

One, two, ten, thirty loud and firm voices rise simultaneously from several sound sources spread in the room. Proud as they are, in their indifference to the context and the listeners' needs, they make no effort to harmonise with each other and are jumbled up, thus indistinguishable, producing an absurd and unbearable uproar.

The room is full with this deafening noise.

One of the Italian voices is singing "Avanti popolo" [Forward people] to a marching rhythm, mixing up with the enthralling emphasis of the French *Marseillaise*, with the unconditional *Deutschland über alles*, with *Bon cop de fals*, with *God bless America* and with the lyrics of the Swiss, the Bulgarian, the Russian, the Canadian and the Albanian national anthems.

Like many monads closed and resolved in themselves, each voice strikes up a national song of patriotic content, maintaining a precise identity and a resolute will.

It is that type of songs, widespread in every people and in every nation, that drives to action and exalts the sense of belonging and participation. Together with an assertive, oratorical and hammering music, this kind of singing manifests the faith in music's potential for action and it expresses the firm will to act on the context, to transform the state of things. Catalysing energies, it incites to challenge and vindication, to courage to direct collision, it expresses through its rhythm the determination and the tension, the intensity that precedes the explosion of action.

Once the connotations related to lyric quality and individual expression of inner nature are lost, the music and the singing represent proper aggregation rituals and thanks to their capturing power they lend themselves to become handy instruments in the hands of those who intend to run political and social processes related to cultural or national identities, thus heralding conflicts.

A group of photographs on the walls portray the singers while they strike up some of the melodies that are invading the room: full of emphasis and energy, proudly clenching their fists, men and women offer themselves with enthusiasm in their singing performance.

A flag, the most eloquent of all symbols, is combined to the songs.

Beside this, there is just a tangle of plugs and cables leading to the thirty hi-fi systems.

The artist Maja Bajevic is sitting still, unconcerned by the mess, armed with an obstinate decisiveness, also singing a song from the rich repertory of the Communist past's rhetoric.

Maja Bajevic grew up in Sarajevo—in multiethnic Bosnia, where once upon a time cultural differences used to find space and ways to integrate; where the plurality of narratives allowed exchange, notwithstanding the confusion and its irresolvable complexity.

During the years in which her city was brutalised by war Maja's study period in Paris turned into an involuntary exile.

Right after the war, however, she returned to live in her home town: a city that was trying to recover and undertaking the steep way towards reconciliation and towards a new identity that still bears the profound injuries of war and of Yugoslavia's splitting up. The city in whose library—now reduced to the facade—a million of books and old manuscripts were destroyed by fire.

From that moment her work focused on issues of individual and collective identity, in the intent to unmask the mechanisms of belonging and exclusion, of control and constraint, the authoritarian attitudes implying an everyday life made of conflicts and tensions, sometimes explicit and manifest, sometimes hidden or latent. Her work tells of a country that got to know the perverse effects of nationalism and of false rhetoric, in which the importance of community and belonging took the most sinister forms—all described with the strength of a person who experienced it directly.

However, these issues and metaphors reverberate beyond the events, and they talk of strength and vulnerability, of constraint and violence, of power and control systems, of cultural contamination and of everyday gestures loaded with sense and history.

Maja Bajevic tends to emphasise how thin the line of watershed is which distinguishes identities related to gender, social belonging, nationality and politics, and at the same time she moves on the line of intersection between public and private spheres, individual and collective sensitivity. Without hesitation the artist assumes the responsibility of a personal point of view, which is openly female. Furthermore she underlines the need to live every event through a personal filter.

Her work implies an attention for the sites she works at, particularly for their identities, their stories and memories, for their traditional everyday activities. Often her works involve typically female activities, related to the making and caring of clothes and linen: activities traditionally confined to the women's domestic environment. Sewing and embroidering are often present, also because of their symbolic value. In her performance *Dressed up*, for example, she cut into pieces a fabric with the map of Ex Yugoslavia printed on it. Then she sewed a dress out of it, thus putting together again the unity that men tore into shreds and defining a concrete and emotional relationship through the fabric of her dress—which is in fact the map of the lost fatherland. The performance took place in Sarajevo, the same city of *Women at Work 1 (Under Construction)*, the first part of a project by Maja Bajevic involving a group of women refugees from Srebrenica. In this case Maja had invited five women, asking them to embroider patterns of the Bosnian tradition on the net covering the scaffolding in front of the facade of the National Gallery of Sarajevo under restoration—this for five days, every day. The usage of a customary and modest activity, typically female and bound to familiar life (now part of the past because of the irreparable rupture produced by war); the fact that she intervenes on the external structure of the museum; evoking the immediate image of an embroidered curtain of a house but also the idea of a situation to be mended, are only a few of the elements that reveal the stratified meanings of this work, allowing various interpretations. *The Observers* (second part of the series *Women at Work*) consisted of a performance at the Château Voltaire in France in 2000: a sort of *tableau vivant* in which the five women posed to stage an exact copy of the painting *Members of the administrative committee*

