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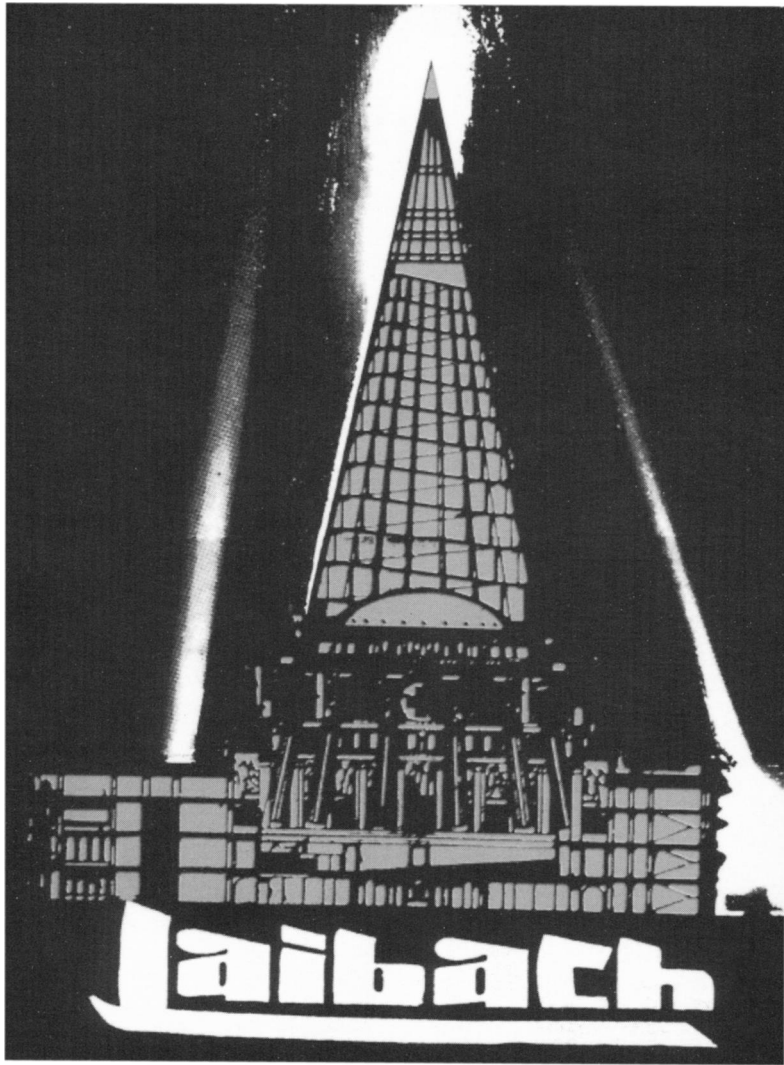
1. Laibach, poster for *Slovenska akropola*,  
1987

## **Everything Provokes Fascism**

an interview  
with Slavoj Žižek

## **Plečnik *avec* Laibach**

an essay  
by Andrew Herscher



While the Slovene theorist Slavoj Žižek has written on a wide variety of cultural productions, including film noir, the cinema of Hitchcock, Wagnerian opera, and science fiction, the following interview is one of the few instances in which he has commented on architecture. The immediate occasion of this interview — conducted by Maja Megla for publication in the magazine *Mladina* on 18 January 1994 and translated and edited here by Andrew Herscher — was a debate in Slovenia about the ideological position of the postpunk band Laibach, who constitutes the “musical department” of the Neue Slowenische Kunst art group. In Laibach’s work, signifiers of Slovene national identity are juxtaposed with those taken from fascist or totalitarian contexts, a strategy that places their work in a complicated relation to those contexts. Even the band’s name can be seen as the product of this strategy, as Laibach is the German name for Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. In defending Laibach from charges of fascism, Žižek compares their position to that of several key figures in Slovenia’s cultural history, first the turn-of-the-century Catholic theologian and populist politician Janez Krek and then the architect Jože Plečnik; this latter comparison is discussed by Herscher in the accompanying essay.

What is at the basis of fascism for you?

*With regard to fascism, we cannot fall into the usual trap, that we too quickly declare superficial phenomena like political movements, demonstrations, and extraordinary circumstances to be fascism. Fascisms are of different sorts. What unites them is a basic reflex: capitalism without capitalism. Fascism wants to preserve the basic relations of capitalism, but simultaneously to take away capitalism’s ideological and economic features, which bring individualism, disequilibrium, and so forth. The ideal of fascism is to have capitalism,*

*in the sense of private ownership and relations of capital and labor, but capitalism that is liberated from all of its excesses: no class struggle, but rather cooperation between classes; no spiritless money, but rather patriarchal relations in which the capitalist is not a spiritless exploiter, but one who looks after the workers in a patriarchal and fatherly manner.*

*Simultaneously, fascism conserves everything that capitalism in its own conception imperils: the nation as a uniform national group, as opposed to a concurrence of uniform wills. To preserve the best from both capitalism and socialism is, according to fascism itself, something good; however, the trap comes here. Fascism’s goal is organic cooperation. Because this goal is impossible to reach, it is necessary to posit an enemy, onto whom the reason for the difficulty can be projected. Fascism is fond of corporeal metaphors for labor and capital, like “head” and “hand”; it likes to speak of society as an organism in which one social stratum is the head and another is the hand. Because fascism does not work and because the reason for its difficulties cannot lie in the antagonistic relations between head and hand, between capital and labor, the cause of the social disequilibrium is projected onto some cancerous formation, some external enemy. These are the Jews or another foreign people.*

What follows from this?

*Even more so, the analysis is valid for the postsocialist countries.*

What do people expect, or rather, what did they expect from the end of communism?

*Not some savage capitalism. On the one hand, they expected democratic freedoms, and on the other hand, they expected in some years a Western standard of living. Simultaneously, they experienced communist authority as denationalization, which set man against man, brought alienation, and destroyed society’s organic solidarity. Common people on the common level therefore expected from the breakdown of communism, which is to say, from capitalism, what capitalism itself most destroys.*

What is capitalism?

*At its basis, it is ruthless competition: individualism. People expected from the breakdown of socialism, from the return to capitalism, some sort of new, ethical, natural community, an organic unity. The danger comes here, because this is a contradictory desire. People wanted capitalism, but at the same time they wanted what capitalism itself most imperils. If this desire, which is contradictory, should be realized and actually come into effect, it must make use of an exterior enemy onto whom the contradiction is projected. Here I am worried not only about Slovenia, but also about other postsocialist societies, and I think that it will get still worse in the future. The disillusionment with democracy, which did not bring us what we wanted, makes a fertile ground for the search for enemies. This is the most general answer.*

What would you say further?

