doi:10.32020/ArtandDoc/32/2025/7

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ART ON THE EDGE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: MARINA GRŽINIĆ, NECROREALISM, AND RETRO-AVANT-GARDE

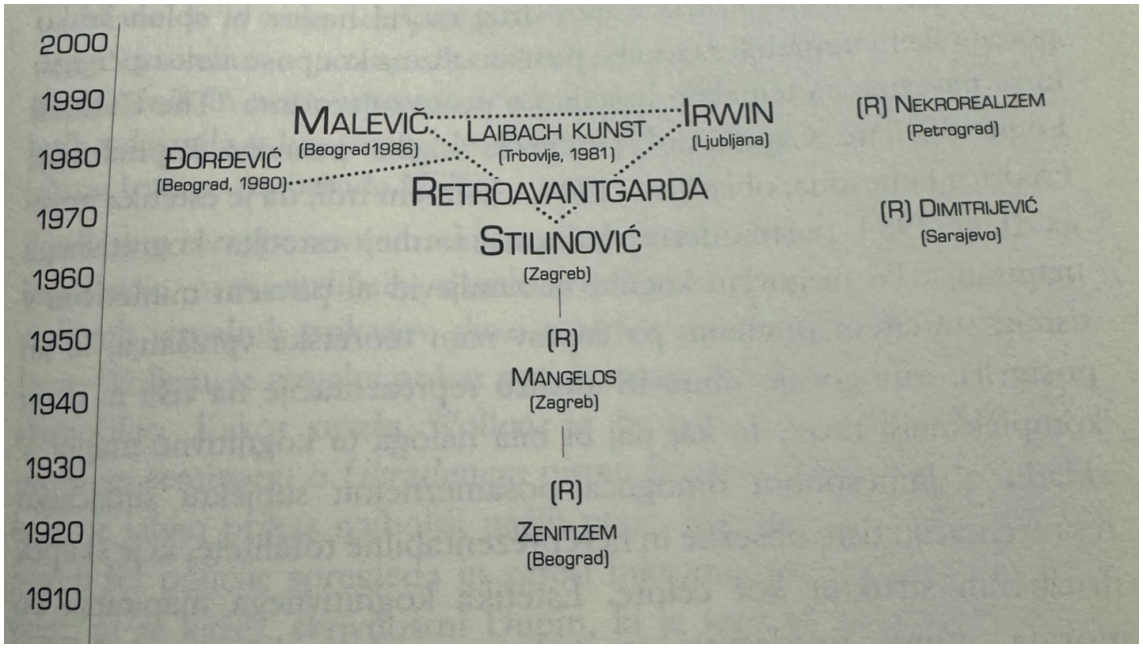
After extensive conversations with Marina Gržinić, an artist, theorist, (alternative) curator, and activist, conducted during the realization of the project *Dissident Histories. Insurgent Futurities (Historie Dysydenckie. Rewolucje Przyszłości)* and the symposium *Images for the Politics of the Future* [2] in Gdańsk in the autumn and winter of 2024, it became evident that the relatively unexplored intersection between two subcultures, the Ljubljana Alternative Scene in Slovenia and Leningrad/St. Petersburg Necrorealism, warrants closer examination. Both movements were active during the 1980s and 1990s and played a crucial role in shaping alternative cultural practices within the post-socialist context.

The alternative culture and art scene (the subculture) in Ljubljana, with Marina Gržinić as one of its central figures, provided a space for exploring sexuality, innovative artistic methods, and subversive cultural movements. Through her close collaboration with the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK, New Slovenian Art) collective, Gržinić made significant contributions to the formulation of theoretical frameworks, most notably the concept of the retro-avant-garde. This theoretical approach emphasizes a new form of avant-garde that specifically engages with the past in order to reimagine the future. Our discussions also addressed the role of Necrorealism as a critical framework for understanding the broader artistic and cultural dynamics of this era. This article represents the culmination of our collaborative efforts.

The Ljubljana Alternative Scene or Subculture in the 1980s (Slovenia)

1. Punk, LGBT, ŠKUC Gallery, VHS (Home Video)

In the 1980s, Ljubljana emerged as a central hub for subcultural and artistic practices that combined the aesthetics of the punk movement, political activism, and experimentation with new technological media. During this period, a space was created where political imagination and aesthetics intersected, leading to innovative forms of artistic expression and sociopolitical



Marina Gržinić, *Rekonstruirana fikcija. Novi mediji, (video)umetnost. Retroavantgarda. Eseji o teoriji, politiki in estetiki* (diagram) [1]

resistance. The introduction of VHS (home video) technology, a key medium of the time, enabled affordable and rapid production, distribution, and reinterpretation of visual content, providing artists with an effective tool to critically engage with and respond to the social and political transformations taking place. The alternative scene in Ljubljana, defined by the interplay of cultural and aesthetic-political practices, acted as a critical response to the ideological constraints imposed by both the Eastern and Western blocs of the time. Notably, the broader subculture was primarily shaped by the practices of LGBTQIA+ communities, visual and video art, theoretical discourses, and punk, which held a particularly prominent position within the scene.

This creative energy also manifested in spaces such as the ŠKUC (Student Cultural and Artistic Centre) Gallery, which became a hub for artists, musicians, and thinkers. The punk scene, with its DIY ethic, music, and provocative performances, had a significant impact on the development of critical thought and artistic practices that challenged the hegemony of socialist ideology. In Ljubljana, punk evolved from being a musical movement into a political and cultural tool for articulating social resistance. It played a key role in transforming the city from a provincial environment into an urban center of countercultural practices, where subversive ideas, theory, and aesthetics converged.[3]

Sztuka i Dokumentacja nr 32 (2025) | *Art and Documentation* no. 32 (2025) • ISSN 2080-413X • e-ISSN 2545-0050 • doi:10.32020/ARTandDOC

2. NSK

An important figure within the Ljubljana alternative scene or subculture in the 1980s was the collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), which brought together key groups such as Laibach, Irwin, and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (later Noordung). NSK's artistic interventions, characterized by the appropriation of totalitarian symbolism and aesthetics, as well as performative and conceptual methodologies, provided a profound critique and deconstruction of dominant ideological narratives. While punk found a visceral expression in Laibach's industrial noise,[4] Gržinić argues that the Irwin-NSK framework remained a predominantly male, heterosexual structure, lacking critical reflection on sexuality,[5] gender, and discriminated minorities. Ultimately, it failed to transcend its inherent limitations in addressing LGBTQIA+ subcultures and marginalized perspectives.

