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[The Matrix of Memory](#)
[Dr. Bojana Pejic](#)

Memory, which concerns us, even if it is not ours, but is, how to say it,
beside ours, and which determines us almost as much as our history.
Georges Perec, Je suis né

In an interview given during the exhibition Manifesta 3, where her video *Women at Work - Under Construction* (1999) was shown, Maja Bajevic stated that she took on here "une manière spécifiquement féminine . . . de reconstruire un espace perdu". In this joint performance, as in the two to follow, *The Observers* (2000) and *Washing Up* (2001), Bajevic delicately interlaces her inimitable politics of domesticity: in her solo pieces and those realized in cooperation with other women, this politics is made manifest through the public performance of diverse manual activities, like embroidering, sewing or laundering. These habitual female proceedings, repetitive and monotonous, are carried out in public spaces so as to lay bare women's customary activities for coping with - absences. The theme of absence, I believe, is at the core of Maja Bajevic's art. Most of her works relate to subjective 'voids', distances, digressions, separations and the plausibility of loss: they refer to absent 'spaces', the spaces that may have existed as actual homes or homelands or have been imagined as "opaque thresholds" (Pepe Espaliú). To deal with absences - in art or life - entails most of all the recollection of formerly existing and now absent presences: the matrix of memory, inescapably, commences to pulse.

Given that *Women at Work* are cooperative works in which the artist also takes part, it would be wrong to assume that Bajevic could herein deal with her own memory only. These performances where the women share in a common manual work are thus pieces during which her participants' memories are - in all probability - triggered as well. And, since they are war refugees, their memory is for the most part that of the Bosnian war, Srebrenica in particular, whose atrocities they, unlike the artist, personally experienced. Objecting to the widely accepted conviction that 'time heals all wounds', Kaja Silverman argues the opposite. In one of her film analyses she asserts that with time the hurt of separation loses its actual limits and becomes a "disembodied wound". If we presume that in *Women at Work* memories or rather wounds are shared, the artist must have found herself in the position described by Silverman: "If to remember is to provide the disembodied 'wound' with a psychic residence, then to remember other people's memories is to be wounded by their wounds. More precisely, it is to let their struggles, their passions, their pasts, resonate within one's own past and present, and destabilize them. Since the new mnemonic matrix which weaves itself around the borrowed memory inevitably shifts the meaning of that memory, it is also to enter into a profoundly dialectical relation to the other, whose past one does not relive precisely as he or she lived it, but in a way which is informed by one's 'own' recollection".

Performance, chosen by Bajevic as the most appropriate medium for coping (however partially and temporarily) with their shared wounds, and for relating to the given Bosnian present and its war-torn past, indicates a truly utopian intention that in the main characterized "event arts" since their inception after the Great War. Back in the 1920s, artistic enactment and engagement were, in Stephen C. Foster's reading, perceived as potentially effective means of providing transition points between the past, present and future: "The event served the artists as an instrument for achieving, in reality or by illusion, a positioning of themselves and their audience in a hostile and self-destructive world and as a potential instrument of change. . . The 'artistic event' made a live, active response to live 'social events', and served as an alternative to the presentation of ideas through a conventional art and literature that had clearly been rendered impotent by the abuses of a dysfunctional and failing society". Aside from this aspect, that I find relevant for discussing *Women at Work*, one additional element is of similar importance. All these performances are conceived as ritualistic events: the first was staged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the later two in France and Turkey. Ritualism has been one of the most common and significant strategies of post-Second World War performance art that stood, in a way, in opposition to an increasing fragmentation of contemporary society. The ubiquity of ritualistic works in women's art of the 1970s, which relied on repetition and simultaneity, has been recognized as gender specific since the women artists have shown an "interest in the communal nature of ritual activity. The assumption is that in ritual activity we escape the fragmentation and contingency of the modern condition and enter into a kind of quasi-religious, timeless wholeness". Accordingly, *Women at Work*, where Bajevic invited only women (and non-artists) to take part, should probably be seen in the context of artworks seeking to 'repair' not modern but indeed 'post-modern' and post-Communist conditions, instigated by the pre-modern and destructive aspirations of the Serbian regime in the late 1980s. Above all these post-Yugoslav conditions have been dominated by nationalisms and wars.