*It seems to me disputable to continue to use the term fascism for the new phenomenon of nationalism. I think that it concerns more fundamental phenomena. We use for a paradigm of postmodern violence or racism the infamous skinheads, who are again an ideological product, because, in essence, there are no skinheads, but rather those whom we understand as such, who attack foreigners in England or in Germany. With them, it is not some sort of profit-loving, utilitarian totalitarianism. They do not pursue foreigners in the name of profit-loving motives, because they lost their jobs to them, nor because of some sort of ideological fundamentalism in the style of "European values" or a cleansing of Europe. The answer that we get from them to the question, why do you attack foreigners? is something very elementary — sooner or later we come to the point that, for them, the values of Europe are completely the same as a job — the elementary relation of the subject, the ego, to some traumatic, disturbing object, which would be called excess enjoyment in Lacanian psychoanalysis, to an object that personifies excess enjoyment. What does a skinhead or neo-Nazi say when you ask him, why do you beat the foreigner? Because they disturb*

*him, because they disturb some equilibrium, because it feels good if he beats foreigners. It concerns the most simple logic of comfort and pleasure, of a superior pleasure that destroys comfort, of a comfort that comes to be wreaked on foreigners. It concerns the preideological core of ideology, thus prompting the question, is it possible here to use the sign fascism?*

Another element would be in this.

*What we today call neo-Nazi racism received a new buoyancy with the new integration process in Europe and American. We witness an occurrence that was foggy with the affirmation of new nation-states, although we are at the end of the epoch of nation-states. A new economic and cultural integration took place, because of which the basic identification of people is no longer patriotic (my country, my nation), but of another kind: for example, the return to prenatal ethnic identification. Thus what is taking place in the Balkans is no longer a logic of identification with the nation as a state. Today, there are pre-state ethnic groups. If I say "pre-state," it does not mean that they are just the product of postmodern late capitalism. The new ethnic violence is a reaction to the breakdown of national identification as state identification, which begins as the period of the nation-states ends. I think that it would be necessary to consider how to change the terminology.*

Is it at all appropriate to speak of fascism?

*The merit of Laibach resides precisely in their skillful manipulation of its symbolization.*

What is significant about Laibach?

*That you cannot pin them down. Theirs was an abstractly totalitarian symbolization, but one that always slipped away if one wanted to thrust in and ask, what actually is it? is it Stalinism? is it fascism?*

*Today, paradoxical unions are forming — not only in Russia and in Serbia but in France — paradoxical unions between former communists and extreme rightists, whom we could call*

neofascists on the basis of a nationalist, fundamentalist ideology. The fundamental conflict today is no longer Left versus Right, but rather, liberal openness versus neoethnic closedness. It seems that we still do not have suitable conceptions of this new phenomenon, the new antiliberalism. Neofascism, nationalism, neocommunism, and the connection between communism and fascism are spoken of; but, in short, a conceptual apparatus is missing. If there is some sort of artistic, political, or whatever other social subject, a public actor — and I say this with full responsibility — made the most exposed to the people, not only before racist danger in general, but precisely before this specific union, which we try to capture with unsuitable ideas as a union of nationalism or fascism with communism: this is Laibach. It seems to me an unbelievably obscene paradox that just now they try to sell Laibach as, so to speak, guilty for Slovenia's bad image.

Specifically, what seems of interest with respect to Slovenia?

Precisely those circles — which we call populist-folk-Krekist-Social-Christian — from which now comes most of the criticism of Laibach. These circles, if not already directly neofascist, are, at least ironically, playing with the acceptance of a role as symbol of neofascism. If one looks in Slovenia for the historical roots of fascism with respect to protofascist origins, they are in these very circles; indeed, we have with Krek an elaborated, explicit, incorporated ideology, an ideology of the nation as an organic community with an exceptional animus against liberal individualism, and everything directly supported by an exceptionally explicit, forceful anti-Semitism. I am not saying directly that Krek was a fascist. I am saying only that, with Krek, there are all the points of origin of fascism; and this does not concern just Krek as some abstract phenomenon.

Precisely those authors who are glorified by writing books about Plečnik give us sermons about Laibach. Where was the keen sense of these authors for detecting fascist danger when they read and wrote about Plečnik? In a good book by Braco Rotar, Risarji, učenjaki (Drafters, thinkers), there is a stack

of persuasive citations from both Plečnik himself and Plečnik-oriented theoreticians, who, at the time when these articles were written at the end of the 1930s, explicitly called for new connections of architecture with populism and for the rejection of modernism, which prevailed openly, and as a positive model, in Germany and Italy.

In the second half of the 1930s, the Plečnikesque is understood as a point of reference against functionalist modernism, against reinforced-concrete, utilitarian, functionalist architecture, and as a basis for some kind of national foundation, an organic unity, and simultaneously — this is interesting — for an elite, aristocratic, and pan-national art against the spiritless liberal reinforced-concrete modernism. I am not speaking nonsense. I am not saying Plečnik is a fascist. I am only saying that there are, with Plečnik, all the roots of a discourse that fascism appropriates without a problem.

But also with respect to fascism, things are complicated. This is not to handle the word fascism as a red flag to signal that it is immediately necessary only to become furious. Fascism is not simply some bloody characters who beat foreigners. It is forgotten that those who are actually fascists can have very sincere convictions about the national community, about solidarity. They are a much more complicated phenomenon. In short, we have a heritage of right-wing populism, from Plečnik in architecture to Krek, which is, if not directly fascist, then at least protofascist. Certainly, this fascism is not Hitlerian fascism. We know it as "light fascism." As it was once said that we have an autonomous socialism with a human face, this is, in my opinion, a fascism with a human face. If we were to look for a model, it would be Dollfuss in Austria, Mussolini to the beginning of the 1940s in Italy, Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal.

As analyses indicate, we have two types of fascism. The first type is a savage, self-annihilating fascism that cannot find an equilibrium and, at a certain point, goes crazy and has to destroy itself, burning itself up in self-annihilating wars (Hitler, Mussolini after 1940). The second type is a patriarchally

*peaceful, principled Catholic fascism (Dollfuss, Pétain in France, Mussolini through 1940) that lacks a self-annihilating dynamic and can peacefully persist to the end of time, as long as it is not buried by economic or other circumstances. Salazar was the longest ruling European dictator and president. Not only is this light fascism still rooted generally in Slovene consciousness, but Slovene self-management has also appropriated it for itself. In its struggle against the evil spirit of statist, evil, totalitarian socialism, self-managing socialism refers to and even reactivates a series of motives that are exceptionally close to light fascism. Peter Jambreč has in the last years of socialism indicated how Franco and Salazar both used a similar or even identical term, “pluralism of interests.” This all constitutes the background of fascist tendencies that nobody in Slovenia is ready to confront and that remains taboo both on the Left and on the Right.*

*This would not cause the Slovene too much trouble, however. But who is he? France provides a typical example. If there are some leftists in France who can characterize Laibach as a protofascist band that is intertwined in a neo-Nazi ideology and who can grotesquely overlook how Laibach operates entirely on the contrary, this seems to me a deep symptom that says many things not only about Laibach, but also about the European Left itself. It seems to me a crucial piece of information for the analysis of the French political scene, where — as a number of analyses with which I am familiar indicate — the fundamental fact for France is the great trauma of the unresolved relationship with their own fascism, with Vichy. Bernard Henri Levy has nicely indicated that the Pétainist regime of Vichy was not foreign. There, the most basic and continually present extensivity of the French political community was struck. An entirely superficial piece of information: do people know that the Pétainist period was the period of the most savage legislating in France? Never before or after were so many laws changed in such a short time. And when Pétainism collapsed, when France was liberated in the summer and fall of 1944 after the invasion at Normandy, when De Gaulle and the antifascist coalition took control, there was a great discussion about legitimization: how should the state be legally formu-*

*lated? Either they should proclaim the invalidity of the Vichy laws or they should recognize a continuity.*