3. Marina Gržinić

Gržinić made a significant contribution to the alternative scene or subculture of Ljubljana in the 1980s. Through her theoretical work and artistic practices, she created a space in her video art for a critical discourse on post-socialist reality and the potential of art as a political instrument. By combining documentary and fictional elements with innovative VHS techniques, in collaboration with Aina Šmid, she laid the foundation for further research into visual language, politics, and technology, which has had a lasting influence on her projects from the 1990s to the present day.

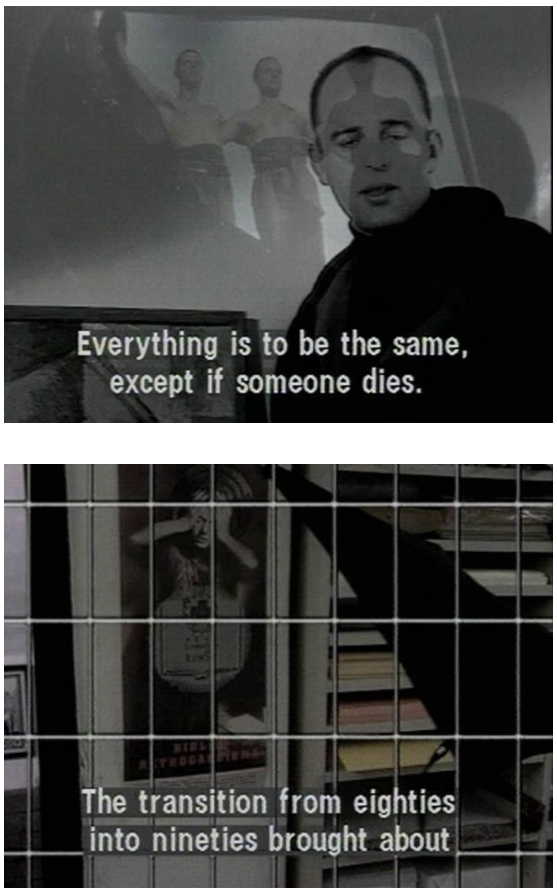
During the 1980s, the duo produced experimental video films such as *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death* (*Ikone glamurja, odmevi smrti*, 1982), *Threat of the Future* (*Grožnja prihodnosti*, 1983), *Cindy Sherman or Hysteria Production Presents the Reconstruction of Cindy Sherman's Photographs* (*Cindy Sherman ali histerija produkcija predstavlja rekonstrukcijo fotografij Cindy Sherman*, 1984), *Moments of Decision* (*Trenutki odločitve*, 1985), and *The Girl with the Orange* (*Deklica z oranžo*, 1987).[6] These films explored themes including sexual identity, social norms, and the impact of technology on society.

In addition to her artistic work, Gržinić made a decisive contribution to the understanding and articulation of avant-garde practices within the Slovenian and Eastern European contexts through her theoretical work. Her analysis of the NSK (New Slovenian Art) collective emphasized the group's primary work, which was infused with critical reflections on the existing power structures within the institution of art, as well as a critical reflection of NSK itself through complex conceptual projects. Known for its appropriation of totalitarian symbolism and aesthetics, NSK allowed Gržinić to rethink the future development of avant-garde practices.

Necrorealism (Leningrad/ St. Petersburg)

Necrorealism was part of Leningrad's parallel cinema (*параллельное кино*) movement of the 1980s, which in the Soviet Union was understood not only as experimental but also as an independent cinematic movement. Emerging outside the state-controlled Soviet film industry (*Goskino*), it was entirely self-funded. This movement opposed the official film production of the time, offering alternative visions and innovative approaches to filmmaking.

In the mid-1980s, artists from Leningrad's underground scene relied on accessible materials to express their ideas, including discarded or expired film stock salvaged from the 'waste bins' of the Lenfilm studio. These low-budget *samizdat* short films, primarily shot on 8mm or 16mm film, were often created in remote locations, abandoned spaces, or natural settings, and were later screened in private apartments, where they remained shielded from the scrutiny of



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Irwin: Transcentrala. NSK State in Time*, 1993

state authorities.[7] By the early 1990s, these films had largely failed to reach official distribution, as dissemination was hindered, and it was only with the wider adoption of VHS technology that the circulation of these independent films became significantly easier. Gržinić:

> The so-called 'first line' totalitarian socialist Eastern European countries (i.e., Russia/USSR, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, etc.) suffered a delay of a whole decade in developing art connected to the electronic media, including the use of video as a social tool, in comparison with Poland, Hungary and especially ex-Yugoslavia. This delay was due to the repressive nature of the communist state in these countries, which executed an almost bloodthirsty control of art and cultural productions, not only over the written word, but especially over instant visual reproductive media and technologies (e.g., copy machines, VHS and even Polaroid photography). The severe censorship of literature was easily extended to cover visual reproductive technology.[8]

The main ideologist and representative of Necrorealism was Evgeny "Yufa" Yufit, around whom a group of young Leningrad nonconformists began to gather in the early 1980s. Among them were punk musician Andrey Panov, known as "Pig" (later the leader of the Soviet punk band Automatic Satisfiers [*Автоматические удовлетворители*]), artists Igor Kotelnikov and Timur Novikov from the New Artists group (*Новые художники*, 1982–1987), and members of the independent film scene, such as director, screenwriter, and film critic Sergey Dobrotvorsky from the Che-Paev group (*Че-Паев*), as well as artist Evgeny "Debil" Kondratyev with his New Wild Cinema (*Новое дикое кино*). Yufit, who began his artistic journey with street performances and experimental photography, turned his focus more intensively to filmmaking in 1984. That same year, he founded the first autonomous and independent film production studio in the Soviet Union - Mzhalalafilm (*Мжалалафильм*).[9] This was a groundbreaking moment, as the studio facilitated the development of alternative cinematic practices that evaded state control and official ideology. In addition to Yufit, other significant artists contributed to shaping the Necrorealist aesthetic, including Leonid "Trupyr" Konstantinov, Vladimir Kustov, Sergey Serp, Igor Bezrukov, and Yuri "Tsirkul" Krasev. Konstantinov, whose painting *In the Reeds* became the logo of Mzhalalafilm, combined grotesque and primitivism in his work, exploring themes of mortal wounds and decay. Kustov investigated the 'corridor of dying' as a metaphor for the transition between life and death, while

