

The avant-garde context in Laibach works

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Abstract: Laibach belongs among the most progressive alternative music bands at the territory of ex-Yugoslavia. For better understanding of Laibach work J made parallel with NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), an organized cultural and political movement established in 1984, active in the area between ideology and art. This relationship was present through several media including the media of "nation" and "state" and its introduction of the avant-garde movement in Laibach-kunst. The multimedia presentation of Laibach performances raising questions of censorship, artistic value, the nature of national identity, historical memory, past and future realities. According to the text NSK State in Time the retro-avant-garde is based on the premise that traumas affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. The retro technique is based upon a return to the ideological motifs as an attempt to transcend currently active artistic and cultural regimes.

In our opinion the most beautiful avant-garde performances were those between 1920 and 1940 held annually in Rome. Young men presented perfectly rehearsed calisthenics. Their slender limbs moved to the rhythm as a single body.

Laibach (Victory under the sun, 1988)

The world of Laibach

The alternative/rock music scene in Yugoslavia (Socialists Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), was born at the beginning of the 1980's at the same time as English and American alternative/rock music. The Yugoslav authorities were more tolerant of popular music in order to differentiate their progressive attitude toward their eastern neighbors. (Zhabeva-Papazova, 2009:1). Yugoslavia stood in an intermediate geographical and ideological space between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The economic crisis that began in 1979 and Tito's death in 1980 exacerbated tensions within the system creating catastrophic possibilities in culture as well as politics. The cultural response to the process of economic and political polarization experienced in Yugoslavia in this period echoed that of Britain in the punk era of the late 1970's and in Yugoslavia worked not only punk or heavy metal bands but more provocative phenomena such as Laibach. (Monroe, 2005:25). The Slovenian band Laibach was founded in 1980 in Trbovlje, a small industrial city. The name Laibach was the old name of Ljubljana used in the period of the Second World War. (Janjatović, 2001: 114). Thirty years have passed since the founding of Laibach, a group whose music and performances have become part of cultural history. What many do not know, however, is that Laibach in fact began its career as a visual art group. Images that most of us know from the paintings of the Irwin group – the cross, the coffee cup, the deer, the metal worker – were originally Laibach motifs. They were part of the capital the group invested in the newly established collective Neue Slowenische Kunst in 1984. With the founding of NSK, the visual art tradition Laibach had been creating up to that time was taken over by Irwin.

Laibach brought an alternative post-modern form of creativity into Slovene art. The group drew connections between New Image painting, the do-it-yourself art of punk bands and the post-conceptual practices. Laibach connected various media – music, video, film and performance, pop culture, politics and art. And at the very start of the 1980's, they defined in clear terms the

fundamentals of the retro-avant-garde. (Gesamtkunst Laibach, Fundamentals 1980-1990). Together with NSK, they worked for the renewal of Slovene national art on the European level, a rigorously planned establishment of an authentic cultural space at the crossroads of the worlds, a negation of spiritual smallness and a deliberate attack on the established cultural monopoly of the west. (Monroe, 2005, Ramet, 1994). The artworks represented a response to the contemporary art scene outside of Yugoslavia, especially the Neue Wilde artists in West Germany, who in the late 1970's depicted such urban phenomena as the punk scene and addressed certain suppressed topics from recent German history, specifically, from the Nazi and post-war periods. Punk and the reinterrogation of Nazism and other totalitarian ideologies was also an integral part of the subculture scene in Ljubljana. (Gesamtkunst Laibach, Fundamentals 1980-1990). In the manifesto "Ten points of the Convent" (1983), Laibach declared under Point one that Laibach works as a team, in the fashion of industrial production and totalitarianism which means the individual does not speak out but the organization does. They continued saying that their work is industrial and their language political. (Ramet, 1994: 118). Ramet's characterization of Laibach's work as 'thought-energizing art' implicitly refers not merely to the aesthetic complexity but also to the effort required to track down the sources of the image and process their implications. (Ramet, 1991:230). Laibach were also under the influence of Attali's theoretical work. Attali's sono-ideological paradigms are very useful in assessing Laibach's work in sound. Both share the same basic thesis that music as a reflection of political power can function as a regime in itself. (Attali 1996; Monroe 2005).

