Introduction

I. OF SEMBLANCES AND . . .

a copy is out in the open, obvious and blunt; once it is
incorporated into the system it starts questioning everything.


Most of the months, short dry months and long wet months, between January of 2001 and October of 2003, I spent in Ljubljana, Slovenia’s capital city, doing research with artists and curators whose work was—in decidedly backhanded ways—helping to build a postsocialist, post-Yugoslav version of that nation. I had chosen to study Slovenia because there was something odd, or at least unfamiliar, about the ways in which mimicry was being used there for self-expression, most especially in the last years of Yugoslavia (1980–91) and through the first few years of independence (1991–2003). Not that the oddities in this regard ceased somehow with Slovenia’s entry into the European Union (2004), its startlingly quick leap into the Euro zone (2007), or even when one of its own gained the White House (albeit by marriage) in 2016.

In *The Likeness* I braid and twist these strands of resemblance through the whole of this historical period, from Josef Tito’s death to Melania
Trump’s ascendance. Proliferating incidences of the unoriginal and the difficult-to-differentiate are here laid side by side to give a glimpse of the artful complexity at work in Slovenia, where likenesses were often effective vehicles for change—whether on the intimate sphere of the individual or the much larger scale of the national. These likenesses are not all of a type. There are many forms of resemblance: one can borrow names or appearances; disrupt or make obvious a symbolic order; copy a sound, a rhythm, a walk, a taste, an institution, or a document. Likenesses can be used to increase legibility or to diminish it. Like most anthropologists, I am interested here not in the catalog of different instances (even when these are conducted in the tune of the same) but in the uses to which these instances are put socially, politically, and, in Slovenia’s case, also playfully. It will be a funny book, in which power, the capacity for change, and the ability to protest what cannot be changed are given form in the idiom of repetition. Likenesses here tie geopolitical transition to the more intimate register of self-conception and self-performance as these mattered to local experiences of social, cultural, economic, and political upheaval.

These three and a half decades of transition were far from Slovenia’s alone. Between 1989 and 1991 the Soviet Union slipped almost magically into history and as the literal (cement) walls and figurative (iron) curtains were brought down the whole center of Europe lurched back from “East” to “West,” from communism to the free market. The roots of this shift were older than twenty short months of surprising politics (Ost 1990). There is a joke, with a nut of truth in it, that in Poland the “revolution” took ten years; in Hungary—ten months; in East Germany—ten weeks; in Czechoslovakia—ten days; and in Romania—ten hours. In Romania it seemed there was just enough time to execute the emperor Ceaușescu (a sentence carried out on film and widely distributed) before stepping blithely over the line from West to East, marked only just hours before by men with machine guns, barbed wire, and impossibility. In Berlin the last man to be killed trying to escape died just half a year before the wall was brought down by hands and hammers on both side; the people scrabbling to bring the city and, shortly thereafter, the nation together again.

In Yugoslavia the aftermath of state socialism was worse, though during socialism things had been better. The borders had not been closed, nor had the nation been under the leaden wing of Soviet protection. Yugoslavia
had not been threatened by tanks, occupation, and other grave sanctions as had the nations of the Eastern Bloc. After its admittedly stressful break from the Soviet Union in the 1950s, Yugoslavia became a founding member of the movement of nonaligned states. These countries—India and Egypt, Indonesia and Ghana—sought to forge a route between capitalism and communism. Their aim was to build a future that would not be determined by an alliance with one superpower or the other. In other words, throughout the second half of the twentieth century Yugoslavia was a driving force toward a hopeful alternative. An alternative politically and economically, but also in other domains, as Tito, its erstwhile leader struggled to bring the world together under separate cover. There was a third way, a path between ideological communism and ideological capitalism, and Yugoslavia’s economic as well as diplomatic successes proved it possible (Gupta 1992; Rubinstein 1970).

A conglomerate nation, Yugoslavia was a linguistically, ethnically, and religiously diverse country that worked. This too made it unusual in the twentieth century. Many of its people felt themselves to be Yugoslavs, marriages crossed lines of all sorts, there was free movement, intellectual interchange, commerce, and uplift as generation followed generation in which things got better. The rapidity with which all of this shattered in the 1990s was breathtaking even to those in the midst of it, as neighbors turned to hate neighbors and Yugoslavs turned back into Serbs, Croats, Muslims, each at the throats of the others. At the speed of a blink (it seemed) enmities turned to massacres.