Sztuka i Dokumentacja nr 32 (2025) | *Art and Documentation* no. 32 (2025) • ISSN 2080-413X • e-ISSN 2545-0050 • doi:10.32020/ARTandDOC





Necrorealism, Evgeny "Yufa" Yufit, *The Woodcutter*, 1983–1985

Bezrukov's films and paintings addressed floating corpses and dismemberment.[10]

Yufit's early films, such as *The Woodcutter* (*Лесоруб*, 1983–1985), *The Werewolf Orderlies* (*Санитары-оборотни*, 1984), and *Spring* (*Весна*, 1987), filled with the so-called 'trash aesthetics' of punk culture, address fundamental themes of life and death in art while parodying the artistic discourse in Soviet art, which often gravitated toward political correctness and was steeped in ideology and propagandistic messaging. He drew inspiration for his work from various sources, including the *Atlas of Forensic Medicine* by the 19th-century Austrian physician Eduard von Hoffmann, as well as the raw, brutal, yet melancholic atmosphere of Leningrad and its suburbs. His cinematic aesthetic was shaped by influences from the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, such as German Expressionism and French Surrealism, while also borrowing from the heroic aesthetics of Soviet films, which celebrated death as the ultimate act of sacrifice for collective socialist ideals. Both Yufit and other Necrorealists subversively rejected this heroic Soviet aesthetic, demystifying and parodying it through grotesque, cynical, and anti-heroic depictions of death.[11] At the same time, Yufit's films tackled taboo subjects in Soviet society, such as violence, brutal murders, suicides, homoeroticism, homosexuality, and gerontocracy, exposing the hidden fractures and internal conflicts within the Soviet system.

Yufit's *The Woodcutter*, an aesthetic manifesto, is a radical example of early Necrorealism, combining grotesque, absurdity, and social critique in just eight minutes. The film opens with scenes of a murdered artist in a studio, where among the displayed objects, dead toys - symbols of Soviet childhood - stand out prominently. What follows is a series of brutal and chaotic scenes of violence, including brawls, murders, and suicides, emphasizing the absurdity and decadence of Soviet society. The film concludes with archival footage of Soviet pioneers releasing white doves, offering an ironic commentary on the idealized future propagated by Soviet ideology. The collapse of Soviet ideology and its inability to renew itself created fertile ground for the emergence of Necrorealism, which, with its radically grotesque aesthetics and social critique, redefined political and artistic resistance of the time. Gržinić:

> Eastern European video productions of the 1990s appear to have developed visualization strategies even more radically than those seen a decade earlier in former Yugoslavia, particularly in Slovenia. This evolution aligns with the Russian aesthetic and philosophical paradigms of the 1990s, which were shaped in the 1980s under the framework of Necrorealism. These aspects are also applicable to the works of Hungarian(-)Romanian video artist Csilla Könczei (b. 1963).[12]

One of the key characteristics of Necrorealist films, established by Evgeny Yufit, is their minimalist and documentary aesthetic, which radically transcends traditional cinematic forms. These films are recognizable for their absence of musical accompaniment and synchronized sound, where unnatural speech symbolizes the negation of human individuality. The camera is static and documentary in nature, and the film's conclusion coincides with the turning off of the camera. The aesthetics of Necrorealism dissolve the boundaries between observer and observed, presenting death as a process rather than a symbol - it is embedded in both the materiality of the film stock and the visual imagery. This creates a paradoxical vision of life in which death remains a constant and inseparable shadow of everyday existence.

Peter Weibel,[13] in his concept of 'death as the capital of culture,' emphasizes that art is not merely a representation of death but a means of transforming it into a tool of subversion and cultural resistance. Yufit's films portray death as a process - rooted in the materiality of film and its visual imagery - and use it to deconstruct Soviet heroic aesthetics. This transformation of death into political and cultural subversion

affirms Weibel's thesis that art positions death as a central concept of culture and simultaneously as a universal symbol of the disintegration of ideological structures.[14] In this context, Necrorealist aesthetics go beyond traditional artistic frameworks, opening new spaces for the critique of social and ideological structures, closely tied to the historical context of the Brezhnev-era stagnation. This period introduced a sense of frozen time and the illusion of an immobile future, which became critical for the development of Necrorealist strategies. Necrorealism can also be understood as a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, where economic and social stagnation deepened the sense of emptiness and uncertainty, solidifying the aesthetics of stagnation as a defining feature of the era.[15] The specific influence of stagnation on collective and individual consciousness has been precisely articulated by Viktor Mazin, who highlights that the era was marked by the suspension of time, the illusion of immobility, and the predictability of the future.

> A distinctive feature of this period was, among other things, the actual suspension of time: ideologically, it became evident that the promised arrival of communism - the dreamlike goal toward which all social movements had aspired - would never materialize. As a result, there was no meaningful direction to pursue, and time seemed to have come to a permanent halt. On the other hand, the tangible absence of time and change aligned with a sense of the future being already present in the here and now. Every member of society knew not only what they would be doing in ten years, the pension they would receive in twenty years, and where they would live in thirty years, but also where they would be buried, how much their funeral would cost, and who would attend the ceremony.[16]

This description precisely captures the spirit of the time when life unfolded in an endless loop with no hope for social or personal transformation. Such an atmosphere created fertile ground for the development of Necrorealist artistic expressions. It became clear that the promised communism would never materialize, while members of society already knew their predetermined futures, evoking a profound sense of inevitable stagnation. Necrorealism, Parallel Cinema, and other forms of Leningrad's underground became sanctuaries for artists who, despite a lack of resources, created unique visions reflecting the social and cultural upheavals of the Soviet Union's final years. Yufit's films are now recognized as avant-garde, unconventional, and cinematically subversive, even though they remained largely inaccessible until the late 1980s.

