

40 Years Of Laibach – An Interview

[The Burkean](#) on 15/08/2020

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Since their inception in 1980 Laibach have consistently surprised, enthralled, confused, even offended audiences with their music and art. Their take on the audiovisual medium is unmistakably their own, with many imitators carrying their torch.

It’s been 40 years now since the formation of Laibach in Trbovlje. How was it that Laibach and each of its founders came to form in a Slovenian town known largely for coal mining?

Not all the “founding fathers” were from Trbovlje but the core-founding members were. This city, with its socio-political background, with its revolutionary and industrial environment, with numerous factories (not only coal mining), aesthetically, politically and culturally controversial and full of contradictions, was absolutely the initial inspiration for the establishment of the group. At the beginning all that we wanted was that we looked and sounded just like Trbovlje.

Laibach is the German language name of the Slovenian capital city of Ljubljana. Was the intent of using this moniker done solely as a provocation? What other purposes surrounded the appropriation of the name by which you are now known?

Laibach: After the Second World War Laibach was not a popular name to mention – although it was one of the legitimate historic names for the city of Ljubljana, established in the Middle Ages. After World War Two this name was only understood as something related to German occupation of the country during the war.

We have chosen the name exactly for its problematic, explosive and conflicting content. In our 1982 manifest we wrote: “The name LAIBACH is a suggestion of the actual possibility of establishing a politicized ideological (system) of art

because of the influence of politics and ideology.” In other words – the choice of name IS important because nomen EST omen.

Many often see Laibach as a four piece band, whilst others will refer to you as a performance art collective in relation to your connections with Neue Slowenische Kunst and its other member groups. What exactly are the limits and constraints of who is a member of Laibach?

Laibach: We don't refer to ourselves as an art collective in the first place, and Neue Slowenische Kunst (as an organised art movement) does not exist since 1992. In our 1982 manifest we stated: “LAIBACH adopts the organizational system of industrial production and the identification with ideology as its work method. In accordance with this, each member personally rejects his/her individuality, thereby expressing the relationship between the particular form of production system and ideology and the individual.

The form of social production appears in the manner of production of LAIBACH music itself and the relations within the group.” And also: “The internal structure functions on the directive principle and symbolizes the relation of ideology towards the individual. The quadruple principle acts by the same key (Eber-Saliger-Keller-Dachauer), which – predestined – conceals in itself an arbitrary number of sub-objects (depending on the needs). The flexibility and anonymity of the members prevents possible individual deviations and allows a permanent revitalization of the internal structure. A subject who can identify him/herself with the extreme position of contemporary industrial production automatically becomes a Laibach member (and is simultaneously condemned for his objectivism).”

Today Laibach functions as an open platform with numerous collaborators on different fields, and some of them are closer to the initial model of Laibach membership, some are more distant. In theory Laibach members are always only four (Eber – Saliger -Dachauer – Keller), but each of them “conceals in itself an arbitrary number of sub-objects”. In practice everyone can be Laibach and Laibach can be everyone. After all we live in a time where majority of people are willingly rejecting their individuality in accordance with the dominant ideology, therefore individualism is not a great factor and obstacle anymore.

On the subject of mining and industry, then the character of your formative years and your use of “worker” aesthetics runs parallel with the British act Test Dept, who came across as more of an agitprop act. Like yourselves they had a history of working evenly with performance art and the live audiovisual medium, along with various musical changes throughout each of your careers. Musically and artistically, could you elaborate the individual and collective influences on Laibach in the early stages?

Influences were many; we learned from history and politics as such, from avant-garde movements and artists, from popular culture and music, and from many great films and architecture. We can't and don't want to elaborate on all these diverse influences in details, but we were greatly inspired by the art of Titian, Cezanne, Duchamp and Magritte, by Heartfield and Malevich, Beuys and Warhol – to name just a few.

