

AUSSTELLUNG! LAIBACH KUNST

Laibach's images have been seducing the audience for all of the forty years. No one is left indifferent. On the one hand, a fascination with image, a feeling of drama, power, and spectacle-like effect. On the other hand, the discomfort produced by a set of signs and layers of symbols, all of which enhances the estrangement effect. In its multimedia practice and overall image, Laibach uses almost all available means of expression: music concerts and performances, video, paintings, xerox and graphics, cassettes and records, publications, mise-en-scène, choreography, props, image.

Austellung! Laibach Kunst was a characteristic call to the early exhibitions of the Laibach group. The referential field of the present exhibition can be found in the earliest artistic practice of Laibach Kunst¹, especially in the first two exhibitions in the Škuc Gallery, in 1982 and 1983. Therefore, here are some explanations². These events lasted one evening each (from six in the afternoon to ten in the evening) as a kind of *soirée*, attracting a wide audience and triggering intense reactions.

Ausstellung! Laibach Kunst (28 April 1982) was an experimental piece in which the practice of xerox collage and assemblage intertwined with a bruitistic concert. The event was highlighted by xerox posters featuring a black cross in a cogwheel, as well as an invitation featuring Hitler at the *Great German Art Exhibition*, and the back of the invitation included a program text where, among other things, it was written for the first time that art and totalitarianism do not rule each other out, that the individual artistic freedom is an illusion, and that the event is about "Unmasking and recapitulating the regime's 'transavantgarde'". The exhibition featured a series of graphics on the theme of Red Districts and some acrylic paintings, and in the foreground, in addition to the large image of Laibach's cross, there was a full-wall composition of black-and-white photocopies on which a classic painting with a deer motif was hung over a multiplied "metalworker". For the second exhibition, *Laibach Kunst – Monumental Retroavantgarde* (21 April 1983), a poster was printed, exhibiting an interpretation of the *Coffee Drinker* (a painting by Ivana Kobilca, 1888) in xerox technique and assemblage: on the coffee cup there was a Laibach's sign (a cross in a cogwheel). The same image was also used on the invitation and on the backside was an excerpt from the *Luchist Manifesto* from 1913 about the rejection of individuality, the use of copies and all historical and contemporary styles. At the bottom, however, there was the proclamation that this exhibition "marks the end of a period of movement, search, stylistic and aesthetic inventions", and that "it is a more mature, critical evaluation of art". The exhibition was first and foremost a *homage* to Tomaž Hostnik, a deceased member of the group, and in addition to his self-portrait, his character was also featured at the forefront of the documentary photographs from Laibach's concert at the *Novi Rock 82* festival. In addition to the already known graphics, a colour painting "Metalworker" was hung over the courtyard door, and black-and-white versions of this motif were spread around the room. There was a considerable number of paintings in the exhibition spaces, made in the oil technique with addition of honey, grain and tar. The exhibition also featured a half-hour video *Documents of Oppression*, in which Laibach and Marijan Osole-Max introduced the characteristics of the *cut-up* technique: the procedures of cutting, transforming, combining, repeating, and assembling "found" footages.

¹ The names Laibach Kunst and Laibach are often used alternately. I understand the name Laibach Kunst as a visual practice of the Laibach group, as it appeared almost exclusively in the titles of exhibitions.

² More info about the exhibitions and the works presented in: Barbara Borčić, *Celostna umetnina Laibach. Fragmentarni pogled*. Založba * /cf., Ljubljana, 2013.

This time we will avoid presenting the social and cultural context, connections and a referential field of the Laibach Group³, and instead focus on the essential methods and procedures that characterize both their early opus and the present exhibition which represents this opus through (re)construction, reuse, and alteration. They introduce a triple principle, followed by representations with selected motifs, materials and techniques: factory, worker, deer / paper, canvas, roofing felt / graphics, painting, ambience.