I remember a friend showing me an empty field in Bosnia that had been a Muslim neighborhood, now emptied of people (some killed, most driven away); the houses had been burnt and their remnants hauled out and away. And then, hard work though it was, even the pipes had been dug out of the ground and made to disappear into the rest of the town, such that no trace remained of the people who had lived there, neighbors, friends, shop owners, and teachers to those who did the routing. There were always pockets of comradery, places and people that resisted this turn toward ethnic and religious divisiveness, where diverse communities had flourished (Baker 2015). Nevertheless, when people write the history of Yugoslavia in the 1990s as a horror story this is what they mean: mundane functionality that flipped, like a coin falling, to genocide; it happened so quickly it felt like
entering a vacuum and feeling the air pulled from one’s lungs, the eyes from their sockets.¹

In Slovenia none of this happened. Yugoslavia’s northernmost republic, a tiny place squeezed between Italy, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, the Alps, and the sea, with its own quirky language and relative ethnic homogeneity, Slovenia seemed from the outside to have just turned its back quietly on Yugoslavia, severing ties, keeping a bit of money in its banks that wasn’t properly speaking its own, and like a greased eel, slipping away from the terrible history the rest of that nation would bear.

When confronted with this story of their escape, Slovenes protest that they too saw violence, they too suffered death. And this is true. There were ten days of war with casualties on both sides; this feels like “a peaceful transition” only in light of what would happen to the rest of Yugoslavia.²

The aplomb with which Slovenia accomplished its transition out of federated Yugoslavia and also out of state socialism initially caught my ear and rubbed itself down into consciousness because of the many (indeed innumerable) ways in which it proved to be the exception, not only within Yugoslavia but also among all the former postsocialist republics and countries. At gatherings of postsocialist this and postsocialist that, which were so common in the 1990s, there was always someone who, when making sweeping generalizations about the hardships attendant to the end of communism, would at some point say, “except in Slovenia.” There was rampant inflation, except in Slovenia; there was a turn to right-wing ethnopolitics, except in Slovenia; there was a tendency for individuals to refuse to pay utility bills, except in Slovenia. And so on and so forth. Then, quite suddenly, the Open Society Foundation—George Soros’s massively funded undertaking committed to the promotion of peace and cultural flourishing in the formerly communist center of Europe—pulled out of Slovenia in 2000.³

¹. For a far more thoroughgoing history of Yugoslavia and its undoing, see Woodward 1995a, 1995b.
². About 50 members of the Yugoslav Peoples’ Army were killed, with three times that number wounded. On the Slovene side, 19 were killed and 182 were wounded. From www.slovenija2001.gov.si/10years/path/war/, accessed July 2019.
³. Likely a pragmatic rather than ideological decision, the Soros Foundation’s withdrawal from Slovenia followed on the heels of a World Bank declaration that the country was “developed” and thus no longer eligible for aid. See www.ce-review.org/00/43/slovenianews43.html, accessed April 2018.
It alone of the socialist East was “open” enough to merit no further funding in this regard.

After enough of this sort of off-the-cuff gesturing toward Slovenia’s exceptional functionality in a situation that flummoxed (at times catastrophically) other newly independent states across the region and into Central Asia, I decided to go there. I was a student of late communism, myself transitioning to become a student of postsocialism and it struck me as curious that nobody was talking in any detail about this place that appeared to be doing the transition so right.

My curiosity was also piqued by a more pointed weirdness. At the time Slovenia’s single most important exports (after refrigerators) were a seemingly neofascist punkish band and a sort of crazed Lacanian philosopher. Both Laibach (the band) and Žižek (the philosopher) commanded devoted followings—in Slovenia and beyond—but neither could really be said to be a “normal” sort of harbinger for a functional nation-state. In the end I even got Fulbright money (which is to say, money from the US government) and from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, both of whose interest was in policy-relevant research, to jet off to Slovenia, one of the few anthropologists to have done so, to try to determine what made it such an exceptional exception.4