> In the late 1980s and 1990s, after the fall of communism, it became impossible to prevent the transfer of Necrorealist films onto video formats, enabling their distribution and presentation at Western European festivals of video art, experimental works, and media productions. [17]

Shortly after Necrorealist creativity was first introduced to the public, the creators of this style, particularly Yufit, were attacked by representatives of the Russian media, critics, as well as psychologists and psychiatrists. The artists were accused of mental illness and necrophilia. Yufit recalls this period as follows:

> When our films finally appeared at screenings, it always ended in a scandal. Plates and glasses were flying in restaurants; it was like being at a sports match. Once, we went to the city of Vyatka to present films titled *The Killers of Urine* and *The Werewolf Orderlies at the House of Composers*. The young composers in the audience were terribly outraged: 'What kind of hooliganism is this?' They even wanted to beat us

> up, but one of our colleagues, who looked like a security guard, calmed them down. Suddenly, policemen entered the hall and interrupted the screening. They ordered us to show our work permits. None of us had them with us, but one colleague presented hers, which read: 'Night cleaner in a sauna.' We were lucky they didn't lock us up in a psychiatric hospital.[18]

Meeting of Slovenian and Russian Artists

In the spring of 1993, Irwin, as part of NSK, developed the concept of *The State in Time*,[19] which emerged during the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Eastern European transitions. The concept was first presented in May 1992 in Moscow as part of the *APT-ART* (*квартирное искусство*)[20] project, whose primary goal was to facilitate communication and the exchange of artistic experiences between two regions that, despite some similarities, were markedly different. Irwin's Moscow Embassy project, styled after the concept of apartment art, took place in a private apartment on Lenin Prospect - a symbol of Soviet ideological and urban heritage - which, for a month, became the embassy of *The State in Time*.[21] This artistic installation was designed as a space for discussions, exhibitions, and performances. Irwin's paintings from the *Capital* series were displayed, alongside theatrical and video productions. During the event, artists and critics from Ljubljana and Moscow, including Gržinić, drafted the *Moscow Declaration*,[22] which emphasized the importance of the historical, social, and cultural experiences of Eastern European countries in the 20th century for shaping a new identity. This identity transcends local specificity, acquiring universal significance. The declaration advocates reflecting on the past as a foundation for transforming the East and developing subjectivity that incorporates experiences with authoritarian regimes and collective memories. Simultaneously, it calls for the creation of new social, political, and cultural infrastructures that reflect shared European and global values. This was not the only collaborative project. In June 1992, Slovenian and Russian artists organized a happening that combined performance, visual art, and historical references. The central event took place on Red Square in Moscow, where the artists unfurled an enormous black square - symbolizing Malevich's suprematist ideas - and, with the help of the audience, transformed it into an artistic act.

> The Black Square, initially rolled up like a burial shroud to facilitate its transport from the bus, is unfolded by countless hands and rotated clockwise. Once unfurled in the heart of Red Square, it exerts the effect Malevich originally envisioned: it is mysterious, radiant, and possesses an indefinable power. Hundreds of people gathered along its edges embody the suprematist archetype. Cameraman Ubald Trnkoczy remarked that they looked like "a swarm of ants around a giant sugar cube."[23]

Transcentrala

A year later, in 1993, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid created the documentary-artistic video project *Irwin: Transcentrala. NSK State in Time* (1993). Gržinić:

> In the 1990s, one of the main directions of their work was reconstruction, repetition, and intentional redundancy of the grammar of contemporary art. This approach particularly focused on the recontextualization of the NSK movement - especially Irwin's work - within the frameworks of art, history, and politics. [24]

The project explores the structure of the utopian NSK State and raises questions about its self-establishment. The central symbol, the

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Studio Mzhalalafilm (*Мжалалафильм*)

cross,[25] which rotates around three axes, is transformed in the film into a swastika in space, symbolizing the concept of *Transcentrala*. The opening scene, utilizing optical illusion, emphasizes this transformation and lays the foundation for exploring NSK's ideological and visual symbolism. Through statements from movement members, the film provides insights into the concept of *The State in Time* while analysing visual politics, political utopianism, and the ideological subjugation of the individual. It also examines the concepts of NSK as an organism and a bridge, which emerged in the 1980s as a social and artistic experiment and, in the 1990s, turned eastward, highlighting the role of ideology in art - a role NSK members, as Miran Mohor notes, understood far better than their Western counterparts.[26] From Moscow's perspective, Ljubljana is portrayed as the most peripheral part of the totalitarian system, emphasizing its knowledge of Western art, which surpasses the understanding of art in other communist states. The film delves into the relationships between space, time, and movement, the interpretation of signs/symbols, and the role of the author and the collective. The *State in Time* project is also a response to the political and social changes of the early 1990s, marked by war, nationalism, and the establishment of new states, offering a critical reflection on the state as a form rooted in ideology.[27] Irwin understood ideological art as one-dimensional, merely illustrating narratives, while the movement between spaces creates the true story. The film

Retroavantgarde, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin*, 1997

documents how NSK envisioned a traveling embassy in Moscow, intended to traverse not only Europe but also America, from East to West (*Transnacionala* project).[28] This project involved various U.S. artists connected by shared symbols and meanings that gave the journey its purpose.

Art is closely tied to its relationship with space and time (e.g., Weimar's Bauhaus or Moscow's Suprematism). NSK's project enters the concept of 'temporal space,' while Dragan Živadinov, who announces his spectacle at the end of the film, raises the question of 'space in time.' This duality transcends mere artistic form, addressing relationships between history, ideology, and visual symbolism. Gržinić:

> In the film *Irwin: Transcentrala. NSK State in Time,* theater director Dragan Živadinov from the group *Noordung Cabinet* describes one of his projects - a visionary trajectory of theatrical performances spanning decades. When Živadinov presented this idea in 1993, it seemed almost mythical, but over time it began to take shape as a reality:
> "The premiere will take place on April 20, 1995, in Ljubljana. Twelve actors, all from Ljubljana, will perform. The theme of the performance will be William Shakespeare. The next performance will occur ten years later, in 2005, with the same actors, at the same place, at the same time, in the same costumes, and on the same stage. Everything will remain the same, except in cases where an actor has died. In such instances, the deceased actor will be

