

The Site of Production: Maja Bajevic's New Work in Sarajevo

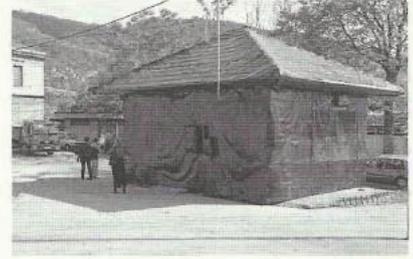
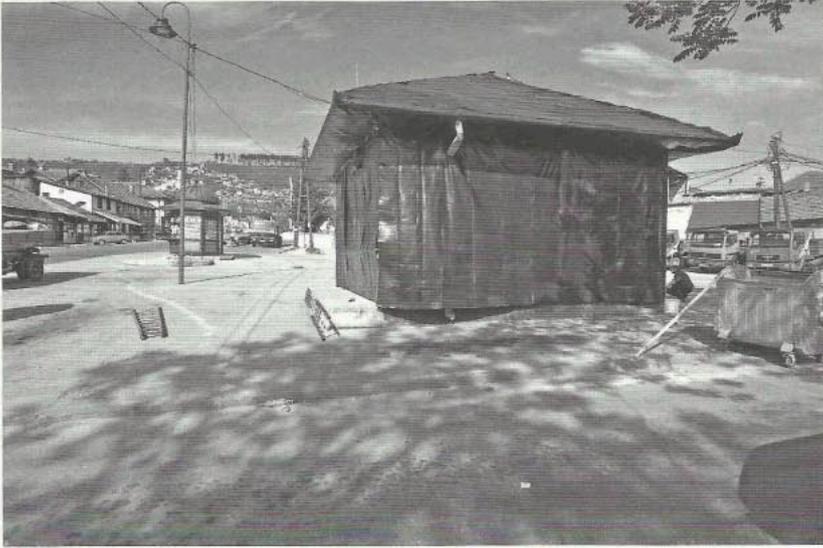
Kim Dhillon

In May 2005, Maja Bajevic returned to Sarajevo to make a new process-based commission referencing the leather craft industry in Visoko, a town twenty kilometers north west of the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the 1980s and 1990s, the area was known as the economic stronghold of the former Yugoslavia because of its exports from the textile industries and leather tanning trade. Ten years after the peace accord which founded this small Balkan nation, the economic infrastructure has still not been rebuilt and renewed competition from foreign businesses has meant that the traditional local leather craft and textile industries have suffered massive job losses.

In this piece, Bajevic worked together with leather traders, skilled craftsmen, a team of leather sewers and former workers from Visoko's struggling KTK leather tannery. For five days, culminating on 22 May 2005, Maja Bajevic and her team worked to sew 210 square meters of leather around a house in Sarajevo, just outside of Bascarsija, the old Turkish quarter. Visible from the steep hill leading to the centre, busloads of locals, city transport workers and passers-by witnessed this temporary new work that resembled a bizarre,

if contemporary fairy tale, a warning about the evils of globalisation. From a distance, the house looked like a chocolate brown, life-size object from Hansel and Gretel. Up close, the craftsmanship was apparent in the perfect seams between enough leather to cover the surface of three lanes of an Olympic size swimming pool. The architecture of the house was typical for Bosnia: a square building with a four-pitched roof and flat eaves. Encased in red-brown leather, skillfully sewn together in a Sarajevo atelier, the house took on an absurd function. It was protected by a shelter more fragile than the house itself. The leather hides had been tanned and coloured a shade of burgundy and were sewn together in large squares. This was a high quality leather normally used for handbags and it had a bright sheen that glistened in the hot May sunshine. The structure did not wrap the house like a Christo sculpture, but was constructed as a second shell around the building. Drain pipes poked out from the leather roof and snaked down the brown wall; exterior fuse boxes had square leather pouches sewn around them.