One might not immediately guess from the pages that follow that this book began with questions related to untoward geopolitical success. Largely this is because my initial questions were quickly answered and also because they were only the tip of a much larger and more interesting iceberg. The answer, just so you have it, is that Slovenes did so well in their transition from communism because they looked to systems that functioned well and copied them. Likewise, they were attentive to demands made upon them and, when not opposed to particular suggestions, they did their best to meet expectations. And when crises did occur, and they did, Slovenes also did their best to resolve things quickly and without undo fuss. A good history of the postsocialist period can lead you through the details of this (Meier 1995; Benderly and Kraft 1996; Gow and Carmichael

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4. Slovenia has its own anthropologists, who were very kind to me as I came bumbling into their world. Rajko Muršič was particularly genteel and smart and his book, Neubesedljive zvočne igre: Od filozofije k antropologiji glasbe (1993) always gave me hope, in the morass of fieldwork, that I was on the right track.
but suffice it to say here that in Slovenia, care was taken to determine the parameters of a good thing and then to make that good thing their own via, in most cases, institutionalization rather than political fiat or (equally dangerous) whimsy. It’s not a perfect nation-state, but it does prove the point that intelligent governance is possible even in situations of extreme stress. In Slovenia’s case this “intelligence” was linked explicitly to the fact that other people in other places had provided positive precedent. There were exemplars worth following and models that seemed wise to adopt.

More interesting, to me, was that similar processes of attentive concern and thoughtful copy were happening far beyond the limited realm of statecraft. And, more important to those Slovenes I came to know, was that through all of the twentieth century, within shifts of geopolitical fortune ran thick veins of artistic interest, production, and talent. The arts and their artists, the philosophers and their philosophy were not developing somehow in parallel to the state: the two domains were mutually constituting. So much so that when speaking of statecraft in Slovenia it is right to put the emphasis on the second word. The craft of the state was what mattered most. Or to put it otherwise, something artful—more of a maneuver than a clearly identifiable object or end form—was playing out in the slow and steady tread from state socialism to welfare state capitalism. In the end, then, I turned from political and institutional functionality toward the arts, for these public functionalities were but symptoms of a larger cultural care for resemblances and what they are good for.

Thus, while much has been written about notions of transparency in the early days of European integration, along with transparency’s anxious Other, “authenticity”—both concepts relying on the notion of a hidden interior that can be revealed—in Slovenia the expressive power of exteriors, not interiors, took center stage (Shore 2013; Jarosinski 2002). There, far from making everything as transparent as possible, such that one could see “through” walls or “into” bureaucratic processes to whatever was going on “inside,” the turn was toward crafting likenesses by copying the obvious and available forms of things: musicians performed covers; artists painted other people’s pictures; punks, rockabillies, and skinheads looked, sounded, smelled, and acted like punks, rockabillies, and skinheads; the politicians organized themselves into an (almost) two-chambered parliament; the
business newspaper was printed on salmon-colored newsprint (Erjavec and Gržinić 1991; Stankovič, Tomic, and Velikonja 1999). I once saw an ideotypical Scotsman ducking into a Ljubljana cafe. Every day I saw a perfect linzer torte—or two or three—in shop windows. Once, early in fieldwork, I found myself confronted with a perfect piano bar. I’d never even been to a piano bar before and, this is the point, I still knew it was perfect. It was like a piano bar from a TV show about fancy foreign policemen who cut into a piano bar to do business. Close your eyes; you can see it too.

Despite the constant repetition of things and styles and sounds and even, as we shall see, persons, there was also always something weird going on. Copies and counterfeits were not really made to dupe people into thinking they’d just happened upon a real painting by Mondrian or Pink Floyd really performing in a converted periurban factory. Instead of a perfect fidelity to form, Slovene copies were consistently made to be recognizable as copies—as not the real thing. The most common route to accomplishing this was situational: likenesses, like that Scotsman, were often just enough out of place that it was difficult to take them for the real deal.

Take, for example, “The International Exhibition of Modern Art” (Internacionalna razstava moderne umetnosti), mounted in Ljubljana in the spring of 1986. The substance of the show was fifty paintings and sculptures, each of which was a copy, if not always an exacting one, of a work displayed in the first, far more famous, instantiation of this exhibit—popularly known as the Amory Show and held in New York City in 1913. This first International Exhibition of Modern Art introduced America (much to America’s then dismay) to the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso; the newer version, in contrast, made works by these same artists—all of which were infinitely recognizable by 1986—into vehicles for a distinctly local politics of artistic production. Of the show, one catalog essay extolled:

The works exhibited are obviously copies; they are not forgeries, because they make no attempt to hide their status as copies: their dates of provenance are all wrong, and their execution is consciously dilettantish. Their anonymous creator has not attempted to reproduce the materiality of the originals in any way, opting to work against it instead. Hence, the copies of

5. A quick glance at the webpages of the Financial Times and of Finance (Slovenia’s financial newspaper, where I worked for a time) can be instructive. You will see that one is a copy of the other and you will guess correctly which copies which.
Joseph Kosuth’s *Definitions* are not executed as photo works, but in oil (and dated to 1905), while Duchamp’s famous urinal (1971) is a handmade plaster sculpture, and not a ceramic readymade. (Arns 2006, 7–8)

Half a hundred copies of famous art works gathered together in a copy of a famous art show all done in such a way as to avoid the singular effect of that original undertaking. The first Armory show was meant to blow America away; it was sensational, it was shocking, there was huffing and puffing, people walked out, fury pouring from them like cartoon smoke from cartoon ears. The Ljubljana International Exhibition of Modern Art may have been a copy in form and in name, and its contents may equally have been copies, but the intention was to use likenesses to inverse effect. Not to shock and awe via unbridled creativity, but to create something “repetitive, uncreative, and boring”: the goal was not “an adventure into the unknown; its voyage rather leads into the known” (Arns 2006, 7). The repetition itself was designed to stand out, over and above any particular works of art.

The likeness here being deliberately pursued was not that of forgery or of deception. Duplication was, rather, undertaken without duplicitous intent. No one was going to buy this Duchampian “Fountain” by accident; there was no mistaking it for the real thing. Rather, both the contents and the fact of the show were principally techniques to open up the space of art for judgments beyond those ordinarily heard at gallery openings or group shows. Gone were questions of aesthetic worth, artistic genius, originality, or skill. In their place arose a different sort of conversation about geopolitical power, about the economies of “high” culture, and most especially about the uses to which history might be put (Bakke 2008).

Copies have different effects than originals, but this only works if they are recognizable as *not* being what they pretend at (Arns and Sasse 2006).

“The International Exhibition of Modern Art” of 1986 did not simply frame ideas about geographies and histories, it gave these ideas form. A past New York was transported in an admittedly queer way to then present-day Ljubljana. This was the most obvious folding of time across space, but there was another more noteworthy displacement, one that emerges only in retrospect. “The International Exhibition of Modern Art” was a Yugoslav project, born of an ebullient art scene that tied that nation’s capital cities (Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo) together, as artists and ideas moved across the federation.
In Yugoslavia in the 1980s, after Tito’s death but before the wars that would do so much harm to the rest of the country, there were principally Yugoslav artists, of whom Slovenes (marked as much by linguistic distinctiveness as by ethnicity) were a part. It was a decade of common creative flourishing, truncated by war, from which the northernmost piece of Yugoslavia emerged with the capacity to continue a thread of artistic concern, while the other pieces—Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia—wondrous and dynamic, lost this thread. History split. Slovene art, Slovene artists, thus bore these unfinished histories forward in time, not by “completing” them (they could not be completed) but in a combination of mourning, growth, and return. This combination already had a name, “retro-avant-gardism,” a phrase invented by Laibach but practiced by a number of Yugoslav artists in the 1980s. What was dynamic and experimental before the Yugoslav wars became a defining characteristic of South Slavic art in their wake.

What is ironic in this slippage of history is that “retro-avant-gardism” as a governing philosophy of artistic practice “imitative of a style or fashion from the recent past” (retro) yet governed by “ideas ahead of their time” (avant-garde) prefigured a truncation of the Yugoslav art scene by a war that had not yet come to pass. The work of many of these artists would, in the future, become the object of precisely the same sort of historical-artistic continuations they’d earlier plied on the “historical” avant-garde (Šuvaković 2003, Erjavec 2003). In retrospect it feels like they were prefiguring their own traumatic undoing, as many of the retro-avant-garde’s founding figures indeed disappeared into the war or were flung by it into new lives in new countries, their futures as Yugoslav artists lost with the loss of Yugoslavia itself.

Despite the seeming prescience of a movement concerned with disrupted histories, in the 1980s across the east of Europe people understood that communism was changing, ending perhaps, but transforming most certainly (Sher 1977). This was especially true in Yugoslavia, where the interregnum following Tito’s death (in Ljubljana in 1980) felt suspiciously like acephalous shatter. There would be no new Tito. The past had already begun to unravel, and the future promised little by way of continuity.