RETROAVANTGARDE

From its very beginnings, the strategy of the Laibach group's activities and presentation was tied to setting up a specific sign system and to the procedures of *ready-made* and *cut-up* methods, which worked hand in hand with provocation and public manipulation tactics. Laibach introduced appropriation and assemblage procedures into its artistic practice, it created collages and bricolages by taking advantage of the possibilities of a photocopier, a tape recorder, and video devices. The group called its method a retroavantgarde and understood a work of art as a view on art, society, and politics. This method, which is essentially determined by the appropriation and reuse of already created images, highlights the theme of the original and the copy. At the same time, it also tackles the question of the individual and the collective, it establishes a collective work and rejects individuality, and introduces anonymity and the use of pseudonyms.⁴

Laibach's multimedia projects are the disassembling and (re)assembling of images, words, light and sound. They juxtapose diverse sources and motifs, ideological and cultural codes. It is about combining in contradiction, assembling the "incompatible", layering of meanings related to art, history, and politics. Their projects are an open sign that has no static meaning. They are permeated by ambiguity and polysemy, and their contradictions are not resolved. Sometimes, among the multitude of effects, we are also surprised by the humour woven into the practice of Laibach Kunst, at least here and there, for example, when they "constantly alienated and assembled with scissors and Sellotape"⁵.

RE : CONS : TRUCT

The procedures that the exhibition on the venerable fortieth anniversary of the Laibach group in the P74 Gallery manifests and represents belong to the original creed and at the same time introduce a certain twist. Laibach Kunst continues to remain non-aligned, indefinable and enigmatic. It introduces the (re)construct: a graphic · a painting · an object · a collage · a bricolage · ambience. By appropriating its own early "second hand" images, by appropriating the appropriation, it stages a kind of simulacrum of a simulacrum. The reuse of images inevitably introduces an alteration, a condensation of motifs is at the same time their relocation.

³ Read more: Barbara Borčić, *Celostna umetnina Laibach. Fragmentarni pogled*.

⁴ "LAIBACH works as a team (collective spirit), following the example of industrial production and totalitarianism, which means: the individual does not speak, the organization speaks. Our work is industrial and our language is political." ("LAIBACH. Pieta ali zvok revolucije ponoči", conversation (Aleks Lenard), *Mladina*, No. 31, 14 October 1982: 14. "Politics is the highest and all-encompassing art, and we, who create contemporary Slovenian art, consider ourselves politicians." (*Problemi. Neue Slowenische Kunst*), 1985, No. 6.

⁵ For example, somewhere I found Laibach's playful statement that Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in postmodernism when it realized that it was, in fact, an eclectic retro-formation and not a one-dimensional, homogeneous modernist practice.

Transmission, repetition, and multiplication on the one hand, intervention, enlargement, and turn on the other. Interventions are sometimes rough, other times subtle, always conceptually well thought out, but ambiguous: an exclusion · a note · a re-assemblage.

Laibach's arrival was marked by prohibition that referred to their artistic images. The images also contributed to later controversial performances and prohibitions. The first image was concentrated in a black cross (in a cogwheel) and in the power of a sign. It was followed by others from the arsenal of Laibach's iconography. A whole sequence of iconic images. Bricolage of symbols of the revolutionary past (Partisan graphics and songs) and media symbols of Slovenianness (prince's stone, mountain peaks, deer, sower) were placed alongside the cult images of soc-realism and Nazi-kunst, genre painting and historical painting alongside the Russian artistic experiment, Entartete Kunst and futurism, images from encyclopaedias and medical manuals alongside the imagery from contemporary films and magazines. The Teutonic, mythological, and archetypal atmosphere was evoked especially by two drummers naked to the waist and the singer's headgear, by the trumpet and hunting horns, the mountains and deer, and by the loud fanfares and drumbeats.

All the works that Laibach reuses in the present exhibition come from the arsenal of their collection of appropriated images and were presented at the aforementioned first exhibitions in the Škuc Gallery in 1982 and 1983. These images are different in motif, technique, and style. But they all had in common the mechanism of their creation, establishment, and reproduction: the dialectic of association and dissociation, unification and separation, integration and division. One way or another, they were commissioned, and we can say that they were always made by a state artist. At the same time, they were representations of a national and cultural identity and they eventually acquired a mythical character and became unique (state, national, pop) icons of their time. "The Metalworker" was modelled after a poster for the "First Congress of the Metalworkers' Association" in 1945. The poster was commissioned by the socialist system of the working people and represented a heroic worker and shock-worker.⁶ The same goes for the industrial scenes on the theme of the Red Districts on Janez Knez's graphics from the 1960s, which companies commissioned as gifts for their workers and miners upon retirement. The painting of a deer (appropriation: Sir Edwin Landseer, "The Monarch of the Glen", oil painting, 1851) was commissioned by the British Parliament as a romantic vision of the Scottish Highlands for the dining hall in London's Palace of Westminster.⁷ On the one hand,

⁶ This image spoke vividly of the political and cultural context in Yugoslavia in the first years after the end of World War II, at a time when the authorities were prescribing a soc-realist direction in art modelled on the Soviet Union.

