced by several of the statements discussed here, especially the variations of the same statements – that in the 1980s, NSK emphasised its own Slovene identity more explicitly in its statements abroad than at home, where they were more broad in this respect, or even referred to something other than the Slovene nation.10

10 For example, NSK explicitly explains its Slovenian background in this interview in Japan: “NSK brings together the experience of all Slovenian art and politics to date. Our cultural and political foundation is the Slovenian nation and its history, which lives at the crossroads of Central European, Western European and Eastern European civilisation” (NSK 1991b, 53).
Figure 3. The cover of Laibach’s first Western album, *Rekapitulacija* (Recapitulation), 1985. Source: Monroe 2005, 74–75.
Laibach and NSK were obviously adapting their appearances in the Slovene and Yugoslav territory up to 1991. In terms of national identification, they avoided identifying themselves as Slovenes, or their appearance was more indefinite and elusive in terms of meaning than their appearance abroad. In the case of the appearance in their homeland, a consistent reading seems to show that Laibach deconstructs the national idea, just as it deconstructs other placements of signifiers that fail to coalesce into the expected signs.

In their monograph published abroad, Irwin write that each nation is created to produce its own culture. They allegedly wanted to make a new Athens on their soil, a cultural space where art will be integrated with the social and spiritual order. In this project they wanted to work together with Slovene politicians and for the good of Slovenia. However, their field is art, therefore they have no specific political intentions (NSK 1991a, 126; Monroe 2005, 110). There is no such or similar formulation in the catalogue of the Modern Gallery for the project *Slovenian Athens* (1985). If Studio Marketing Delo’s advertising campaign “Slovenia, My Country” was primarily addressed to the Slovene audience by representing the Slovene nation on its own territory, NSK uses the expression of Slovene identity more in the international environment than in their homeland. On the back of the book *Neue Slowenische Kunst* there is a well-known statement by Irwin: “We are artists, and not politicians. When the Slavic question is resolved once and for all, we want to finish our lives as artists” (NSK 1991a; NSK 1991b).11 This phrase, also used by Laibach, may seem to support nation and statebuilding. However, Monroe states that it is paraphrasing Hitler (Monroe 2005, 110, 284). From this point of view, nationbuilding, including Slovene nation-building, is associated with totalitarianism and with the service of art to politics, which the collective renounced in their manifesto from the very beginning.

On the occasion of receiving the Golden Bird Award in 1986, the NSK collective inscribed in marble an acknowledgment and an appeal, in which they stated:

11 Alexei Monroe wrongly cited Irwin as he wrote: “We are artists and not politicians. When the Slovene question is resolved once and for all we want to finish our lives as artists (Monroe 2005, 110). Monroe wrote “Slovene” question instead of “Slavic” question as stated in both editions of the 1991 monograph on the art collective. This mistake completely changes the meaning of the statement, which is an original word play and the play with meaning in reference to the etymology of the word “Slav” that was related to the term “Slave” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as Borut Vogelnik who coined the term noted in a conversation with me on June 25, 2022.
Figure 4. In 1986, the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective prepared an appeal and an acknowledgment on the occasion of receiving the Golden Bird cultural prize from the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia. The text is inscribed on a marble commemorative plaque. Source: New Collectivism.
The activity of LAIBACH and NSK maintains productive ties with the history of the past, the present and the future; it is rooted in a fanatic violation of the mass and energy preservation law and relies heavily on the Slovene programme for spiritual, cultural and political independence. (NSK 1991b, 7)

But in the same acknowledgment and appeal, they nevertheless renounce the politically emancipatory task.12 The prize was awarded by the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia (Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije – ZSMS) to Laibach, Irwin and Scipion Nasice as part of the NSK “for their joint activity and contribution to the new Slovene art” (NSK 1991b, 6) on the Day of Youth, May 25, 1986, a year before the Poster Affair.