*They recognized a continuity. From here originates the traumas, from the unresolvedness of French fascism itself, an unresolvedness that comes from the impotence of the Left to confront what is, in psychoanalytic terms, the libidinal economy of fascism. On which level, through which mechanisms is this fascism actually apprehended? In which ways does fascism offer which pleasures? The explicit ideology of fascism is certainly sacrificed. Fascism is, at all times, defined in distinction to some decadent, rotten, bourgeois degeneration. The slogan of fascism is “enough of enjoyment, enough of debauchery: a victim is necessary.” The whole trick of fascism is certainly in an excess enjoyment, which itself produces the renunciation of enjoyment, the gesture of sacrifice.*

*The Left was never ready to really confront this trauma. From this comes the Left’s persistent traumatization, how to kill fascism, and the persistent impotence of its abstractly enlightenment arguments against fascism, which simply do not function. The Left emphasizes as its great ascertainment that fascist ideology is irrationally authoritarian. Fascism tells you to obey, but it does not give reasons to obey. Obedience like this, however, has a meaning. Fascism knows everything about this. The tragedy of the Left is that the more it criticizes those who are caught in fascism, the more it gives them arguments to be fascist.*

*Only psychoanalysis can clarify this mechanism. I cannot overpraise the exceptional achievements of Laibach, which they were so successful with and which I plan to develop in my next English book. They proposed a model of disidentification, of freedom from an enchantment with fascist enjoyment, which is not the model of the naïve leftist enlightenment critique. Literally, in this is the historical meaning of Laibach. Laibach offered a model of that which in Lacanian terminology would be said to go beyond the fantasm. Laibach confronted us with a fantasmic logic, with fascist enjoyment, and simultaneously, they presented this in such a way as to defamiliarize it and enable us to keep our distance from it.*

Art is either an individual matter, or a matter for the entire nation.

Jože Plečnik<sup>1</sup>

Every artist comes from the depths of his nation, from the dark, subterranean workshop of the national psyche, and through his creation, illuminates its basic, typical features, the essence of its spirit and character.

Laibach<sup>2</sup>

### Plečnik *avec* Laibach

To an exceptional degree, the architectural work of Jože Plečnik was produced in contexts defined by projects of nation building. In both Prague and Ljubljana, Plečnik worked at a moment when the city was newly founded as a capital and he was at the very center of each city's transformation into the representative seat of a new nation. In Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, he was commissioned by the nation's first president, Tomáš Masaryk, to reconstruct Prague Castle into a "national symbol," while in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, Plečnik as de facto city architect produced designs for virtually every state building that was projected in the period between the wars.<sup>3</sup>

Historical analyses of Plečnik's *oeuvre*, with their own ties to nation-building projects, have tended to be based on the premise that the nation exists as a natural, objective entity and that the representative needs of the nation furnish among the few catalysts for the production of historically significant, monumental architecture. Indeed, Plečnik himself offered this premise as his own, telling his students in Ljubljana, for example, that the church and the nation alone provided the "great tasks" that allowed for the building of important architectural works.<sup>4</sup>

There are positions, however, from which the idea of the nation has been assessed more critically. In Etienne Balibar's analysis, for instance, the prerequisite for the formation of a nation — the categorization of humanity into artificially iso-

lated "fictive ethnicities" — necessarily involves "a violent conflictual split at the level of social relations themselves, . . . a system of hierarchies and exclusions which, above all, takes the form of racism and sexism."<sup>5</sup> To acknowledge these hierarchies and exclusions would certainly produce a different reading of Plečnik's "great tasks," a reading that would locate them with respect to the nation's oppressive and exclusionary workings as well as to its facilitative and permissive ones.

Slavoj Žižek has given both a detailed account of the conflictual split in the center of Slovene national identity and a general description of the modern nation as an ideological construction.<sup>6</sup> According to Žižek, the discourse of national identity must be sustained by something that has a different, nondiscursive status, the status of the Lacanian "real." National identity, then, is not simply produced through a discursive practice — by *inventing* traditions, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, or by *imagining* communities, as Benedict Anderson argues.<sup>7</sup> Rather, this discursive practice is sustained by the presence of the "Nation-Thing," defined by Žižek as a "real, non-discursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation *qua* discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency."<sup>8</sup>

In the 1994 interview for *Mladina* translated above, Žižek articulates what would appear to be an almost inevitable interpretation of Plečnik's work from a position that accounts for the fantasies of unity and repressed exclusions that nation-formation necessitates and that national monuments seem to embody: "I am not saying Plečnik is a fascist," Žižek states, "I am only saying that there are, with Plečnik, all the roots of a discourse that fascism appropriates without a problem."<sup>9</sup>

Žižek's comments in *Mladina* arose from a debate about the supposed "fascist ideology" of the Slovene musical group Laibach. Žižek's opponent in this debate was Damjan Prelovšek, a Slovene architectural historian who has written extensively on Plečnik and who contributed to an attack on



Laibach that appeared in the Slovene press in January 1994.<sup>10</sup> This flurry of criticism was based on and extended a claim made in an article in the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* that the Slovene Ministry of Culture financially supported Laibach's "neofascist performances."<sup>11</sup>

The issue of *Mladina* in which both Prelovšek and Žižek were interviewed was entitled "Neue Slowenische Ekspert" (New Slovene Export), in reference to the Neue Slowenische Kunst, the art group of which Laibach forms a part. While Prelovšek laid out the argument against Laibach, Žižek noted that "precisely those authors who are glorified by writing books about Plečnik give us sermons about Laibach."<sup>12</sup> Thus, he asked, "where was the keen sense of these authors for detecting fascist danger when they read and wrote about Plečnik?"<sup>13</sup> In Žižek's digressive swerve from Laibach to Plečnik, then, he indicts Plečnik for precisely those crimes that Prelovšek charges to Laibach.

Žižek's analysis of Laibach, which shifts attention from the alleged subject-position of Laibach itself to the operation that the group performs on its ideologically saturated material, takes far greater account of the complexity of its work than do the unreflective condemnations of Laibach based on the brown uniforms and military boots worn by band members or even on its direct appropriation of texts, musical motifs, and graphic images from Nazi sources. Indeed, Žižek exposes the fundamental error of trying to determine some set of positive properties (brown shirts, military boots, and so on) that define the permanent essence of fascism. For him, all the traits that supposedly — or indeed, let us say, *actually* — characterize fascism do not overrule the fact that, in the last instance, fascism is constituted discursively, in an operation compelled by the presence of the "kernel of enjoyment" that the fascist subject encounters in fascist discourse.

But what if Žižek were to approach Plečnik as he has approached Laibach, attentive not to signifiers themselves — the

"Plečnikesque" as opposed to "reinforced-concrete, utilitarian, functionalist architecture" — but to the operation that Plečnik performed on these signifiers? On the one hand, this approach seems to have been precluded in his interview in *Mladina*, a context in which Žižek was placed in opposition to Plečnik's self-appointed interlocutor; in this discursive configuration, the "truth" of Plečnik would be determined by nothing else than Žižek's antagonistic relation to Prelovšek. On the other hand, Žižek's apprehension of architecture as a mere signifier, rather than an operation performed on a signifier, suggests that architecture might possess a special status for him, the status of a signifier that does not signify, a ground, which is precisely the status of architecture in many foundational philosophies. In any case, Žižek's comments on Plečnik in the context of his debate with Prelovšek are a disturbing supplement to this debate, a supplement that "sticks out" in comparison to his refined and sensitive analysis of Laibach.

