Laibach: Our sympathies were always on the side of communism with a human face

23.08.2019  The sound of music with Dmitry Tolkunov /  art, COMMUNISM, Laibach, music, NIETZSCHE, NORTH KOREA, NSK, NSK State, Totalitarianism

LAIBACH TALKS ABOUT THEIR PLANS FOR NEW PROJECTS, IMPRESSIONS FROM THE TOUR TO NORTH KOREA, PHILOSOPHY OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, SYMPATHY FOR COMMUNISM WITH A HUMAN FACE, AS WELL AS MUCH MORE

Laibach is not just an ordinary band in its traditional meaning. A more correct categorization of them would be as an art-group that uses music as one of the main tools for promoting their visions and ideas. During their almost 40 year existence,
Laibach was involved in many other projects besides recording and performing music – like visual art, creating a virtual state and political party, making soundtracks for theatre projects and other memorable affairs.

Right from the first days, Laibach invented their own original concept that was mainly based on references to totalitarian aesthetics with the provocative use of images from Italian futurism, socialist realism and allusions to Nazi Germany symbols. These methods were completed by Laibach’s stage image, as all group members wear military-style uniforms during the shows.

As well, even the group’s name has a controversial meaning for many people, Laibach was the German name of Ljubljana (the capital of the band’s motherland, Slovenia) in the Middle Ages. The way Laibach communicates with the rest of the world also stays within the strict line of their concept, the group sees themselves as one organism and stands for a de- individualization method – none of Laibach’s members ever give personal interviews and all public statements are made on the collective behalf.

Due to this shocking for average philistines approaches, Laibach was banned in their home country Yugoslavia at the beginning of the ‘80s and was given the status of dissidents. Like real resisters, they looked for alternative, contraband ways of presenting their art to people and founded NSK (NeueSlowenischeKunst/
New Slovenian Culture) collective, which worked in the fields of visual art, graphic, video, theatre, philosophy and gave the band the possibility to hide and to perform in a partisan kind of way under the mark of NSK. At the end of the decade when Laibach achieved international success, they sorted their fragile relationship with the authorities and started to perform legally in Yugoslavia again under their original name. At the beginning of the 90s (when Slovenia became an independent country), Laibach finally received full well-earned respect and the country’s pride for them as the main Slovenian music export.

Laibach - PAST:PERFECT (WAT Documentary)

During their career, Laibach experimented with different musical genres, starting from industrial in their early days to neo-classic, gothic and techno-pop. They are known for specific covers of other people’s music. Laibach has put its touch on recognizable heritage like The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical “Jesus Christ Superstar”, 80’s pop-rock tunes by Europe and Opus, as well as much more. With the help of Laibach’s touch, this cheerful music began to sound like blood-chilling, infernal marches. This trick shows the essence of the bands art-method, which can be described as deconstructing and bringing to the spotlight the demons of a repressive and totalitarian ideology that lives in mass-cultural clichés. However, besides puzzling people with these strange and dark covers, Laibach has made a bunch of conceptual albums that are based on their own music and lyrics with serious messages and statements in which they shared
their views on modern reality and showed themselves as anti-globalists, supporters of social justice and opponents of capital power.

Laibach - Eurovision (Spectre), official video

Having a passion for experiments and exploring new territories led Laibach to exciting projects such as concerts with symphonic orchestras, covering some of Bach and Wagner’s classical music, and taking part in one of the most surreal music affairs of our time – Laibach’s show in North Korea.

Laibach is still full of energy, working at the same time on a few new projects, shooting remarkable videos and touring around the world. We had a chance to talk with them about their recent plans, latest tours, impressions from their North Korea tour, Nietzsche’s philosophy, as well as many more interesting things.

Interview: Dmitry Tolkunov

Hello! As I understand Laibach finished a big European tour with the new album “The Sound of Music”? How was it generally? Do you have some memorable moments of the tour to share?

The gigs are all listed on our web pages. The tour in general was good but touring itself is very difficult, extremely demanding logistically as well as socially and it is killing many bands and relations, so only the strong survive. On the other hand,
tours and live concerts are probably the last remaining mechanism of the traditional, romantic distribution of music and ideas, based on physical exchange and collaboration, and we are always relieved when we do a good show and a good tour – and stay alive.

Laibach Spectre Tour FULL CONCERT Live in Ljubljana 16th May 2014

Live concerts are the last remaining mechanism of the traditional, romantic distribution of music

Laibach is known for experimenting with different genres, but we think your last album “The Sound of Music” with which you just toured is your first experience with musicals. Is that correct? Does it lead to a new experience of the show production and the way you present the music, in terms of the scenes, visual concepts and picking special venues for the show?