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> replaced by a symbol placed in the position they previously occupied.
> For deceased actresses, their words will be replaced by a melody of the same length, while for deceased actors, their words will be replaced by rhythm. The surviving actors will perform as if the deceased are still present. The performances will then continue every ten years - 2015, 2025, and 2035 - culminating in the final performance in 2045. By then, all the actors will have passed away. I will still be alive, and the stage will be filled with symbols."
> This concept of temporality and theatrical continuity profoundly reflects NSK's commitment to ideological permanence and the tension between the transience of the individual and collective representation.
> As 2025 approaches, the next performance is eagerly anticipated. [29]

The video premiered in 1993 as part of Irwin's installation in the NSK Slovenian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Retro-Avant-Garde and Mapping Socialism in Theory and Film

In 1990, Peter Weibel introduced the concept of the discursive framework of the retro-avant-garde, providing an external perspective to interpret and define the (former) Yugoslav space. He incorporated the work of Mladen Stilinović, the 'Belgrade Malevich' (Goran Đorđević), and the Irwin group into this shared conceptual context, assigning their activities a unified theoretical framework.[30] Gržinić delved into these theoretical matters, publishing her findings in 1997 in the book *Reconstructed Fiction. New Media, (Video) Art. Retro-Avant-Garde. Essays on Theory, Politics, and Aesthetics.* [31]

That same year, together with Aina Šmid, she created the experimental video *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin,* which, along with *Irwin: Transcentrala. NSK State in Time,* became a seminal work for understanding the connections between art and ideology in post-socialist contexts. Understanding the concept of the retro-avant-garde required clarifying its conception. In this context, a theory emerged that positioned Irwin's work not solely through the lens of retro-avant-garde principles but within broader historical and philosophical frameworks. Central to this was Hegel's dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis,[32] where Irwin's embassy projects for *The State in Time* represented the synthesis, while Stilinović and the 'Belgrade Malevich' embodied the thesis and antithesis, respectively.

The Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, as the thesis of the retro-avant-garde concept, opened a space for exploring the ideological dimensions of art through his linguistic experiments. One of Croatia's most prominent conceptual artists, he was known for his ironic and critical works that revealed the entanglement of art, politics, and ideology, often critiquing repressive systems from socialism to capitalism. His well-known installation, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist,* highlighted the dependence of artistic practice on global cultural hegemony, positioning language as a key tool of performativity and critique. Stilinović was a member of the *Group of Six Artists* (*Grupa šestorice autora*), which in the 1970s experimented with alternative forms of art outside institutional frameworks. Why him? Gržinić:

> Stilinović was the first to engage with the ideology of language. One of his most important and well-known statements is that *an artist who does not speak English is not an artist*. This is a crucial observation, revealing that while one might think from within a socialist context, the moment one seeks to be part of art as an institution, proficiency in English becomes

> essential. Stilinović also emphasized that language is inherently performative. This position is well illustrated in the video, which incorporates footage of his documentary works and photographs.[33]

The Antithesis, as Gržinić emphasizes, paradoxically emerges in Belgrade through the work of the 'Belgrade Malevich,' who focused his practice on conceptual investigations of reproduction and appropriation. In the 1980s, he created a series of works that reinterpreted pieces by Kazimir Malevich, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and others, thereby problematizing the notions of authorship, originality, and the value of art. Copying, which in the 1980s was considered one of the most provocative artistic gestures, was elevated by him into a critical strategy that challenged the art system based on authenticity and the artist's signature. Gržinić:

> Đorđević's approach is rooted in analytical philosophy. As a mathematician, he received a scholarship and travelled to the United States in the 1980s, where he encountered the major revolution in contemporary American art characterized by repetition. At that time, conceptual artists engaged in re-creation or reproduction - Egon Schiele, Cindy Sherman, and others replicated works by other artists or key scenes from films, signing them with their own names. The central paradox was that, despite the act of repetition, authorship was retained through the artist's signature. Đorđević adopted and deepened this practice by refusing to sign his works with his own name, instead performing under the persona of the 'Belgrade Malevich.' His adoption of Malevich's identity symbolically invoked the entire history of Eastern art. This was significant because, at the time, no history of contemporary art existed within socialist regimes.
>
> In Yugoslavia, the history of art was accessible through books, but there was no opportunity to see original works. Artists and art historians could not travel to exhibitions or view originals. Experiencing Malevich's work in person - his fascinating cross - revealed that what had been imagined as an enormous, spatially dominant figure was, in reality, a small painting. In perception, however, it had been elevated to a monumental scale, capable of organizing an entire space.[34]

In the film experiment by Gržinić and Šmid, all the most significant works essential to the avant-garde, the West, and modernism appear, forming the foundation of contemporary artistic understanding - but not in their original form. Gržinić:

> Indeed, these are not originals, but copies created by the so-called 'Belgrade Malevich,' who reproduced one work after another. These pieces were exhibited at the ŠKUC Gallery in Ljubljana in the 1980s. It was an extraordinary exhibition that raised important questions, later philosophically explored in the video. We did not have the opportunity to see original works by Magritte, Picasso, Matisse, and others. Instead, in Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin, we included copies of works by Duchamp, Picasso, Matisse, and Malevich.[35]

The synthesis represented by Irwin, as described by Gržinić, transcends politics in its direct ideological form. Their art is deeply ideological as it produces concepts that are far from neutral. These concepts shape perceptions of the world, interpretations of art history, and understandings of the Western historical paradigm, which often excludes the East. Through their visualizations, Irwin skilfully articulates these issues, while Gržinić, with her

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theoretical approach, provides a foundation for understanding their concepts within a broader historical and ideological framework.