We took ideas from the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang, Leni Riefensathl, Billy Wilder, Jacques Tati, Charlie Chaplin, Jean-Luc Godard, King Vidor, John Carpenter, Brian De Palma, George A. Romero... We don't even want to talk about music influences – there are too many – but of course we have to mention at least Marinetti, Bach and Kraftwerk. We appreciate nonstandard acts like (our friends) Test Department and we saw many interesting groups and individuals, creating fantastic music, shows and ideas.

But Laibach is avoiding artistic and music definition as such. We don't consider ourselves artists nor musicians, but anartists and engineers of human souls. We find art (and music) very limited and we aim to function primarily as a social (or socio-political) sculpture.

There has often been a high emphasis on morally transgressive shock tactics and displays of moral/political ambiguities by Laibach. As a group that covers and emphasises the audio and visual fields equally, your work has at times made me think of a hybrid of Throbbing Gristle's confrontational performances in the late 70's and early 80's, the Wagnerian “gesamkunstwerk” and what Walter Benjamin described as the “aestheticization of politics”, or Debord's “spectacle”. With what many have regarded as a strong totalitarian aesthetic, what have Laibach intended to evoke or awaken in the listener and onlooker? To this day, do Laibach

still strive to do the same thing?

The 8th statement of our 82' manifesto says: "LAIBACH practices provocation on the revolted state of the alienated consciousness (which must necessarily find itself an enemy) and unites warriors and opponents into an expression of a static totalitarian scream." And this is what we (still) do. Of course we believe that in art morality is nonsense, in practice it is immoral and in people it is a sickness and yes, we are masters of ambiguity, with a strategy behind it.

We practice transgression – and use other tactical weapons and means – as much as we feel we need to in order to smoke the listeners and onlookers out of their comfort zones and making evil losing its nerves. The truth is not static and definite, freedom even less so therefore the view, perception and understanding cannot be fixed to a final – one and only – definition as well.

The music and aesthetics of Laibach have certainly changed over time. From Opus Dei onwards, there is an increased accessibility, and innovative variations on the formats of contemporary pop songs. That has continued from your rendition of The Beatles Let It Be, as well as NATO and the national anthem-themed Volk. What brought on this more ear-friendly, yet ambitious turn in the musical approach?

Firstly – we have – and never had – no prejudices about pop music. We move freely from one genre to another genre, because every genre is a system of – sometimes hermetic – contents and rules that can help us to communicate certain idea. We find every genre relevant and using it can actually be an experimental process for us. We can quote here another item from our manifest, saying: "LAIBACH is the knowledge of the universality of the moment. It is the revelation of the absence of balance between sex and work, between servitude and activity. It uses all expressions of history to mark this imbalance. This work is without limit; God has one face, the devil infinitely many."

Laibach's shows in North Korea were the focus of much attention. In what ways did playing in front of live audiences in a more "illiberal" jurisdiction compare to your days performing in the former Yugoslavia? To what extent were your reputation, aesthetics and prior controversies known to the authorities of the

DPRK, and how were you received in the country?

North Koreans knew nothing about us till a few weeks before we arrived when someone from Europe actually informed them about all the controversies that Laibach is able to and was producing. But it was already too late for them to cancel their invitation – we were practically already in the country. Maybe because of all that fuss they received us even with greater care and kindness, and even with some humour in fact.

Comparing North Korea and Yugoslavia is of course possible (it is possible to compare North Korea even with United States, why not), but communism in Yugoslavia was quite different from the North Korean one, although Tito and Kim Il-Sung were officially good friends and they even visited each other in 60' and 70'. For instance humour is in general not forbidden in North Korea, but destructive humor (sarcasm and cynicism, etc.) is. On the other hand communism in Yugoslavia was very much destroyed because of an overdose of black humour that was practiced and understood too literary and too wildly all over the country.

