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MAJA ZEĆO

Uzdrmane budućnosti
Discomfited Futures

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Institut za suvremenu umjetnost
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On Our Discomfited Future
Jon Blackwood, curator

“To discomfit” is an unusual, semi-obsolescent verb in the English language. It is a word rarely encountered now outwith the pages of older novels, or re-purposed as a funny word in a contemporary joke. The origins of the word are in Middle English, originally meaning to experience a defeat in battle; in the more modern sense it means to put someone off their stroke, or to disturb their expectations.

Often incorrectly used as a synonym for embarrassment, to discomfit someone is actually to affect them more profoundly; to disturb the flow of events unexpectedly, in a way that will not be forgotten quickly. For this exhibition of Maja Zećo’s work, dating from 2016, discomfited seemed the best of many possible alternative words, encapsulating the ways in which her practice not only disturbs our understanding of the art disciplines she chooses to follow, but also our own awareness of the systemic polycrisis that is engulfing us all.

Maja took a circuitous route in becoming an artist, something she had long considered for herself but had little clear route towards realising. Born in the very last years of Yugoslavia, her reality as a small child was the siege of Sarajevo (1992-95) and being socialised to conditions of war rather than peace. As such, after peace came with the signing of the Dayton agreement, it proved rather difficult to substitute the ‘normality’ of war with the ‘abnormality’ of peacetime. In time, Maja’s creativity developed through a university degree in design, and a creative practice as a VJ (visual jockey) in the last decade of Sarajevo’s expansive and innovative post-war rave scene.

Yet these early efforts in electronic music and as a designer overlaid a consistent interest in, and growing knowledge of, contemporary art. In this sense spaces such as Sarajevo’s ARS Aevi collection- the artist’s first encounter with a contemporary art exhibition- and Pierre Courtin’s duplex 10m2 gallery, the site of her first public exhibition- were critical formative experiences, alongside exposure to mature performance practices based in the city- those of Jusuf Hadžifejzović and Cultural Association “Ambrosia”. This latter group, a Bosnian parallel to Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), has been in existence for over thirty years, and at its peak in the late 1990s, had over twenty participating members. As a VJ, Maja participated in the performances of Ambrosia’s musical arm, Liminalit, from c. 2012-2015.

Sarajevo was rather fragmented culturally, in the first two decades of this century. The money that had funded visual art in the first few years after the war began slowly to dry up; galleries, collectives and initiatives came and went after butterfly lives, with the city’s institutional memory rather shallow. However, Sarajevo did offer chances to grow and develop to those who wished to take them, either through formal education or through informal enthusiasm and social networks. It was a place where initiative was encouraged and there were real chances to grow skills and confidence in making events and in experimenting with building up a following and a skill set.

However, once these opportunities had been exhausted, the question for an individual young creative will be how do you keep paying for this and for how long are you willing to work for close to nothing, or leave? The worsening level of cultural funding, and the catastrophic brain drain which affects Bosnia-Herzegovina, the young in particular, rests very heavily on the creative sector. Maja was one of many young people under thirty who took the decision to leave Sarajevo after a long period of contemplation, for opportunity abroad; in her case, for a Ph.D at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, in Scotland's North-East, in the summer of 2015.

Migrating from one space to another, however controlled and planned, is in itself discomfiting. Substituting a range of familiar spaces, established cultural codes and conventions, and a language for a set of strange parallels, balances the pain of departure with the excitement of a possible re-invention to come. The process of migration and joining the ever-growing ranks of "the diaspora"- a heavily loaded if not pejorative word in the context of Sarajevo- is on-going, never completed, and endlessly repeated. The origin, and emotional charge of many of these works lies in the artist's leaving of Bosnia, and present reality with a life split between Aberdeen and Sarajevo- a home in both cities, and neither. This personal challenge to a fundamental of identity – where we call "home"- was explored through the medium of sound and performance in her practice based Ph.D, and developed in the earliest pieces made in Scotland – *Hold in Breathe Out* (2016) and *Grains of Sound*, performed in Banchory in September 2016.

Maja's practice is based on four fundamentals; a sense for and intuitive interest in the layers and nuances of individual places; a desire to expand and explore the sensory aspects of existence, unafraid of durational performance and extremes; the complex overlapping of performance, performativity and sound; and a deep commitment to practice driven by research, both in ideas and in materials, in response to the particular contours of commissions, working innovatively with materials and technology to make that response highly individual.

This is perhaps best exemplified in the ongoing relational project *Silencer*, first performed in London in 2018 and in many locations nationally and internationally, since. *Silencer* is a soundproof suit made from the kind of sound dampening panels normally found in a radio studio, augmented with binaural microphones that record the reactions of engaged audience and passers-by, which the artist cannot hear live. These recordings also form the basis of an ongoing relational aspect of the work- it changes and grows with each iteration, augmented by the reaction of those who engage with the performance. The work also functions as a living public sculpture, challenging and disturbing the everyday conception of public space and the role that art may play in it. Reactions from surprised laughter to confusion are commonplace in performances of *Silencer*, with the balm being provided by the interaction of artist and public.

Costumes and costume making unites the four pieces in this exhibition, in different ways. This can be interpreted in a theatrical way, as the artist inhabiting the personality of another, in order to address issues that she may be hesitant to address as herself. It can also be interpreted as the artist wishing to hide herself whilst addressing serious issues. Both of these notions however tell only part of the story.