The video *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin* by Gržinić and Šmid delves deeply into postmodernist debates grounded in Gržinić's theory of the retro-avant-garde and the concept of mapping post-socialism. The video specifically focuses on the work of the Irwin group, not as a documentary record but as an experimental form that establishes a broader theoretical and historical context. Within this framework, the thesis develops that their work cannot be read solely through the lens of the retro-avant-garde principle but "must instead be situated within key historical and philosophical positions."[36] In her essay "Mapping Post-Socialism," Gržinić argues that the East did not provide the West with adequate theoretical and interpretive tools for understanding the uniqueness and diversity of artistic projects emerging from the former East.[37] Gržinić:

> In 1997, we continued exploring the significance of NSK and the ideology of the retro-avant-garde in the video Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin. This video is based on my philosophical essay "Mapping Post-Socialism," interpreted by actor Jernej Šugman. The text functions as a theoretical treatise on the cultural, artistic, and political landscapes of post-socialist Yugoslavia and its successor states during the 1980s and 1990s.
>
> The video focuses on one artistic group and two individual artists: the group Irwin from Ljubljana, Mladen Stilinović from Zagreb, and the artist from Belgrade known as the 'Belgrade Malevich.' Through their art and engagement with socialist and post-socialist ideologies, these figures offer a unique 'coding' of the former Yugoslav territories. This process was the catalyst for the retro-avant-garde, a true avant-garde movement that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and radicalized the potential of contemporary art in the state once known as Yugoslavia.[38]

The video includes a montage of rare historical documentary materials - some preserved only on VHS - alongside reflections from the previously mentioned Peter Weibel and Slovenia's most prominent philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. The film features the acclaimed Slovenian actor Jernej Šugman and Milena Zupančič, a star of Slovenian and Yugoslav cinema, as an iconic figure of the avant-garde. Gržinić describes the dramaturgy of her video experiment as follows:

> In our video, Ali,[39] portrayed by Jernej Šugman, becomes a symbol of a specific way of life that exists at the intersection of art and culture, while simultaneously undermining established boundaries of academic thought. Ali is not just an individual; he represents a stereotype, a prototype, and an archetype of his era. This period, marked by the division of the world with the Iron Curtain, also heralded the beginning of Europe's fraught immigration policies and racial issues. What began as resistance against Turkish immigrants evolved into widespread xenophobia targeting Muslims and other marginalized groups striving to become part of the 'greater European family.' The 1970s were also a time of stagnation for countercultural movements, which began losing momentum - at least until 1976, when punk culture reignited rebellion and protest.
>
> The choice of Ali as a character in our video was a deliberate rejection of using film characters solely for 'commercial' entertainment. Instead, we sought to anchor the political dimension of the image in the transience of the immigrant's existence, illustrating the precise implications of broader geopolitical

dynamics. In the video, Ali transcends the socio-political sphere and enters the artistic context, evoking reactions of comfort, disgust, or a blend of both.

In the opening scene of *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin*, we borrow a sequence from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). Ali begins his monologue on post-socialism, visually depicted as 'Jack Nicholson' from Chinatown, complete with a bandaged nose. As a product of society's dysfunctional relationship with technology, Ali personifies a nightmare - both for himself and for the narrative of the retro-avant-garde. Through him, ideology materializes in the spheres of the body, history, art, and culture.

The video also explores the relationship of the retro-avant-garde with technology, emphasizing that this movement was not merely an artistic construct but was fundamentally dependent on technological conditions. This perspective highlights how the retro-avant-garde, like art itself, shapes fiction. While technology may not dictate destiny, it certainly defines the context in which art emerges.

In one of the most distinctive scenes, Ali speaks on the phone, while the voice of Peter Weibel can be heard, and Weibel's name is written on the telephone receiver. This comedic moment draws attention to the framework that supports the fictional narrative of the video. Weibel's presence - recognized as one of the first curators to popularize the term 'retro-avant-garde' in the context of NSK/Irwin - anchors the concept within the frame, even as the narrative of the video evolves independently.

In other words, while Weibel is known for being difficult to reach, in this context, he is present and even speaks. His reappearance in this space reflects a return to the arena he helped define as the one who coined the term 'retro-avant-garde.' However, paradoxically, this space is no longer 'his.'[40]

How to create an experimental video that is political while avoiding a documentary approach? Gržinić:

> The key lies in establishing associative connections with selected materials, allowing for the creation of a broader context without directly presenting facts. This approach, applied in the film *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin,* relies on the intertwining of artistic and theoretical foundations. In my text on the retro-avant-garde, I do not treat Irwin's position as an isolated phenomenon in Slovenia but place it within a broader regional context, encompassing two key practices in Croatia and Serbia. The film is more than an artistic concept - it is a political essay executed through montage and visual language. With this approach, I sought to rethink the history of the avant-gardes from the perspective of Eastern Europe, where Western influence served as the dominant framework for understanding art. Irwin's practice enables the visualization of theoretical concepts that I articulate in my texts. It is not about the artists themselves thinking within broader theoretical frameworks. This film and this text that I am creating are not self-evident. That is why this video is experimental - a form of political essay expressed through visual language and montage, which does not narrate an intimate story but instead creates a theoretical video through theory itself. It is a theoretical and critical essay aimed at exploring and examining what was happening within a context that, at the time, was completely incomprehensible to many.[41]

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Gržinić argues that the discussion about ideology in art truly began with Louis Althusser's work *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* which was translated from French into English in 1971,[42] and with contributions from conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth. Althusser, as Gržinić emphasizes: "materialized the artistic revolution of contemporary art" [43] by demonstrating that art is not merely an anthropological phenomenon but an ideological institution with political and conceptual consequences. According to Althusser, art cannot be understood outside the ideological framework within which it is created and operates. This ideological dimension of art was radically expanded by Slavoj Žižek in the 1980s.[44] Žižek's groundbreaking thesis - that ideology operates even without a specific context - elevated the concept to an abstract level while simultaneously linking it closely to concrete artistic practices. By doing so, Žižek extended Althusser's understanding of ideology, turning it into a key tool for analyzing the political, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of artistic production. Gržinić:

> It became clear that art is always embedded in a broader social and political context. It is not merely a form of creativity but a reflection of the time in which it is created. This time is always inscribed in its content and form. An example of this is the Futurists, who are often viewed today as fascists - something that was overlooked and taboo for many years - while their art was defined within the framework of the awakening of the urban idea. [45]

