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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bell, S. P. (2011). Laibach and the NSK: Ludic paradigms of postcommunism. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 11(4), 609-619. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-446315>

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Laibach and the NSK

Ludic Paradigms of Postcommunism

SIMON PAUL BELL

The subject of this article is an exploration of the work of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) and in particular the music group Laibach. By analysis of the artistic interventions and provocations of this Slovene performance-art collective, this article interrogates how Laibach and the NSK articulate the unfinished narrative of communism in Eastern Europe, and the legacy of Yugoslavian Self-management Socialism. Other diverse discourses such as ideology, Suprematism, "Balkanisation" and the wider notion of European identity, in particular a perceived Western chauvinism, are all fertile ground for Laibach's provocations and are here subject to analysis.

Laibach are the most influential delivery system of the NSK. Emerging in the wake of Tito's death and shaped by the breakup of Yugoslavia, the NSK are a performance-art collective founded in 1984 in Ljubljana, northern Slovenia. The three founding groups of the NSK are Irwin (art), Noordung (theatre), and Laibach (music). Over the years the NSK has grown and developed further offshoot groups, but all function within the NSK Organigram.

Laibach remain Slovenia's most successful cultural export, yet their history in their native country problematizes this relationship. As the leading expert on Laibach in the West and NSK collaborator Dr. Alexei Alexei Monroe has pointed out, even if Laibach's opponents approved of their devotion to the transmission of Slovene language and culture, its dissemination by a group found too disturbing to refer to by name was unacceptable¹. Laibach's work is a necessarily violent sonic encoding of certain ambivalent archetypes constituting Slovene identity. It is a mission Laibach and the NSK approach as a duty, unapologetically claiming a central place within the Slovenian national space. Monroe suggests the phrase "Oblast Je pri nas Ljudska" (Our authority is the authority of the people) from the recording "Država" ("State", 1985) is Laibach's declaration of its right to manipulate national symbols². Yet Laibach and the NSK simultaneously embrace and maintain distance from Slovenian identification, treating Slovenia and its cultural signifiers as Duchampian ready-mades, thus alienating many of their fellow Slovenians. For example, samples of Tito speeches occur throughout Laibach's recordings; the track "Panorama" is attributed jointly to "Josip Broz TITO-LAIBACH 1958-1985" ("Panorama" 1985), and the diagram of the NSK's organisation, the spectral *Organigram*, bears a resemblance to those in Yugoslav textbooks, whose aim is to explain the country's Kafkaesque system of socialist self-management.

For centuries Slovenia had been subsumed into the Austrian empire, then part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1941. In 1941 Slovenia was occupied by Italy, Germany and Hungary, and in 1945 became a federal republic of Socialist Yugoslavia until its independence in 1991. Considered a political and cultural European nexus,

¹ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 151.

² IDEM, *Culture Instead of a State, Culture as a State: Art, Regime and Transcendence in the Works of Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst*, PhD., University of Kent, 2000, p. 174.

Slovenia's history has been one of threats of assimilation and self-assimilation, either by Slovenians refuting a Slav identity or neighbouring nations claiming that Slovenians were a lost variant of their own national norm¹. Between 1927 and 1945 Italy and Hungary instigated aggressive assimilatory campaigns, with the Magyarisation and Italianisation of place and family names, even of headstones². These threats to Slovenian national identity from without and within only lend greater resonance to Laibach and the NSK's manipulation of the signifiers of Slovene national identity, an identity built almost exclusively on the Slovenian language and culture. With no prominent military leaders, streets in towns or villages were named after writers, painters, scientists, and a few statesmen. Thus a leading Slovene intellectual, Josip Vidmar, was to suggest in 1932 that this small nation could excel not in economy or politics, but in culture and art³.

As part of Tito's split with Stalin in 1948 and a policy of non-alignment, Yugoslavia escaped the more excessive strictures of Stalinism. After the failure of collective farming in the immediate post-war years, Edvard Kardelj, Tito's "ideologist" introduced Self-management Socialism, described by Aleš Erjavec as incompetent populism and impossible bureaucracy⁴. It was however in the non-alignment policy that a more tolerant attitude was reflected in the arts, particularly in the flowering of a Slovenian subculture in the 1980s. It was in this climate of transition following Slovenia's postcommunist independence that the Slovene dissident, collectivist performance/media groups such as the NSK now found themselves in; what Johannes Birringer calls "post-alternative" or "post-utopian" art⁵.

