

YOLI TERZIYSKA

Exhibition Review: *DANGER: We Forge the Future!*

DANGER: We Forge the Future! The Foundry, Maubourguet, France. May 10, 2022.

On May 10, 2022, near the small town of Maubourguet in southwestern France, the prolific avant-garde music group Laibach held a live event titled *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* The concert was put together in conjunction with the contemporary Russian artist Andrei Molodkin. The collaboration resulted in a music event and an exhibition where artworks by contemporary artists including Santiago Sierra, Jens Haaning, Erik Bulatov, and Molodkin were displayed. The visual centerpieces of the happening consisted of a projection of Molodkin's most recent installation work, *Vladimir Putin filled with Ukrainian blood* (2022), and a handwoven tapestry commissioned by Laibach titled *UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA* (2022). The evening also featured a text written by Slovenian philosopher and performer Peter Mlakar meditating on present-day atrocities in Ukraine and the relationship between good and evil.

This unique group of dissident performers highlighted the persistent and crucial capacity for contemporary art to point out and criticize political discord and social injustice. All works presented at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* aimed to scrutinize Russia's horrendous acts toward Ukraine since February 2022, while also turning viewers' attention to political violence. Despite the event's modest attendance of approximately one hundred spectators, which could have been a reflection of the location's remoteness, *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* conveyed both hope and power in niche communities' capability to call upon, and possibly effect positive change on a problematic status quo.

DANGER: We Forge the Future! was held in The Foundry, a mid-nineteenth-century armament factory that produced military equipment for the French National Defence during World War I.¹ The Foundry was recently acquired and repurposed by the London arts organization a/political, together with Molodkin. Their vision was to create an experimental art space where artists could develop ambitious projects and collaborate. Presently, The Foundry provides a haven and a support system for art that falls outside the constraints of the contemporary art market and the traditional approach of art institutions. The Foundry and its artists have a vested interest in political critique and questioning the establishment. These creative ventures are typically silenced and sidelined

1. "The Copenhagen Declaration" Press Release, *This Is Tomorrow*, August 1, 2015, <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/the-copenhagen-declaration>.



Laibach performs at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* (May 2022); photograph by Ari Matsuoka; courtesy a/political.

as they can threaten institutional reputations and damage the dynamics of an art market that is interested in the steady capitalization of their product—palatable works of art that maintain contemporary tastes. As per Molodkin’s vision, the space also showcases artworks and holds events with dissident artists, including himself.² Laibach’s collaboration with Molodkin and The Foundry’s other artists in launching *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* at the ex-factory befitted each participant’s objective—to be given the space to critique political power without the danger of being shut out by the mainstream.

Laibach performed a set in two parts. Their first set was a reconstruction from material they played in the early 1980s, and the second set featured some of their new work. The cult musical group first performed in Trbovlje, Slovenia, in 1980. At the time, Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia, and that same year their socialist president, Josip Broz Tito, passed away. Tito’s death rendered Yugoslavia’s future uncertain. It also provided an opportunity for the emergence of a rich underground youth culture, which was critical of their country’s power structures. Laibach was one of the key cultural actors that challenged the establishment through their avant-garde, post-punk, industrial music. At the start of the ’80s, Laibach mainly probed issues of nationalism, a pertinent focus in the soon-to-dissolve state of Yugoslavia. As they merged with other underground groups like the art collective IRWIN and the theater group Scipion Nasice Sisters, Laibach initiated the foundation of a larger creative body in 1984—*Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK), meaning New Slovenian Art. Laibach adopted the use of distinctive visual aesthetics along with their music practice. Tongue-in-cheek, the group employed agitprop

2. Vivienne Chow, “A Former Soviet Soldier Turned Dissident Artist Has Opened an Art Space in France for Anti-Putin Voices,” *ArtNet News*, May 9, 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/foundry-russian-dissident-artists-france-2111255>.



FORWARD (2016) by Erik Bulatov installed at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* (May 2022); photograph by a/political; courtesy a/political.

imagery, military-inspired set and costume designs, and recurrent references to socialist visual art and theater. Laibach set out the concept of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or, a total work of art. Forty-two years later, the group still applies similar visuals to their performances, and collaborates with other members of the NSK, namely Mlakar, who is head of the group's "Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy," and has collaborated with Laibach on numerous occasions.

Mlakar's written work reads as an antiwar sermon pointing a finger squarely at the current war in Ukraine: "War is the natural state of things. Is this really the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Is there no alternative?"³ As Mlakar was unable to attend the event, the text was read by Ivan Novak, Laibach's bandleader and central ideological figure. Novak introduced the speech while standing within an artwork by Erik Bulatov that was featured at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!*'s exhibition. Bulatov's monumental sculpture *FORWARD* (2016) is composed of a row of steel red and black Cyrillic letters that read "FORWARD." The sculpture embodies the artist's utopian vision for societal progress and his urgent call for a change. Having lived through Soviet political movements such as Perestroika, Bulatov draws on his personal history and disappointments with his government.⁴

3. Jo Vickery, "A Year of Revolutionary Exhibitions," *Sotheby's*, July 21, 2017, www.sothebys.com/en/articles/a-year-of-revolutionary-exhibitions.

4. "The Copenhagen Declaration."