Regardless of the part of the globe in which they occur, nationalisms have, as Cynthia Enloe argues, "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope". As is widely known, the most 'functional' debasement of the 'other side' in the Bosnian war was carried out, in the cause of ethnic cleansing, in the form of the rapes that 'our brave guys' inflicted on 'your women' in order to humiliate 'your men'. (After returning home from the Bosnian front, some Serbian soldiers stated to the local press that the 'best' things in the war were "shooting and fucking".) Unlike fallen heroes, the victims of rape, as earlier in history, became, however, perceived not as 'fallen heroines', but were more often than not, were viewed as 'fallen women' and rarely as citizens whose individual and human rights had been eradicated. In a double turn, a violated woman, as nationalist rhetoric would have it, 'means' the raped Nation. Ann McClintock's critique is very much to the point: "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous. . . Nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people's access to the resources of the nation-state. . . No nation in the world grants women and men the same rights and resources in the nation state. . . Not only are the needs of the nation here identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men, but the representation of male national power depends on the prior construction of gender difference. All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to define symbolically the limits of national difference and power between men". In her politicizing of the domestic, Bajevic is well aware that with her public performances she enters a

sphere that is highly gendered: not only in post-war Bosnia, but in all other post-Socialist (nation) states, the political/public sphere is practiced as a menspace.

The family of performances called Women at Work is staged in those public spaces one usually passes by or goes through. Since these works ultimately deal with the absence of home, the artist intentionally avoids the semi-public venues considered to be the 'home of the arts' and stages the performances accordingly, in freely available spaces that are far from able to induce homey sensations. The politics of domesticity also implies the practice of emplacement: the presence of women who execute domestic work lasting many hours or days transforms these non-spaces – a façade, a castle, a bathhouse – into ritual places in which an interface of (the artist's) individual and borrowed memory could occur. These venues are sites for temporary existences, for crafting needlework or laundering as if home and home members were there. These places are to be inhabited by the liminal personae, by those who are passeurs, the people-in-passage.

The façade

In his seminal anthropological study, *The Rites of Passage* (1908), Arnold van Gennep examined life crises or liminal states (limen, signifying "threshold" in Latin) and rituals that "accompany every change of place, state, social position and age". Victor W. Turner will later remark: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial". Each rite of passage moves through three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation into the *communitas*. In the transitional period an individual is neither in nor out of society, he or she is in a liminal state; from this state the ritual subject should emerge transformed. Although all performances belonging to Women at Work, in a slightly different way though, refer to transitional conditions, *Under Construction* (1999) is an artwork that could be clearly read as a rite de passage. This performance takes place in Sarajevo some four years after the peace was won. For her project Maja Bajevic, a Bosnian but a non-Muslim, invited five Muslim women - Fazila Efendic, Zlatija Efendic, Amira Tihic, Hatidza Verlasevic and Munira Mandzic - from the region around Srebrenica, now part of Republika Srpska, and who are living as refugees in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In *Under Construction* Maja Bajevic interweaves two crucial facets of the rite of passage. Firstly there is the personal experience of the subjects-in-transition, in a situation once described by Stephen Greenblatt: "In a rite of passage, something is extinguished, something becomes extinct: if not you yourself, in your bodily being, then something you are, a status or position in which you have been fixed, from which you have drawn your identity, to which you referred your experience in order to give them some coherence or meaning. And then, either through choice or through something over which you have no control, the status crumbles, the position disappears, the identity is no longer your own". This inner experience remained, however, invisible to outside observers.

Under Construction is an artistic event wherein different aspects of women's social invisibility are layered. Here, women's work is accomplished in public and, in addition, such a 'superfluous' and apparently purposeless activity as decorating the façade is contrasted with purposeful male physical labor, namely, the male workers' job of restoring the 'essence' of the building soon to serve again its meaningful, public function as the national museum for visual arts (Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina). In this performance, though, more crucial than exposing the invisible domestic craft to public sight, and laying bare the gendered constellation of manual labor, is, I trust, something else: this is an upsetting issue that was swept 'under the carpet' in all post-Yugoslav states, Bosnia included: the war refugees. At this point, Bajevic introduces yet another focal feature of a rite of passage, and this is the social impact such an event has in a community: "A rite of passage is something that happens to an individual – and as such, is a particularly intense experience – but it is at the same time social and in most cases institutional. A private rite of passage is like an unattended wedding: it can mime the form of the ritual, but misses the mark. The significance of the transition derives from collective understandings that accumulate around the performed acts. . . . And the emotions too are collective, in that they follow certain paths laid down by those who have gone before and those who actually or in imagination are the spectators of the ritual actions."