12 In an extended acknowledgment and appeal, they write that the NSK represents

an organised cultural-political campaign for the renewal of Slovenian national art at the European level, a planned establishment of an authentic cultural space at the crossroads of two worlds, a denial of spiritual smallness, and a deliberate attack on the structure of the Western cultural hegemony. Slovenian land is a small land between worlds, yet a land with a huge potential of creative people, a land that is striving to gradually compensate, at the cost of great sacrifices and superhuman efforts in all fields, including the cultural field, for what it has been deprived of due to an unusually turbulent and tormented past. We have been shaped by exceptional historical circumstances into a generation which is aware that the youth of a nation as physically small as ours must develop greater creative forces than the youth of great nations; that the youth born after the Revolution must be the most creative youth in the history of Sloveneness, because all previous generations had to struggle tortuously with the basic historical claims of a small nation: the struggle for freedom, trampled from all directions into serfdom, the struggle for a language that was constantly denied the right to his homeland, the struggle for the geographical integrity of the land, and finally, with the struggle for basic political and human rights. We are aware that we belong to that generation of Slovenes who no longer have to waste precious strength in this struggle for the fundamental claims of their nation, but can devote their time first and foremost to creation.

(NSK 1991b, 6–7)

In this account, NSK identifies itself with Sloveneness, but ultimately concludes that they do not need to waste precious strength for the claims of their nation, even though at that very time there were heated political debates against Serbian hegemony and the nation was fighting for the “fundamental claims of their nation,” from which it can be inferred that NSK had at that time given up the political struggle for the Slovenian national emancipation – or encouraged the expression of political views. More on this later in this article.
Figures 5 (left) and 6 (right). In 1987, it was the turn of the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia to organise the youth relay as part of the Day of Youth celebration. They invited the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective to participate. The poster announcing the event was produced by their design department, New Collectivism (Figure 5). Richard Klein's 1936 painting “The Third Reich. Allegory of Heroism” was used as the basis for the poster (Figure 6), with Nazi symbols replaced by Yugoslav ones. When this was publicly revealed, it evoked strong reactions from the entire Yugoslav public (New Collectivism, Dan mladosti [Day of Youth], 1987).
Art in the Service of Politics

The New Collectivism’s poster for the Day of Youth in 1987 (Figure 5) is a famous scandal, in which the collective used Richard Klein’s 1936 National Socialist painting “The Third Reich. Allegory of Heroism.” They replaced the key symbols – the National Socialist flag for the Yugoslav one, the eagle for a white dove symbolising peace, the fire in the torch with Plečnik’s (never built) Cathedral of Freedom, the 1947 plan for the Slovene Parliament. The Nazi coat of arms is replaced by the Yugoslav one, with six torches representing the six Yugoslav republics. They also added Mount Triglav as “another symbol of Yugoslavia” (Novi kolektivizem 2009b).

The NSK participated in the Relay of Youth, which was conceived as an agitation and propaganda of the Yugoslav regime and ideas. They were invited by the ZSMS, the youth wing of the Communist Party, as the event was organised annually by one of the country’s youth federations.13 The ZSMS was well aware of the nature of the work of the New Collectivism and had publicly supported the NSK in the past (Monroe 2005, 110). After all, ZSMS had commissioned the New Collectivism to design posters for youth work brigades from 1984 onwards.

The poster for the Day of Youth in 1987 was originally intended as a poster for a play designed by the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre, NSK’s theatre department, and directed by Dragan Živadinov. The theatre performance would take place on Lake Bohinj, with Plečnik’s Cathedral of Freedom in the middle, pontoon bridges would be built with crawlers, and 200 soldiers, 185 cm tall, would perform. Youth from all republics and provinces would gather at 6 a.m. and arrive by boats across Lake Bohinj to the pontoon bridges, stand in front of Plečnik’s Parliament of the Republic of Slovenia and dance the famous choreographies of biomechanical National Socialist, National Communist and Futurist concepts. As Dragan Živadinov (8:20–9:10) explains, the highlight of the event would be the descent of a naked young man – Borut Veselko – in a helicopter from Triglav, holding a relay baton in the shape of Plečnik’s Parliament. In the future, the performance was supposed to travel abroad, first to neighbouring countries, on the lakes of Austria and Italy. It would have been a great spectacle, like the traditionally spectacular performances for the Day of Youth at the Yugoslav People’s Army Stadium in Belgrade, but this performance