Synthesis. Riders of the Apocalypse: Necrorealism and Contemporary Dystopia

Necrorealism was not merely an artistic movement but a radical response to Soviet ideology. Instead of glorifying socialist values, the Necrorealists used a subversive approach to expose the disintegration of ideological structures, portraying them as grotesque and absurd realities. Their art, described by Sergey Dobrotvorsky as 'prophetic,' foretold the end of ideologically controlled art and the transition to a freer cultural expression.[46] Their vision is lucidly summarized by Gržinić:

> The Necrorealists transitioned in their work from surrealism to complete madness. However, this is not madness - it is pure and unwavering dystopia, revealing an absurd and grotesque perspective on reality while posing questions about the meaning and collapse of human existence. Necrorealism dealt with dystopia long before it fully emerged in the West.
> In the East, there were utopias, while in the West (including Yugoslavia) during the 1980s, there were Foucault's heterotopias. While we were in heterotopia, the Necrorealists were already in dystopia - in the future, or rather our present, where society has become profoundly dystopian. The Necrorealists developed this vision even before the rise of social media in the West. [47]

With their art, the Necrorealists exposed a dehumanized culture, emptied and subordinated to ideology. Through grotesque imagery, absurdity, and dehumanization, they critically addressed the repressive mechanisms of Soviet society while exploring the decay of the body and psyche. Their works, inspired by pathological phenomena and ideological spectacles, depicted decomposition and

death, raising fundamental questions about the meaning of existence within a stagnating system. Necrorealism was not merely an artistic practice but also an anticipation of the future.

Gržinić concludes the discussion with the concept of necropolitics, as defined by Achille Mbembe. She describes this dystopian state of necropolitics in the following way:

> In 2003, Achille Mbembe developed the concept of necropolitics as a complement and extension of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. While biopolitics examines the mechanisms of power that regulate and manage life, necropolitics highlights how power is exercised to decide over death and determine which lives are deemed worthy of living and which can be subjected to violence, exploitation, or destruction. Mbembe specifically links the concept of necropolitics to colonialism, racism, and war, where certain groups of people are treated as 'disposable' or 'sacrificable.' This logic of death manifests in contexts where exclusion, marginalization, and dehumanization result in death. In colonial and postcolonial settings, necropolitics is enacted through states of emergency, occupations, and camps, where subordinate communities are perpetually exposed to the threat of annihilation. [48]

Gržinić frequently references this concept in her work when analyzing contemporary forms of inequality, exploitation, and violence, particularly in relation to migration policies, postcolonial dynamics, and global capitalism. She examines how authorities manipulate bodies and death to consolidate their power structures, where death is not merely a final event but a persistent condition that defines social and political existence. Necropolitics has illuminated the dystopian elements now recognized in social media, the manipulation of truth, and phenomena such as Donald Trump. Gržinić describes him as a 'necro-dystopian figure' who embodies the extremes of capitalism, post-truth, and the dismantling of any emancipatory politics. She emphasizes: "Trump is not alone; he is supported by Germany, France, the UK, Slovenia, and others."[49] The contemporary reality, which Gržinić terms 'necro-dystopia,' goes beyond traditional dystopia. Necro-dystopia describes a state of political reality devoid of foundations and context, where truth, ideology, and social structures have disintegrated.

In this chaotic framework, where power operates according to the logic of necropolitics, questions of truth, justice, and collective action become increasingly marginalized. Necro-dystopia opens space for critiquing contemporary social and political arrangements while warning of the dangers of authoritarianism, dehumanization, and the misuse of technology, which increasingly permeate everyday life.

In conclusion, this specific diagnosis of the current state raises questions not only for philosophy and politics but also brings new challenges for art. As a space of resistance and reflection, art is called upon to reconsider its role in this context. How can artistic practice respond to the disintegration of truth, social structures, and emancipatory potentials? Can it function as a space for engagement and solidarity, or does it take on the role of a dystopian mirror, exposing the mechanisms of dehumanization and violence? In this context, Necrorealism remains significant as both an aesthetic and a political strategy - not merely as a record of the anxieties of its time but also as a warning and a call for the possibility of a different, more humane future.

Sztuka i Dokumentacja nr 32 (2025) | *Art and Documentation* no. 32 (2025) • ISSN 2080-413X • e-ISSN 2545-0050 • doi:10.32020/ARTandDOC

Notes

[1] Marina Gržinić, *Rekonstruirana fikcija. Novi mediji, (video)umetnost. Retroavantgarda. Eseji o teoriji, politiki in estetiki* (Ljubjana: Koda, 1997), 195–208, il.195.

[2] *Marina Gržinić, Historie Dysydenckie. Rewolucje Przyszłości*, edited by Łukasz Guzek (Gdańsk: Gdańska Galeria Miejska, 2024).

[3] Marina Gržinić, „Biopolityka, Nekropolityka, Radykalna Estetyka," in *Marina Gržinić. Historie Dysydenckie. Rewolucje Przyszłości*, edited by Łukasz Guzek (Gdańsk: Gdańska Galeria Miejska, 2024), 25-141.

[4] Ibidem, 133–134.

[5] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive. Gržinić notes that the case involving Roman Uranjek, a member of the Irwin art collective, remains complex and underexplored. Uranjek died by suicide in 2022 while facing accusations of sexual misconduct at art gatherings in Ljubljana, which allegedly occurred over several years. The incident sparked controversy, but the scandal was quickly suppressed, with many in the community claiming to have been unaware of any wrongdoing. The circumstances continue to raise questions about accountability and the cultural climate of the time. See https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/skupina-irwin-vse-kar-o-vemo-o-fotopubu-smo-izvedeli-iz-medijev.

[6] The films by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid are available on the website https://grzinic-smid.si.

[7] Maša Guštin, *Kino w Mieście - Miasto w Kinie: Petersburska Twórczość Filmowa w Czasie Transformacji* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2017), 111.

[8] Marina Gržinić, "VHS as a Medium of Subculture," *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*, https://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/193/469, https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2020.0000.193.

[9] As part of the studio, Andrej Miertvyj (Kurmajarzov), Evgeny Kondratyev, Oleg Kotelnikov, and Denis Kuzmin were involved. Later, they were joined by Konstantin Mitenyev, Igor Bezrukov, Andrey Medvedev, Ivan Sotnikov, Iveta Pomerantseva, Sergey Vinokrugov, and others. In addition to filmmaking, they also engaged in literature, photography, and painting. Maša Guštin, *Kino w Mieście - Miasto w Kinie: Petersburska Twórczość Filmowa w Czasie Transformacji*.