Slovenia has a population of two million, its capital Ljubljana only 300 000, and poetry is the privileged national genre, hence the surviving stereotype of Slovenia as a "nation of poets"⁶. Slovenia is small enough that every cultural or political event has a visible effect, and pre-independence art and culture were partial surrogates for a national state that did not yet exist. Laibach and the NSK thus already operated in conditions insistent on the primacy of culture, and not only brought Slovenia greater international attention but did it on their own terms; a deliberate counter-attack to the established cultural monopoly of the West.

From the outset Laibach and the NSK were controversial, their early period defined by a series of interventions offensive to mainstream Yugoslav culture and political bodies. The name *Laibach* itself was a national scandal in Slovenia, and has been termed the group's "ideological original sin"⁷, first appearing on posters in their home town of Trbovlje in September 1980, an act leading to them being unable to use their name in their native country until 1984. First used in 1144 as the

¹ For example, Pan-Germanists believed Slovenes to be a "lost" Germanic Volk known as the "Windisch".

² Alexei MONROE, *Culture Instead...cit*, p. 28.

³ Aleš ERJAVEC, "Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art", in *Postmodernism and the Post-socialist Condition*, University of California Press, London, 2003, p. 135.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

⁵ Johannes BIRINGER, *Performance on the Edge: Transformations of Culture*, Continuum, London, 2000, p.109.

⁶ Matevž KOS, "The Anxiety of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian Literature and the Globalising/Postmodern World", in Christian MORARU (ed.) *Post-communism, Postmodernism, and the Global Imagination*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, p. 200.

⁷ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine...cit*, p. 158.

original Hapsburg name for the capital Ljubljana, *Laibach* acquired its more negative connotations when it was used by Nazi occupiers. By resurrecting this forbidden name Laibach articulate an unspoken and uncomfortable truth concerning Slovenia's historical German connections and aspirations. This founding act of controversy was further substantiated by an onslaught of ideological and aesthetic provocations. In June 1983 Laibach achieved overnight national notoriety when they appeared on Yugoslavian state television in apparent totalitarian dress reading answers to pre-scripted questions comprising a series of cryptic formulations operating as a direct provocation to the state. The presenter, Jure Pengov ended the interview by denouncing Laibach as enemies of the people and calling for them to be banned. Early Laibach concerts were also overt provocations; as Alexei Monroe describes, they were "nightmarish and utterly extreme combinations of alienation, infernal noise, and brutal visual imagery"¹. At the Zagreb Biennale in 1983, the concert was interrupted by the police, and Laibach expelled after projecting images of Tito montaged with pornography. Their dress was equally incendiary; an austere non-specific totalitarian coding suggesting both Italian fascist and Nazi uniform, yet with essential signifiers such as the fasces or the swastika replaced with Malevich's Suprematist cross. Challenged on this overt totalitarian dress, Laibach responded: "Laibach mainly uses the means of manipulative abilities of propagandistic nature and repressively exploits the power of information"². Already, for those prepared to decode the façade, Laibach were laying down their manifesto of wilful ambiguity.

The popular press and veteran Yugoslav partisan groups were the most vocal in denouncing Laibach; a reciprocal arrangement fuelling much of Laibach's dynamic. By fusing references to Yugoslavian self-management Socialism, partisan imagery, and audio recordings of Tito with fascist Völkish imagery and German translation, veteran partisan groups and popularly conceived Slovenian national identity were guaranteed offence. Laibach recordings such as "Jezero" (the name of a Slovenian lake) and "Vojna Poema" ("War Poem") for example are perversions of iconic Yugoslav partisan anthems.