13 The history of relays is described by Nataša Štrlič (Štrlič 2009).
Figure 7. New Collectivism poster for the youth work brigades in 1984. The poster was commissioned by the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia. The authors used a portrait sculpture by the sculptor Arne Breker, who worked for the National Socialist German Party. His public sculptures were admired by the Nazi authorities, who saw them as the opposite of so-called degenerate modernist art. Source: New Collectivism.
Figure 8. The theatre department of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre created a spectacular theatre performance on Lake Bohinj for the celebration of the Day of Youth in 1987, which was never realised (NSK 1991b, 180–181).
was not conceived in the spirit of previous ones – the idea of touring abroad was particularly suspect. As the president of the ZSMS at the time, Tone Anderlič recalls, ZSMS liked the concept of the theatre performance, but saw it as a way of abolishing the Relay of Youth, which took place every year during or before the celebration of Tito’s birthday on May 25, and with it, a way of abolishing this celebration, along with some values and symbols that were no longer relevant (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 6:45–7:15). According to Ivan Novak, in the context of the NSK, they tried to re-romanticise a ritual to the point where it might actually abolish itself (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 6:35).

The Slovene proposal for a poster for the Day of Youth (Figure 5) was accepted by the Federal Relay Organising Committee, after Roman Uranjek had defended it on behalf of NSK (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 11:30–11:45). The Committee discussed the proposed poster, which was criticised for not being clear enough, for not being inviting, for not sufficiently expressing the spirit of the Day of Youth, for needing a lot of explaining, for its badge not being attractive to young people because of the black colour on a metallic background, which would make young people not want to wear them, as this is not the colour of youth. Interestingly, if the poster had been coloured, it would have been even closer to the original National Socialist image, which further confirms the similarities between the propaganda rhetoric of the two regimes, Communist and National Socialist. The Yugoslav People’s Army, through its representatives, also had a say in the federal committee that organised the relay. Uranjek defended the metallic colour by arguing that it suited comrade Tito because he was also a metalworker, which allegedly convinced General Adžić (who later, during the time of Slovenian liberation war, threatened to fight Slovenia “to the end”), to approve the poster (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 11:30–11:45).

NSK has therefore began to serve Yugoslavian politics. This is how the communists understood it. “By being selected in the 1987 competition of the youth political organisation, their work left the world of art and entered the world of politics in the extremely strained relations of the Yugoslavia of the time, which were an ominous sign of the possibility of conflict” (Kučan 2007). As the then president of the ZSMS explains, “We started from Triglav as a symbol of Yugoslavia at that time and also of Slovenia” and this was “a departure from the highest point in history” (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 9:10–9:20). The whole event was therefore conceived as a kind of journey into the past through the restoration of symbols and elements from political and artistic memory.
However, the Relay Organising Committee was not aware of the original painting on which the poster was based. But following the public disclosure of the connection to the National Socialist painting on 28 February 1987 in an article in the magazine *Politika*, the poster was rejected, and strong media reactions ensued. The question was even raised whether the threat of neo-Nazism in Slovenia was being manifested through the Neue Slowenische Kunst. On 3 April 1987, Slavoj Žižek, then a member of the League of Communists of Slovenia, provided a so-called semiological-Marxist defence of Neue Slowenische Kunst in the magazine *Mladina* in response to those who wondered whether Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective were neo-Nazis. The poster affair acted as a *point de capiton* on the advocates of the persecution, as a remnant of reality where things were supposed to finally show their true colours – in this case, the true image of Slovenia. But the poster turns the opponents into “naive imbeciles” who are giving in to their fascination with Nazi symbolism. The poster or the spectacle of the Neue Slowenische Kunst transfers to the other its own “imbecility,” its own helplessness in coping with the feeling of an “endless nightmare” or (to use a psychoanalytic term) the unbearable core of pleasure (Žižek 2015, 173).