It’s not really the first of its kind; the album ‘Volk’ from 2006 is quite similar in genre. We always decide about the style and the concept of the album based on given opportunities, within the context in which we are creating the new production. The Sound of Music was created mainly because we were invited to do concerts in North Korea.
Laibach - Anglia (Volk) Official Video

The album ‘Volk’ from 2006 is quite similar in genre to a musical

Can you please tell us a little bit about the previous album – Thus Spoke Zarathustra? Why was this type of concept chosen? Is Nietzsche an important philosopher in Laibach’s world? Does he have a big impact on you?

The album Thus Spoke Zarathustra happened because we were firstly invited by Slovenian theatre director Matjaž Berger to create music for the play based on this famous Nietzsche’s work, performed by the Anton Podbevšek Theatre ensemble. AP Theatre is located in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, and it is actually named after the Slovenian avant-garde poet from the ‘20s, whose poems are characterized by the so-called titanic lyric subject, with the features of Nietzschean over-man and Whitman’s pantheism. Podbevšek’s only collection of poems is called ‘Man with Bombs’ and beside Nietzsche’s novel he was, in fact, also an important inspiration for the music that we wrote. For the album release, we later recomposed and modified mainly fragmented music into 12 tracks.

We never really studied Nietzsche systematically or were obsessed with him anyway but Matjaž Berger, who invited us into this collaboration, believes that Laibach already has Nietzsche ‘incorporated’ within its Laibachian plasma.

We certainly always loved his moustaches and also his idea of the Eternal
Recurrence, but we are not Nietzscheans, we consider ourselves Duchampians.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s influence on modern continental philosophy is enormous and without him it would probably go into a totally different direction. He had strong influences also on Europe’s political history and with ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake-truth’ Nietzsche’s age has, in fact, maybe just arrived; his perspective offers us a way of understanding this phenomenon.

Laibach - Vor Sonnen-Aufgang (Official Video)

Nietzsche’s influence on modern continental philosophy is enormous

Nietzsche anticipated our current cultural and political climate. From his late 19th-century perch, he warned us that Europe’s increasingly democratic states would fall into parochialism and mass hysteria. He promoted a grand unification of Europe and advocated trans-national politics that would transcend petty nationalists and in which culture and art could thrive. He hoped for the emergence of a kind of trans-European elite that could lead a cultural and political revolution. Nietzsche foresaw what is now actually happening again – more fragmentation, more nationalism, more tribalism, and more nihilism. He also predicted what he calls “wars to determine the future of mankind,” which are taking place in the shadow of God. And he reasons that the death of God reopens the question of what we want humankind to be.
All these are good enough reasons to discuss and interpret his ideas. Many of Nietzsche’s ideas from Zarathustra’s novel and from his other works are still very relevant and they are there to help people interpret the current political and social topics.

*What are the bands further plans after the “Sound of Music” tour – some singles, videos, albums…?*

We are working on several different releases of which some are dealing with historic material and some with new music. We are also working on different projects that will happen next year. There will be more shows till the end of the year and new tours are coming next year.

*What will be the musical direction of your future works?*

They depend on the project but are certainly very diverse. In principle, we don’t like to talk about future projects upfront.

*Laibach is well-known for bringing their unique touch to other people’s music. Probably one of the few albums in which Laibach created songs with clear personal statements about what’s going on in the modern world was “Specter” in 2014. Do you have plans to do more of this kind of work in the near future?*

Yes we do, we are already working on some similar new material.

*In the early days, Laibach stood for the approach of the de-individualization – which fit perfectly into the totalitarian views to which the band was always into. This kind of approach means that all the band members are anonymous and Laibach is presented as one organism with no focus on the band members as individuals. In the meantime, we all know who are the main Laibach members and can call them a kind of public figure. Why did you stop this de-individualization method?*

We didn’t. The media and public know only a small amount of people that are creating Laibach and some of them are not even on stage anymore. The majority of our members and close collaborators of the group are totally unknown to most people. As a group, we still believe in the same principles of work as we did in the
early ‘80s. It is only due to social media and traditional media demands that certain members were made more ‘public’ than the others.

*Playing with political meanings and totalitarian aesthetic and leaving people puzzled about it was always your method. Can you please pull off the masks for once and tell us for which political and economic system you have personal sympathy for?*

We wear no masks but Laibach is in principle not interested in daily politics and does not support any political movement or party. Having said that, our sympathies were always on the side of communism with a human face.

*Totalitarian views were always a big part of Laibach’s art. How are you feeling about visiting North Korea, which is a country that can be called in some ways the quintessence of this aesthetic – was it a kind of surreal adventure for you, a deep dive back to your roots, or nothing so special?*

Performing to the North Korean audience in Pyongyang was an extraordinary experience for us – and for them. We experienced a lot of enlightenment – on both
sides. We certainly didn’t go there for a deep dive back to own roots – Yugoslavian communism was very different from the North Korean one; we went to Pyongyang in order to support and boost the unification process between North and South Korea.

