

MAJA BAJEVIC' CONTINUOUS INVESTIGATION INTO HISTORY

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IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SPACE, hanging right under its ceiling, the eye fixes on a sequence of sentences mounted one after another:

We Are Hungry in Three Languages
We'll be on Top
We Are the Image of the Future
We Are the People
We'll Take More Care of You
We Shall Overcome
We Want Bread, and Roses Too

The neon letters glow in a light blue. The words are a strong declaration of political engagement but the atmosphere in the huge glass pavilion is quiet if not solemn. At one end of the gallery there is a tent-like structure; upon entering we see words dancing weightlessly in the dark interior. On a closer look it becomes clear that the words are projected by a slide projector; an old washing machine has been transformed into a steam blower generating the mist that make the words appearing and disappearing in the vapour. Some of the windows of the pavilion are smeared with dust, with slogans written with fingers onto them; scaffoldings left in front of the window wall suggests that a performance has taken place earlier. A small container that is placed in the middle of the space holds an archive about political slogans and their historical backgrounds for the visitor to consult.

The installation described above is a representative moment in the recent oeuvre of Maja Bajevic. It was featured in the group exhibition 'Take Liberty' this spring/summer that I organized for the National Museum in Oslo. Bajevic's installation inhabited the entire Pavilion of the architecture museum. Built in 2008, the glass and concrete structure designed by



Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn (1924-2009) harks back to his earlier works such as the iconic Nordic Pavilion in Venice's Giardini, and heeds the modernist call for rationality and transparency. Bajevic disregards the clean and impersonal vocabulary of this public space with the remnants of performative elements: windows are dirtied with dust and slogans are smeared with fingers onto them. For the Sverre Fehn Pavilion in Oslo, Bajevic made a new participatory element for the viewers to engage in. The entire floor of the pavilion is clad with linoleum. In the lino flooring there are carved out posters with slogans on it. Visitors can make their own prints, choosing their favourite political declaration. Templates of the printed posters are taped to the glass walls. All the elements in the room, from the neon letters to the small archive, the steam machine tent, the scaffolding and the smeared windows, the lino carvings on the floor and the posters loosely taped to the walls, come across as temporarily set up, ready to be moved soon again. Thus the pavilion looks more like a laboratory that invites visitors for contemplation and participation rather than a proper museum show. One could argue that with this strategy, Bajevic unhinges the clean and transparent ideals of the existing modernist space by introducing opacity and dirt, yet her installation seems to be made so specifically for the space that the modernist architect almost becomes her secret collaborator. Although Fehn built many museum spaces, the idea of a museum always troubled him slightly. Rather than accentuating the focus on the museum as a container of material things, he wanted to redefine its position as secular cathedral with a special power by creating a public space that provided an equally sacred atmosphere. In Bajevic's installation, this aspect gets enhanced by the few material objects we encounter. We can hear slogans sung by five different voices echoing through the space. The slow and simple performance is reminiscent of meditation or religious rituals – time seems eclipsed. The passing nature of all history can be sensed as a lived bodily experience.

'To Be Continued' is a multilayered performative installation that Bajevic first exhibited at the Palacio Crystal at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid in 2011. A year later it was shown in Berlin at the Daad Gallery and in New York at the Graduate Center's James Gallery. Every time the installation was enriched with different elements while keeping the centre core of the artwork the same – an extensive research of political slogans from the last 100 years that the artist initiated almost two decades ago and made permanently accessible to viewers. In Madrid there was a further participatory element: visitors could climb a bunker-like structure and then dive down again on a huge, fun slide.

Like in other works before, Bajevic here deals with question of democracy, the division between collective and individual identity, and the ephemeral and constructed character of identity and even history itself. Her work expresses both the individual's desire for freedom and the need for communal solidarity. To what degree personal freedom is respected varies not only from one historical specific context to the next, but also from one segment of a given society to the next. Bajevic's installation touches on many themes – from sexual and ethnic identity, to cultural belonging, to civil disobedience and the struggle for independence. What ultimately emerges is a concept of history that is not fixed and permanent, but can only be understood as a state of continuous conflict between differing opinions and values. ●

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