*of the Old people's home in Haarlem* by Frans Hals, representing—according to the painter's intentions—“the very image of death—gentle, inexorable and eternal”.

For the Istanbul Biennial in 2001 Maja Bajevic realised *Women at Work 3 (Washing up)*, a new performance with the same five women in the female section of the hamam in Istanbul: hand-woven cloths with embroidered phrases of public interest by Tito were washed by the five women until they were worn-out. While the climate of domestic enclosure typical of societies based on the separation of gender was reproduced, the situation of exclusion that normally women suffer had been turned over: men cannot enter the hamam and thus can see the performance only through a video.

Maja Bajevic believes that art is the expression of thought and experience, that the artist cannot avoid facing the context and must take up a conscious and responsible position; she believes in the power of the individual and of art, in its faculty to relieve mankind, to affect reality.

With angry and bursting energy, *Avanti Popolo* states that when the music ends up taking an authoritative expression, thus losing the context, the excitement risks to drag along reason and everything can turn into indistinguishable chaos, in fray, in turmoil.

The attachment, the passion for identity are evident in the refusal to see the others instead of the will to recognise oneself. Thus fundamentalist, nationalistic and particularistic ideologies find a fertile ground in the inalienable need for taking root, when it revolves—sometimes rather because of laziness than for party-spirit—to strong external identities instead of the more challenging interior investigation. And when you exclude doubts and shades of meaning; when the attention gives way to great principles that request an absolute, immediate, unconditioned acceptance; when the faith in the uniqueness of one's own mission induces to impose one's own point of view at any cost, then individual yearnings may become secondary and the collective dimension may allow the tragedy to take over.

An Antidote to these mechanisms is the continuous relationship between individuals, the courage to express weaknesses and contradictions, the attempt to put oneself in somebody other's place experiencing different perspectives. This is what her *Kit with gloves to save your marriage* says—a trousseau consisting of two gloves joined by the fingertips, a glass of nutella and a long spoon to face the hardest moments of common life. It says in fact that, in a world rich of different values and of individuals ready to impose themselves, while we question ourselves, torn between the fear of thinking of the future and the need to conceive new ways of staying in this world; between the desire to reconnect to history and a sense of uprooting, of fragmentation; between the inalienable research for roots and a nomadism that questions the concept of identity, the most precious skill is the one to comprehend visions and values different to ours. That the real measure for the human being is the way he lives everyday details, that one should never allow that distances turn into separation and that therefore it is important to go back to look closer. If the experiences are infinitely different, people can communicate anyway, even if in the respect of their differences. What is always fundamental is to continuously, closely face the other.

In some other cases Maja Bajevic had touched the themes of rhetoric and of the logic of opposition, as well as of their most direct and dramatic result: war. In 1998 in Sarajevo she put up *The Speaker*, a fake political campaign that she made public through a video on the back of a van travelling through the city. The politician talks and talks, but the voice cannot be heard. With *Avanti popolo*, on the contrary, the process is turned upside down: it is not because of lack of sound, but because of its excess that sense and content of the songs get lost. Playing all together, they reveal their aggressive nature and end up to be set up to zero through excess.

Maja Bajevic faces the issues of cultural and social differences and complexity without pretending that the message is evidently linear. In her gaze you realise the need to overcome stereotypes, streamlining and taking sides, in order to renew and redefine the very concept of identity.

Maja is wondering: is it possible that in order to feel united one needs to take sides against the “other”? Could we not abandon the tendency to impose a unique solution and finally accept the complexity, the impossibility to reconcile opposites, learning to recognise the possibilities lingering in the turns of present?

Will we ever stop shouting at each other?

Gabi Scardi