Four men had sewed the leather for the better part of a week to create the piece. On 21 May, it was brought from



Installation views, Sarajevo, Maja Bajevic *The Leather House* (2005) Photos: Dejan Vekic

the atelier to the site and over the course of a day, assembled in eight large panels (one for each wall, one for each section of the roof) over the house. Without regard to any restrictions for health and safety or practicalities that would have burdened such a project if it were to happen in the UK, the men worked without scaffolding. Cigarette packs were stored temporarily among telephone wires on the roof for easy-access on the frequent breaks. (And there were many. Work in Bosnia inevitably gets done, but at a relaxed crawl). With a simultaneous dry humour, irony and the subtle suggestion of political meaning beneath the surface, Bajevic's project drew attention to the socio-economic questions facing the region nearly ten years after the Dayton Peace Agreement. The massive job losses in this region now give little concern to people outside Bosnia nor does their plight gain economic support from the international community who backed the peace.

The turmoil of the international textiles trade has recently been at the forefront of international press. Historically textiles is an industry that has acted as a catalyst for industrialisation, kick-starting the economies of many developing nations. Textiles is a market whose demand is endlessly expanding with the high-turnover of the fashion industry and textiles factories have consistently provided thousands of jobs in both developed and developing nations. This industry, however, is increasingly dominated by China, where dress production is up 600%, T-shirt production up 328%, and trouser production up from 31 million to 240

million in the first quarter of 2004. Meanwhile jobs in other parts of the world are under threat where they cannot compete with China's low economic costs and scale of production. Neil Kearney, secretary general of the Brussels-based International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers Federation says: "I think it is no exaggeration to say that China has hijacked the world market in textiles and clothing."¹

The European Union and the United States have the support of the World Trade Organisation to pressure China to raise its exports tariffs on textiles in an attempt to protect jobs in the States and in hard hit European nations like Greece and Portugal or Slovenia, another nation established after the break up of Yugoslavia. Bosnia and Herzegovina however lies outside the protection of the EU and without the support of the international community for the nation's redevelopment, its textiles workers, traders, and employers are left to fend for themselves in a losing battle within this global textile market. In this situation which is typical of modern globalisation, local political manipulation is often indistinguishable from the control mechanisms of larger economic systems and global markets. Bajevic views the situation as a "new colonialism," involving the domination of several states by capitalism without regard to levels of skills in the workforce or local economies which had established ties to particular traditions in craft. In this situation, governments are powerless to intervene and can only provide remedial measures. Ten years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bajevic's new project explores the

repercussions of transition from State socialism to free market capitalism. Bajevic's new work could easily make sense in Lesotho, South Africa, where 20,000 jobs in textiles have disappeared since January 2005, or Dhaka, Bangladesh, where it is feared nearly a million jobs will be lost (half the Bangladeshi textiles industry workforce) in the near future as production shifts further into East Asia with the increasing domination of China's textile industry. Lenin's old question, "What is to be Done?"² suggests that there exist other possibilities, often more subtle and perhaps with longer effects, than straightforward protest to raise awareness or seek change.

The starting point for Bajevic's new project was the workers at KTK, a tannery and leather garment factory in Visoko. On the factory site there are three main buildings: two are completely derelict and abandoned, leaving thousands of square feet of industrial space wasted as a direct consequence of the war. KTK now runs at a tenth of its pre-war capacity but in 1985, KTK was producing 100,000 square meters of leather a year ready for export, with staff working in round-the-clock shifts of three hundred in order to meet demand. When Bajevic and I arrived at the tannery to film the colouring of the last of our order of leather, only a handful of workers were on site to complete the job. Those still employed now come in only when they are needed. To get to the toilet in the factory, you must cross through two massive empty wings of the factory. The large canteen looks abandoned: its rows of tables and chairs deserted. Adjacent rooms sit full of machinery that have fallen into a state of disrepair. In its redundant state, the massive machinery presses – the size of two skips – take on a sculptural form. They have conveyor belts and steamers that could dwarf those seen in broadsheet printing factories. The emptiness of the place is made most apparent by the silence. KTK is a quiet place lacking the drone of white noise typical of a busy industrial site.