Perhaps less planned but equally fortuitous in establishing Laibach's scandalous reputation was the Day of Youth poster affair. *Dan Mladosti*, or "Day of Youth" was up until 1987 an annual Yugoslavian state ritual in the best socialist-realist mass-as-ornament tradition, whereby young Yugoslavs gathered to celebrate Tito's birthday. The design department of the NSK, *Neu Kollektivism*, adapted a Richard Klein Nazi propaganda poster to advertise the event, replacing the Swastika flag with the Yugoslav flag and the German eagle with a dove, a strategy only noticed by accident long after the poster had been used to advertise the celebration. By having their poster design accepted by the Yugoslav authorities as representing the spirit of this state jamboree the NSK had exposed telling similarities between the Yugoslav Socialist regime and fascism, its apparent ideological adversary³.

Motifs are cross-referenced throughout the NSK structure, lending a unified cohesion to the work across the disciplines. These Ur-motifs, such as antlers and stags,

¹ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine...*cit, p. 180.

² Wiktor SKOK, "XY – Unsolved", in Naomi HENNING, Wiktor SKOK (eds.) *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2009, p. 34.

³ For a comparison between the two posters see: <http://paragonanubis.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/statue-1.jpg>.

the worker, the Zahnrad (cog), and the Kozolec (a distinctive Slovenian hayrack) are the nodal points to the NSK phantasm. The three most recurrent symbols are the sower, the stag, and the Malevich cross. The symbol of the Sower, as derived from Millet's *Sower* (1850) and Slovenia's own Ivan Grohar's *Sower* (1907) occurs in Irwin paintings and decorates Laibach album sleeves and posters. The NSK find in the sower a recognisable theme "in the memory of European culture, the emblem of sowing and harvesting, sacrificing and giving, the soil and man, fertile matter and mortal beauty and power"¹. Despite there being no wild stags in Slovenia, Laibach have appropriated the stag as motif; the sleeve to *Neu Konservativ* and *Nova Akropola* both incorporate an image of the stag. In "Vade Retro Satanas" ("Get back Satan") the sound of a rutting stag is sampled, and on their early tours antlers occupied a prominent place on stage. It is however Malevich's *Cross* (1912-1923) which Laibach have embraced to the point where it becomes ubiquitous, and by analogy replaces the swastika in the Laibach construct². In the words of the NSK:

"For us, members of a small nation, the cross simultaneously takes on a different, fateful meaning. Our culture nails us into the centre of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined but its significance has never been fully clarified. It is in here that we materialise our own ideas"³.

Within this specific vocabulary of symbol and myth operate the two dominant systems of Laibach and NSK praxis: Retrogardism and Over-identification. Retrogardism, re-contextualized by Marina Gržinić as the new "ism" from the East, and initially termed the "monumental retro-avant-garde" or the "retro-principle", is essentially a process of montage. Yet rather than attempting to directly effect avant-garde, revolutionary transformations, Retrogardism combines "avant-garde and pop elements with Nazi-Kunst, socialist realism with conceptualism, modernism with folk art, Slovene impressionism, and other diverse elements"⁴.

Imagery such as the motifs mentioned above, in being associated with the discredited grand utopian narrative, have no exchange value in late-capitalism, and are thus free-floating signifiers for Laibach to re-anchor, or *re-mythologise*. Laibach restore this outmoded iconography to the resonance of Malevich's Suprematist "pure object". However, in this restorative action Laibach maintain a separation from their inflammatory iconography by a process of dissonance and repetition. Combining Nazi-Kunst and Socialist-realism effectively disempowers active ideological content, and their repetition of the imagery in various contexts introduces a "surplus, excessive element that helps frustrate categorization and which is the responsibility of the spectator and not the artist to interpret"⁵.

¹ The NSK operate as a collective, and authorship is listed as "NSK". N.S.K., *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, Marjan Gobolić (trans.), Amok Books, Los Angeles, 1991, p. 140.

² For an image of Malevich's *Cross* (1923) see: http://www.dmoma.org/lobby/exhibitions/blockheads/images/malevich_black_cross.jpeg.

³ N.S.K., *Neue Slowenische Kunst*...cit, p. 142.

⁴ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine*...cit, p. 50.

⁵ IDEM, *Culture Instead*...cit., p. 11.