In Slovenia, the starting point of a post-Titoist future was the same as for the other Yugoslav republics. And if Serbia gave rise to the likes of Kazimir Malevich, perhaps the anonymous artist responsible for the “The
International Exhibition of Modern Art,” then, in the beginning, Slovenia had Laibach, the seemingly fascist punk band mentioned above.\(^6\)

Laibach emerged in the early 1980s just as punk was fading in Yugoslavia and they were anyway “too different, too crazy” to be properly speaking “punk” (Miha Štamcar, personal conversation, 2002). Unlike other artists working principally with mimicry, including the early Slovene punks whose art was largely a copy of that of their British brethren (Bakke 2007), Laibach didn’t copy the avant-garde nor did they copy the disenfranchised youth of a Western European island. Instead they gave voice to fascism, ethnonationalism, and diligent communism. They were in this way provocative, as this untoward mix of ideologies intimates. Laibach, in holding these incompatibles fiercely together seemed to cast light upon the absurdity of each. And though they were a band, playing music upon a stage was the least of their undertakings. Laibach lived the philosophy they championed. They both represented and preached conformity and fanaticism. They spoke with one voice, they eschewed individuality and creativity, they used no proper names, they wore well-designed suspiciously fascist uniforms.\(^7\) All of their songs were covers and yet they could hardly be considered a cover band. They were in many ways terrifying. And though Laibach’s earnestness was never in question, there was a fair amount of confusion over just what exactly they were earnest about. Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar writes: “Laibach . . . shocked the pub-

\(^6\) Laibach, the German name for Ljubljana, when “dusted off and set in type for rock festival posters within a year of Tito’s death functioned as the sheerest provocation in Yugoslavia . . . . It evoked . . . the much longer span of pre-Yugoslav Slovenian history” (Benson 1995). This history of a minority-language community within and under Germanophone governance includes four hundred years as a province in the Austrian (and later Austro-Hungarian) Empire and two years of annexation to the Third Reich (1943–45). This latter period is especially fraught because of claims (and counter-claims) of local collusion with Nazi occupiers, dust and mites under the carpet that the word Laibach unsettles into flurries.

\(^7\) Says Laibach’s Ivan Novak of these outfits: “We wore miner’s uniforms (1980–82), Yugoslav army uniforms (82–87), hunting clothes (87–92) and skiing clothes (92–96) . . . . But because everyone keep on repeating that Laibach wore ‘Nazi uniforms’ we finally dressed up in 2003 in Nazi uniforms (clothes used in Yugoslav war films), but also in American military uniforms, repeating the same photo session in both uniforms, sending two different set of photos to media—and they always picked up Laibach dressed in ‘Nazi’ uniforms, just so they could repeat the claim that Laibach is a Nazi band” (Ivan Novak, personal correspondence, July 2019). What is important here is the desire of others that Laibach conform to their (others’) ideas of what might rightly be feared, in this case preferring one horror in particular rather than accepting that it is just one of several available (traumatic) options.
lic because they never once let on that they were making a parody of totalitarian ideology. They exhibited no distance to their own position whatsoever, to their ‘totalitarian’ form or organization or their ideological proclamations. To all intents and purposes, they resembled a militant group that believed fanatically in their own ideology” (Dolar 2003, 156).

At a moment of hope, a cultural juncture in which democracy or at least a radically reformed communism might be embraced, Laibach belted out nationalist hymns (and vacuous Western pop songs), often in gravelly German. They mixed the words of Hitler, Tito, and Stalin, the images of National Socialist artists, and the pastoral symbolism of right-wing ethnonationalists with a delivery style of neofascist automata. This confusing array of symbols led some to publicly claim the group were ultranationalists, others that they were German imperialists, and still others that they were dangerously utopian communists (Tomc 1994). Each ideology, as it was attributed to them in turn, was hopelessly incongruent with the others. Meanwhile Laibach offered few clues as to where they “really” stood on any of the important issues of communism, fascism, ultranationalism, or even punk rock. They were unflinching and they remain so. For those interested in knowing more, the finest history of Laibach and NSK, the artists’ collective they helped to found, is Alexei Monroe’s Interrogation Machine (2005).