Nevertheless, Žižek's analysis of Laibach suggests a way to consider Plečnik's architectural production that accounts for the complexity of the architect's relation to the process of nation-formation, a process that reached a point of crisis during the era of Plečnik, just as during the era of Laibach. This is not to say that a transhistorical analytical tool can be distilled from Žižek's discussion, but instead, that the work of Plečnik, like that of Laibach, problematizes rather than reinforces the nation's status as an objective, natural entity.

Among the set of Plečnik's "great tasks," perhaps the greatest was the design he produced for a Slovene Parliament building. Here, then, I will attempt to come to terms with the "leftover" of Žižek's debate with Prelovšek, a leftover that could wholly condition analysis of Plečnik's architecture, by reading this design through Žižek's account of the Laibach spectacle. In his design for the Slovene Parliament, Plečnik should have implicated himself most deeply in "a

discourse that fascism appropriates without a problem,” and thus it would be here, among all his works, where ideology critique would find its most appropriate target.

### Laibach Kunst: The “Enjoyment” of Fascist Art

The material of Laibach manipulation: Taylorism, brutism, Nazi Kunst, disco.

Laibach<sup>14</sup>

Laibach is a musical group, but its output includes the complete set of apparatus by means of which contemporary music is produced and disseminated: album design, concert spectacle, promotion/propaganda materials, “public relations” as the issuing of manifestos and the staging of happenings, and so on. Laibach’s songs use rhythms, instrumentations, and samplings from both Eurodisco and military marches, combining these musics in such a way as to articulate each of them as regimental, automatizing mechanisms. The group performs both cover versions of Western songs and its own music. In its cover versions, the expressions of originality, opposition, and utopian conciliation that organize Western popular music are recontextualized into a collage of totalitarian signifiers, rendering such expressions as mere commodity attributes.<sup>15</sup> The lyrics of Laibach’s own songs, sung in Slovene and German, are organized around struggles for spiritual redemption: the personal pronoun is always expressed in plural forms, the individual consciousness is never acknowledged, and all intersubjective relations are reduced to brotherly bonding or conflictual struggle, the only alternative to these being a transcendent communion with Nature (“We love the soil achingly”) or with Deity (“If the Gods should bless us with death”).

The design of Laibach albums and the staging of Laibach concerts are based on images drawn from Slovene nationalist mythology (antlers and deer, the cross, the hay rick), so-

cialist realism (mines and factories, classicized peasants), and the art of Nazi Germany. Indeed, the content — which is, it must be emphasized, distinct from the meaning — of Laibach Kunst can be defined as a triangulation between three topoi: the Christian Socialist culture of early twentieth-century Slovenia, the social realist culture of the Stalinist Soviet Union, and most prominently, the Nazi culture of Third Reich Germany.

Not surprisingly, Laibach has consistently provoked criticism — and in certain quarters, approval — because of its supposed celebration and promulgation of totalitarian, fascist, or neofascist ideology. The group’s self-definition, for the uninitiated, could heighten fears of fascist affiliations: “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 scream.”<sup>16</sup> And yet, in Žižek’s analysis, this definition proves to be remarkably accurate.

Žižek’s interpretation of Laibach is organized around his conception of ideology as a *field*, “like the cement of a social bond.” Here, Žižek refines Louis Althusser’s non-superstructural model of ideology by drawing upon Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of preideological or protoideological “floating signifiers.” These floating signifiers become solidified into a field through discursive articulation; as they are affiliated into a discourse, their meaning becomes fixed and the ideological field is constituted. For Žižek, this field is a Lacanian “quilt,” structured through the intervention of a “nodal point” that confers a precise and fixed signification to the field’s other elements.<sup>17</sup> It is this nodal point, or “pure signifier,” that guarantees the consistency of the ideological field, rather than any referent, any “real object.” And yet the real is retained as an ontological category through an acknowledgment of the enjoyment that motivates *the desire to signify*; this is the

act that implicates the subject in social reality, and thus, the problematic of ideology.

In his *Mladina* interview, Žižek argues that “the merit of Laibach resides in their skillful manipulation of [fascism’s] symbolization”;<sup>18</sup> or, as he puts it elsewhere, in the “alienation of the ideological field.” This latter citation comes from Žižek’s fullest account of the band, “The Enlightenment in Laibach,” originally published in the Croatian magazine *Quorum* in 1988 and republished in English in the British magazine *Art and Design* several months after his debate with Prelovšek.<sup>19</sup> In Žižek’s account of Laibach performances, this alienation occurs through an extraction of signifiers from the discursive matrix that originally endowed them with meaning. Laibach accomplishes this extraction by juxtaposing signifiers from different, and incompatible, discourses within a single, unprecedented nondiscursive space. Thus, in the Laibach spectacle, “over here [are] pieces of Nazism, over there pieces of Stalinism, together with pieces of the Slovene national mythology, torn out of their context, scattered around in the senseless network.”<sup>20</sup>

For this effect of alienation to be sustained, the new context of these “pieces” must remain prediscursive, a “senseless network”; the context of the Laibach performance cannot restructure the pieces into *another* discursive formation. In Žižek’s account, then, Laibach Kunst is purely appropriative, purely reflective, because there is no new “nodal point” around which the pieces of the different discourses can reconstitute. These pieces become “floating signifiers,” dispersed in a space that is logically, if not temporally, prior to their endowment with meaning.

What sustains this account of the Laibach performance is the special status Žižek grants to art, one that separates art from other, ideologically driven practices. In this view, the materials presented in art are distanced from their appearance in reality; art can *present* ideology without implicating

itself in ideological discourse. Althusser articulated a very similar view; just as he distinguished economic, political, and social practices from one another, so, too, did he accord aesthetic practice a certain autonomous status. Therefore, according to Althusser, “what art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*,’ ‘*perceiving*,’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it declares itself as art, and to which it alludes.”<sup>21</sup>

This independence of aesthetic practice from ideological discourse, this ability of art to “present ideology in phenomenal form,” allows Žižek to link the reception of art to the process of Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>22</sup> Both Althusserian art and Lacanian psychoanalysis are, in this sense, means to provide the subject with an *experience*, as opposed to a *knowledge* of ideology — ideology that is not to be overcome or exposed, but to be experienced as the nodal point of the subject’s very identity. Thus Žižek describes the experience of a Laibach performance in the exact terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the performance “presents to the senses” the two stages of this psychoanalysis, the “exceeding of fantasy” and the “identification with the symptom.”<sup>23</sup>

The fantasy of fascism is, for Žižek, the renunciation of enjoyment in the face of the fascist demand for total obedience. The fascist subject is to obey authority not out of *desire*, but rather, out of *obligation*. The enjoyment that this identification produces is repressed by the fascist fantasy of authority, which places the subject in the ideological field:

The Fascist ideology is based upon a purely formal imperative: Obey, because you must! In other words, renounce enjoyment, sacrifice yourself, and do not ask about the meaning of it — the value of the sacrifice lies in its very meaninglessness; the sacrifice is for its own end; you must find positive fulfillment in the sacrifice itself, not in its instrumental value.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, in fascism, enjoyment comes from groundless obedience, which is to say, from the renunciation of enjoyment.