According to Aleš Erjavec, the poster affair raised a number of questions about Yugoslav political reality, its ideals, and their symbolic representation (Erjavec 2003b, 61). But how to understand the NSK’s criticism of the dominant Yugoslav political regime, discourse and ideology, taking into account that the collective was under the patronage of Slovenia’s political leadership? Milan Kučan, then President of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia (Centralni komite Zveze komunistov Slovenije – CK ZKS), claims that he was not aware of the poster’s resemblance to the National Socialist painting, but was only informed that it was a remake of a National Socialist painting by Slobodan Milošević in a late-night call to his home phone. Milošević was informed about the matter by the Counterintelligence Service (Kontraobveščevalna služba – KOS). The affair merely confirmed rumours already circulating in Belgrade that the political leadership of the Slovene Youth Organisation was using Nazi symbols and ideology, which, according to Kučan’s interpretation, was a serious accusation. He was surprised and began to pay attention to the matter (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 12:50–13:40).

I invited the members of the youth organisation for a talk. I wanted to understand the reasons for selecting the controversial poster. In particular, I wanted to know whether they knew they selected a copy of a Nazi poster. Was
it purely a matter of posturing? Did they not care how it was received by people outside their circles? Did they think about the opportunities they were offering on a platter to politicians who wanted to silence Slovenia? I also wanted to know how close allies are we and how much trust there is between us. I was left convinced that they did not know the origin of the poster. It was only many years later that I learned that this was not the case. (Kučan 2007)

CK ZKS called the ZSMS leadership to account, and according to Jožef Školč (president of the ZSMS in 1988–1989), they were instructed to dissociate themselves from the campaign and to condemn the new collectivists. “We succeeded in moving this discussion from the political to the aesthetic field, and when this happened – and here various philosophers, the engaged Slovene critical public and Škuc were involved – it was simply a victory for us” (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 14:10–14:40, 16.35–17:20).

After this, the NSK’s work supposedly finally moved into the sphere of pure art, helped by the youth wing of the Party. But there are two political issues at work that were challenged by the NSK collective. One political issue concerns National Socialist symbols and the similarities between the propaganda rhetoric of the National Socialist and Communist regimes, which are demonstrated by the fact that the poster was accepted by the Relay Organising Committee. In this respect, it appears that ZSMS took advantage of the situation to wage a political struggle. Školč says that the poster was only an illustration of everything and only later took on a central role, “but it was really a political conflict” (Balantič and Zupé 2017, 9:20–9:35). This was similar to the developments with the 57th issue of *Nova revija*, which, as Niko Grafenauer suggests, came in handy for the liberal fraction of the Slovene Communist Party, because

it supported that communist group which, in contrast to the centralists, sensed the disintegration processes in the Yugoslav Party well enough and later directly fostered them through the so-called intra-party alternative produced by the former ZSMS. (Grafenauer 1994, 2)

In this sense, the performance of the NSK in Slovenia, at least between 1984 and 1987, can also be understood as in the service of, or the exploitation of the artistic collective for the political game between the “old communists” and the “young communists” in the sense of the situation described by Grafenauer, where “the Slovene nationalcentric party nomenclature took the initiative in the struggle for power over the rigid centralists” (Grafenauer 1994, 2). However,
the ZSMS was also part of the communist leadership, and it was presumably precisely because the ZSMS had appropriated the NSK collective and understood their work as in service of politics that the political leadership did not respond with greater repression of the NSK members and their work. While members of the collective were interrogated, only Dragan Živadinov was imprisoned and beaten. The activities of the NSK, their performances and their name were not banned. Instead, according to the explanation of the ZSMS, the NSK collective managed to negotiate with the political leadership a “transition” into the sphere of pure art, which meant the political redemption of the artists.