When I saw Laibach in Slovenia in 2002 there were still neo-Nazi fans jammed up against the proscenium, their shaved heads, puffy bomber jackets, and jackboots identifying their subcultural affiliation and their politics. When I saw them in Zagreb in 2001, I was shushed during the concert by aging Croatian aesthetes, with powdered faces and nicely pressed clothes. This was a punk show to be savored; the rules of high art here applied. No talking during the growling grinding out of sound; no interrupting the smashing march of drums. When I saw them in Los Angeles in 2008, they spun the table on their fans who were there for the neofascist hymns, and what they gave them instead was beauty. A single female a cappella (“in the manner of a chapel”) number formed the entire first set of the show. A man in lederhosen stamped his feet and booed. When I saw them in Washington DC in 2003, the day that George W. Bush won his second term, the audience was comprised of goth kids there for Goth Night, which would start later in the same space, intermixed with the staff of the Slovene Embassy. The ambassador and his wife had met at a Laibach show decades
earlier, and the group’s US tour that year, they told me, had been underwritten by the Slovene government. Laibach had become a sort of Slovene cultural patrimony, whose dissemination on the world stage was supported (in various ways) by the state. In 2015, Laibach were first Western rock band ever invited to play in Pyongyang, North Korea. Now called an “avant-garde
industrial band” (by *Rolling Stone*), they performed a set consisting in large part of cover songs from *The Sound of Music* (Grow 2015). “We are not interested,” they said, “in making cover versions as another tune of the same song, but in changing history . . . remaking history. We are . . . remaking originals out of copies” (Laibach 1988).

They have, that is to say, through all of this remained remarkably consistent not just in their approach to art as “a noble mission that demands fanaticism” but to a radical copying strategy (Arns 2003, 2) linked to the reanimation of lost futures and to an equally radical overidentification with fearsome ideologies.8 What history has cut, the retro-avant-garde restores, repositioning an original breaking point as if the dead had not died, as if the East had never split, as if Yugoslavia had remained. “Politics,” Laibach says, “is the highest and most all embracing art, and those who create contemporary Slovene art should be considered its politicians.”9 This was not mere lip service: fanaticism and politics were central to their project.

During the 1980s, when Laibach caused such worry, they grew, joining with the painters IRWIN, the theater group Sisters of Scipio Nasica, and the graphic design collective Novi Kolektivizem (New Collectivism) to create

8. On TV in 1983, Laibach were asked what they thought of Edvard Kardelj's idea (Kardelj was the principal architect of Yugoslav self-management and an ethnic Slovene) that neither the state nor the system nor the party can bring happiness to a person, that each person must create his or her own providence. In response Laibach said: “Not the State, not the Party, not God, and not the Devil: happiness lies in the total denial of one’s human identity, in people’s consciously waiving their personal tastes, belief, judgments, in their free depersonalization, in their ability to make sacrifices, to identify themselves with a higher, superior system, with the masses, the collective, the ideology.” Such words from “a group of five men in their early twenties, seated in a row wearing Yugoslav army shirts. Lit from below, as in a horror film, staring straight forward, their faces expressionless under close cropped hair, members of the ‘rock’ group Laibach had engineered an assembly of generic ‘triggers’ which, in combination seemed to indicate some unspecified totalitarianism. Each wore an armband with a symmetrical cross—a calculatedly ambiguous symbol. Black leather boots, gleaming buttons, crossed arms and blank eyes completed the effect” (Benson 1995, altered slightly). Thanks to the future having arrived in the interim, you can watch the interview on YouTube. It’s amazing. “Laibach—Tv Tednik 1983 (uncut)—Part 1,” posted July 9, 2009, video, 6:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2WLRAr6nLo; and “Laibach—Tv Tednik 1983 (uncut)—Part 2,” posted July 9, 2009, video, 6:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmzKcXTGFo4.

