

THE STORY SO FAR

Website



Laibach is a music and cross-media group from Slovenia established on the 1st of June, 1980 in Trbovlje. The name of the band is the historic German version of the name Slovenia's capital Ljubljana. From the start Laibach has developed a "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" – multi-disciplinary art practice in all fields ranging from popular culture to art (collages, photo-copies, posters, graphics, paintings, videos, installations, concerts and performances). Since their beginnings the group was associated and surrounded with controversy, provoking strong reactions from political authorities of former Yugoslavia and in particular in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. Their militaristic self-stylisation, propagandist manifestos and totalitarian statements have raised many debates on their actual artistic and political positioning. Many important theorists, among them **Boris Groys** and **Slavoj Žižek**, have discussed the Laibach phenomenon both from an analytical as well as critical cultural point of view. The main elements of Laibach's varied practices are: strong references to *avant-garde* art history, *nazi-kunst* and *socialist realism* for their production of visual art, *de-individualisation* in their public performances as an anonymous quartet dressed in uniforms, conceptual proclamations, and forceful sonic stage performances – mainly labelled as industrial (pop) music. Laibach is practicing *collective work*, dismantling individual authorship and establishing the principle of *hyper-identification*. In 1983 they have invented and defined the historic term '*retro-avant-garde*'. They creatively questioned artistic '*quotation*', *appropriation*, *re-contextualisation*, *copyright* and *copy-left*. Although starting out as both an art and music collective, Laibach became internationally renowned foremost on the music scene, particularly with their unique cover-versions and interpretations of hits by Queen, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, etc. In 1984 Laibach initiated the founding of the wider collective of **NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst)** together with the painters from the group **Irwin** and the theatre group **Scipion Nasice Sisters**. This led to the establishment of a strong platform for social, cultural and political activity within the climate of liberalisation and pluralisation in 1980's Yugoslavia. NSK existed as a synchronised movement till 1992, later partly changing itself into a virtual NSK State in time. After the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, Laibach continued mostly within the realm of popular music, while remaining a point of reference in terms of artistic cultural criticism. During recent years the group underwent an international re-evaluation of their artistic practice in the course of an emergence of post-structuralist views on worldwide conceptual art production.

AUSSTELLUNG! LAIBACH KUNST : UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA

30 August–5 October 2024

MMC KIBLA/KiBela, Ulica kneza Koclja 9, Maribor

Opening hours: Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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It is a great success when artists become recognizable names, but rare are those who need no name at all. In this case, it is enough to see a black cross, read a word in German or hear a deep male voice (*Life is life . . .*) for people all over the world to know immediately – Laibach! This is the reach and profile of the collective that has been successfully carrying out artistic provocations in all media and forms, in all areas and at every neuralgic point in the world for over 40 years, from the West to the Far East, from Nazism to fascism, from socialism to capitalism, at both poles of the Cold War and on the untrodden paths of all three world wars and from North to South Korea. Today we can justifiably claim that Laibach is a canon name in contemporary art – numerous retrospective exhibitions have been organized worldwide, the last one this year in Ljubljana¹. But such a status is both an honor and a curse, for there is a fine line between canon and crypto. Just as Duchamp's urinal is now regarded with the same lethargic admiration as the *Mona Lisa*, it is quite possible that Laibach's works will be put in gilded frames, locked in display cases and relegated to dormant museums. But that just does not happen: Laibach still arouses interest, disbelief and discomfort, it still rubs and confuses the audience – not only "the others", but also nominal sympathizers. Laibach still attracts us, then it offends us, and finally it attracts us and offends us all at the same time. Why is this so? At first glance, the situation is simple: whether music, film, visual art, performance or everything together (*das Gesamtkunstwerk!*), Laibach does not stop working, it does not stop exploring or provoking, it does not slow down, it does not take its foot off the gas. And apart from that, it is becoming increasingly clear that the authoritarian politics that are at the heart of Laibach's interest are not a thing of the past, but are also increasingly on the rise in the "civilized" West. In short, Laibach is necessary and present today. But that does not explain the unique combination of fascination and offense that they continue to evoke.