Although this "emphatic eclecticism" (a term Irwin use to define their system of aesthetics) bears much resemblance to postmodern practice, the semblance is superficial. In a relatively rare statement of clarity, Laibach distance themselves from the playful pastiche of cynical Western postmodernism, and emphatically deny claims that they are merely playing with the past in reviving the historical avant-garde:

"Our image is not a surface, a facade or a glittering reflection of the idea that irritates so many. We design and carry the time and we are what we are, from head to toe".

Lev Kreft in his contribution to the *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009* exhibition catalogue notes that Laibach and the NSK manifest the trappings of the avant-garde; the symbols, the shock tactics, manifestos and attitude, coupled with an apparent postmodern approach to historicity, but differ from Western postmodernism in that they restore art's problematic dalliance with totalitarianism and hegemonic power structures². Much of Western postmodernist art is playful and de-politicised, or focused on individual and localised politics. However, there is nothing playful about Laibach and the NSK's practice, which has none of the "unfinished" trait common to much postmodern art. Laibach operates in mono-statements³ and an aesthetic necessarily monumental, closed and fixed.

That Laibach are often accused of postmodernism, primarily by journalists and cultural theorists in the West indicates a fundamental difference in how Laibach are perceived in the East and the West. In the latter, terms such as "Flirting with fascism", "tongue-in-cheek" and "Wagnerian" are employed unsparingly in reviews and critical analysis, claiming an irony and humour to Laibach found nowhere in their music or press releases. This is an express attempt to render comfortable the provocation of an incongruously overt Grand Utopian Narrative form that is apparently without irony or pastiche. Laibach's Retrogarde actions are not parody or pastiche, but reflect an unresolved European narrative; a raw traumatic historical.

Laibach's other prime system, that of Over-identification is linked by subject matter to its Retrogarde actions. Restoring what is now considered Völkish kitsch to its original mythic resonance, an action otherwise referred to by Laibach and the NSK as re-mythologisation or re-capitulation, necessarily entails ideological ambiguity. For much early Laibach critical analysis, and their audience, this unsettling ambiguity

¹ N.S.K., *Excerpts from interviews given between 1980-1985*, Available at: <http://www.laibach.nsk.si/I31.htm> (accessed 11.11.2010).

² Lev KREFT, "Avant-garde, Retro-garde and Progress", in Naomi HENNING, Wiktor SKOK (eds.) *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst...cit.*, p. 74

³ The Laibach/NSK "mono-statement" is composed of two parts: its archaic context and its unequivocal certainty. Most of Laibach and the NSK's text is couched in the heightened declarative vocabulary of the grand utopian narrative. The absolutism of the mono-statement carries the commanding certainty of the propaganda poster, yet typical of Laibach and the NSK, although the manner is one of definite statement, the very certainty of the tone creates as its binary an equivalent confusion in the audience. Statements such as *Our freedom is the freedom of those who think alike*, generate conviction and confusion in equal measure. The Laibach/NSK mono-statement is also usually delivered in third-person. Laibach/NSK as an entity exists separately from its creators, which lends these statements an air of providence, as if emanating from a force beyond the control or understanding of its authors.

became the focus for any review or discussion. The uneasy feeling experienced by many supporters of Laibach during their most provocative phase is based on the assumption that ironic distance is automatically a subversive attitude, and the strategy of over-identification brings to light this false consciousness. Žižek asks what if the dominant attitude of the contemporary post-ideological universe is active cynical distance toward public values; what if this distance designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance¹? It is the function of over-identification to confront this structure with a surplus authenticity of conviction.

Yet despite the ardency of their "message", attempts to cohere Laibach's iconography into an ideological field are confounded. Walter Strauss lays out three components at the core of the fascist aesthetic ideology; (i) belief/mystique: a chosen destiny of nation or race, expressed for instance in the notion of the Aryan, or Volk, (ii) Cult of leadership, and (iii) Glorification of heroism or sacrifice². All these nodes are missing from the Laibach mythic construct: "Our work is pure because our symbols are pregnant without any meaning"³. Neither do Laibach articulate other vital founding nodes of "true" totalitarianism. For example, teleology in totalitarianism and Laibach are very different; both Stalinism and Nazism serve a "big other" of history, their actions are accountable to an end-time, whereas Laibach claim they *are* time, and thus they are the "big other". Similarly, there is no cult-of-leader in the Laibach spectacle, constructed as it is around the collective, where individual artists are not credited. The leader "personality" or nexus is perhaps found in Laibach's vocal element, which is predominantly authoritarian, but this emphatic impossible authority has no primal father-figure; the voice free-floats. Also absent is a utopian drive; contrary to universal totalitarian practice, Laibach posit no answers in the form of a projected Utopia. Concomitant with such, and perhaps most tellingly absent, is any enemy, or *other*. As Susan Buck-Morss writes in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*: "To define the enemy is, simultaneously, to define the collective"⁴. Alexei Monroe has also written on the hollowness of Laibach's supposed totalitarian or fascist ethic, comparing Laibach and the NSK with Orwell's *1984*:

