

Maja Bajevic.

Women at Work – Washing up (2001)

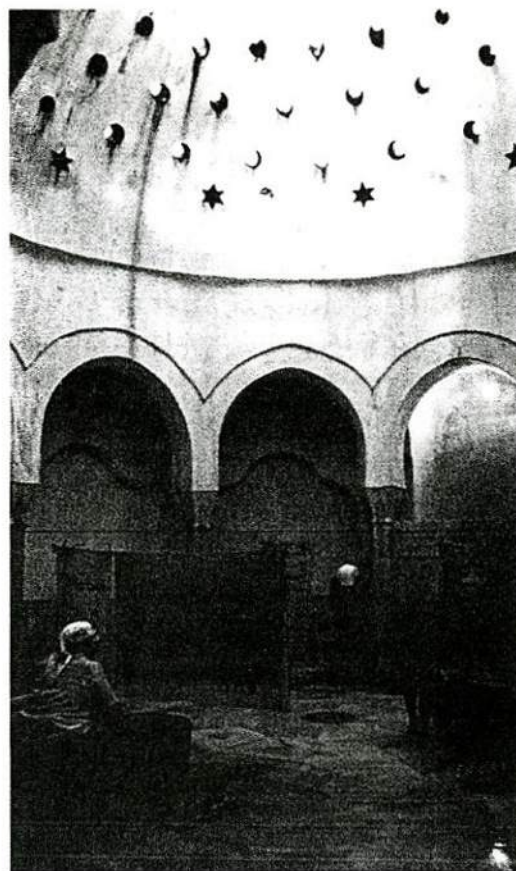
Maja Bajevic: This is the last work in the series called *Women at Work*. The first was called *Women at Work – Under Construction* and took place on the scaffolding outside the National Gallery of Bosnia-Herzegovina two years ago. Each work has fallen in September – which is very funny.

Then the second work, *Women at work – The Observers* was in Voltaire's Castle in France a year ago. This is the last one and it's sub-titled *Washing Up*. We are going to publish a catalogue with these three works and with texts from Bojana Pejic and Dunja Blazevic.

I knew this would be the final one, so the idea of "washing up" as in "tidying up" is also present. But we are also washing from history, and from the guilt that occurs when you have survived a war, which we all have in a way. When I was thinking of the idea of washing, the idea of the Hamam (Turkish Bath) came naturally. I always work in public and explore how politics intervenes in private life: the Hamam is a place in between private and public, so it was perfect for this performance.

We are also showing the beginning of the project in a video placed at the entrance of the Hamam. The video shows us embroidering sentences from Tito onto cloth. Today these sentences read as completely ironic: 'Long Live the Armed Brotherhood of Our Nations'; 'We live as if there will be peace for a hundred years, but we prepare ourselves as if there will be war tomorrow'; 'A country that has youth like ours should not worry for its future'. It was often said that particularly that generation of "youth" made the war in Yugoslavia (the sentence dates from the 1970s). We embroidered these sentences onto cloths and then during five days of washing, we completely destroyed them so they became like rags. It was important that the performance lasted 5 days. In all three works, it was always a five-day cycle. It gives you the time to slowly get into it. Nothing spectacular happens during the performance, it is more acts of everyday life but put in a different context and, sometimes, turned around.

Katy Deepwell: Do you think of this process as parallel to Tito's vision of a united Yugoslavia which also collapsed?



Maja Bajevic: Yes. Definitely. We are washing these pieces of cloth in dirty water and we wash all the time the same pieces in this dirty water. It's the reverse of what you would normally do. We are doing something that should be completely normal, but we are doing something that is completely the opposite of "normality" because the water - like history - is dirty. That makes the whole process of "washing" quite absurd. In the end we destroyed a thing of our own making - the embroideries. And this process is like politics, that destroys the same thing it had constructed before.

Katy Deepwell: You have been collaborating with two women from Bosnia Herzegovina, Fadila Efendic and Zlatija Efendic, in this performance; did you work with them on other pieces in the series?

Maja Bajevic: Yes. They have been in all three pieces. In the first work, we were six. In the second work we were five and when we were embroidering the clothes for the performance, we were four. In this actual performance we are three.



Left and Above: Maja Bajevic *Women at Work– Washing Up* (2001) Five day performance, Hamam, Istanbul. Courtesy of Istanbul. Biennial.

So it's like the numbers involved have also got smaller as the series progressed. It's very precious, this collaboration. We have coffee in Sarajevo from time to time. We also were working with the women in the Hamam here who are doing the massage. We became like copines – friends. We were in the same business – in a way – with a friendship that comes through work. It is really that which connects us. There's an age difference between us, and a difference in experiences but the connection is even stronger since it comes through work.

Katy Deepwell: Istanbul has a visibly male public culture. This is very obvious to me as a Western woman. What interests me is that you chose to set up a female viewing situation as much as a Women at Work situation. It would have been equally possible to do this performance in the Cistern or in another space in the city and had a mixed audience. Could you say something more about the importance of the venue?

Maja Bajevic: The idea of washing was always there. We were even talking about doing it in the Cistern. But then, for various reasons, it wasn't possible. The idea of the Hamam in the end was really perfect. Many people have asked me why this was women only. But this is the reality of the Hamam, only for women or only for men. I'm just doing it by the rules of the place where I am doing it.

Katy Deepwell: The first in the series *Under Construction* was equally an intervention in the male space, as it was a construction site and the piece was made during the night when they had left for the day. So this is another intervention – creating a woman-only space.

Maja Bajevic: To me, since I am a woman myself this female space is very close and I really like investigating it. My work is always very intimate, it explores the intimate. The reason why I use "female" spaces is simply because they are closer to my own experience.

Katy Deepwell: You're forcing your audience to participate, as the only way to see the work is to have a real bath. You're in one sense placing your audience in a naked role which the typical gallery-going audience might feel very uncomfortable with – apart from the delight of having a bath.

Maja Bajevic: It brings people closer. It's a much more intimate situation. You are naked – having a bath. There's this performance going on. Each time I work in public, as an artist, I am, in a more intellectual way, getting naked – so I think it's really good that other people get naked as well!