Slavoj Žižek claims² that the dissident character of Laibach in the period of late capitalism was expressed in the absolute acceptance of the ruling ideology, which was so literal and extreme that it made even the regime itself uncomfortable. Regardless of which political system Laibach engaged with, they have always managed to combine seemingly innocuous pop culture, ideological newspeak and militant iconography into a spectacle of horror that makes us frown precisely because we recognize it around us and in ourselves. Their work is ironic, but it does not bring us the noise of ironic distance. As Laibach themselves stated in their 1982 manifesto *10 Items of the Covenant*,³ all art is subject to political manipulation, except that which speaks the language of the same manipulation. But Laibach practice this violent manipulation so skillfully, powerfully and explicitly that it is no longer amusing or absurd, but so shocking that we can no longer bear it. But if we are brave enough, if we dare to persist in this feeling, then we can ask ourselves what this effect says about us and our cultures.

With this in mind, we also come to Laibach new exhibition UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA by Laibach at the Multimedia Center KIBLA in Maribor. The exhibition is related to Laibach's *Alamut*, a symphonic work that premiered in 2022 and takes us into a historical story about the charismatic Persian religious and

¹ AUSSTELLUNG! LAIBACH KUNST 1980–1984! ŠKUC Gallery.

² In the introduction to the book *Interrogation Machine* (Alexei Monroe, MIT Press, 2005), which can be found in the Archive.org database.

³ Laibach: 10 Points of Convention. URL: <https://garagemca.org/en/exhibition/nsk-from-kapital-to-capital/materials/laibach-desyat-statey-zaveta-laibach-10-items-of-the-covenant>

political leader Hasan Ibn Sabi. Laibach's *Alamut* is based on the novel of the same name by Slovenian author Vladimir Bartol (from 1938), which emphasizes Ibn Sabi's cruel cynicism and establishes the book's motto "Nothing is an absolute reality, everything is permitted" as the overarching principle of Ismaili and the central idea of the novel. Laibach's *Alamut* is thus a meditation on the cynicism and nihilism of political authority, on radical philosophical skepticism and the renunciation of all traditions, on the spirit of Machiavellianism and the rise of fascism.⁴ Laibach thus delve into the distant past and its foreign culture to find the themes that we today feel are unique to our time. With this exhibition, Laibach also continues its focus on the Middle East, Muslim cultures and Islam, politically charged and slippery topics that the group approaches in their recognizable style, with understanding but without reservation, devoted yet merciless.

On the wall hangs a large black and white painting, painted with ink on paper, and beneath our feet lies a hand-knotted, intricately woven, colorful Afghan rug of the same size as the painting on the wall, which we can perceive both by sight and touch. These carpets are a particularly important part of Islamic culture and art. They are valued both as decoration and as prayer relics and serve as a daily resting place. The painting on the Laibach rug does not, of course, provide an opportunity for relaxation. The painting was originally intended as a replacement for *Guernica*: in 2017, the collective performed at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid and took a photo in front of Picasso's *Guernica* (which is in the museum), which they wanted to use as the cover for their album *We Forge the Future (Live at Reina Sofia)*. But after Picasso's heirs refused to allow the photo to be used, the group made their own version, which appeared on the album cover and later in the exhibition as its dark double. The composition of the painting openly refers to Picasso's work (from 1937), the motifs are taken directly from the painting cycle *Homes, Prisons, Forests. On the Threshold of Freedom* (1944) by the Slovenian painter, sculptor and illustrator Nikolaj Pirnat (1903–1948). Pirnat ended up in the Italian concentration camp Gonars in 1942. After his release in 1943, he joined the partisans and painted continuously. Without fetishizing suffering, it must be emphasized that Pirnat saw and experienced what Picasso could not even have dreamed of in his most terrible nightmares. *Guernica*, which was painted after the bombing of this Spanish city by the Germans, shows a man in a state of shock and basic human fear, whereas Pirnat's people no longer had even this after the unimaginable "Operation Barbarossa". On one side the executioners, on the other the destroyed people, dehumanized, reduced to broken bones and worthless skin, crushed or already dead, far from any fear or hope, Pirnat's creatures do not emit an anti-war cry as in *Guernica*, but radiate the gloomy post-war twilight, take our breath away, write poems after Auschwitz. The only human community there are murderers in uniforms, the only solution is quick death and instead of God, the only thing that stands upright is the black sun with a reddish glow. If Pirnat's paintings can give hope, it is because the person who saw them survived and found the strength to paint them.