"Nowhere in the NSK's work is there any equivalent to Oceania's demonization of the sexual or the orchestration of hatred. There is terror and fear in Laibach's spectacle but no enemy is shown or named and there is no equivalent to the daily hate sessions of *1984*"⁵.

It can be said Laibach and the NSK are the most famous exponents of the strategies of Retrogardism and Over-identification, and both tactics directly arise from Eastern Europe's totalitarian past. This combined strategy of opposition centres Laibach and

¹ Slavoj ŽIŽEK, "Why are Laibach and the NSK not Fascists", in Laura HOPTMAN, Tomaš POSPISYL (eds.) *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, p. 64.

² Walter STRAUSS, "Gottfried Benn: A Double Life in Inhabitable Regions", in Richard GOLSAN (ed.) *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, University Press of New England, Hanover N.H., 1992, p. 67.

³ N.S.K., *Neue Slowenische Kunst...*cit, p. 98.

⁴ Susan BUCK-MORSS, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 8.

⁵ Alexei MONROE, *Culture Instead...*cit, p. 44.

the NSK as an illustrative nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. A predominant Western chauvinism depicts Eastern Europe as a feudal wilderness locked in barbaric totalitarian drudgery, Slavic hordes in desperate need of liberation, democracy, and capitalist aspirations. This perception of the West as free-market liberators bringing goods to the passive consumers of Eastern Europe fuels the notion of Eastern Europeans lacking the discrimination to judge good from bad in popular culture, and therefore incapable of producing "pop" forms that can compete globally¹. Laibach's challenge to this misconception is necessarily militant, and drives the selection of their recording material and adaptation of musical genre. As Aleš Erjavec, author of *Postmodernism and the Post-socialist Condition* writes, the position of artists such as Laibach and the NSK is complex, "for they deconstruct not only post-socialist culture and history, but also the wish of the Western art system to see and identify the artist in such a culture as an asymmetrical and exotic *Other*"². Laibach at once deny and re-affirm this prejudice, by exploiting the need of Western culture and its art institutions to see the post-socialist artist as a caricature or degeneration of Socialist Realism and socialist culture. Zdenka Badovinac in her article on Eastern European performance art, *Body and the East*, writes that:

"Just as Western art has mainly presented itself to the relatively isolated East as reproduced in magazines and books, so the East has been presented in the West with a small quantity of poor-quality documents, with white spots in retrospectives of European art, and with the myths of official art and the suffering dissidents"³.

In this dialogue, the West is dominant, with the power to create new trends and dictate the boundaries of the visible. Badovinac claims the only way Eastern art can remain viable in this representative economy is therefore by an expressed ideology. Laibach and the NSK operate autonomously from this system of Western preconceptions and yet simultaneously over-identify with this ideological surplus that art from the East "must have". For instance, working with the West's preconceptions and ignorance of the Balkans and Slovenia, Laibach told Western journalists that their "uniforms" were based on those of Slovene partisans. In reality Slovenian partisans combined British, soviet and other fatigues with the O.F.⁴ partisan insignia⁵.

Laibach parody themselves as a primitive Balkan ritual for the West. In the video for *Sympathy for the Devil* (1988) Laibach take this to an absurd degree. The band are seen as feudal overlords in some Balkan castle presiding over a semi-barbaric feast:

"The luxuriousness of the feast confirms and denies Western stereotypes of impoverished, oppressed East Europeans who can access only pre-modern forms of enjoyment"⁶.

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 280.