This is not a practice about hiding, or about insecurity; it is perhaps a processing of past and present trauma through metaphor and allusion; a confrontation of the issues of the Bosnian war and our present urgencies relating to the climate emergency and the appalling revelations of renewed conflict in Syria, Ukraine, Yemen and Palestine. But this is also a practice which is future facing and speculative; the origins of her engagement with what we might call "Balkan Futurisms" began with *In Search of the Sun* (2020-21), and intensified strongly in *Dissolutions* (2022-present).

Balkan Futurisms are a topic that has attracted much interest from artists and curators in recent years, at the end of post-socialist transformation. The phrase is tongue in cheek, acknowledging the Utopian imaginations of past modernisms and recognising their emptiness and absurdity when applied to present circumstances. The phrase does not seek any appropriation of Afrofuturism, which relates to a different, parallel set of experiences. Rather it establishes a point of contact in experience parallel to the origin of Afrofuturism, concerned with a

practice originating in a territory that was also subject to colonisation and dealing with the consequences of historical amnesia, erasure and loss, a process re-set with every successive conflict or political uprising.

It is in that sense that we can read *In Search of the Sun* - which responds to the modernist portrait bust *Eastre, Hymn to the Sun*. Completed in 1924 by the Scottish modernist artist JD Fergusson (1874-1961), the image that was at the time regarded as futuristic, relating to the work of the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov, from where the title derives. Maja's work re-imagines *Eastre* in contemporary times of migration from conflict and climate change and holds to account the Western "orientalising" view of non-Western cultures. This was also brought into focus by a close reading of the Scots Balkanophile Rebecca West and her book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), from where many of the stereotypical and racist tropes of peoples from the former Yugoslav space are re-enforced and re-capitulated.

If *In Search of the Sun* offers an unlikely fusion of Scottish and Balkan histories, *Dissolutions*, whilst reflecting the tongue in cheek notion of Balkan futurism and deep awareness of the repeating cycles of history, fuses the artist's own personal experience of siege in Sarajevo with the distressing images that were emerging from Ukraine as the Russian aggression took hold after 24 February 2022; of frightened citizens hiding in basements and underground stations from shelling and assaults from missiles and drones. This early media footage of the Ukrainian war provoked many unhappy memories in Bosnian citizens whose half-buried memories of the recent past were brought again to the surface. *Dissolutions* is an open-ended performance and installation which subsequent conflicts have given further life to; the strong desire to maintain some sort of peaceful life but increasingly expecting that to be disrupted profoundly.

This theme of conflict and the fading of the expectation to a peaceful life will be further addressed in the new performance *Defend and Protect*. The title infers an old British government leaflet entitled *Protect and Survive* which was circulated in the 1980s, advising citizens on how best to prepare themselves for the possibility of a nuclear attack. But this piece returns to the idea of soil as a means of protection, packed into what looks like an old Warsaw Pact-issued flak jacket, made from heavy white sacks.

The suit itself is augmented with a device that emits drone sounds; just as drones have changed the face of contemporary warfare, so too they have changed the soundscape of the everyday, even in peace time. The differing sounds of drone motors, their differing frequencies and intensities, are an important part of this piece, connoting not only the intangible threat and devastating effect of drone warfare but also the sense that we live in any kind of era of common security, where a state will feel obliged to take care of its citizens, is behind us. Increasingly, the piece suggests, as society atomises and loses any sense of common binding narrative in the post-digital era, our need for defence and protection of what is important to us, will increasingly fall on the individual's shoulders.

Maja's practice is also playful, and engaging, frequently leading viewers and participants to places they had not expected to be taken. The imagery is very striking, with these impacts augmented by and shaped by the sounds that are built into the works. This is an artist who has huge capability to adapt, and respond, to individual circumstances; I suppose, in the end, still running towards the afterglow of modernism and utopianism whilst keenly aware of their fading. We can't forget our past expectations or what life might bring us, not let go of the fact that these expectations are fading decisively into the past. As much as Maja's practice is animating by a life spent between two countries, her practice may also be framed by the fading of these past expectations and the discomfiting present and future we all now inhabit.

Links

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www.majazeco.com

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List of Works

Room 1

Silencer

2018 – present

Duration of video: 2 minutes 53 seconds

Documentation of performances: photographs, sound composition from binaural microphones, video documentation from performance of *Silencer* in Aberdeen, 1 March 2019.

Sound Composition: Commissioned by Fermynwoods Contemporary Art, Northamptonshire

Video credit : Karolina Bachanek

Photographs: Matthew Cawrey

Room 2

Defend and Protect

2024

Heavy duty sacks, soil, red light, mp3 player emitting different civilian and military drone sounds

Dissolutions

2022-present

Red satin dress, lace from Bosnia and North Macedonia, fez, saz, strobe light, sound piece featuring recording of distorted sounds, UNHCR relief sacks

Grains of Sound

2016

Duration: 15 minutes 49 seconds

Video documentation of live performance at the Barn, Banchory, Scotland, on 22 October 2016, part of Sound Scotland : sound festival 2016.

Video credit: Fraser Denholm

In Search of the Sun

2020-21

Duration: 6 minutes 34 seconds

Video piece, with emergency blanket. The film *In Search of the Sun* was commissioned by Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum with support from Aberdeen City Council.

Camera: Maja Zećo and Elodie Baldwin