Who brings us such images today? Two variants, one of which is recognized as museal art and the other which we would expect to find in a mosque or an Arab palace, lead us to the question of who actually creates and exhibits art. The answer lies in the photographs in the exhibition. The painting hanging on the wall was hand-painted by the artist and one of Laibach's permanent anonymous collaborators from Trbovlje, coincidentally in the same studio where Laibach was founded in 1980. The way the painting was created is intimately and directly linked to the ideas and heritage of Laibach, a masterful blend of expressiveness and precision. On the other hand, the collective commissioned a family from the rural part of Afghanistan to make the rug, who had knotted the same painting to order and according to a precisely defined pattern. In this variant, the maker's attitude is strictly professional: the family wove the rug with care and precision, including pixelating the image (due to the poor internet connection, only a low-resolution photo could be used as a template). But the family did the work primarily for payment, with no personal connection to the commissioned image, as if they were weaving an original *Guernica*, a traditional pattern or a Mikey Mouse painting. The craft of making and the process of creation in this case seem separate from the understanding, feeling or creation of an image. But – is it really that simple?

As an export product of Islamic countries, carpets have served as a bridge between the cultures of the East and the West for centuries. The way they were made was passed down from generation

to generation, with women playing the main role in the handiwork. As a result, carpet making in Afghanistan today is a rare space for women's freedom, as the Taliban regime prevents women from continuing their education beyond elementary school and thus also denies them the space for economic emancipation. But this was not always the case. As early as 1957, women in Afghanistan gained access to higher education and employment, but history is not linear in "peripheral" countries. In the second half of the 20th century, Afghanistan was a constant theater of political and military tensions between the USSR, the United States and conservative Muslim movements. The end of the Cold War did not bring peace; moreover, a climax was reached in the 21st century: after the terrorist attack in New York, the USA immediately began to take revenge on Afghanistan and disempowered the Taliban within three months. After twenty years of unstable democracy under American tutelage, the US government abandoned its mission in August 2021, ordered the army to withdraw and handed the country back to the humiliated and vengeful Taliban. Even if we do not remember the facts, we can remember the footage of the overloaded planes leaving the country at the time, with desperate people clinging to the wings. Since the return of the Taliban to power, Afghanistan has become a country facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world: last year, 28 million people needed humanitarian aid, 14.7 million of whom needed the bare essentials to survive. Two million people went missing and 6.4 million refugees were registered. The country is plagued by natural disasters, food shortages due to drought, poverty and, of course, the brutal Taliban regime. Laibach traveled there to commission the production of a carpet with the motif *UNTERNEHMEN BARBAROSSA*, at a time when the Taliban had already taken power and Russia had begun its aggression against Ukraine. The people who wove the terror of the Slovenian partisans thread by thread live here. The production of carpets therefore carries a different weight. European high culture traditionally values artistic creation more than handicrafts, but in today's Afghanistan, handicrafts can mean anything, while "engaged art" is just a useless foreign term used by distant elites. In this sense, the handmade carpets spontaneously bring to Laibach's painting what artistic creation cannot. Thanks to them, the painting manages to connect times and cultures and become a dark postcard from the past present.

We can dismiss these stories and come to the conclusion that they are very far away and do not concern us. Laibach's work shows that the West and the East are not separate or opposing cultures, but two sides of the same picture. Religious fanaticism and political nihilism go hand in hand, just as the fear of a higher power and cruelty towards the weaker ones appear again and again. That is why we can recognize someone's present and foresee our future in the paintings from the Second World War. Laibach are not the only ones to draw attention to this, but they are unique because they do not play the card of sentimentality of a personal history, but show that we are not isolated from others and have not risen above collectivism. When we feel fear, guilt, anxiety, but also joy, pride and defiance alongside our ego, these feelings have to do with the part of us that is embedded in a collective, that seeks protection and strength in the community. But when the collective defends us, we inevitably feel the pain of everyone else who is part of that collective. *Resistance is futile*, regardless of the fact that resistance is a natural reaction to unimaginable horrors perpetrated in the name of our imagined communities. But just because these communities are imaginary does not mean they are not real. Not only that, but even the communities that are not imaginary are real – the fact that people belong to other civilizations, religions and worldviews does not mean that we do not perceive them as close to us. Resistance is futile – say Laibach and add: *So lie down and relax*. That's why Laibach attract us and get on our nerves at the same time. That's why they are still so important. That's why they belong to *all of us*, even when we least want to admit it.

– Luka Ostojčić

⁴ We should add that Vladimir Bartol sarcastically dedicated the novel to Benito Mussolini.