² Aleš ERJAVEC, *Postmodernism and the Post-socialist Condition*, University of California Press, London, 2003, p. 96.

³ Zdenka BADOVINAC, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, MIT Press, London, 1999, p. 55.

⁴ O.F.: an abbreviation of Osobodilina Fronta, which translates as "Liberation Front". The O.F. were the Slovene communist-led partisan resistance of World War II.

⁵ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine...cit*, p. 166.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 235

Later footage is shot among straw-strewn ruined buildings; for the casual Western viewer this may indeed be typical Slovene habitation. As an extension of these prejudices, Bulgarian author Elka Tschernokoshewa has discussed a tendency of Western media to ascribe to everyday Eastern European life an apocalyptic quality. In this respect Laibach *reflect* the West back upon itself. By extension, in this formulation if the analyst takes the form of the big *other*, then Laibach are the analyst to the West's analysand. In their strategy of impossible authority, and their emphatic Lacanian quilting nodes of the monumental state, Laibach thus function as the analyst to the West, who imagines that within the Laibach enigma, or Lacanian *Che Vuoi*, the truth of its desires will be answered.

Laibach's function as an illustrative nexus between Eastern Europe and the West is perhaps best demonstrated in an analysis of their appeal. On the whole Laibach's albums differ enormously in genre with each fresh release. For example the light digital techno of *Kapital* (1992) was followed by the guitar-heavy rock of *Jesus Christ Superstars* (1996). Laibach are at risk of alienating their fan-base with these sudden swings in genre, yet Laibach "fans" remain loyal. If, as Ičo Vidmar suggests in the sleeve notes to *M.B.21. DECEMBER 1984* (1984) the music is incidental to Laibach, what then is their core appeal? Laibach resonate in the "post-histoire" West as heralding from a space where history is still alive, still happening, even if post-totalitarian. Boris Groys speaks of a Western malaise, where "historical facts are losing their special immanent character and their role in the context of time, being transformed into everyday conscious experience"¹. Similarly, Roger Conover in *Against Dictionaries: the East as she is Spoken by the West* sees in Western art gallery curators a search for *place* and *desire*:

"Desperately searching for the 'next real thing' curators need to keep extracting juice from the world to justify their existence. The easiest place to look for that juice, that meaning, if your own world is empty, is in the places where reality still exists, authentic, local, 'real' places that globalisation has not yet denatured, where not every shop window has been designed like an installation"².

Žižek finds in the West an equal appetite for consuming the East in two films made in Yugoslavia during the Balkan war: *Underground* (Emir Kusturica 1995) and *Before the rain* (Milče Mančevski 1994).

"To the Western liberal view, both films offer precisely what this view would like to see in the Balkan conflict – a spectacle of timeless, incomprehensible, mythical circuit of passion, in contrast with the decadent and anaemic Western life."³

Alexei Monroe in the sleeve notes to Laibach's *Anthems* (2004) echoes this theory:

¹ Boris GROYS, "The Irwin Group: More Total than Totalitarianism", in Laura HOPTMAN, Tomaš POSPISYL (eds.) *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, p. 288.

² Roger CONOVER, "Against Dictionaries: The East as she is Spoken by the West", in IRWIN (ed.), *East Art Map*, Afterall, London, 2006, p. 357.

³ Slavoj ŽIŽEK, "Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism", *Razpol, glasilofreudovskega polja*, no. 10, Problemi 5-6, 1997, p. xxxv.

"For some, it seemed that nowhere in either half of 'Occupied Europe' was there a phenomenon quite as absolute or romantic as what Laibach seemed to offer – all 'actually existing' ideological and cultural systems seemed compromised and anaemic in comparison"¹.

It is not only Laibach's re-enactment and representation of the traumatic historical that generates an allure, but a justified claim in actual involvement in history. For the "anaemic" West, for whom the last significant political youth movement was the hedonist rave culture of the early 1990s, Laibach exist in an exalted position of direct involvement with its country's politics and struggle for identity. Laibach's recording and touring history covers tectonic shifts in their country's development, including a European war and Slovenia's independence. In Laibach can be found, as Igor Golomstock observes, "A nostalgia for art's lost social role, for its purposeful organisation, for its direct link with social and political life"².