⁷ The selection of this "aristocratic" and "archetypal" image of the English Victorian painter remains rather unclear, although in its time and later it was extremely popular, widely reproduced, commercialized, and used for market brands (for example as a logo for Glenfiddich whiskey), advertisements, souvenirs and other items for sale. Copies of the painting in graphic technique have been in circulation since its creation, and today print versions are available on demand on the World Wide Web. More interestingly, this image was artistically appropriated or cited as a concept and idea of Scotland much earlier as well as later: a slightly colour-modified copy was made by Peter Blake for Paul McCartney in 1966 on the initiative of gallerist Robert Fraser, making the painting a real pop icon. Blake also added the caption "After 'The Monarch of the Glen' by Sir Edwin Landseer. Sir Peter Blake. 1966." After that, Peter Saville – artistic director of English record labels and record cover designer for Joy Division, New Order and others – made a graphic entitled "After After Monarch of the Glen by Sir Edwin Landseer' by Sir Peter Blake" in 2002 (which Laibach also used) and later also the tapestry, and so on and so forth various other appropriations followed. At the same time, the original Landseer painting, passed down from hand to hand by aristocrats, art dealers and corporations, clearly remains an important national icon representing Scottish cultural identity, as the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh has sought to get it into its collection for years, succeeding in 2017 with the help of extensive contributions from individuals and institutions.

then, we have the product of a socialist and industrial revolution, on the other, the emblem of a hierarchical capitalist society.

Laibach actualized these three motifs – factory, worker and deer – in various techniques: graphics, xerox or painting. They were able to reproduce them all, initially by hand or with a photocopier, and now with computer programs.⁸ In the present exhibition, however, we see that these relations between motif and technique can also be reversed: the painting becomes the wallpaper, and the xerox the painting. Through this shift, Laibach creates images, and by condensing two images, a third, composite one is created, which refers to different contents. At the same time, the shifting establishes new relations, re-evaluates the image/performance and its meaning.

An industrial scream

The industrial “scream”⁹ characterizes all of Laibach’s artistic practice, visually, sonorously and performatively, it is its basic recognizable expression.¹⁰ Their image – shaven and uniformed, of rigid postures and steely gaze, alienated speech and covered with a system of signs – evoked various references and associations. The art of resistance and totalitarianism, pessimism of intellect and optimism of will, total devotion and experimental eagerness. At the same time, industrial production with its repetitive rhythm, increased productivity and depersonalizing effect is their constant also in terms of production: mechanization of the production process, collective machine, controlled and measured movements, repetitive patterns. Laibach represented this theme in the character of the worker or in the factory and mining facilities in the proletarian and revolutionary Red Districts. They found the motif of the “factory” in Janez Knez’s graphics from the 1960s, they appropriated and marked them, repeated and varied them, and always marked them with their own sign or name, most often with an (anamorphic) black cross.

In the present exhibition, Laibach uses these Knez’s figurative graphics again and uses them as an entrance for an intervention. This time they take a certain fragment and mark its place with a red line, leaving a trace of the process. The fragment, on the other hand, is zoomed in, i.e. enlarged beyond recognition, thus reversing the perspective. The figurative sign imaginary is deconstructed and reconstructed into abstract compositions. The image no longer belongs to the same iconic order/regime of depiction, it is determined by a black-and-white geometric

⁸ In 1981, Laibach most vividly introduced the issue of reproduction and appropriation with the assembling of photocopied prints (later with a painting) “Prohibited Reproduction”: a direct prohibition, written as a mirrored image, evoked the possibility of appropriation of a specific painting (René Magritte, “La reproduction interdite”, 1937), and all of those that were to follow. Of course, this was possible in a world where there were no copyrights, prohibitions and sanctions yet.

⁹ The graphic “Scream” (1980) is one of Laibach’s first images and appropriations: a human figure (Edvard Munch: “The Scream”, lithograph, 1895) is placed in an industrial environment (Janez Knez: “Trbovlje Cement Factory”, 1964) and at the bottom on a black surface, LAIBACH is written in capital letters. The graphic is a part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana.