Performing to the North Korean audience was an extraordinary experience for us

North Korea is, of course, a completely different world from anything you can imagine from a European perspective, as reality in North Korea is basically surreal. Although we did have some ‘insider’ information from people who had already visited the country, we still had all the usual preconceptions that people from the West normally have about it. But North Korea is much more different from the things that media in the West is keep on repeating about and generally we found most of the tabloid stories and stereotypes about the DPRK utterly false. In fact, North Korea is a greatly, if not totally, misunderstood country, even by generally open-minded, liberal people in the West and this is a kind of phenomenon in itself.
North Korea is greatly if not totally misunderstood country

The country is still quite poor and isolated and has an oppressive political system (still, much less than the USA or Saudi Arabia), but positive changes and good energy is visible everywhere. People are generally very kind and they seem to possess the precious wisdom that we Europeans don’t. We didn’t come across any cynicism, sarcasm, irony, vulgarity and other ‘western cultural characteristics’ there, only basic modesty, kindness, pride and respect. They love to laugh, smile and joke as well, much more than people back in Europe do nowadays. North Koreans are also well dressed, simple but elegant, and they learn foreign languages. Pyongyang, that has been completely bombed and erased by Americans during the Korean War, is today a clean, well-kept and colorful city with impressive socialist and post-modernist architecture, sculptures and parks. Also, its shops have a striking ‘pop art’ character and they look as if Jeff Koons would have designed them, along with the sculptures in their parks. We have been sincerely impressed by North Korea and we advise people to visit this country before it may be too late.

You were the founders of an art-group, NSK, that also had a side project – a virtual country, the NSK State. Do you have some interesting exhibitions or events scheduled in the near future?
In order to answer this question, we need to clarify some facts and notions first. There was the historic NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) and there is the NSK State.

Neue Slowenische Kunst is not the same as the NSK State; these are two very different notions and ideas. Laibach started in 1980 and NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) was created in 1984 due to the fact that Laibach was forbidden (between 1983 – 1987) and because there was a lot of people from different media groups who wanted to work with Laibach. Therefore we decided to create a kind of expanded Laibach, consisting of different groups, specialized for theatre, art, design, architecture, philosophy, etc. within one larger collective, primarily based on ideas and aesthetics, published in Laibach manifesto.

Yugoslavia’s political and cultural situation created a perfect background for this movement to happen. NSK successfully functioned between 1984 – 1992, when it started to disintegrate as a formation and finally ceased to exist, proclaiming as its final act the constitution of the NSK State – a virtual State in Time (or state of mind), with no borders and no physical territory, but this time operated directly by its thousands of citizens from around the world.
As one of the original creators of the State we still generally support its ideas, but in order to actively develop the potentials of the utopian project Laibach decided also to create a party (Spectre), not to replace the NSK state but to establish the possibility for a synchronized international movement and a network, whose members would critically and more actively correspond in cultural, political and social issues locally and internationally. Unlike the NSK State, which was created as a democratic experiment, Spectre is a totally totalitarian concept. In principle, it functions independently from the NSK State but the two can also intertwine and in time the party can actually become the core of the universal State.

NSK does not exist anymore, only the NSK State does

So – NSK does not exist anymore, only the NSK State does. There are occasionally certain exhibitions that relate or discuss the idea of the historic NSK as well as the NSK State project and sometimes we are invited to join as special guests, sometimes not. Which is good because the NSK State should, in principle, be able to exist independently from Laibach as well as from other NSK and NSK State founders.
The visual art content was always a main part of Laibach’s shows. Who works on them? Are these artists NSK State members?

NSK State has no members, only citizens – hence there is no membership. In Laibach we don’t consider ourselves artists, but engineers of human souls and “anartists”. Of course, our visual content is an important part for us and always was and is created with our diverse collaborators within the Laibach Kunst universe. Most of them are not necessarily citizens of the NSK State but some are.
Visual content is an important part for us and always was

*Does Laibach have some favourite countries and cities where they like to perform most of all?*

In principle, we don’t differentiate between different countries and audiences. They are all our favourites, just some more than others.

*Has Laibach ever been to Andorra and would it be interesting for the band to have a show in one of the smallest European countries? Do you think that this kind of show can be somehow compared to your shows in your home-country Slovenia, which is a very small country too?*

Well, Slovenia is small, but it is still approximately 26 times bigger in population and 40 times in territory than Andorra… And of course, it would certainly be a big pleasure and an honor for us to perform there!

*We really hope that Andorra’s citizens will have the possibility to enjoy your fantastic show someday and thank you for this interesting interview.*

Thank you!