Država-the state

The state is the most dramatic materialization and symbol of the regimes with which Laibach and NSK interacts (totalitarianism, national and artistic history, spiritual and political authority real capitalism, the music industry). Whether in the form of statements, Tito samples, references, to heavy industry and propaganda, the state is one of the dominant NSK paradigms and the most spectacular and traumatic utopian/dystopian example of the power mechanism that structure its work. The NSK state was established as a response both to NSK's own activity to date and to post-1989 political events. NSK has its own territory, issues passports and citizenship on its own authority. The aim of the association was the constitution of a transnational paradigmatic state in which Laibach represented the ideological, the theater, the religious and Irwin the cultural and historical impulse. Besides cultural venues and exhibition spaces NSK, has also located temporary embassies and consulates in private apartments (Moscow, Florence, Umag-kitchen room, Sarajevo). With their embassies and consulates NSK introduces a degree of absurdity problematizing any attempt to recapitulate the state project into an agenda for political action and balancing its more grandiose manifestations. NSK confers the status of a state not upon territory but upon the mind whose borders are in state of flux in accordance with movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body. (Monroe, 2005: 247-250; www.nskstate.com). Laibach effected an anticipatory recapitulation of attempts by intellectual and political nationalists to discard Ljubljana's previous Yugoslavness as abruptly as its central European/Germanness had been deemphasized after 1945. No Laibach action is free of paradox and its significant that together with the other NSK groups it maintains active links with former Yugoslav and Eastern Europe. (Monroe, 2005:176).

Laibach-Kunst and retro-avant-garde

In Laibach-Kunst retrogardism uses both the threatening collectivist mass-industrial energies of the avant-garde and its socialist realist negations. There is simultaneous movement such as: back (forward) to the total utopianism of the avant-garde and forward (back) to the classicist values of socialist realism and Nazi-kunst. The symbol of the retrograde is the NSK logo itself a combination of eclectic elements. It's important to remember that Laibach's illumination of a continued

susceptibility to tyranny applies at least as much to western as to eastern societies and that their greatest success has been achieved in Western culture and North America. The retrograde elements are always present in NSK works but in constantly shifting proportions-at times black humor may predominate; at other times romanticism and frequently contradictory elements will be present in equal strength, generating friction, confusion, and fascination. A basis for this strategy of combination can be found in Laibach's Monumental Retro-Avantgarde text which incorporates an extract from a 1913 manifesto by the Russian avant-garde Lučizem group. This group said that copies have never existed and they recommend painting from pictures painted before their time. They acknowledge the usefulness of all styles for the expression of their art, those from the past as well from the present. Laibach manipulate the totalitarianism (or hegemonic drives), latent within every social or ideological system, exploring their contradictions ad absurdum. (Monroe, 2005:51-53).

Art and totalitarianism are not mutually exclusive. Totalitarian regimes abolish the illusion of revolutionary individual artistic freedom. Laibach Kunst is the principle of conscious rejection of personal tastes, judgments, convictions...free depersonalization, voluntary acceptance of the role of ideology, demasking and recapitulation of the regime ultramodern.(Laibach, Art and totalitarianism, in NSK, 1991: 21)

According to the text NSK State in Time the retro-avant-garde is based on the premise that traumas affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. The retro technique is based upon a return to the ideological motifs as an attempt to transcend currently active artistic and cultural regimes. (Monroe, 2005: 69).

In 1985/86 NSK worked together on the theater production entitled "Retrogarde Event Baptism below Triglav" (conceptually prepared by the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater). This production was very important because it was the first collaborative art project of NSK. The event, which took place in Cankarjev Dom, Slovenia's central cultural institution, was at the same time the inauguration of the biggest stage in Slovenia. One of the main topics of the show was the permanent conflict between avant-garde and tradition. It is important to stress that their position from the beginning has not been to operate against existing institutions, or outside these institutions, but to create a parallel institution. This was the important difference that distinguished NSK from other alternative groups in Slovenia at that time.(Miran Mohar in the interview for the e-magazine Art margins, 2000). In the same interview Eda Zufer tried to explain what was their idea of avant-garde:

...At the beginning of the 1980's there was a huge intellectual production in Yugoslavia by aesthetic philosophers who wrote books that for the first time brought the history of the avant-garde to the readers, to the students. There was a parallel worldwide process of redefining the historical avant-garde, but it was important that this also happened in the Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian languages. At that time, this was a kind of radical discourse because the stress on internationalism was used to oppose hermetic national and communist ideological models. We of course read these books, and they were a source of knowledge for us, but at the same time, we were standing on completely different historical and sociological grounds than those writers. Maybe I'm wrong but at least this is how I see things today. There was an ideological shift in the value system, a real difference between the "retro-avant-garde" and the early 1980's academic interpretation of the avant-garde. The attempt by philosophers to place the avant-garde in a historical and theoretical framework was based on the perspective that socialism would never collapse. Here was the shift: we used this potential of the avant-gardes from another, rather twisted perspective-that socialism will collapse. We were deconstructing it. At least this is how I see this process today.... Laibach was representing the field of ideology; the theater was representing the field of religion, and Irwin was representing the field of culture. Each group had

its own strategy. If I can speak for the theater group, the subjective and utopian potential of the historic avant-garde was a huge inspiration. I think this return to the initial trauma of the historic avant-garde was true for the whole NSK project, which I see as a critical project. But the story is not finished of course, and the evaluation has to be done from the outside. (Eda Zufer, in the interview for the e-magazine *Art margins*, 2000).

Borut Vogeltnik added that the relation to the avant-gardes was very different—it was not unified within the larger group. (Borut Vogeltnik, in the interview for the e-magazine, *Art margins*, 2000). Miran Mohar continued the conversation with explanation of their different expressions of the term avant-garde:

Laibach used the expression "retro-avant-garde"; Irwin used "retro-principle"—strictly; the theater group used "retro-garde." The meaning of these words differed, as it is obvious from the expressions themselves. For Irwin, in the first manifesto, this was declared as a principle, as a way of doing things. "Retro-principle" was connected to the organic eclecticism of Slovenian art; we accepted eclecticism by birth, we took it over as an obvious standpoint, even though everybody at the time was trying to speak about the "originality" of Slovenian art. (Miran Mohar, in the interview for the e-magazine *Art margins*, 2000).

Laibach and the audience

Laibach tested the audiences' tolerances and responses presenting the same program across all Europe largely ignoring ideological borders and attempting to break through the ideological and cultural overcoding of the new cold war period dramatizing the military-cultural colonization of Europe. Laibach's transmission of specific Slovene national imagery across Europe represented a kind of cultural nonalignment independent of both NATO and the Warsaw pact. Laibach's aggression seemed to be an example of violent cultural colonization thrown back in the face of larger and more powerful nations. The group reactivated Occupied Europe concepts for its NATO tour in 1994/95 and its larger-scale concerts can be seen as occupations marking out their own territories and simultaneously deterritorializing those of the hosts. It's above all on stage that Laibach create a paradigm of impossible authority driven by the iron logic of their concepts manipulating audiences' desires to submit to overpowering spectacle even while challenging them. The severe treatment of Laibach audiences was reminiscent as much of police actions as of avant-garde shock tactics. Glaring spotlights trained on the crowd and the taped sound of barking dogs evoked the semi-criminalization of Slovene rock in the 1970's preempting and recapitulating repressive action against Laibach performances. (Monroe, 2005:182-184, 205).

Happy anniversary Laibach

This year Laibach 30th jubilee is supported with the exhibition titled *Gesamtkunst Laibach, Fundamentals 1980-1990* held at the International Centre of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana from 16.04-6.06.2010. The exhibition is itself historic, because the paintings, prints, posters, publications, newspaper pages, invitations, record covers, photographs, concert stage sets, videos and promotional products are assembled and displayed for the first time in 30 years. This exhibition is going to be accompanied with two more exhibitions who are going to be in: Trbovlje and Zagreb. With never-ending artistic freshness, Laibach creates a path for reading images that will also appeal to the new generation born after 1980. (*Gesamtkunst Laibach fundamentals 1980-1990*).

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