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JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



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Interview with Laibach**

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INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

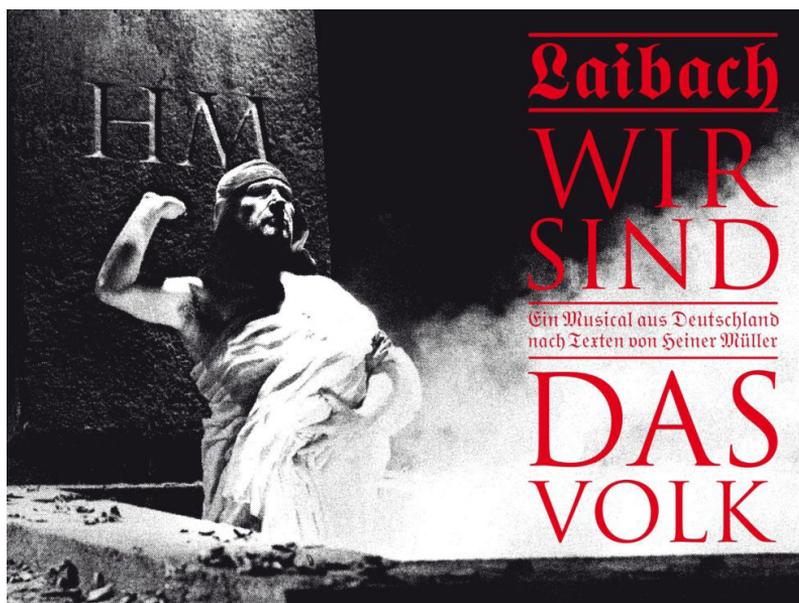
No. 10, July 2023, pp. 9–15.

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“EACH NATION HAS ITS OWN TRAUMA THAT REQUIRES A QUALIFIED EXORCIST”: Interview with Laibach

To mark the closing of the 28th edition of the *Memory Module*, a cultural project realized by International Theater Festival MESS, on May 9, 2023 at the Sarajevo National Theatre, music and cross-media group Laibach released the theatre play *Wir sind das Volk – Ein Musical aus Deutschland*, based on motifs and texts by Heiner Müller (1929–1995), one of Germany’s most prominent dramatists and theatre directors.



This “apolitically-political musical”, initiated by dramatist and director Anja Quickert in 2019, brings together Müller’s and Laibach’s complementary poetics. Although it considers the situation in post-war Germany in the first place, this project, facing German national trauma and collective guilt, reveals many levels and forms of the nation(alism) and fascism in its current global omnipresence. As Laibach explained, they followed “Heiner Müller’s own strategy of cutting and rearranging the material, taking his text and putting it into another context, rebooting it with music, in order to drag the audience into it or alienate them from it. Music unlocks the emotions and is therefore a great manipulative tool and a powerful propagandistic weapon. And that’s why a combination of Heiner Müller, who saw theatre as a political institution, and Laibach, can be nothing else but a musical.”

With this musical stage performance, Laibach returned to the Sarajevo National Theatre, the place where this group played in November 1995 during the siege of Sarajevo and, as part of the political art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst, proclaimed this city as a territory of the abstract utopian *NSK State in Time*. Held in the spirit of cultural resistance against war destruction and violence on November 21, the day of reaching the Dayton Peace Agreement, Laibach’s concert is considered one of the most important events in besieged Sarajevo.

The staging of *Wir sind das Volk* on the Victory Day in the city where “European political history traumatically purged itself of its symptoms” correlates with the intention behind the project *Module Memory*: dealing with the past on the basis of artistic expression through its aesthetic and ethical essence.

In this interview, Laibach answered several questions regarding the idea behind the project *Wir sind das Volk*, their long-term connection with Sarajevo, and Laibach’s *modus operandi* in general.



Photo by Adnan Lingo

The last time Laibach performed at the Sarajevo National Theatre was in November 1995, when the Dayton Peace Agreement was reached. This event in the (musical) history of Sarajevo was symbolically remembered as the beginning of peace and the normalizing of life. What did this visit and establishment of NSK State Sarajevo mean to Laibach? Was it an act of overidentification with the reality of the besieged city?

In a manner of speaking, yes, but primarily our gesture was a humble but also necessary expression of solidarity with the besieged city and clear rejection of the logic of military aggression. By demonstrating the establishment of the NSK state on this occasion, we wanted to stress that the proclamation and practice of elementary statehood will be an important element in the constitution of peace in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*This time, you are here on the occasion of your performance *Wir sind das Volk*, based on the writings of Heiner Müller (1929–1995), one of the most significant German-speaking playwrights since Brecht. How does Müller's poetics correspond with Laibach and the crisis of the actual moment?*

Like Laibach, Müller dealt a lot with German national traumas – and thus with patriotism. In the field of art, he radically practiced the denazification of Germany and mercilessly led the German nation through the purgatory of collective guilt. Laibach practices roughly the same with Slovenians, Austrians, Americans, Italians or Bosnians, and all other nations around the world, because each nation has its own trauma that requires and needs a good and qualified exorcist.

