

Fine Arts / New Media

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Swimming in the sea, with your passport in your mouth

Little Slovenia is this year the first of the countries that joined the EU in 2004 to take over the EU Presidency. Reason enough for a short winter visit to sample the Mediterranean feeling in the capital, Ljubljana.

The city has a lively, youthful flair. That the name Ljubljana comes from “ljubljen” (loved) is something one would be happy to believe. “But the most wonderful thing about Ljubljana is that you only need to drive one hour to Trieste for an excellent Italian cappuccino”, says Maja Vardjan, an architect in her mid-thirties, a journalist who for just over half a year has been the head of a gallery for design in Ljubljana.

With just 280,000 inhabitants Ljubljana (called in German Laibach) is small, in the culture scene everybody knows everybody else. “You need to get away every so often to prevent a feeling of claustrophobia developing”, says Maja critically, but the self-confident Slovene doesn't allow the comparison with the nearby Austrian provincial capital of Graz, which is about the same size: “Ljubljana is, after all, a capital city. We can choose between dozens of clubs with international music programmes, just as many serious galleries, alternative culture centres, between hundreds of bars and cafés, any number of museums and theatres. We are a ‘capital village’. Incidentally, Maja admits that she likes to drive to Vienna, which is about four hours away by car, to visit the many international exhibitions there that art institutions in Ljubljana cannot afford, due to the enormous insurance costs alone. The artist and director of the inter-media platform “intima.org”, Igor Stromajer, sees Ljubljana as belonging to a global trend: “In contrast to the larger cities like Paris and London, where no one can any longer afford a life worth living, the smaller regional cities are on the way up”. You only have to take a look at Lille or Porto, or indeed Maribor in Slovenia, which has an extremely lively art scene.

At dinner in the evening Igor Stromajer tells me: “Slovenia is so small and our coast is so short that when we go swimming we have to keep with our passports clenched between our teeth”. Slovenes, according to Igor, have always had problems in finding an identity of their own, due to the country's geographical position as a transit land and, above all, to its size. “In fact there is nothing that is specifically Slovene: no typical foods, no special landscape, no individual architectural style. Perhaps we function so well as the model student of the EU, because we have always been European, multi-cultural, intercultural, trans-cultural.” On the occasion of Slovenia's accession to the EU in 2004 Igor's grandmother remarked dryly: “But surely we've been European for the last seven hundred years?”

Climate change of the Slovene kind

Ljubljana in January 2008. The sun is shining, the high peaks of the Alps glitter with snow and are reminiscent of Merano or Bolzano, and the sky suggests the proximity of the 46.6

kilometre long Slovene Riviera. You think you can smell the sea. But this is probably your imagination. But the outdoor terraces – filled to bursting – of the innumerable cafés and bars that spread a Mediterranean atmosphere through the small picturesque streets of the old town do not seem to be an illusion. Since August 2007 smoking has been strictly forbidden at the workplace, in public buildings and in bars and restaurants. Now those with a nicotine dependency sit (and work?) outside, under the warmth given off by gas lanterns, where apparently they are joined by a number of non-smokers as well, out of solidarity. Climate change of a different kind.

And what do Slovenes think about being described as “Balkan”? Alenka Greorgi, the young artistic director of the legendary Gallery Škuc asks this question herself: “Where do the Balkans begin? Always somewhere else. For a Swede in Vienna, for us Slovenes naturally on the Croatian border. Many of us prefer to define our country as part of the Adriatic-Alpine region. We have quite a few jokes on this theme, which is a living expression of our current search for identity. But certainly there is a little of the Balkans in us, after all we were part of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia and a lot of Bosnians and Croats live in this country. For a number of Slovene artists the label ‘Balkan’ initially represented an entry ticket to the international art scene.”

Double penis a la Plenik

During the Yugoslav period Slovenia always defined itself strongly in terms of culture. Therefore the state supported almost everything, even clubs, even individual creative artists, indirectly through paying their social security contributions. Today roughly between 2,500 and 3,000 persons are registered in Slovenia as “culture workers”; around half of them receive support. The institutions are allotted budgets for a three-year period by an expert commission but the programme must be applied for in advance each year.

Maja showed me a street lamp in a side street with two strange drooping phallic symbols, one of the many small interventions in urban space that are examples of the strange humour of the brilliant city architect Jože Plenik (1872–1957). German architecture theorist Andreas Ruby is said to have once described the lamp as a “column of double impotence. The function of a small Plenik pyramid at the side of the pavement in Zoisova Street still puzzles the inhabitants of Ljubljana today. Motorists have to dodge around this bulky monument (as was intended perhaps?). Is this a possible indication that Plenik was a Freemason?

