

Music

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Women's Discos, Gays and Punk – The Underground in Ljubljana in the 1980s

An interview with Aldo Ivani. In the 1980s, the cultural scene in Ljubljana was vibrating like never before: weird art actions, wild punk concerts and crazy lesbian and gay get-togethers were characteristic of the underground scene in the Slovenian capital, which is only about the size of Graz.

The story of the underground in the 1980s in Ljubljana – between the death of Tito in 1980 and the “10-Day War” in 1991, cannot be told without reference to the charismatic band leader, artist, journalist and DJ Aldo Ivani, one of the leading actionists of that time and the man to whom the legendary music and performance group Laibach gave their first interview.

Born in Pula, Croatia, in 1959, Ivani founded the well-known electronic band “Borghesia” in Ljubljana in 1982. In the meantime, he has released more than 40 recordings and has been working as a DJ for about 25 years. In 1998 he founded, together with Vuk Krakovi, the successful jazz-noise band “Bast”.

Heinrich Deisl: you moved from Croatia to Ljubljana at the start of the 1980s? Why?

Aldo Ivani: To study psychology. At least that was my official excuse. Actually, I was interested in the scene in Ljubljana at that time, much of which was organised by students. Above all, I went to a lot of great gigs. My passion for music and art were in the end what made me decide in favour of Ljubljana, which interested me far more than Zagreb, for instance.

What were the first years like?

We founded the performance and theatre group ‘FV112/15’. We simply took the name from a Slovene encyclopaedia, in which, on page 112, line 15, we found: “C’est la guerre!” You see, we were very influenced by Dadaism and Futurism. And we had a penchant for technology. We dragged tons of audio and video equipment onto the stage, because we wanted to combine politically motivated cabaret and punk, and the most appropriate place for that seemed to be discotheques. A kind of “Cabaret Voltaire in the disco”. The discos, which were just developing back then, were perfect for it and what is more they had good sound systems. Around this time I also began to work as a DJ and journalist. Among the important Yugoslav bands of the 1970s were “Disciplina Kime” or “Bijelo Dugme”, who played rock. “Pankrti” was probably one of the best-known punk bands of the time and was the precursor of the band “Laibach”.

What was the political mood like in the country at that time?

It was a time of great upheavals in Slovenia, everything was moving towards a modern civil society. The first peace demonstrations were organised, the first gay scenes were developing. It was a matter of working against the system, of the right to be different. Magazines that were close to the student scene, such as “Ladina” or “Tribuna”, regularly reported about the local and regional art and culture scene. Yet this struggle did not only take place in the aesthetic field, but was also very politically motivated, due to the social situation created by Socialism.

Many things became possible in the wake of such influential institutions as “Galeria Škuc” and “Radio Student”: at “Škuc” we organised some of the earliest exhibitions of contemporary critical art in Yugoslavia, while in the cellar of “Radio Student” – which later became “Club K4” – the legendary “Disco Student” parties were held. Incidentally, when I started to work as a DJ in “ClubK4”, you were only allowed to play music from eight in the evening until midnight. That’s a long time ago.

Which music was “in” at that time?

Punk was of course the dominant musical direction and not all the guests liked the funk and hip-hop records that I played quite as much as I did. Quite early on we organised the Disco Student parties together with feminist groups, to which only women were admitted. As many as 200 women from all over Yugoslavia would come to them. Even the bouncers and security staff were women. A real affront for society at that time, which was strongly dominated by men, as in fact it still is today!

Apart from “Laibach”, your industrial-funk band “Borghesia” is probably the most famous representative of the alternative Slovene music scene. Was there any kind of competition? How would you yourself describe the style of “Borghesia’s” music in a few sentences? In Slovenia in the 1970s many of the projects influenced by Fluxus and other performance-oriented art tendencies took it into their heads to work with music. Out of that there arose a so-called Novi primitivizam (“New Primitivism”) in many places, incorporating the do-it-yourself ideas of punk. Raw, disturbing, crude: one’s own body and the body of the state were the declared battlefields of the discourse, which was partly existentialist and partly glamorous. That applied just as much to “Laibach” as to “Borghesia”. While “Laibach” tended to work directly on the system, “Borghesia” represented a ‘street vibe’ style, which was more oriented towards street life than the arts scene.