The fantasy object — the Lacanian “*objet petit a*” — is, then, this literally “obscene enjoyment” experienced as obedience, as the very annihilation of enjoyment. To “exceed the fantasy” is to experience how this fantasy object functions, “materializing the void of our desire,” initiating the very process of desire-as-such.

The paradoxical nature of fantasy, for Žižek, is that while it stages the desire of the Other (in fascism, the state’s desire for total obedience) rather than that of the subject, it founds the identity of the subject; fantasy is a way for the subject to externalize the organization of enjoyment, the basic constitutive act of self-definition. In the Laibach spectacle, however, there are fascist signifiers with no fascist fantasy; or, in other words, fascist signifiers are identified with only on the level of pleasure, without the fantasy project that typically enables such identification. Laibach thus transforms fascism’s renunciation of enjoyment in favor of action into nothing but enjoyment, using the thematic and material apparatus of fascism itself.

The object of enjoyment encountered in this way is, according to Žižek, the Lacanian “sinthome,” a “symptom in the dimension of enjoyment-of-the-real.” In relation to the sinthome, there is no fantasy object; the subject simply identifies with a symptom at the level of pure signification, taking pleasure in the sheer ability to signify. It is here that the Lacanian psychoanalytic process ends, with the subject recognizing his or her identity “in the real of the symptom,” and it is here that Laibach enlightens its audience as to the fantasy of fascism: as Žižek writes, “Laibach subverts totalitarian logic . . . so that it is dissolved as an active social bond, leaving only the uneasy kernel of its limited enjoyment.”<sup>26</sup>

For Laibach’s critics, who deny the group a place in Slovene society, this society can be constituted and understood by recourse to eternal, objective, natural premises, be they the laws of ethnicity, of language, or of natural right. The radically contingent identity of the Slovene nation,

formed in collisions with the Hapsburg Dynasty, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and state and national socialism, is repressed into the “national unconsciousness.” For Žižek, this is a totalitarian logic, one whose secret sharers include totalitarianism’s most extreme forms. Thus Laibach provokes its audience to identify the fascist subject as the presupposition of the liberal-democratic national subject, an identification that can only create anxiety and further fantasy-formations (Laibach as fascist, and so on) because of its disturbing implications.

Fascism’s “truth,” then, is that there is a truth to politics, rather than a contingent, evanescent, contradictory assemblage; consequently, any criticism of fascism from the standpoint of liberal democracy can only confirm this “truth.” In this sense, the way to attack the “truth” that fascism offers is not by substituting another “truth,” but by defusing the pleasure that fascist “truth” provides. As Žižek writes in *Tarrying with the Negative*, “The truly radical critique of ideology should go beyond the self-congratulatory ‘social analyses’ which continue to participate in the fantasy that sustains the object of their critique and to search for ways to sap the force of this underlying fantasy frame itself.”<sup>27</sup> This precisely is how he envisions the Laibach spectacle.

### Plečnik’s Slovene Parliament: The “Enjoyment” of Fascist Architecture

We Slovenes have to choose between Vienna and Rome, or perhaps Belgrade.

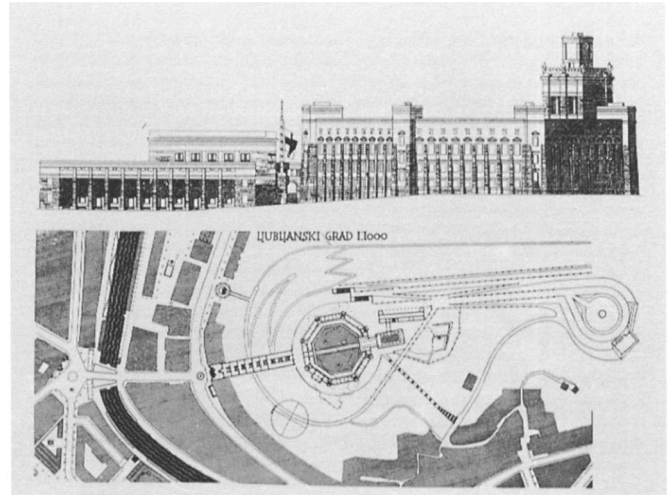
Jože Plečnik<sup>28</sup>

Žižek sees the Plečnikesque developing in a form diametrically opposed to that of Laibach Kunst. In the Plečnikesque, according to Žižek, signifiers are fused into precise discursive formations, one structured around the nodal point of “nation” and one around the nodal point of “class”:

In the second half of the 1930s, the Plečnikesque is understood as a point of reference against functionalist modernism . . . , against reinforced-concrete, utilitarian, functionalist architecture, and as a basis for some kind of national foundation, an organic unity, and simultaneously — this is interesting — for an elite, aristocratic, and pan-national art against the spiritless liberal reinforced-concrete modernism.<sup>29</sup>

If the Plečnikesque can be defined in opposition to utilitarian modernism, however, it is on the basis of its relation to historical precedents; while utilitarian modernists explicitly renounced historical architecture as a precedent for contemporary production, replacing its role in design with hypostatized “functions,” architects like Plečnik refused to disassociate contemporary architectural production from history. Yet it is precisely this refusal, this commitment to working with what could be termed “signifiers extracted from given discursive fields,” that initially suggests the likeness between Plečnik’s project and that of Laibach. Indeed, just as conservative cultural critics understand Laibach as “fascist,” so, too, did some understand Plečnik as “nationalist,” or “populist,” as Žižek rightly points out. But as much as this characterization is inadequate in the case of Laibach, it is also inadequate in the case of Plečnik. In his scheme for the Slovene Parliament, in fact, Plečnik’s problematic was identical to that of Laibach: the representation of Slovene national identity. Yet not only was this problematic the same, but so was the strategy for working it out; like Laibach, Plečnik can be seen to assert not the organic wholeness of the Slovene nation, but rather, the nation’s essentially *alienated* condition.

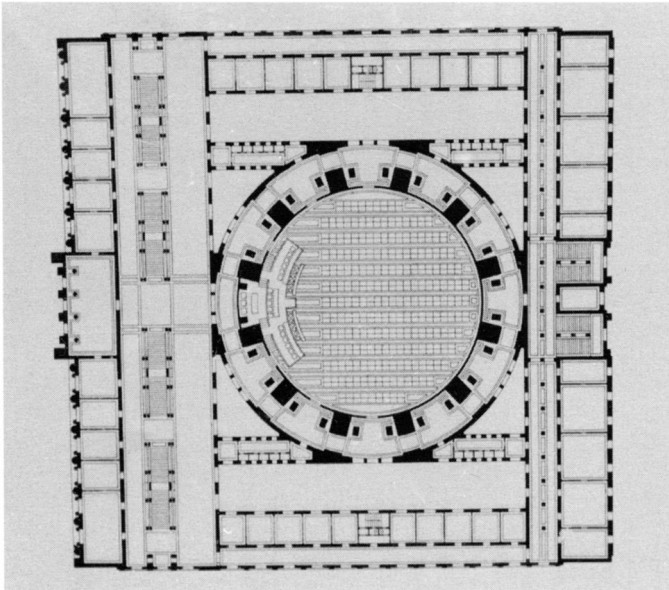
Plečnik was commissioned to work on the Slovene Parliament in 1947.<sup>30</sup> During the Second World War, Ljubljana had been occupied first by fascist Italy and then by Nazi Germany; after the war, the Slovene nation existed administratively as a “People’s Republic” within the Yugoslav Federation. On 23 January, Plečnik’s seventy-fifth birthday, he received a letter from the Secretary of the People’s Assembly