Laibach define their audience thus:

"The LAIBACH audience is any audience which accepts the extreme position of contemporary (post)industrial production. Identification with our positions is possible by means of the intellect or the intuition in a schizophrenic subject, who is, in the process of degeneration, totally alienated from society (mobilization of unstable individuals). The audience can add to our demonstration the everyday practice of politicising, the desire for knowledge and the dimension of satisfaction"³.

Hence the Laibach audience, in conceiving themselves outside or beyond the mainstream, identify with the transgressive iconoclasm of Laibach and the NSK. The ambiguity of this transgression however, has attracted elements across the political spectrum. Nazi salutes have been seen at Laibach performances, whilst in 1994 a Laibach performance in Hellerau, Germany was protected against local fascists by riot police⁴. This transgressive space of "moral suspension", in Althusser's terms interpellates the Laibach audience by representing an opportunity to experience the taboo and transgressive, if only temporarily⁵. Laibach can be said to practice "sympathetic magic" in resurrecting old fetishes and old gods; committing the taboo of returning to life the ostensibly defunct European totalitarian ritual. Laibach's overt performance of this ritual establishes the *other* of transgression, interpellating an audience wishing to identify with exclusionary practices. As Eda Čufer writes, although Western art history has absorbed and validated historic avant-garde forms, Socialist-realism and totalitarian art remains *Other*, as non-assimilatory as the Swastika⁶.

Operating within this transgressive space, comparison with Laibach can be drawn with the ethnographic icon of the "Trickster". The Trickster is beyond the "allowed fool"

¹ From the sleeve notes to *Anthems*, 2004.

² Igor GOLOMSTOCK, *Totalitarian Art*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990, p. x.

³ N.S.K., *Neue Slowenische Kunst...cit*, p. 46.

⁴ Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine...cit*, p. 304.

⁵ Althusser's theory of interpellation is that an ideology "hails" or interpellates the subject, and this ideology, in interpellating the subject, validates the subject by affirming their subject-position. (Louis ALTHUSSER, *On Ideology*, Verso, London, 2008, p. 48).

⁶ Eda E. ČUFER, "Enjoy me, Abuse me, I am your Artist: Cultural Politics, their Monuments, their Ruins", in IRWIN (ed.), *East Art...cit.*, p. 371.

tolerated as a necessary disruptive element within the structure. The trickster figure is neither self nor other, but a third and disruptive (external) unit in a dialectic. Agnes Horvath in *Mythology and the Trickster: Interpreting Communism* equates the Eastern European experience as the *nulla*, a space: "where everything can happen without meaning"¹. In maths the "nulla" is the numberless number, in Horvath's context; a liminal space of myth, a "fluid state of non-being" and the dwelling place of the Trickster². If, as Sophie Nield suggests in her essay *On the Border as Theatrical Space*, continental Europe is a liminal space of performative borders, a theatrical space wherein identity is performed, then from this potential formlessness, this "nulla" arises the Trickster, belonging "neither to the realms of the gods, nor to the humans, as it does not participate in their experiences, yet has a foot inside both worlds"³. This is Laibach and the NSK in the context of post-socialism, and in the context of Europe as liminal threshold.

In occupying the *other* space of the Trickster, Laibach perform an essentially exorcist function, their demonic, militarist and "negative" performance plays with the spectral elements that haunt the background of the prevailing political systems. The track "Vade Retro Satanas" directly references this exorcist quality. It is not however through a purging that Laibach exorcise, but through a *gorging*, Laibach are not an emetic but a satiation. In this context Taras Kermauner describes them as "psycho-hygienists", in that they enact the "magically-ritual, mystically bloody, sacrificially oppressing, and sacredly disturbed"⁴. The psycho-hygienic of Laibach is its very barbarism. Kermauner cites Stravinsky, who protested against the labelling of the Germans as barbaric; suggesting that true barbarism cannot be corrupt and disgusting. Kermauner goes on to defend Laibach's psycho-hygienic qualities for exposing the jouissance in transgression and in the subject's willingness to submit to the totalitarian ritual.