Less than twenty metres away, a major new building is under construction. An Italian leather garment manufacturer is establishing a new factory, which is likely contribute a final blow to the plant and which may lead to the eventual closure of KTK. This new factory with modern machinery is not obliged to employ anyone from KTK, many of whom had been with the company for more than thirty years; nor is it tied to the local tradition of tanning in the way that KTK was; and all its leather will be produced as raw material for export, further reducing the effect on the manufacturing base of the region.

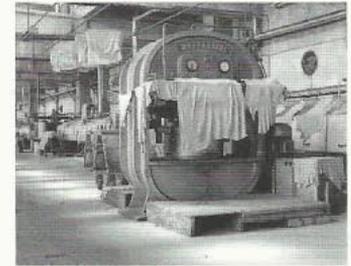
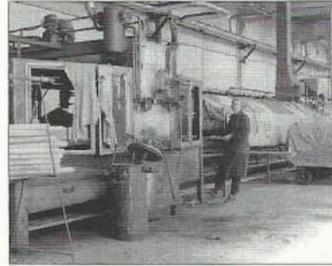
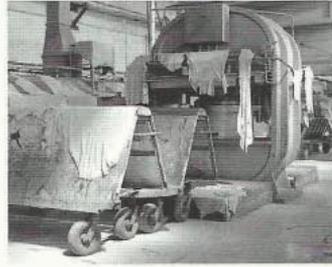
Bajevic's new work, however, is more focused on process than end product. The piece was shown as a projected video and documentary photos in London in June 2005; both forms were intended to translate and give permanence to the unfolding process of producing the house. The project exists as a narration upon her collaboration with the craftsmen, factory workers and local tradesmen. The object produced, the house, is not the "artwork" only the documentation of the processes by which the structure was made: the negotiations, plans, labour and relationships built. This process in turn, forms the core of Bajevic's ongoing concerns with the impact on individuals of both the economic repercussions and failures of this new state. Bajevic's work consistently remains grounded in this reality. It is never hysterical despite the traumatic political situations it often questions. The artist manages this balance by tying the work back to the culture of textiles production in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and rooting it in its home.

The project management of this piece had involved two main negotiations: coming to an agreed deal with Kemo, the manager and operator of KTK Lederplast in Sarajevo, the outlet for the nearby KTK factory, to purchase a total of over 250 square meters of leather and organising a team of leather sewers to work with Fico, a craftsman standing six foot five with a long grey pony-tail, to sew the leather into a cast of the house. Neither Kemo or Fico embody the stereotypical image of workers in the leather industry but both have made their livelihood out of the material. After countless Bosnian espressos, cigarettes and sugary cakes from the tiny shop in Bascarsija, a final contract was agreed. The first stage of this process was complete; the rest sat in the hands of the employees in Visoko who had quickly to tan, press and colour the mass quantity of leather and those of Fico and his team of craftsmen who would sew for fourteen hours a day for five days to complete the project.

Textiles in contemporary art tends to be wrongly reduced to one of two things: craft-based works, or works associated with the feminine. It is against such ideas that Bajevic's work seeks to work and why the project was willingly supported as a new commission funded by the London-based Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles and Arttextiles 3. Her project emphasises the labour involved, as Bajevic told me: **'I wanted to stay with this notion of work, while moving away from work thought to be typically feminine. For me, shared work is far more interesting...working with people you share their**



Maja Bajevic KTK Visoko Tannery Photos: Thierry Bal



time...which then becomes precious.' Bajevic always insists on paying the people with whom she works, as a way of validating their labour and is conscious of its repositioning in an arts context: **'I always present my project to the people I invite to work with me and I always pay them. I consider that they will spend their time and energy on the project and therefore should be paid for it. That makes the beginning point clearer and fair.'** The project had a significant trickle-down affect as the small Arts Council of England budget was used almost entirely for production fees and costs: Bajevic also put her artists' fee into the general production budget. The project acted as an investment into the textiles industry in Bosnia and Herzegovina paying the wages of the skilled craftsmen and sewers, some of whom haven't worked in the many years following the war as well as the remaining employees of KTK who tanned and coloured the leather ordered for the house.