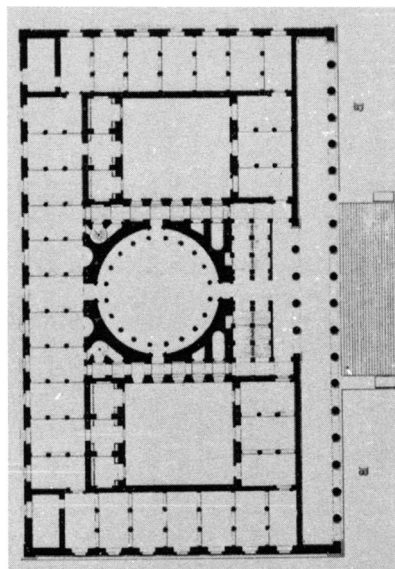
2. Jože Plečnik, design for the Slovene Parliament, Ljubljana, first scheme, 1947, plan and elevation

of the People’s Republic of Slovenia in which, “in the name of the President of the People’s Assembly, Ferdo Kozak, I politely ask you, if you have time available, to visit the apartment of the President today at around 5:00 in the afternoon . . . to discuss a building for the Slovene Parliament.”<sup>31</sup>

In the scheme that Plečnik presented to the assembly, the new parliament building replaced Ljubljana Castle, the city’s most venerable landmark. This means of housing the parliament was, in fact, a radical version of a strategy that Plečnik had employed before the war; in many of his prewar proposals for public buildings, he transplanted new institutional programs onto existing historical sites: with respect to Ljubljana’s three castles, for example, Cekin Castle was to be transformed into a national gallery, Tivoli Castle into a national university, and Ljubljana Castle into a national museum. In none of these schemes, however, did he propose that the castle be more than remodeled.



3. Plečnik, design for the Slovene Parliament, Ljubljana, second scheme, 1947, plan



4. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Altes Museum, Berlin, 1822–30, plan

In the book that documented Plečnik’s 1932 scheme for the conversion of Ljubljana Castle into a national museum, the castle hill was first termed a “Slovene acropolis.” In this book, *Ljubljanski grad: Slovenska akropola*, the Slovene art historian and then conservator of monuments France Stelè, wrote that “Ljubljana has a natural acropolis with its castle. However, the medieval sense of the castle as a sign of national and princely strength has already been dead for a long time, and the castle now sits as a corpse on the living anthill of the city.”<sup>32</sup> Plečnik’s design, then, converted the “natural acropolis” into the “Slovene acropolis” by transferring the city’s museum, then housed in the Rudolfinum, a conventional building built at the turn of the century by a Viennese architect, to the city’s historical, geographical, and visual center. As Stelè wrote, Plečnik’s project “placed a representative symbol before the nation.”<sup>33</sup>

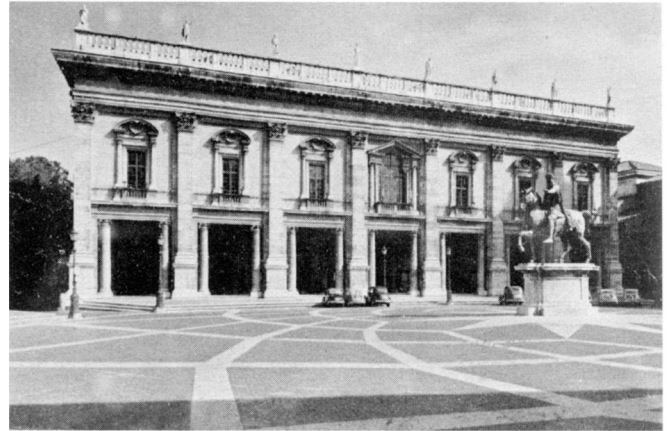
Thus, before 1947, the site of Ljubljana Castle was already conceptualized as one of national significance, a significance alluded to in its designation as a “Slovene acropolis.” Proposing to rebuild this site, then, was “impossible,” as Plečnik was informed by Kozak in a letter from May 1947.<sup>34</sup> Even at this moment, however, the critical force of Plečnik’s project is apparent, a project in which a national fantasy — the Slovene Parliament — is proposed as a fantasy. Indeed, in their monographs on Plečnik, both Prelovšek and Peter Krečič describe the parliament project as “utopic,” “a product of fantasy.” Yet the fantasy is ascribed to Plečnik himself; Prelovšek thus writes that Plečnik “was already seventy-five years old and after his frustrating war years, he let his fantasies and memories flow freely.”<sup>35</sup> As Žižek argues after Lacan, however, the desire staged in fantasy is not that of the subject, but that of the Other, a point that would focus attention on the parliament building as an object of national fantasy, and not simply one derived from personal details of the architect’s life.



5. Plečnik, design for the Slovene Parliament, second scheme, model

When Plečnik's first scheme was rejected, he apparently abandoned the project. In his May 1947 letter, Kozak informed the architect that proposals for the parliament building would henceforth be accepted in the frame of an architectural competition, with the building to be sited at the edge of Tivoli Park, a large green space directly adjacent to Ljubljana's city center.<sup>36</sup> Plečnik, it was certainly known, had always steadfastly refused to participate in architectural competitions, and indeed, he did not participate in this one. No first prize was awarded for this competition, however; instead, it was decided that a team of five chosen architects, with Plečnik among them, should draw up a scheme for the parliament. In October 1947, Kozak again wrote to Plečnik and asked him to produce a "conceptual sketch" for the new building. Plečnik must have initially refused, judging from a letter Kozak wrote a month later, in which he urges the architect to accept a program for the projected parliament building.

By the end of November, Plečnik had drawn up a second scheme for the parliament, a remarkable building that he named the "Cathedral of Freedom." Although the building is relocated from the "Slovene acropolis" to the far less distinguished site in Tivoli Park, it is a scheme that "exceeds the fantasy" of the Slovene Parliament even more powerfully than Plečnik's first proposal. For this fantasy excess is produced less by siting than by design; specifically, the parliament building is composed of elements appropriated



6. Michelangelo, Palazzo de' Conservatori, Campidoglio, Rome, begun 1563

from central monuments of Slovenia's "national enemies." This procedure resulted in a building that simultaneously presented and distanced the enjoyment-of-the-nation embodied in the parliament.