North Korea is a very different place from the rest of the world. The reception of the concert crowd at our show – that was mainly chosen in the music cultural field, with some diplomats and foreign guests added – was very 'cultural'. North Koreans apparently never heard such music (as Laibach) before, so they didn't really know what to think about it, but they reacted politely, applauding after every song, and in the end of the show they gave us standing ovations (or maybe they were just happy that it is over; Syrian ambassador certainly was – he didn't like the show much – commenting that "it was too loud – almost like a torture"). Choe Jong-Hwan, an elder Korean visitor, gave a statement after the concert, saying: "I didn't know that such music existed in the World and now I know."

Rodong Sinmun (Workers' Newspaper) – official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, reported this: "The Slovenian band Laibach held a performance at the Pong Hwa Art Theatre. Workers in related fields, Pyongyang City employees, European friendship and cultural exchange delegations, representatives from various diplomatic and international organizations, foreign embassy staff members, and expats residing in Korea attended the performance.

The Korea Europe Cultural Exchange Promotion Agency, Norwegian Traavik Info, and Slovenian band Laibach all worked together to prepare the performance, which included “Whistleblowers,” “Sound of Music,” “Climb Every Mountain,” “Edelweiss,” “Across The Universe,” “Life is Life,” “Do, Re, Mi,” other world classics and anti-war themed songs. The performers possessed unique singing styles and powerful voices, and highlighted the beauty of each piece with their virtuosity, thereby showcasing the band’s artistic caliber. Laibach also performed an excellent rendition of the Korean song “Arirang,” to the great pleasure of audience members.” What better reception could we have wished for...

In relation to your “confrontational” past with the Yugoslav authorities, then your reputation now that whilst provocative is a one of acceptance. Some critics would say that in performing a concert at the approval of a globally sanctioned state and government, that this is not only contrarian, but is exploitative to its subjects. How would you address such a critique, and do you think there is any validity in such an argument? Does Laibach see itself and its art as contrarian?

Contrarian yes, but not on a daily political terms. We analyse the relation between ideology and culture and between art and politics, our language IS political, but we are not political activists and we do not deal with daily politics. Beside, our performance in Pyongyang was not at all directed towards the North Korean regime itself – that would be too easy and it would also be presumptuous to believe that we can make a significant difference in this country with one or two shows only; the whole action was rather turned against the (media) perception in the rest of the world.

The fact that the group as Laibach is performing in (openly totalitarian regime of) North Korea was a transgressive gesture by definition, to which the reaction all over the world was quite furious, somewhere almost hysterical if not inherently ‘totalitarian’. There are just too many fixed prejudices about Laibach and North Korea to ensure that such ‘collaboration’ between the two parties would go through easily. Of course we do not support the North Korean regime – but we don’t support any other regime as well. The most authoritative country in the world is the USA and we nevertheless did several tours there in the past, last one just before departing to North Korea.

We also performed in Israel twice and we were aggressively urged from all around the world to cancel performances there as well. If we'd have to follow that über ethical rule – not to perform in a country with oppressive and authoritarian regime – what country would be good enough and what level of state authoritarianism would still be accepted and tolerated that we'd be allowed to perform there freely? Where is the line? Israel is heavily supported by the US and by many European countries; should we cancel our shows in all those countries as well? If Laibach is really the best possible support to North Korean regime, than we can only say: hail to North Korea, we are all yours!

But we actually learned a lot about North Korea while we were there; we now see their regime clearly as a result of the geostrategic politics of the winners of the Second World War. Up to this date the whole Korean Peninsula (and especially North Korea) is basically prisoner of the Truman Doctrine, which actually decided that a united Korea is a no-go, because it would not be in the interests neither of USA or USSR nor of China – that has also become a major player after the Second World War. Such division (and such a regime in North Korea) as it is, fits America better since it can be used as an excuse for a strong US military presence in the region (that is in fact controlling China).