[10] More about other members of the Necrorealist movement can be found in the publication created as part of the eponymous exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2011. *Necrorealism,* edited by Nelly Podgorskaya. Moscow: Museum of Modern Art, 2011.

[11] Maša Guštin, *Kino w Mieście - Miasto w Kinie: Petersburska Twórczość Filmowa w Czasie Transformacji*, 118-119.

[12] Marina Gržinić, "VHS as a Medium of Subculture," *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*.

[13] Peter Weibel (1944–2023) was an Austrian artist, theorist, curator, and educator who left a remarkable legacy in the field of contemporary art and media theory. His work bridged art, technology, and theory, often exploring the impact of technology on society and artistic creation. Weibel was renowned as the director of the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, where he curated numerous significant exhibitions and projects. His artistic practice encompassed performance, video art, interactive installations, and digital media. In his theoretical contributions, he examined the concept of the 'expanded media space' and the influence of digital technology on perception and communication. Weibel collaborated closely with artistic collectives such as NSK and contributed to discussions on the retro-avant-garde, particularly through his role in popularizing the term, which refers to the work of the Irwin group and the broader NSK movement. He was also a prominent voice in philosophical debates, integrating art with science and philosophy, with a focus on societal transformations in the technological era.

[14] Peter Weibel, "Peter Weibel: Death is the Capital of Culture. A Conversation with Olesya Turkina," in *Necrorealism*, edited by Nelly Podgorskaya (Moscow: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 42–43.

[15] Maša Guštin, *Kino w Mieście - Miasto w Kinie: Petersburska Twórczość Filmowa w Czasie Transformacji*, 117.

[16] Viktor Mazin, "Die Einfassung des Nekrorealismus," in *Parallel'noe kino. Die russische Filmnächte 04.–06.02.99*, edited by H. Höller and B. Wolf, Graz, 1999, p. 41.

[17] Marina Gržinić, "VHS as a Medium of Subculture," *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*.

[18] Konstanty Usenko, *Oczami Radzieckiej Zabawki. Antologia Radzieckiego i Rosyjskiego Undergroundu* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012), 39.

[19] The *State in Time* project, developed by the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) collective, represents an artistic and ideological entity without physical territory, situated in time. It serves as a symbolic critique of nation-states, raising questions about belonging, identity, and citizenship. As an abstract social body, it merges artistic projects with political reflection, including the issuance of NSK passports, which express resistance to conventional notions of statehood and national borders.

[20] Apartment Art (*kvartirnoje iskusstvo*) was a Russian art movement that emerged in the late Soviet era (1960s to 1980s) as an alternative to official art, which prioritized socialist realism. Artists presented their work in private apartments, as public spaces were inaccessible to independent creators. Events such as exhibitions, performances, and literary readings took place in intimate settings, allowing artists to evade censorship and create without restrictions. The movement encompassed a variety of media, including painting, poetry, and conceptual art, with key figures such as Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, and groups like the Moscow Conceptual School and the Leningrad Necrorealist Scene. Apartment Art symbolized resistance against the repressive

system and the creation of a space for free artistic expression. Margarita Tupitsyn, Victor Tupitsyn, and David Morris, *Anti-shows: APTART 1982–84* (London: Afterall Books, 2017).

[21] Aleš Erjavec and Marina Gržinić, "Mythical Discoveries, Utopian Spaces and Post-Socialist Culture," *Filozofski vestnik / Acta Philosophica,* vol. XIV, no. 2 (1993): 21–34.

[22] Eda Čufer and Irwin, "Koncepti in odnosi," in *Irwin: Retroprincip*, edited by Inke Arns (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2003), 231.

[23] Michael Benson, "Prihodnost je zdaj," in *Irwin: Retroprincip*, edited by Inke Arns (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2003), 196.

[24] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 29 December 2024. Author's archive.

[25] The influence of the Russian avant-garde, particularly Kazimir Malevich, was pivotal for Laibach. Their first poster, featuring nothing but Malevich's cross, became a key symbol. Later, the cross appears everywhere. It was often misinterpreted as a Christian cross, suggesting a form of Catholic euphoria.

[26] Miran Mohor in film *Irwin: Transcentrala. NSK Država v času* (1993), dir. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, https://grzinic-smid.si/?p=488.

[27] Ibidem.

[28] Eda Čufer, "Transnacionala – Potovanje z Vshodne na Zahodno obalo," in *Irwin: Retroprincip*, edited by Inke Arns (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2003), 177–186.

[29] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 29 December 2024. Author's archive.

[30] Marina Gržinić, "Sinteza: retroavantgarda ali mapiranje postsocjalizma," in *Irwin: Retroprincip,* edited by Inke Arns (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2003), 218.

[31] Marina Gržinić, *Rekonstruirana fikcija. Novi mediji, (video)umetnost. Retroavantgarda. Eseji o teoriji, politiki in estetiki* (Ljubjana: Koda, 1997).

[32] Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," *The Žižek Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 53-86.

[33] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[34] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[35] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[36] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[37] Katarzyna Kosmala, "Constructed Stories of (Non)Belonging to Europe: Performative Videos of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid," *Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts*, XV (XXIV) (2013): 81-82.

[38] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 29 December 2024. Author's archive.

[39] *Post-Socialism + The Retro-Avant-Garde + Irwin* draws inspiration from the character of Ali in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In Fassbinder's film, Ali, a Moroccan immigrant in Germany, becomes a central figure for exploring racial tensions between Germans and immigrants from Muslim countries. Through the emotional depth of melodrama, Fassbinder unveils the complexity of these racial dynamics in 1970s Germany.

[40] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 29 December 2024. Author's archive.

[41] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[42] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–186.

[43] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[44] *Slavoj Žižek, Jezik, ideologija, Slovenci*. Zbirka Družboslovje (Ljubjana: Delavska enotnost, *1987*).

[45] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[46] Сергей Добротворский, "Авангардисты в небесах," *Сеанс* no. 2 (1991): 12-16.

[47] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[48] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

[49] Interview with Marina Gržinić, 17 January 2025. Author's archive.

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