The (artistic) ritual on the façade takes place in Sarajevo many years after the implementation of peace guaranteed by the Dayton Peace Agreement signed in December 1995. In exhibiting her own and her partners' ritual crafting on the façade to the casual observers in the Sarajevo streets, the artist simultaneously exposed the painful social issue: she pointed to the communal position of her co-workers whose citizen status as war refugees is exposed to collective amnesia. This occurs not only in Bosnian and Herzegovina but in all other post-Yugoslav states as well. The performance *Under Construction* publicly unveils the condition of women-refugees who are pushed to the margins of social visibility in the a community, which, as the argument goes, has (to have) more urgent needs such as the actual reconstruction of the country devastated by an imposed war. Bajevic deconstructs these alleged societal priorities and touches upon a 'less burning' problem: the collective invisibility of refugees, in this case women exiles from Srebrenica, produced in a post-war country.

During the Bosnian war the anonymity of women refugees, regardless of their ethnic group, was steadily reinforced by the mass media, foreign television stations in particular. The refugees were televised as an unidentified mass, as a crowd or a suffering 'Volk'. The women were seldom interviewed, and they were as a rule reduced to ethnicity or Nation, they were subsumed under essentialist terms such as "Bosnian women", or rather, "Muslim refugees". Women's identities, their names being mentioned, for instance, was far less frequent. In the same vein, none of the reviews written about Women at Work after it was shown at the Manifesta 3 and the 7th Istanbul Biennial, respectively, reveal the names of the participants: they remained anonymous. They are always referred to as either "women exiles" or "refugees from Srebrenica". In all these cases the women 'naturally' stand over and over again for their 'Volk' or the religious group they belong to, deprived of their individualities and their visibility as subjects and citizens.

Bajevic's co-performers are women whose condition is liminal in numerous ways. Moreover, they have been enduring this state for many years. They used to live in small towns and villages in the region of Srebrenica and in their 'earlier' lives they were either employed or performed the 'invisible' domestic work as housewives and mothers; since 1995, however, when they were forced to abandon their homes, they (have to) lead a 'city life', for the time being residing in Sarajevo's suburbs, in homes left by the people who are now living in exile somewhere else. Each of these women lost a male family member who most probably died in the Srebrenica massacre. The family and therefore the social status of these women in the Bosnian state could not, however, be clearly defined. Their men are not officially declared dead but rather "missing". Nonetheless, in order to support their life without their men and homes, the Bosnian government grants them the status of widows, and provides them with a certain minimal income as if their husbands or fathers were actually buried. In the absence of the deceased bodies, however, Bajevic's companions were deprived of the possibility of performing their individual work of mourning, usually consisting of several phases. In many cultures, the Muslim one included, the display or at least the presence of the dead body (in this case wrapped in a special cloth) is one way of honoring it; this marks the beginning of the mourning ceremonies which are concluded by the body's entombment, itself a rite of passage having both individual and communal meaning. Regularly visiting the graveyard and paying tribute to the departed person has a soothing function for those who are left behind, but it is also an act with public visibility. This is, in passing, a gendered aspect of mourning since it is carried out first and foremost by the female family members.

Fazila Efendic, Zlatija Efendic, Anira Tihic, Hatidza Verlasevic and Munira Mandzic could never perform these customary sorrowful but comforting duties. The loss of their normal existence as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters was never accompanied by a ceremony that would enable them to survive this life crisis and move on to a new state of existence. Their grief remained socially invisible except for the white headscarves most of them wear, following the practices of Muslim culture in which white is the color of mourning. By inviting these women to work with her on the façade, Maja Bajevic made their invisible mourning socially perceptible and provided it with a due dignity. This performance, then, could be recognized as a labor of mourning being performed within the institutionalized framework of art. This may be supported by the fact that performers, or rather the liminal personae who appeared on the façade did not sing together, as women habitually do when they embroider together at home - in peacetime. Over hours and days the leisure work was enacted in silence. A rite of passage that occurred here 'as art' was a ceremony that did not (or rather could not) take place in life. Perhaps, *Under Construction* could be best described in Benjamin's terms as a Trauerspiel.