Another political issue addressed by the NSK is related to the Slovene national question. In 1987, the Slovene political leadership – the CK ZKS and the SZDL – did not support the Slovene national programme, but rejected it (Osterman et al. 1994, 46–91). Emphasising Slovene identity was not desirable in these circumstances, it was criticised as nationalistic and could be perceived as a threat to Yugoslavism and the Yugoslav regime. In this spirit, the “contributions to the Slovene national programme,” which were published simultaneously in the 57th issue of Nova revija, were disqualified as a nationalist position, a counterpart to the Serbian Memorandum, even though according to Niko Grafenauer, the managing editor of Nova revija, who was dismissed together with the editor-in-chief Dimitrij Rupel after the publication of the 57th issue of the magazine, in the case of Slovenes, it was about protecting national identity, whereas in the case of the Serbs it was about a hegemonic “Greater Serbia” programme (Grafenauer 1994, 2). The disqualification of “contributions to the Slovene national programme” showed that it was strategically less dangerous at that time to be more cautious in the homeland in terms of identifying with the Slovene “national Thing,” which was the case with Laibach and NSK, especially in comparison to their international performances (I address specific examples in the section Slovene Question).

As Monroe notes, NSK gradually became mainstream art in the 1980s (2005, 110). How did the more prominent aesthetes read NSK’s approach during this period? Marina Gržinić explains that in the 1980s, the formation of NSK brought about the emergence of an alternative subcultural movement in Ljubljana. According to her interpretation, NSK projects contributed to the rapid disintegration of the aesthetics and ethical standards of communist

14 In the summer of that year, Dragan Živadinov was imprisoned and physically and mentally ill-treated, but this allegedly had to do with his conscription into the army, to which he did not respond (Krečič 2009, 29).
culture and identity. Laibach staged a (hyper)literal re-enactment of totalitarian rituals and, instead of direct subversion, confronted us with an almost fanatical identification with the totalitarian ritual performed on stage. Or, as Gržinič summarises Žižek, Laibach staged the phantasmatic structure of totalitarian power in all its obscure ambiguities and in all its unconscious moments of obscenity; obsenities that power structures must constantly conceal in order to reproduce themselves (Gržinič 2003, 247–252). As Aleš Erjavec notes, Laibach was more socialist than socialism itself. According to his interpretation, the NSK were an important component of civil society and the political processes that led to Slovenia’s independence (Erjavec 2003b, 61).

Revision of Political Memory and Dismantling of the Identities Constructed in It in Favour of Imagining the Slovene Nation

Rhetorical ambiguity and semantic elusiveness are essential to the performance of the entire NSK. Laibach and NSK have aesthetically perfected the semantic elusiveness. Through its consistent building of ambiguity and contradiction in its messaging, NSK produces interpretatively relatively open artistic products, in the sense of the openness of works of art as interpreted by Umberto Eco (Eco 1989)\textsuperscript{15} and Roland Barthes. Barthes explained the modernist text as “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 1977b, 146). In the rhetoric constructed by Laibach and the NSK as a whole, different messages speak simultaneously and can come into conflict with each other. Barthes concluded that a modern text’s “unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1995, 148). It is precisely this ambiguousness of NSK texts, which can result in different “unities of reading,” that makes it possible to explain why their messages are not always understood in the same way by their recipients.\textsuperscript{16} The argument that based on the retrogardist principle, the New Collectivism’s poster “can be interpreted in many ways,” was also part of the defence against the lawsuit, which was withdrawn by the Slovene public prosecutor a year later (Krečič 2009, 29).

\textsuperscript{15} For my detailed analyse of the Umberto Eco’s concept of open work and the connection between the openness of artworks and the possible link between open artwork and politics, see Tratnik 2021, 161–180.