9. This paraphrase of a 1939 quote by Adolph Hitler was included by Laibach in their response to an interview question by Radio Študent in 1985 about the phrase "Kunst ist Politisch," which they appended to one of their productions. Hitler's original statement read: “I am an artist and not a politician. When the Polish question is finally settled I want to end my life as an artist” (Neue Slowenische Kunst 1991, 48).
Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). And in 1991, when an impossible future came to pass and Slovenia became an independent country for the first time in its history, NSK reframed their already highly bureaucratic organization into an echo state. Their organization was different from that chosen by Slovenia’s politicians, in being more hierarchical and in making no claims to territory. If a state were to operate like a pop-up shop with a strong Internet presence it would look a lot like the NSK state-in-time. They have pop-up embassies and consulates; they have convinced other nations’ armies to wear their regalia (if only long enough to take some pictures); they maintain a permanent online passport office which issues passports (you can get one). And for a week or so in 1994, three years into independent statehood, they even ran a post office located in Ljubljana’s central post office, such that this building found itself home to two parallel postal endeavors, each offering what appeared to be identical products and services: go to the counter, buy some stamps, and use them to mail some letters. Not all of the stamps, however, had been designed at the behest of nor issued by the then relatively new national postal service. Some had been designed by Novi Kolektivizem (the graphic artists) and priced according to an NSK currency, which did not at that point exist, though it now does.

As with the passports, this false government service was both real and unreal, whether considered in its materials or in its activities (though rumor had it that this ersatz postal service would deliver letters domestically, if the proper NSK-issued postage was affixed). To complicate this entanglement further, several years later the same artists were commissioned by the national postal service to make a “real” postage stamp. This stamp then functioned in an almost identical way to the art-stamps earlier made by the

10. These passports, like their stampy brethren, were real-enough-seeming that for many years NSK maintained a mild sort of boastfulness about how people had used their passports to slip out of Yugoslavia during the wars. Thus was this formal document of a state that held no territory mostly an artful means of waging political commentary—until the mid-2000s, when thousands upon thousands of passport applications began rolling in, most from Nigeria. Slovenia (then a member of the EU), the NSK state-in-time, and the possibility of unhindered travel into Europe were collapsed by a single optimistic misunderstanding. It seemed, from afar, that anyone could, for a modest processing fee, purchase a legal European passport on the Internet. The requests trickled into and then flooded the NSK passport service and worried the Slovene government. Many actions hoping to clarify matters were taken and none of then slowed the tide (Arns 2011a, 2011b). If you like, you too can get an NSK passport: https://passport.nsk.si/en/how_to_get_an_NSK_passport.
same collective. One, could in other words, use such a stamp to mail a letter.

Research on Slovenia tends to stop with Neue Slowenische Kunst, the wily weirdness of its art forming a sort of rabbit hole of proclamations and projects that can absorb the whole of a scholar’s life. I am indebted to the theorists of NSK who came before me: Inke Arns, Zdenka Badovinac, Michael Benson, Eda Ćufer, Mladen Dolar, Marina Gržinič, Alexei Monroe, Slavoj Žižek, and members of NSK themselves among many others. Because of them I can gesture toward the thoroughness and nuance of the group and their work and also move on, for NSK are symptomatic of something else: a cultural proclivity to value a certain kind of obvious copy. Not just any forgery will do—rather, the likenesses that proliferated in Slovenia were those possessing the peculiar capacity to be recognizable as copies while also allowing for less nuanced readings. They were, in other words, also “mistakeable” for what they pretended at being.

Think of how American professional wrestling makes it possible to believe it’s a sport rather than a sort of theatrical dance of massive men hurling their bodies at one another (Bakke 2001; Atkinson 2002). Think of how in the early days Stephen Colbert played an (almost) perfect right-wing pundit, or how John Stewart’s *The Daily Show* both was and was not a news program (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). Think of those latter-day skinheads at a Laibach concert, waving their flags and believing (whilst the singer bent down and with a pointed index finger growled “and we’re not here to please you/we have no answers to your questions/yet we can question your demands” (Laibach, “WAT”). Think of a friend of mine, whom you have never met, a Slovene woman with an irrational boss, who said (to deal with him): “I’m just going to do everything he says even more than he wants, so much so that he can’t complain any more. I am going to be the best employee he ever had” (Gilen Tengi, personal conversation, 2003). This love affair with likeness, or with overconforming such that conformity is recognizable (or not) as critique—is at its most bombastic and most seductive with NSK, but the swarm of semblances (Tomšič 2018) neither begins nor ends there.

Sometimes the weirdness was more nuanced, less pointed, and harder to recoup into a politics of art or art of politics. Mimesis was, in other words, a broader cultural phenomenon, one which the public-facing NSK drew attention to but did not invent. In 2001, for example, in that perfect piano