The Bathhouse

Washing Up (2001) is set out in a commercial, single-sex, communal space, the Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul. In difference with the two earlier editions of *Women at Work*, this piece could be attended only by women and, moreover, it presumed the active participation of spectators who could access the art event after passing through a cleansing rite of bathing. The viewers, here transformed into users, were guided to the performance room by the recorded voices of adults reciting a children's game in Turkish, English and the artist's mother tongue. Over five consecutive days (during the opening of the 7th International Istanbul Biennial) Maja Bajevic, Fazila Efendic and Zlatija Efendic performed two hours a day, laundering white cloths with several 'epic' texts, which they had earlier embroidered in Sarajevo.

The politics of emplacement consists here of using the Turkish bath, a topos that in past centuries has been imagined and imaged in Western painting as the 'essence' of Oriental - and women's - 'Otherness'; more often than not it was just a 'pretext' for displaying the female nude in the process of bathing. Discretely referring to the Western tradition of Orientalism, Bajevic may have chosen this venue also because the women's bathhouse in many cultures stands for the household and home. In these communal places women may achieve a kind of 'applied spirituality' and through the washing of the body and the children, traditionally the laundry as well, they could conduct secularized access to purity: "The women's baths, then, are a site where the rites of female purity are enacted as the physical manifestation of other forms of purity (spiritual, sexual, psychological). The household is reconstituted within this arena of symbolic celibacy, using the vehicle of the female body and including the period of obligatory inert leisure before returning to the outside world. Bathing is secular worship, wherein pleasure is linked to duty and ritual . . ." Bearing in mind that *Washing Up* takes place in an Istanbul bathhouse and that it also involves two Muslim female participants identified by their pantaloons and headscarves, this performance also subtly alludes to the ablutions (the ritual cleansing of the hands and body) that all Muslim men are obliged to perform before their recurrent daily prayers. The choice of the hamam does not only suggest the prime role of water in the Islamic context, since the re-vivifying function of water is immanent to religious symbolism existing as it exists in fairly different cultures, as Eliade wrote: "In water everything is 'dissolved', every 'form' is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water, not an outline, not a 'sign', not an event. . . Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regeneration, of giving new birth. . . Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores - even if only for a moment - the integrity of the dawn of things".

Besides its other qualities, *Washing Up* is one of the rare artworks produced in the countries that once formed the federal state of Socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991) that implicitly deals with Communist, or rather Titoist, heritage. The art historian Dejan Sretenovic, proffers quite important comment that goes beyond the immediate context of the Belgrade art he is examining: "Whereas communism in the countries of Eastern Europe, as observed by Baudrillard, disimmunized itself and fell into its own emptiness spontaneously and unexpectedly, 'as a result of its own inertia', nobody knows what actually happened with communism in former Yugoslavia, since there was no radical ideological mobilization in the country and it plunged into political and ethnic conflicts, resulting in its bloody disintegration . . . there was no ideological vacuum or necessary distance so that Titoist ideology could become the subject-matter of an impartial deconstructivist activity". Only after the actual and bellicose destruction of former Yugoslav was finally over, the artistic deconstruction, still seldom, started to take place.