Laibach is not art, Laibach is a statement, expressed by the rhetoric of totalitarianism. Laibach treats the ideologies and historical context along Duchamp's idea of ready-made, which is, by its nature, in an antinomial relation with the art. If we consider art as a space between reality and the truth, what is the position of Laibach in this context?

As we already stated many times all art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation. To speak in political terms means to reveal and acknowledge the omnipresence of politics. The role of the most humane form of politics is the bridging of the gap between reality and the mobilizing spirit (*the truth*). Ideology takes the place of

authentic forms of social consciousness. The subject in modern society assumes the role of the politicized subject by acknowledging these facts. Laibach reveals and expresses the linkage of politics and ideology with art and culture and the unbridgeable gap between this links and the truth. As the *engineering of human souls* Laibach practices provocation on the revolted state of the alienated consciousness (which must necessarily find itself an enemy) and unites warriors and opponents into an expression of a static totalitarian cry.

According to Müller's perspective, the function of art, which is political, is to call into question systems of values and beliefs as well as their (eventual) destruction. In this relation, politics represent what is "possible". On the other side, art, as a free space for imagination, reflects what is "impossible". Art affects politics by expanding the boundaries of "possible". Do you detect the provocation and theatricalization of manipulation as the only means of liberation and demystifying political power?

We agree with Müller on this only conditionally and in the context of the foregoing. We certainly recognize provocation as a legitimate method of liberation, but not necessarily as the only means of demystifying political power. Provocation is most provocative and effective when it is least recognizable as such or when it operates under the guise of misleading representations.

Photo by Velija Hasanbegović



Our reality is shaped by the mass production of information, which affirms language unification and algorithmically dictated behavior patterns. Is individuality just an illusion, and how does this situation change the value system in art?

Of course, individuality is an illusion, except for the richest class, who own, advertise, and sell this illusion. This has been especially clear for at least the last thirty years, with the emergence of the World Wide Web and the digital distribution of information. Art has also long (if not always) been owned by capital, and therefore capital dictates its content and its value system. If we want this relationship to change, we need to change the system globally and from within. Politically and economically. Until then, we will continue to see art mainly and primarily as a helpless and essentially useless aesthetic tool of rich, perversely cynical, parvenus. The small part of the arts that may still be existing independently only confirms this blatant situation.

Music infiltrates the emotional space as a perfect propaganda tool at this sentimental level. This exploitation of emotions is present in pop culture. It creates different identities and offers a sense of belonging. Identifying with a particular genre or statement usually implies excluding any other perspective. What is the position of pop culture in an ideological way, and how (a)political is it?

Pop culture is as political as any other culture; furthermore, it is radically political in its deception and silly pretense, but it has long ceased to be on the left of the political spectrum, where it existed conditionally at least between the 1960s and the 1990s. It is now deeply rooted on the right, and it doesn't look like it will be moving anywhere else any time soon. Instead, pop culture is now becoming one of the greatest repositories of indigestible nonsense, unbearable conservatism, and primitive backwardness. Just like most politics as such in general. But its influence on social consciousness is still growing stronger.

Laibach's symbols were often interpreted differently from the initial idea. How powerful can a system of symbols be? How do different interpretations, triggered by the same symbol in various contexts, reflect the state of social consciousness?

Confucius already stated that symbols and signs rule the world, not words or laws. It is through symbols that man consciously or unconsciously lives, works, and has his being. It has been like that in the past and today, at the time of aggressive advertisement, when some of the most powerful symbols have even become a true modern work of art, this stands even more. Laibach's symbols were deliberately created and used in such a way that they cause confusion and skepticism, even rejection, and could be interpreted differently, depending on the angle or the context. Evading unified interpretations, our symbols thus nullify themselves. But with commercial and other ideological symbols (of power, politics, state, religion...) different logic is at work. Just as matter is highly concentrated energy, a symbol is highly concentrated meaning, creating a hidden language that emotionally sways the audience but also gives a sense of security and identity. Most omnipresent symbols do not allow different interpretations, they only offer different levels of standardization and points of identification for different social statuses and classes.



Photo by Vanja Čerimagić

Laibach held a concert in North Korea in 2015. In the last few years, you have been trying to arrange a performance of your symphonic work Alamut in Iran. What is the aim of visiting countries that the Occident considers embodying totalitarianism? Does this act represent a form of demystifying all general narratives created in the East related to the West and Western prejudices towards the East?

It is not only the question of East and West opposing narratives; Laibach can't (and don't want to) make difference between one and the other totalitarianism. People are people everywhere and we can also find basic inspiration for our delivery everywhere. The reason we want to present our symphonic work *Alamut* in Iran is simple; the story, as described in the novel by the Slovenian writer Vladimir Bartol, takes place in Iran in the 11th century, and Iranian musicians and composers also participate in the creation and performance. Iran has an exceptional musical, poetic and philosophical tradition, so it is logical that the symphony, which deals with the relationship between politics and religion and the mechanisms of manipulation, should also be presented in Iran.

Laibach is the knowledge of the universality of the moment. It is the return of action on behalf of the idea. Is this statement the key to Laibach's sustainability for over 40 years?

It is our duty and responsibility to be who we are and to respond relevantly to the stimuli of the zeitgeist. Forty years is objectively not a particularly long period, we still have a lot of work to do.