\textsuperscript{16} Laibach is also appropriated by far-right groups, which Laibach does not seem to approve of (cf. Milekic 2015). The model of community building they present contributes significantly to this appropriation: from uniforms, putting the collective before the individuals, internal cohesion, proud attitude and use of community symbols, to assertive, self-confident performance and militant music that gives the audience courage.
Through the various “connotators”\(^{17}\) which it uses in visuals, music, artistic and other texts, in the symbols used, in the overall rhetoric of its performances, including body postures, ways of speaking or singing, and the use of light and uniforms, the NSK art collective draws on collective memory. Unlike those artistic contributions that were in direct service to the state for the construction of national identity and therefore support the construction of nationhood, the NSK relies on symbols and iconography that have already been constructed, i.e. including those produced in the process of the construction of Yugoslav nationhood. In this sense, what they do is a revision of collective memory and a dismantling of previously constructed identities. This is also evident in their use of the technique of replacing or rewriting symbols, by which the New Collectivism invokes the partisan interventions of rewriting German symbols from the war. These interventions can be read as a symbolic victory or liberation from occupation and thus as a contribution to the construction of political memory in the function of building a community with a certain identity. In its statement regarding the poster, the group explains that the swastika was covered by a five-pointed star, “inspired by the night-time illegal action of the partisans who destroyed fascist memorials with a red star” (New Collectivism 2009b). In this sense, according to the New Collectivism’s interpretation in response to the criticisms of the Republic Committee of ZSMS (Republiški komite Zveze socialistične mladine Slovenije – RK ZSMS), the poster does not denigrate the struggle of the Yugoslav peoples and nationalities against fascism – on the contrary, it serves as a warning and protects the expansion of democratisation, and encourages the development of a pluralism of self-management interests, both social as well as artistic and cultural, in the present times of crisis and upheaval.

(The New Collectivism 2009b)

Zoran Terzić writes that Laibach or NSK used the iconography of totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and Stalinism) as a reference to past traumas. Official Yugoslav communist executives, however, largely understood Laibach’s works as representing trauma themselves by appealing to nationalist and separatist rhetoric (Terzić 2005, 247). But I cannot agree with Terzić’s conclusion that it is wrong to take seriously artistic conceptions that are even counterfactual, i.e. by thinking of them as representations of reality. Terzić argues that it is a mistake to understand artistic conceptions as political programmes (Terzić 2005, 249).

\(^{17}\) “Connotators” are signifiers that evoke connoted meanings.
In this paper I argue that art cannot be understood completely in isolation from society, i.e. as a symbolic action that has no direct connection with society and the constitution of community. Nor does it make sense to draw a strict line between historical reality and collective memory. On the contrary, art makes an important contribution to the formation of collective memory and to the construction of identities, which is essential for social reality.

In an influential work that introduced a complex discourse on cultural memory in 1999, Aleida Assmann presented how artists shape “our” memory. She examined how fiction and art are rooted in and preoccupied with questions of personal, political and cultural memory (Assmann 2013, xi). She discussed various media that provide material support to the underlying cultural memory. She focused on writing, on the image, on the body, and on the sites of memory (Assmann 2013, 11, 12). Laibach and NSK use all these and other media to address memory. Performing in military uniforms with a deliberate use of light and a commanding voice in German evoke eerie feelings for the Slovene population of the 1980s, as they trigger the reliving of the collective memory of the experience with the terrifying German army during the occupation of Slovenia in World War II, as these performances were consolidated in the collective memory by the popular post-war cultural production in the service of nation-building. Yugoslav nationality after World War II was largely established through the representation of the enemy as the occupier of the homeland. The demonised representation of the occupier was essential for the construction of the myth of brotherhood and unity and functioned as a border-defining mechanism that also relied on instilling fear in the population.

A part of the Slovene public was distinctly unsympathetic towards the NSK collective, especially the Laibach group in the 1980s. They recognised the images of Nazism from the collective memory in their performances. Laibach’s first performance and exhibition in September 1980 (a good two months after the group was founded) were banned for illegal and irresponsible use of symbols, and on 20 July 1983, the SZDL banned the group from using its name. The name Laibach first appears in 1144 as the name for the “city by the river,” during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy it is used alongside the Slovene name Ljubljana as the German name for the city and reappears after the capitulation of Italy in 1943 as in a defence of the Third Reich. The NSK, especially Laibach and the New Collectivism, used the names Laibach, as well as Neue Slowenische
Kunst\textsuperscript{18} in their performances and artistic actions to draw on the traumatic representations of the Slovene nation from the past, as they were vivid in the collective memory of the 1980s. They not only evoked the threat of devastating consequences for the Slovene nation in the event of a German war victory, but also the centuries-long efforts of Slovenes to recognise and preserve elements of Slovene culture, above all the language, under the Habsburg rule (a memory that the NSK group also articulates comprehensively in its acknowledgment and appeal upon receiving the Golden Bird Award on May 25, 1987), and later increasingly also in the context of the SFRY (which was clearly demonstrated by the attempt to introduce common core curricula in education).