Maja Bajevic's way of undoing the ideologically charged past is to situate the political in the domestic, 'female' realm. Contrary to the decorative motives embroidered on the façade's netting, and the needlework with geometrical patterns crafted during the residence in the castle, the cloths being washed in the bathhouse carry phrases with ideological meaning; these 'epic' messages are particularly familiar to those who lived in the now vanished country - 'Titoist' Yugoslavia. These political slogans used to be written on banners displayed during national holidays or congresses of the Yugoslav Communist League. They are now embroidered on towel-like textiles akin to the kitchen cloths with cheerful (but wise) advice to housewives that women used to use for decorating their 'kingdom'. But the statements applied to the laundered textiles are less jolly and more war-like. The first, "Long live the armed brotherhood and unity of our nations", was the slogan built into the fundamentals of the 'new' Yugoslavia born out of the Peoples' Revolution and a 'just' Liberation War; the second refers to the readiness of all Yugoslav peoples/nations (and not solely the professional military forces) to defend their independence and freedom against attack by a (potential) foreign enemy: "We live as if there will be peace for a hundred years, but we prepare ourselves as if there will be war tomorrow"; and finally the last statement, often printed in the history manuals used in schools, addresses future generations, those who were to enjoy peacetime in a 'hundred years' to come: "The country that has youth like ours, should not worry for its future". The author of these sentences quoted by Bajevic is in fact Josip Broz Tito (b. 1892), the one and only President of the Socialist Yugoslavia and the 'engineer' of what is today called the Yugoslav multi-cultural 'experiment'. When Tito, locally known as the 'son of all Yugoslav nations' died in May 1980, Bülent Ecevit (today's Prime Minister of Turkey) confidently wrote in the condolence book: "He is one of the rare leaders who left without fear of what would happen after him". Eleven years later, 'Tito's' Yugoslavia, a country in which Bajevic and her co-launders (as well as myself) were born, legally ceased to exist, soon to end up in war wreckage.

In unmasking the previous Communist militarism, which over decades painstakingly exploited its anti-fascist commitment in the World War Two, Bajevic also demystifies the bellicose nationalisms that emerged as one of the basic ideological 'remedies' to repair the 'wounds' of the previous ideological construction. For both the project of (Yugoslav) Socialism - regardless of the fact that it guaranteed social equality between male and female citizens - and that of re-invented nationalisms exploited, although in different ways, the patriarchal blueprints. Hence, Bajevic here radically inverts a strong egalitarian optimism cherished in the early stage of Socialist Yugoslavia, when, back in 1958, Tito issued this resolute statement: "The belief that domestic work is only for women is backward and it has nothing to do with the role of woman in a Socialist society". Real life, on the other hand, proved the opposite to be the case.

This ritual laundering may only to a certain extent be read as the labor of mourning over the 'lost space' locally called Yuga, performed here as a self-distractive action that wipes out the cloths earlier embroidered by the launderers themselves so as to

'mimic' the disintegration of former Yugoslavia annihilated by its own, previously 'brotherly-oriented' (and brotherly armed) citizens. Washing Up may also appear as an artwork whereby "historical" or in Kristeva's words, "masculine" time is countered with "women's time" allied to cycles, gestation and recurrence, suggested here via 'feminine' proceedings presented in a cyclic manner (five days, two hours a day) and by the very location of women's bathhouse. Despite this, it would be rather simplistic to argue that women here just 'wash away' men's wars, as some (feminist) reviewers of this performance were quick to assume.

Washing Up is a new rite of passage where, it seems, the liminal subjects now try to 'remake' the world and, hopefully, their place in it - once more within the institution of art. The water used for washing the embroidered fabric is, however, not clean: prior to washing, it was made dirty by the launderers themselves and during the course of performance it remained unchanged. Is this, then, a cleansing ritual? Discussing various concepts of pollution and taboo, ritual uncleanness and its links to the sacred, Mary Douglas asserts that in many cultures the societal system of cleanness is usually at war with itself: "Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of the mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order. So it started from a state of non-differentiation; all through the process of differentiating its role was to threaten the distinctions made; finally, it returns to its true indiscriminable character. Formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay". Even though Washing Up more than earlier performances bears evident references to a collectively lived past, I am not prepared to believe that those Grand Narratives of History, be they Communist or nationalist, are here domesticated through women's laundering in dirty waters in order to be 'repaired' - forgiven and forgotten.

In her *Women at Work* Maja Bajevic does not deal, I think, with that collective time institutionalized as History, but with the time of memory, instead: this is individualized time, a time that is made personal. If we presume that during the shared 'feminine' labor an interplay of personal and shared memories also takes place, each of the performances becomes, in effect, a Trauerarbeit, a work of mourning. This process, though, implies that the 'wounds' and 'absent spaces' (or absent lives) are remembered in an imperfect manner, as Kaja Silverman suggests: "The function of recollection . . . is to transform, not to reproduce. . . To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present". The matrix of memory weaves on behalf of the here and now.

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