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Performance :: 4 May 2012

Laibach: Monumental Retro- avant-garde at Tate Modern, 14th April 2012

by Andrew Haydon

Chances are if you don't know who Laibach are, you're probably not reading this review. However, in the hope that there is a wider audience for this piece, it feels that, more than a lot of other "bands", Laibach need a fair bit of introduction and contextualising.

In Britain, Laibach are perhaps best known – if they're known at all – as: "that band who did those covers of Queen's One Vision and Opus's Life is Life in the Eighties, while dressed up like Nazis".

Laibach were formed in Trbovlje, Slovenia, then a part of Yugoslavia, shortly after the death of the post-war Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980. Laibach was the core around which the radical art movement NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst – the German for New Slovenian Art – pronounced: en-es-kah) was developed. Their approach revolves largely around what the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek described as "radical over-identification". In a totalitarian state, this boils down to behaving more totalitarian than the state itself.

The band's name comes from the German name for Slovenia's capital city, Ljubljana- first recorded in print in 1144, used again when Slovenia was absorbed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and for a third time when Yugoslavia was invaded by the Nazis in 1941. In their home country Laibach's name reflected these historical traumas. Combining their "over-identification" with their nominally communist leaders, Laibach "emphasised the correlations between fascism and Yugoslavian socialist tropes" (Alexei Monroe, Tate catalogue).

There is a very famous interview the band did with Yugoslav state television in 1983 in which the authorities were so keen to finger them as Fascists that they essentially cemented the band's reputation overnight in precisely the opposite way than intended. As a way around banning the band directly, the Yugoslavian authorities banned the word 'Laibach' in 1984.

It is striking how little of this context is immediately *legible* in Britain.

Without background knowledge and outside the context of a totalitarian state in which the band operated, which also served as its legitimiser, what one is left with could easily be mistaken for a novelty band doing goth covers whilst dressed up like Nazis.

Now, however, all that ambiguity seems lost; Laibach and NSK are the subject of a respectable retrospective at Tate Modern.

Now that Laibach live, eschewing the haircuts and drums, they're quire removed from the full-on evocations of Nuremberg.

Now that Laibach themselves are as much a Laibach tribute act as they are Laibach...

Now that there is no concrete context for that with which they were over-identifying...

Well, you do wonder precisely what it is you are actually watching.

The concert is titled: Monumental Retro-avant-garde which, as titles go, is about the most intelligent I've ever heard given to a rock concert. The internal contradiction of retro- and avant- is particularly appealing. In Simon Reynold's excellent book on the music industry's current addiction to mining its own past, *Retromania*, there a section early on dedicated to the work of Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard (p.44-48), who re-stage (filmed) gigs by once cutting-edge bands and then re-film those re-creations- as art.

The first part of Laibach's Monumental Retro-avant-garde concert is also the "re-creation" of a legendary gig that the band played in Zagreb in 1982 (at the NSK symposium, it was wryly noted that while that gig in totalitarian Yugoslavia went on until it was broken up by the state police at 5am, tonight, in totally-free Britain, it would be ending at midnight).

Amusing footnotes like these notwithstanding, the question here is less about the faked authenticity of Forsyth and Pollard's replica gigs and more like that of the philosopher's axe. The band on stage are *still* "Laibach". And yet they are not the same Laibach who played that concert in 1982, thanks to the death of their then lead singer and the effect of three intervening decades on the remaining band members most of whom are no longer members of the current touring version of "Laibach".

Having not seen much footage of this original gig – although some was shown on monitors during the evening – it is difficult to make too many specific comparisons. Conjecture is possible, however – I suspect, for example, that very few of the Yugoslavs who attended the original gig went in Laibach "costume". I doubt that many people videoed the gig on their phone or took photos. I also doubt that there was the same atmosphere of clean, antiseptic corporatism, replete with wristband checking by black bomber-jacketed security guards carrying walkie-talkies.

Musically, this first section is: interesting, impressive, imposing. Several of the band's original members crank through the angular, industrial sound that Laibach virtually improvised from whatever instruments and noise-making equipment they could find. This lasts for five or six pieces, then, without too

much signalling, the next phase of the concert is on, offering a workmanlike trot through of a lot of older back-catalogue works (nothing off Volk, for example).

This was a marked contrast to the last time I saw Laibach play. That was in Berlin at the end of December 2010. The differences are fascinating: even in contemporary Berlin, flirtation with and appropriation of communism and fascism's totalitarian iconography still carried one hell of a charge. Their version of the Turkish national anthem, performed in a venue on the edge of the Turkish district, Neukölln, felt incredibly close to the bone.

Of course, if you've got all their records (I haven't), I guess everything is going to feel like "an old favourite", but Laibach in Berlin struck me as a pretty uncompromising lot concentrating mostly on more recent material. At Tate Modern they seemed far happier to play crowd-pleasers. Their cover of Lennon and McCartney's Across The Universe in particular received a massive cheer of approval and recognition.

The third phase of the advertised programme was playing live their contribution to the soundtrack of the forthcoming Finnish sci-fi romp (I'm guessing romp) Iron Sky. I'll stick my neck out here and say that I reckon B-Maschine is probably the best *original* song Laibach have written, although it sells itself short by not using its awesome chorus more than once (there's a version on YouTube that repeats said chorus over and over until you're infested with ohrwurms). But, yes. B-Maschine (my own phone-cam video of the performance is on YouTube here – terrible sound quality, not a patch on the live experience) is like being injected with liquid awesome until the hairs on the back of your neck bristle.

After that, and A.N. Other song off of Iron Sky, even more surprisingly, the band actually bang through a Greatest Hits package: Leben Heißt Leben, Geburt Einer Nation, etc.. I believe there's a "Laibach – Greatest Hits" album coming out, and this concert was recorded to be released as a double CD, so I guess this is partly dictated by market forces. Even so, it's a surprise to see a band usually so defined by their unimpeachable integrity behaving like their own spotless tribute band.

That said it is all of course hugely enjoyable. And yes, I think there's still plenty of irony at play here, even if in this instance the subjects about which Laibach are now most mordant are themselves rock history, while the collapse on which their attention is now focused is that of the record industry rather than the Berlin Wall or former-Yugoslavia.

If you know the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern – previously home to Louise Bourgeois's Giant Spider, Anish Kapoor's Marsayas and Olaf Eliassor's gorgeous Weather Project – it basically puts the stage just before that half-way platform, placing the audience on the polished concrete sloping floor facing the band. Aside from the fact that the band is lower than half of their audience, it makes for a good view from pretty much anywhere. However more use could have been made of the already totalitarian-looking dimensions of the Turbine Hall – something the band could have also embodied better if they'd tried to look less like an ageing rock group. After all, what is Tate Modern's gigantism actually

trying to say? In many ways, it's one of the most curious spaces the art world has ever conjured.

I'll save my thoughts on what it all means for an upcoming essay on the NSK symposium; the interim conclusion- if this is art, then it totally rocked, and if it was **merely** rock, then it asked a good deal more of its audience than most popular music.