Let’s take a closer look at how the positioning of “Germanness” in relation to “Sloveneness” works on several levels. The naming of the band itself with a German name for Ljubljana and the Neue Slowenische Kunst place Sloveneness under German domination. For Slovenes, the connotation of stereotyping the Slovene nation as historically largely subordinate to the Germans is uncomfortable and revives the self-image of the nation as a victim. Germanness in relation to the Slovene nation also revives the stereotyping of the Slovene nation as Germanic Slavs. It invokes the image of the Slovenes as those who themselves have embraced German identity and are pejoratively called \textit{nemškutarji} (“Germanisers”). The use of German also in the lyrics of the songs and the allusions to the German National Socialist army through the use of clothes as uniforms, the similarities in the symbols and the posture of the Laibach members \textit{put forward the thesis} that Slovenia, and with it the Slovene nation, are Germanic. Therefore, they cannot be Slovene. Due to the specific Yugoslav context and the recurrent political problems with Belgrade’s centralism, the stereotyping of Slovene inferiority and the occupation of the Slovene nation by other nations in the 1980s could also be understood in relation to the position of the Slovene nation and Slovenia in the SFRY. However, it is precisely this thesis – that there is no “Sloveneness” at all, but that the Slovene nation is always subject to the domination of other nations – \textit{that triggers an antithesis that is affirmative towards Sloveneness} and appeals to Slovenes to reject stereotypes of Slovene inferiority in relation to other nations and a lack of national selfconfidence. This appeal is aided by the militant confidence of Laibach, which, as recognised by Monroe, for example, shatters the stereotype of the Slovenes as unassertive provincials (Monroe 2005, 133).

\textsuperscript{18}The name \textit{Neue Slowenische Kunst} comes from the title of a series of lectures given by Ferdo Delak in Berlin in 1928. It was proposed by Dragan Živadinov.
In their reply to the formal response of the Presidency of the RK ZSMS to their poster for the Day of Youth, the New Collectivism presented its positions and demands, which were published in the newspaper *Gorenjski glas*, 6 March 1987 (Krečič 2009, 12).
In this sense, Laibach and NSK, in the context of SFRY before its dissolution, *contribute after all to the imagining of the Slovene community as a nation on its own territory*. The resistance to totalitarianism and commanding domination provoked by Laibach and NSK’s presentation was complemented by the desire for emancipation. Therefore, this strong aesthetic evocation of trauma, which was also felt physically during Laibach’s performance, indirectly contributed to the idea of Slovene nationhood, i.e. an independent Slovene state.

In response to the statement of the RK ZSMS Presidency on 28 February 1987, New Collectivism explained its artistic techniques of replacing the symbols on the poster, stating: “It is time for our youth, together with the entire social public, to speak out about the trauma of any repression, and in doing so, to re-evaluate and destroy it” (New Collectivism 2009b). The group goes even further in its rejection of the view that “the proposal for the poster is a plagiarism of the Nazi painting, in which the Nazi symbols are merely replaced by Yugoslav ones” in the “positions and demands” document of March 2, 1987. Here they state that they are using the principle of counterpointing symbols, a wellknown principle in art. As an example of the use of this technique, they cite “a series of posters of occupied nations in the struggle against fascism, on which the symbols of national resistance are placed in direct conflict with the typical symbols of fascism.” The NSK was aware that youth “are brought up with the idea that the trauma of fascism must not be forgotten, because forgetting allows history to repeat itself”, which is why they were convinced that “youth must talk about the traumas of the past if they want to talk about their future” (New Collectivism 2009a).

**Conclusion**

Laibach and NSK evoked a repressed but essentially present self-image of the historically everpresent subordination of the Slovene nation to other nations, which contributed to the formation of a collective political complex of Slovene subservience and inadequacy. The evocation of this political representation by the artistic collective, especially Laibach, in the manner of reviving and dismantling iconography and rhetoric was not pleasant, but it did trigger a revision of collective remembering and an assessment of Slovenia’s current position and the Slovene nation’s potential for national liberation.
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