In several of our videos, such as “AR”, “ZMR” or “FZZ”, surrealistic and homoerotic images can be discerned, although of course we were always working with self-irony. I think they were images that probably cut deeper into the collectively regulated real-socialist militarism than “Laibach’s” ideological games of confusion, which, from the official side could at least somehow or other be deciphered as art.

Did “Borghesia” have a message?

It was about individual freedom. A further provocation was the name of the band: it was not good, in a Socialist country to return to the idea of the bourgeoisie, in the sense of the middle-class before the French Revolution. In order to be artistically independent, we founded our own record label. It seemed logical to extend the performative experience that we had gained from working in the theatre group FV112/15 to include visual design. In

Slovenia, punk had always had a very visual element. This may have been due, among other things, to the integrational role played by “Škuc”. Goran Devidé, who unfortunately died very young, applied the technical genius that he had shown in FV112/15 in exactly the same way to “Borghesia”. Half of our band members were video artists.

After the end of “Borghesia” in 1989, it wasn't until 1998 that you founded the no less successful band Bast, which for a while collaborated with the radical American performer Ron Athey and the drag queen Vaginal Davis from Los Angeles?

1989 and 1991 were great turning points in the history of our country and in our artistic responses to them. “Bast” was an audiovisual manifestation, in which we dealt intensively with political, religious and social subjects. Practically from the very outset, “Bast” collaborated with Igor Stromajer and Davide Grassi from the Slovenian multimedia platforms “Intima” and “Aksioma”. We recorded so many pieces that the existing material would have been sufficient for two further albums. The current CD “Retinal Circus” was produced according to the “Creative Commons” guidelines, at present the best way of maintaining artistic freedom. Because we are also affected by the fact that practically no one buys CDs any more, everyone downloads their music, which makes our empty wallets even emptier. But then once you have decided to find the mainstream not so great, your whole life is one big struggle (laughs).

What is it like for you in Slovenia, now that the country has joined the EU?

The most important thing is to be working on something that one really likes. And if one can earn money by doing so, then so much the better. After all, that can help to transcend mental borders. On a political level, I find the fact that Slovenia is now part of the EU has made things better rather than worse. One can travel to Italy without any tedious controls. The government has changed, but of course it takes considerably longer to change people's mentality. The confrontation between liberality and falsely understood traditionalism continues to be very present. Consumerism and monoculture are knocking on one's door 24 hours a day, yet music from Central and Eastern Europe is nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for that reason, internationally practically “invisible”.

Documentation of the music scene in Ljubljana in 1982:

www.e-arhiv.org/neven/KLET/DFVapr182INTRO.avi

Documentation of Borghesia:

www.ljudmila.org/scca/ip/zanka/angl/Triumph.html

Borghesia videos:

www.e-arhiv.org/zanka/TriumpfZelje_divx.AVI,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIF_LrS-1Cc

Aldo Ivani (*1959 in Croatia) is a musician and sound technician. In the 1980s, his band “Borghesia” achieved something approaching cult status on the music underground scene. With the avant-garde jazz formation “Bast”, which he founded in 1998 and which involved up to 12 musicians, he toured all over the world. Apart from his own releases, he has compiled and produced two CDs entitled Trans Slovenia Express (1994, 2005) for the

famous London label Mute, featuring contributions by both well-established and young Slovene musicians.

Heinrich Deisl is a music journalist, cultural theorist and DJ from Vienna. He is the editor of skug – Journal für Musik, which has appeared at regular intervals since 1990, and focuses on Central and Eastern European art.

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