The Copenhagen Declaration (2015) installed by Santiago Sierra and Jens Haaning installed at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* (May 2022); photograph by a/political; courtesy a/political.

Laibach's sets were staged in Sierra and Haaning's 2015 work titled *The Copenhagen Declaration*, which was remounted for the event. The installation was built from thirty-one black-painted wooden letters sized 360 × 250 × 100 centimeters (11'8" × 8'2" × 3'3") that read "TIRED OF THIS GLOBAL SADISTIC REGIME." The artists' work, along with Bulatov's, were both forged at The Foundry, reflecting the experimental art space's resolute ethos. The first set Laibach performed featured music from their 1983 concert held in Madrid's Reina Sofia museum, titled *We Forge the Future. Live at Reina Sofia*, with the intent to draw a connection between music that portrayed the rapidly changing Yugoslavia in the 1980s, and the group's call for urgent change today. The songs express Laibach's militant industrial style, while ironically celebrating Yugoslavia's socialist achievements in their lyrics. The second set consisted of songs from the group's upcoming project titled *Sketches of the Red Districts*. The compositions reflect on the political upheavals that took place in their native Trbovlje's "red districts," where the Slovenian communist party was officially established in 1937.⁵ Delivered primarily through a megaphone by Novak and vocalist Milan Fras, the band's radical lyrics trace the history of the twentieth-century's oppressive political regimes, and symbolically refer to Vladimir Putin's current acts of terror by citing totalitarianism, war crimes, state violence, and subjugation.

5. Neža Loštrek, "April 17 in Slovenian History: Slovenian Communist Party Established," *Total Slovenia News*, April 17, 2019, www.total-slovenia-news.com/lifestyle/3476-april-17-in-slovenian-history-slovenian-communist-party-established.



Laibach performs at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* (May 2022); photograph by Ari Matsuoka; courtesy a/political.

Laibach's message was furthered by Molodkin's projections featured in the background of the stage. Flashing behind the performers were images of Putin covered in blood. Molodkin's *Putin filled with Ukrainian blood* is constructed from an acrylic block filled with human blood, measuring 49×69 centimeters ($1'6'' \times 2'3''$). Molodkin collaborated with Ukrainian friends and colleagues who donated their blood, which activated the message behind the president's portrait as it flowed through his encased hollow likeness. Presented as a revolt against the war in Ukraine, Molodkin's projections also included words and sayings such as "NATO," "EU," and "EUROPE IS FALLING APART," all dripping in blood, pointing to those organizations' complicity in today's war, as well as historical footage of wars that included photographic moving images of soldiers marching and wielding weapons. Molodkin commented that by opening The Foundry's doors to the public, more anti-Putin voices will be heard, saying, "when people cancel Russian culture, they are acting exactly the same as the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union."⁶ Having served in the Soviet army and endured imprisonment due to an artistic practice that the government deemed inappropriate for the regime's ideology, Molodkin now aims to give an opportunity for critical Russian voices to be heard, asserting that his portrait of Putin soaked in blood epitomizes a factual description of Russia's president.⁷

6. Chow, "A Former Soviet Soldier."

7. Chow, "A Former Soviet Soldier."



UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA installed at *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* (May 2022); photograph by a/political; courtesy a/political.

Another visual centerpiece of *DANGER: We Forge the Future!* was the handwoven tapestry. The artwork's title, *UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA*, which translates (from German) to "Operation Barbarossa," refers to the code name given to Nazi Germany's failed invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, whose ultimate goal was the enslavement and genocide of the USSR's local population. The tapestry was created by a family of weavers in Afghanistan to the same dimensions as Pablo Picasso's momentous 1937 painting *Guernica* (349 × 777 cm; 11'4" × 25'5"), which responded to the atrocities of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy's 1937 bombing of Guernica, a Basque town in northern Spain. Laibach's choice of size and title for the tapestry performs as a multi-referential platform that alludes to contemporary political issues. Hanging on one of The Foundry's walls, the tapestry depicts a distressed mother holding her child, as another, dead, child lies beneath her. Skulls, blood spatters, a horse on its hind legs, and soldiers holding heavy artillery convey a chaotic and disturbing dynamic that echoes *Guernica*'s grim portrayal of war. *UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA* stylistically appropriates the works of Nikolaj Pirnat, a Slovenian artist who produced propaganda artwork for the partisan Allies in the 1940s. The composition and imagery in *UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA* are visually similar to Pirnat's works, utilizing commanding graphics; a predominately black, white, and red color palette; and agitprop characteristics. Laibach plans to present the tapestry to the United Nations in an attempt to highlight current acts of violence and the ubiquitous barbarity of war across history.

The concert and art exhibition were explicit in their messaging. The event was a multilayered presentation of disapproval and critique toward current political

conditions and potential for societal actions. It also provided its viewers with two distinct notions—Laibach’s continued rebellious stance against the status quo, and that of war as an ongoing, and unchanging, bearer of inhumanity and evil. Molodkin’s projections referred to the tangible present, while Bulatov’s *FORWARD* and Sierra and Haaning’s *Copenhagen Declaration* urged change. The Foundry’s objective to cultivate and display politically charged artwork before an audience communicates hope that positive change can be activated. ■

YOLI TERZIYSKA is a London-based arts writer focusing on issues of contemporary art and politics.