In 1988 Boris Groys challenged the art-world's view of 20th century aesthetics that art's oppositional role is a given:

"That art is an activity that is independent of power and seeks to assert the autonomy of the individual and the attendant virtues of individual freedom. Historically however, art that is universally regarded as good has frequently served to embellish and glorify power"⁵.

This is the dynamic behind Laibach and the NSK's interventions, and is expressed in point three of their manifesto *10 Items of the Covenant*: "All art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation"⁶. Groys extends his point in declaring that the myth of the innocent avant-garde arises

¹ Agnes HORVATH, "Mythology and the Trickster: Interpreting Communism", in Alexander WÖLL, Harald WYDRA (eds.), *Democracy and Myth in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2008, p. 27.

² *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³ Sophie NIELD, "On the Border as Theatrical Space", in Nicholas RIDOUT, Joe KELLEHER, *Contemporary Theatres in Europe*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 63.

⁴ Taras KERMAUNER, "Laibach Kunst – a Structural Analysis. A Lethal or Playful Challenge to Totalitarianism", in Naomi HENNING, Wiktor SKOK (eds.) *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst...cit.*, p. 58.

⁵ Boris GROYS, *The Total Art of Stalinism, Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 7.

⁶ N.S.K., *Neue Slowenische Kunst...cit.*, p. 18.

from the misconception of European totalitarian art as being a return to the past, "a purely regressive reaction to a new art that was unintelligible to the masses"¹. In directly restoring (re-capitulating) art's collaborative relationship with power in their praxis, Laibach and the NSK problematize their own oppositional space. Art carries with it its own modern predominant moral givens: it is left-wing, concerned with individual freedom, it should not be elitist, it should have a social purpose, it justifies society, it is a pillar of democracy, demonstrates freedom of expression, and in depicting possible cultural futures constitutes cultural science fiction. In challenging all these givens Laibach and the NSK operate with a vocabulary recognised by neither late-capitalism nor its opposition. If a public is a virtual entity created by being addressed, Laibach and the NSK interpellate, but establish their own unique discourse to do so. Laibach distance themselves from "avant-garde, revolutionary or hedonistic-nihilistic positions in relation to authority"². This is a central tenet of Laibach and the NSK; a refusal to be part of the aforesaid vocabulary of oppositional trends. It has been a continuous theme since the group's inception. The NSK

"do not aim to gain acceptance by artistic or political establishments, which is a radical stance, since so many discussions of postcommunist art have focused on precisely on measuring the liberal spirit of the newly democratic states based on their readiness to 'accept' previously controversial artwork"³.

Laibach and the NSK's vocabulary is that of totalitarian architecture, and such monumentalism is designed to dwarf the individual to the point where he or she can only be valid as part of the mass. Compare this to the micro-political vocabulary of current aesthetic oppositional discourse, which, in tune with late-capitalism, focuses on the individual and localised "project politics".

For over thirty years the artists Laibach and the NSK have been operating outside this late-capitalist matrix of information exchange⁴. Not only by positing void, an absence of meaning at the heart of their structure, but by a process of wilful ambiguity demanding a problematic subject position, whereby a safe critical distance from Laibach's apparent complete re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual entails a failure to fully engage with Laibach's discourse. This praxis has impacted on both a domestic and international scale. Domestically, their history is interwoven with that of their native Slovenia's (both before and after independence) and internationally they have projected a contentious interpretation of Slovene national identity by way of challenging Western cultural monopoly. In their tactic of Over-identification can be found an alternative strategy of resistance to the collusive cynicism of late-capitalism, but it is their strategy of Retrogardism that is most salient as regards Eastern Europe, the unfinished narrative of communism and the post-totalitarian age. In re-mythologizing the myths and iconography of 20th century European grand utopian narratives, Laibach and the NSK demonstrate that far from being safely in the past, the European traumatic historical remains an open wound.

¹ Boris GROYS, *The Total Art of Stalinism...cit.*, p. 8.

² Alexei MONROE, *Interrogation Machine...cit.*, p. 32.

³ Nataša KOVAČEVIĆ, "Late Communist and Post-communist Avant-garde Aesthetics: Interrogations of Community", in Christian MORARU (ed.) *Post-communism, Postmodernism...cit.*, p. 212.

⁴ Laibach were founded in 1980, the NSK in 1984.