“For us young Slovene architects the way in which Plenik was able to shape public space in Ljubljana is highly influential. He was – also in private – a rather odd character whose spirit still shapes the city today. A master of his profession and something of a trademark for Ljubljana”, says Slovene architect Matija Bevk (*1972) who with his partner Vasa Perovi (*1966) has set up one of the many young architects offices in the city. “The young architecture scene in Ljubljana is extremely lively”, explains Maja Vardjan. “In the 1990s the competitions were still not restricted and so a few young smaller offices were able to establish themselves with large projects early on.” The legendary exhibitions “Sixpack” (2004) and “Young Blood – I'm a Young ‘Slovene’ Architect” (2005) did the rest of what was needed to make the young generation of Slovene architects known throughout the world.

There is a lot to be built in Slovenia and the money to build it is available. Slovenia has only slightly more than two million inhabitants, is regarded as the “swot” among the new

members countries of the EU, and this year has the “honour” of being the first of the new members to take over the EU Presidency. The economic figures could not be better, even though in January of this year there was almost a general strike, as the low earning population was no longer willing to accept the inflation that resulted from the introduction of the euro. The average monthly wage is around one thousand euro; but the prices in H&M and Benetton are as high as in Vienna. But the state functions, in contrast to the situation in Bosnia or Bulgaria, which is probably one of the reasons that young artists stay here. With his business partner the young architect Matija Bevk has leased, at a reasonable rent, a generously sized floor in an old tobacco factory. The tobacco factory in which Bevk and Perovi have set up their practice is one of the empty industrial complexes outside the centre of the city which are at present being converted for the country's “creative industry”, or to make office spaces or elegant apartments.

ROG, an old bicycle factory site, is another such area where it is intended to set up a centre for contemporary art as well as an architecture and design centre, the whole cross-financed by commercial tenants. This is very much to the taste of the current Slovene minister for culture, Vasko Simoniti, a man denounced as arrogant and conservative, more of a manager than a lover of culture. The art scene in Ljubljana takes a sceptical view of the commercially oriented project in ROG, as people are more familiar with anarchic scenes such as the Metelkova. A barracks site occupied by the autonomous art scene since 1993 with – state supported – galleries, clubs, studios, social facilities and a young persons hotel in a former prison. It lies in the city centre, which is a battleground for property speculators, not far from the main railway station. The state has made repeated attempts to demolish the building or at least to turn off the electricity supply but so far without success. But those familiar with the occupied autonomous ruin “Tacheles” on Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin know that the alternative punk-hippy attitude of such culture spots nowadays seems somewhat dated.

The glorious Eighties and the boorish bears

But perhaps this kind of attitude has a somewhat different meaning in Ljubljana than in the West. In the Eighties, when Slovenia was still part of Yugoslavia, in the period between the death of Tito in 1980 and the “Ten Days War”, which in 1991 ultimately led to the independence of the country, when the system was starting to fall apart the culture scene in Ljubljana was more vibrant than ever before. Art actions that were critical of the state, wild punk concerts, zany lesbian and gay meetings shaped the nature of the underground scene in the Slovene capital. The protagonists of the artists collective from those days are still active as artists today. At that time the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst / New Slovene Art) from which the industrial band “Laibach” was to emerge was a major source of impulses. The artists collective IRWIN (Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Borut Vogeljik) remains active today, for example through the art project “East Art Map”, which has been accessible in Internet since 2004, this collective has invited curators, critics and artists to introduce important art projects from their respective countries. Less well known in the West is the legendary industrial funk band “Borghesia” based around the charismatic artist, journalist and DJ Aldo Ivani who also founded the performance and theatre group “FV112/15”. In a Dadaistic manner the name was simply taken from a Slovene encyclopaedia where on page

112, line 15 one could read: “C'est la guerre!” An important role was played by the legendary “Galeria Škuc”, which organised one of the earliest exhibitions of current critical art in Yugoslavia. There then followed years of experimentation with technological practices until the late '90s, followed in turn a long crisis of art, which at present is giving way to a “second spring” led by a committed young generation of artists aged between twenty and thirty.

And, by the way, artist Igor Stromajer has no difficulties with Slovenia being described as a “Balkan country”. Greece, he says, is also part of the Balkans and yet it is a modern EU state. Although the term does have negative connotations, Igor admits with a laugh. He tells how, when the Balkan wars were raging, many bears were driven out of the woods in the Balkans and it was hoped to relocate them in the French Pyrenees. The locals there protested, arguing that bears from the Balkans were far too badly behaved.