Sarajevo is a city where arts funding is minimal at the best of times as the region is still repairing the infrastructure lost in the war. The National Library, for example, still sits abandoned after being burned down (along with hundreds of thousands of books) by Serbian troops. Bajevic's aesthetic strategy of process gains relevance in a city like Sarajevo because of the economic benefit it brings and the exposure of socio-political problems which it offers. Dunja Blazeovic, the Director of the Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), runs her programme on temporary project-to-project funding. Established in 1996 with funding from the Open Society Fund of Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to run the centre for four years, it was meant to be self-sufficient

by the end of that funding period. Despite the challenge of developing a consistent programme without reliable core funding, Blazeovic works hard to produce artists' projects that bring the public closer to new and unconventional art forms, arguing they have **'a humanizing effect on the social and urban spaces and become part of everyday life.'** In May 2005, the SCCA also launched its new project 'On De/Constructing the Monument' in Sarajevo. The project's concern is with what Blazeovic calls, **'the disease of the manipulation of culture, art, religion and media by the nationalist elite.'** Strongly opposed to a harmless, docile or self-satisfied programme of public art projects in Sarajevo, Blazeovic shares Bajevic's concern to address the social and political shifts from Socialist to Capitalist systems which are dominated by local elites and result in an increasingly stratified society where foreign aid or international development workers are placed in what is still considered a dangerous zone. Blazeovic calls the situation: **'controlled chaos, the absence of a system, a lack of political transparency and of public opinion in all spheres – from the economy to culture and art.'**²³

Women at Work, which Bajevic showed in *Manifesta 3* (Ljubljana, 2000), was a Blazeovic and SCCA produced project with five women refugees from Srebrenica. With Bajevic, they worked together to sew needlework decorations and embroidered designs on the protective netting that hung on the scaffolding of the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina when it was refurbished in 1999. Here Bajevic employed textiles to examine women's traditional domestic labour as embroiderers within the home, but the location



Maya Bajevic 'Under Construction': *Women at Work* 5 day action, Sarajevo (1999)

and staging challenged any commonplace interpretation of the women's individual identities by placing them within a political and collective space. In *Women at Work*, Bajevic grappled with her own struggle to reconcile the war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s with that of the personal experiences and trauma of these five women from Srebrenica. In the late 1990s Bajevic returned to Sarajevo after a five year involuntary exile in Paris (she had been on a research stipend when Yugoslavia collapsed and Sarajevo was besieged, and became a student again in order to keep her papers valid, virtually re-sitting her recent degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo at the Ecole Superieure de Beaux-Arts in Paris). The refugee women from Srebrenica were homeless and had escaped one of the worst and most notorious massacres of the war in former Yugoslavia. They worked together for two hours a night for five days. The passing audience had the experience of watching the women working by lamplight on the scaffolding as they made the netting protecting the damaged National Gallery into something quite domestic and personal. This work indicated Bajevic's ability to make the complex, traumatic experiences that occurred within Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s comprehensible through an intimate and personal form of intervention. The piece resulted in a work which was both performance, video, photography and textiles: moving far beyond each medium's limits to engage with broader and more complex questions of changing identities in socio-political situations. She extended the series *Women at Work* as performances to develop strategies of reinvention and re-appropriation using typically feminine

activities from domestic labour and working with the same team of women from Srebrenica. In 1999, with two of these women at the Istanbul Biennial,¹ she performed for two days in a female-only space of a Turkish hammam laundering fabric embroidered with Titoist statements until the material disintegrated. In France, she also re-posed Frans Hals's painting *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* (ca. 1664) sitting with three women as seemingly passive witnesses. For her textiles is an artefact which can speak about the context in which it is made and different social, political and economic complexities.

Bajevic's work speaks about more than one individual's experience of a single war. Since 2001, her practice has developed to speak with sophistication and surprising humour to political experiences on a universal scale made manageable by her personal identification with them. The distance and separation forced on Bajevic while she was exiled in Paris during the war has provided her with a complex perspective, both intimate and objective, that has catapulted her practice forward in recent years. Bajevic's video *Back in Black* (2003) represents a typically Bosnian form of sardonic humour evident in spite of the events of the war: men sit in a coffee shop decorated with portraits of Tito and tell jokes about the siege. In a pattern that seemed to me to be typical of the Sarajevo mentality, humour becomes a distancing tool by which horrific collective experiences as well as grave situations can be grasped.