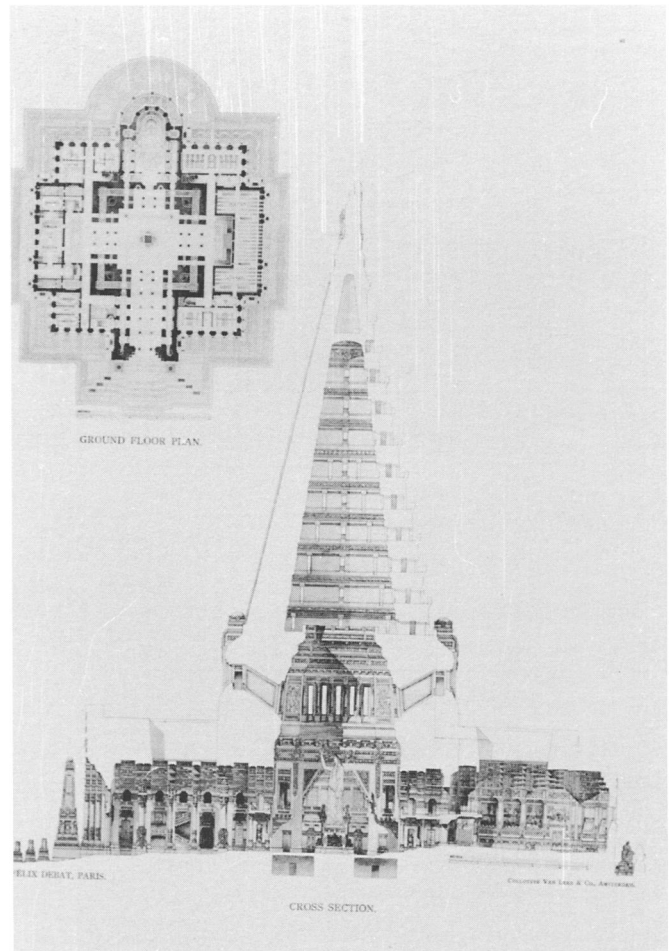
Similar to the plan of J. S. Sirén's Finnish Parliament Building, built in Helsinki in the late 1920s, the plan of Plečnik's Slovene Parliament refers to Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin, a building that was central to the formation of Prussian national identity in the first half of the nineteenth century. The plans of both parliament and museum are composed of a central rotunda surrounded by a cubic block. While the rotunda serves as a vestibule in the museum, it is the central council chamber in the parliament, a difference in function that only heightens the particularly formal similarities between the plans of the two buildings. The most significant difference between the plans is that the internal courtyards in the museum are compressed in the parliament, allowing the plan of the parliament to become a perfect square, a configuration that emphasizes the parliament's idealized form. In the context of the Slovene Parliament, the Altes Museum plan becomes a "floating signifier," an element detached from its prior discursive context, that of Prussian national identity, and affiliated with other, similarly floating signifiers.

On the façade of the Slovene Parliament, the stoalike front of the Altes Museum is replaced by a colossal order of Doric col-

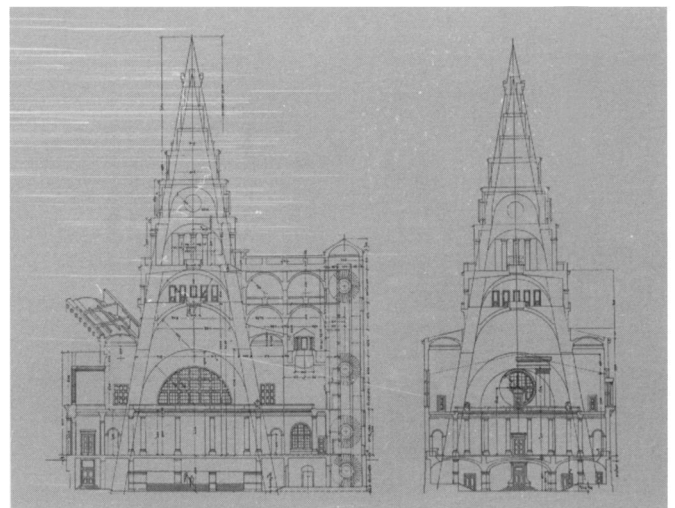
umns overlaid on a three-story-high wall. With individual Doric columns and entablatures framing the wall's first- and second-story windows, the façade is typical of late Renaissance Italian buildings and strongly resembles the façades of Michelangelo's City Hall buildings on the Campidoglio. The parliament's Italianate façade is thus another element drawn from a seemingly "prohibited" discursive context, an element that becomes, like the Prussian plan, a "floating signifier."

The parliament's central element is a hundred-fifty-meter-high cone that rises above the rotunda. Here again, Plečnik recontextualized a signifier, but in this case from a third discursive context, not that of fascist nationalism, but rather, that of utopian internationalism. The cone of the Slovene Parliament is a version of the cone above the "Palace of Peace" designed by Felix Debat for an international competition sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation in 1907.<sup>37</sup> Plečnik was certainly familiar with this competition, as his teacher, Otto Wagner, received fourth place for his entry. Moreover, an examination of a project on which Plečnik was working simultaneously with the Slovene Parliament, the Sv. Križ Church in Zagreb, shows how the stepped profile of Debat's pyramidal cone was transformed into the smooth profile of the parliament's cone via the church's tower.

The Slovene Parliament is, then, only a *specter* of national fantasy; it is an assemblage of elements from precisely those discursive contexts that Slovene nationality was defined against: the "Germanic," the "Italian," and the "international." In this sense, Plečnik's parliament is an assemblage of mutually noncohesive signifiers. If Laibach exceeds the fantasy of nationalism in a comic fashion, Plečnik did so in a tragic one; only four years after the Italian occupation of Slovenia, only two years after the German occupation of Slovenia, Plečnik projected a Slovene Parliament by grafting together elements expressive of the national fantasy of the Italians and that of the Germans. In so doing, he suc-



7. Felix Debat, design for the Palace of Peace, Brussels, 1907, plan and section



8. Plečnik, design for Sv. Križ Church, Zagreb, 1947, section





9, 10. Laibach, *Slovenska akropola*, 1987, cover and interior of compact disk

ceeded in maintaining a distance toward the “fantasmic nature” of his own nation’s symbolic reality.

### The Parliament as Nation-Thing

The *Titanic* is a Thing in the Lacanian sense: the material leftover, the materialization of the terrifying, impossible *jouissance*. By looking at the wreck we gain an insight into the forbidden domain, into a space that should be left unseen.

Slavoj Žižek<sup>38</sup>

Plečnik’s scheme for a Slovene Parliament was never realized, and in 1956 a far more modest parliament building was erected in Ljubljana’s downtown. Krečič writes that “sources currently available do not explain why [Plečnik’s] project was not executed.”<sup>39</sup> If the idea of the nation is regarded as always already present, then Plečnik’s scheme for the Slovene Parliament can be understood as an epiphenomenon of this idea, as a product of a nation that existed ideologically, if not politically. That the scheme remained unrealized could then be interpreted in terms of the discrepancy between the nation’s imaginative and actual existence in 1947.

If the nation is seen, however, as an essentially conditional entity, an entity formed through conflictual historical processes, then it could be an epiphenomenon of the parliament, as well as the other way around; in other words, architecture could be understood to have a *productive* as well a *reactive* relation to its cultural context. The history of Plečnik’s scheme, in fact, sug-

gests that his Slovene Parliament might have become nothing other than the Nation-Thing itself, the nodal point around which the Slovene nation constituted itself.

The transition of the Slovene Parliament into such a Thing can be traced from at least the mid-1980s, when the parliament began to appear as a national symbol in a variety of contexts. On the cover of the 1987 Laibach compact disc *Slovenska akropola*, an image of the parliament in cross section is juxtaposed with the title “Slovenska akropola.” Taken from Stelè’s description of Plečnik’s remodeling of Ljubljana Castle into a national museum, this title thus merges a signifier of the *site* of Plečnik’s first parliament scheme with a signifier of the *building* of his second scheme. The compact disc itself is inscribed with the plan of the second scheme’s enormous conical tower, suggesting a homology between the contents of the disc and the contents of the never-built parliament chamber.