¹⁰ On the world music scene, they were considered representatives of industrial rock alongside the groups Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, Psychic TV, Test Department and Einstürzende Neubauten. Already in the first years, they wrote: “From its very beginnings, Laibach has been using provocation aimed at consumers (images, sound) of Laibach production, a provocation to the revolt of alienated consciousness (which must necessarily look for an opponent). Laibach unites warriors and opponents in an expression of a scream of static totalitarianism.” (“LAIBACH KUNST – PISMO”, *GM*, No. 2, 5 November 1982).

composition that belongs to the world of abstraction.¹¹ By doing so, it shows that what we first see and recognize in a referential attachment to reality is not always what it actually is. It can also be diametrically opposed to it: a self-referential abstraction that reveals pictorial facts, the artist's stroke, and the design of expression.¹²

Factory

Factory, worker, and deer are basic motifs of the exhibition (and of the referential early exhibitions), they are themes, concepts, and rhetorical figures – from metaphor and allegory to comparison and metonymy –, but also very real and concrete things, a matter of life and creativity.

The central motif of this exhibition is concentrated in the factory. As a “Laibach Kunst Machine”, the factory is in fact a fundamental marker of their practice on several levels and in several aspects – as a material industrial object, as an abstract-concrete production space and process, and as a multi-meaning component of the exhibition: following the sequence city-industry-production-work-worker-action-revolution-movement-state-freedom-art ...

Numerous references could be found to the topic of “factory”, from the industrial revolution and the socialist political-economic system within which art had an important symbolic place, to art factories (Andy Warhol: *The Factory*), artistic texts (Kazimir Malevich: *God is Not Cast Down: Art, Church, and Factory*), contemporary museums (Tate Modern), and studio complexes (Rog Factory). Furthermore, from works of art (Andrzej Wajda: *Man of Marble, Man of Iron*; John Lennon: *Working Class Hero*) to music machines (*The Machines, The Work*) and record labels (Factory Records), industrial sound/rock and their technological aspects and derivations.

What is certainly decisive is the more personal and close experience of the place from which the Laibach group originates and where it was founded in 1980: the proletarian Trbovlje and the Red Districts with their industrial landscape and revolutionary past, factory and mining facilities and the history of revolt. A city “in which a modern industrial worker with a developed sense of class consciousness has matured ... This city has built us and we continue the revolutionary tradition”, they said in a 1983 television interview.¹³

In addition to visual depictions, the factory appears in songs and compositions from the group's very beginnings, such as “Tovarna” (*The Factory*), “Tovarna C19” (“*The Factory C19*”), “STT” (*Equipment and Machines Manufacturer Trbovlje / Strojna tovarna Trbovlje*) and

¹¹ Janez Knez, whose works were the earliest in the appropriation process of Laibach Kunst, also experimented in his work and moved from realistic depictions of industrial architectures and landscapes to a reduced and abstract image with a system of black and white geometric surfaces by repeating and varying motifs. At the same time, he worked on paintings and graphics with different motifs and in different styles or fine arts approaches, sometimes in a soc-realist manner, some other time as a geometric abstraction. (Comp. Breda Škrjanec, *Topografija življenja*, in *Janez Knez*, exhibition catalogue, The International Centre of Graphis Arts in Ljubljana, 2015.)

¹² This effect is very similar to that created by enlarging parts of paintings by old masters, from Titian and El Greco to Rembrandt and Goya. Researchers and art historians always discover an abstract image in detail, and this can reveal the artistic power, innovation, and masterful skilfulness of pictorial representation.

¹³ TV Tednik (journalist Jure Pengov), TV Ljubljana, 23 June 1983, published in: Laibach, *Documents of Oppression, Punk Problemi*, 1983, no. 10/11. The Laibach group appropriated this TV show as their video and called it “XY-unsolved”.

“Resistance is Futile”. The factory, they say, is the “cathedral” of life and work – it is, in fact, life itself in all its dimensions of constant movement and cyclical repetition. The schematic and at the same time recognizable representation of the factory and its visual beauty became the visual materialization of the idea and the poetic sign of the exhibition.

FACTORY

your beauty, factory,
is like a blade; I surrender,
while the clouds flutter
and laugh

(Tomaž Hostnik, 1981)

Barbara Borčić