A similar mentality can be found in her approach to the leather house. Rather than making a dark, monumental work speaking of the wrong-doings of globalised economies and the people directly affected by them, Bajevic uses two strategies: a collaborative project based on labour processes and a sense of humour. In turn, everyone involved in making

her house covered in leather has a stake in it. Those not directly involved in the work are caught by its striking comic appearance which challenges audiences to question its function with an objective distance enforced by her use of the absurd.

Prior to arriving in Sarajevo, I, as the curator/production agent, was worried the new work would be so somber in tone that it might struggle to engage audiences after the initial process or who might miss its significance because they weren't there to see it made. Once we began production, my concern dissipated: the work wasn't one of mourning a lost industry or livelihood, people were happy to simply be working, and to have an opportunity to voice their concerns about the new factory. Bajevic has reiterated since we began, that the original, intended audience for the work is the people who made it. Their input into the collaboration strengthened the integrity of the project. I speak six words of Bosnian, but nonetheless, had a half hour conversation with one employee at KTK while we were filming the leather being coloured there. I came out of the conversation with two pieces of information: 1985, and 100,000 square meters, the past production statistics.

In Bajevic's new work the artist has entered areas of work typically and traditionally dominated by men. Men both build houses and dominate the leather industry. Although textiles in contemporary art tends to be associated with women's work, the cultural history of its industrial practice is work often done by men, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Bajevic is conscious of the potential stereotypes: **'For me, as a woman, textiles, and especially working together with other women, is a great excuse to work on something else while staying in the natural surroundings of these women. For me the final "product" has never been the work we have done in textiles but the process and the context of doing it. In this project it will be a man's world since working with leather is traditionally more of a "man's job."**

An intention of this project has, from the beginning, been to challenge the role of textiles in contemporary art production and to move away from clichés of the medium by developing a work that extends Bajevic's practice across textiles, performance, video and photography. Bajevic says, **'there is obviously that feminine connection with textiles which exists, definitely, but there is also the male element to it. For me as an artist it was interesting to move to crafts that are connected with textiles, but connected from**

the other [masculine] side. [This work] is also different in that before, with *Women at Work*' she says, 'we were putting out in public what normally happens in the home, and with this project it's the other way around. We are kind of making a shelter for the house, sheltering the interior of the home from the outside world.'

In 2003, Bajevic was one of the four artists to represent Bosnia and Herzegovina when it participated for the first time with a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In the exhibition catalogue, the curator, Asja Mandic, wrote: **'Maja Bajevic's works express the trauma of war in a post-war environment of disintegrating values, poverty, and social instability, where the common man is swamped under the weight of social and political change and manipulation.'**⁴ She continued: **'Maja Bajevic feels a responsibility as an artist to mirror reality directly. Her works communicate about what used to be, what is now felt, and what is sometimes forgotten, ignored, and pushed to the margin.'**⁵

While she identified Bajevic's work as politically charged, autobiographical, and emotional, Mandic commented that her art was both an **'act of resistance and social criticism, as well as a healing agent.'**⁶ While this is true of her work several years ago, she has now moved beyond healing. Bajevic's new work challenges social criticism not to heal, but to question, progress and disturb the bottom line.

Kim Dhillon is a curator and writer based in London. She produced Bajevic's new project *Sarajevo* in May 2005 with partner Jessica Wythe and it was shown 4-12 June at the Foundation for Women's Art, Great Sutton Street, London.

Notes

1 Claire Penketh 'China Strengthens Grip on Textiles Trade' BBC News broadcast, 19 May 2005

2 V.I. Lenin *What is to be Done* (1902)

3 Dunja Blazevic 'De/Construction of Monument' (Sarajevo: Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art, 2005)

4 Asja Mandic 'Maja Bajevic' First Time: Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 50th International Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia (Venice: Ars Aevi, 2003) p. 35

5 Ibid

6 Ibid