Laibach continued to use the image of the parliament in the late 1980s, but as Slovene national consciousness became increasingly heightened during this period, the parliament appeared in other, more official formats. An alternative Slovene currency printed and circulated in Ljubljana in 1989, for example, reproduces the parliament as the preeminent national monument. It is not surprising at all, then, that the first stamp printed by the finally independent Republic of Slovenia in 1991 displays the same cross section of the parliament as was seen four years earlier on Laibach’s compact disc.



11. Alternative currency, Ljubljana, 1989

Rather than the parliament filling the empty niche of national symbol, the symbol every nation perforce must have, the circulation of the parliament's image suggests the more productive role that the building played in the formation of national identity. Indeed, the frequency with which the parliament was referred to in the years of Slovenia's withdrawal from Yugoslavia suggests its role as the Slovene Nation-Thing itself. The apprehension of the parliament's image as a sectional drawing seems to acknowledge this status of the building; the parliament *qua* section drawing is, like the ruins of the Titanic, "a positive, material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing."

Plečnik's achievement, like that of Laibach, rests in the production of a symbolic object that ultimately resists articulation as *merely symbolic*. As fascist signifiers in Laibach Kunst provide an affect different than that provided by fascist ideology, so, too, do the "nationalist signifiers" in Plečnik's Slovene Parliament provide an affect different than that provided by nationalist ideology — an architectural affect that is displayed and experienced in the building's virtual facticity.

## Notes

This essay began as a paper for a Ph.D. proseminar taught at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, by Michael Speaks, whom I thank for his criticism and encouragement.

1. Quoted in Dušan Grabrijan, *Plečnik in njegova šola* (Maribor: Založba obzorja, 1968), 74.
2. NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod hrvatske, 1991), 74.
3. In the interwar period, Czechoslovakia was an independent state, while Slovenia was a constituent part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and after 1928, of Yugoslavia; thus the political definitions of the Czechoslovak and Slovene nations were quite different. On Plečnik's development of Prague and Ljubljana as capital cities, see Andrew Herscher, "Prague and Ljubljana: Producing the Capital City," in *Josip Plečnik: An Architecture of Prague Castle*, ed. Damjan Prelovšek (Prague: Prague Castle, 1996).
4. Quoted in Grabrijan, *Plečnik in njegova šola*, 79.
5. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 9.
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Jezik, ideologija, Slovenci* (Ljubljana: Delavska enotnost, 1987), 9–59, and idem, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 200–31.
7. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
8. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 202.
9. Slavoj Žižek interviewed by Maja Megla, "Vse draži fašizma," *Mladina* 3 (18 January 1994): 21; translated above by Andrew Herscher.
10. See, for example, Damjan Prelovšek, *Josip Plečnik: Wiener Arbeiten von 1896 bis 1914* (Vienna: Tusch, 1974), idem, *Arhitekt Jože Plečnik* (Ljubljana: Delavska enotnost, 1986), idem, *Josip Plečnik, 1872–1957: Architectura perennis* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1992), as well as idem, ed., *Josip Plečnik: An Architecture of Prague Castle*. For the attack on Laibach, see Boris Podkrajšek, "Neonacizem in levica," *Slovenec* (5 January 1994), Vinko Zalar, "Umetnost in totalitarizem," *Slovenec* (8 January 1994), Damjan Prelovšek, "Hoja nad prepadom," *Delo* (8 January 1994), and idem, "Zadnjič Laibachovcem," *Delo* (15 January 1994). Maja Megla gives an account of this debate in "Neue Slowenische Eksport," *Mladina* 3.
11. "La Vague fasciste," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1521 (30 December 1993–5 January 1994).
12. Damjan Prelovšek interviewed by Maja Megla, "Nisem fašist," *Mladina* 3: 18–19; Žižek, "Vse draži fašizma," 21.
13. Žižek, "Vse draži fašizma," 21.
14. Laibach, "Totalitarizem: Akcija

v imenu ideje," *Nova revija* 2, nos. 13–14 (1983): 1461.

15. See, for example, the Laibach albums *Let it Be* (London: Mute Records, 1988), a remake of the Beatles' album, and *Sympathy for the Devil* (London: Mute Records, 1988), which comprises eight versions of the Rolling Stones' song.

16. Laibach, "Totalitarizem," 1461.

17. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 88.

18. Žižek, "Vse draži fašizma," 21.

19. Slavoj Žižek, "Die Aufklärung in Laibach," trans. Miroslav Mičanovica, *Quorum* 4, no. 1 (1988): 18; translated as "The Enlightenment in Laibach," *Art and Design* 9, nos. 3–4 (March–April 1994). This issue of *Art and Design*, entitled "New Art from Eastern Europe," documented contemporary art movements in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Slovenia.

20. Žižek, "The Enlightenment in Laibach," 86.

21. Louis Althusser, "Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: New Left Books, 1971), 221–23.

22. Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1987), 102.

23. Žižek, "The Enlightenment in Laibach," 86.

24. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 82.

25. A similar view of fascism as pleasure sublated into obedience can

also be found in Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephan Conway et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

26. Žižek, "The Enlightenment in Laibach," 86

27. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 213.

28. Quoted in Grabrijan, *Plečnik in njegova šola*, 69.

29. Žižek, "Vse draži fašizma," 21.

30. The fullest account of Plečnik's projects for the Slovene Parliament is given in Peter Krečič, *Jože Plečnik* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1992), 370–72.

31. *Ibid.*, 371.

32. France Stelè, *Ljubljanski grad: Slovenska akropola* (Celje: Mohorjeva tiskarna, 1932), 4.

33. *Ibid.*, 17.

34. Krečič, *Jože Plečnik*, 373.

35. Prelovšek, *Josip Plečnik*, 301.

36. Krečič, *Jože Plečnik*, 371.

37. International Competition of the Carnegie Foundation, *The Palace of Peace at the Hague* (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1907), 5: 1–2.

38. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 71.

39. Krečič, *Jože Plečnik*, 371.

### Figure Credits

1, 9–12. Collection of the author.

2. Peter Krečič, *Jože Plečnik* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1992).

3, 8. Josip Plečnik, *Napori*

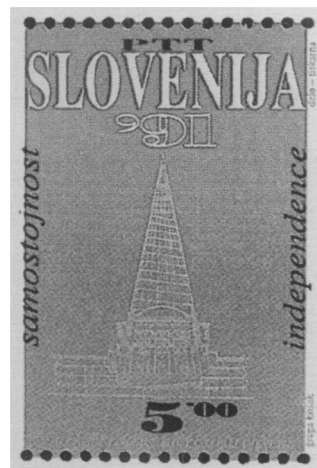
(Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1955).

4. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (Berlin: Arani, 1980).

5. Aleš Erjavec and Marina Crzinič, *Ljubljana, Ljubljana: Osemdeseta leta v umetnosti in kulturi* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1991).

6. James S. Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

7. International Competition of the Carnegie Foundation, *The Palace of Peace at the Hague* (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1907).



12. First postage stamp, Republic of Slovenia, 1991

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