China obviously also prefer to have a 'tampon, a buffer zone' between itself and US dominated South Korea and is certainly not too enthusiastic to have a new, re-united Korean economic and pro-American oriented political power on its borders. North Korea as such is therefore in an perpetual Status quo situation, where everybody acts according to the rules of a huge prison camp. And they are forced to enjoy it. Kim Jong-Un and part of the North Korean political elite are now for some time trying to reform the country, but the situation is extremely complicated and he himself is basically a prisoner in his own regime. Therefore we have nothing but great sympathies for North Korean people and we hope they will soon be able to decide about their future destiny by themselves.

Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history" that came with the collapse of the USSR and the former Iron Curtain states. These newly "freed" entities felt eager to partake and prove themselves as players and stakeholders within a newly incorporated "unipolar" world. With decades now past, states such as China and

Russia are reemergent as geopolitical, economic and military powers. Buzzwords such as “Occupy”, “Black Lives Matter”, “#MeToo”, “Antifa”, “Trump”, “Brexit”, and “Soros” hold an abundance of connotations and associations.

Depending on which way one looks at it, these can hint towards dissatisfaction or affirmation towards a “global order”. To what extent does the concept of “soft power”, or authority through persuasion and “consensus” influence Laibach? Do you or have you sought to address or express any of the above matters in any previous or future work?

Of course we are aware and are also influenced by the omnipresent mechanisms of ‘soft power’; we are powering it ourselves being part of the entertainment industry and culture; practicing seduction, persuasion, attraction and repulsion, all of the cunning characteristics of soft power. Soft power – or some might call it ‘sharp power’ – strategies particularly grew in the US and UK – and also elsewhere – after the Second World War, with the rise of mass information media and pop culture. But today, with the explosive growth of the internet, social media and the integration of authoritarian information outlets into the media spaces of democracies, the opportunities for exerting influence are far greater than at any time in the recent past.

We have now all become victims of our wishes and desires, our own enjoyment and freedom. There is no way back, but there seems to be no way forward as well. The current epidemic situation with Covid 19 “soft” threat is the perfect result, the perfect outcome of this trap. In this respect Fukuyama’s “end of history” proclamation actually became very real. But this would of course be too nice to be true; there is a crack in every wall and as long as ideologies are still alive and they conflict each other, more history will be produced, sooner or later. And more hard power will come to force again, because in reality soft power is and always will be just a masked extension of hard power.

The album Spectre seems to be a reference to Marx, yet also the shadowy, nebulous organization of James Bond fame. To you, what are the “specters” that haunt the modern world? In what way do they reflect themselves in the development and progress of Laibach’s work as an entity?

The spectre of Communism appears to have been finally exorcised. The spectre of global capitalism is now freely haunting the world. Like a disease it ensnares people through the utopian injection of desires and fantasies into the social and political bloodstream. Its hypodermic needle is the entertainment, information and communications industry. It is a shared needle, and in democracy there is no cure against its own disease. Of course it reflects itself also in the development of our work. We don't know yet how deep we are infected by it, but in our lifetime we have developed enough antibodies to resist. That is – if we find it necessary.

Being from Slovenia, would you care to elaborate to what extent the folklore, culture, literature and art indigenous to your country has influenced your work? With Laibach Revisited just released, to what extent do these influences reemerge?

We were deeply influenced by the folklore of Communism, by doctrines of self-management and non-alignment, by industrial production of the Red districts, by socialist disco, by quadruple principle of Tito, Toto, Tati and Tutu, etc. As far as traditional folklore goes we may be influenced by Slovenian gothic

tales that are in fact part of indigenous art that you have in mind.

On the grounds of the reputation that you are now known by, do you think starting Laibach would be possible today? If yes or no, then why or why not? Do you think the world has changed for the better or the worse since your inception, and how so? In a time beyond our lives, how would you hope or wish for Laibach to be remembered?

The world has changed in both directions; the process is simply called the evolution, or more precise- dialectical evolution. And if Laibach will ever be remembered, we wish to be remembered as the dialectic evolutionists. And the engineers of human souls.

Thank you for the interview. The last words are yours...

We don't have the last words yet; it's a bit too early for that as far as Laibach is concerned...