

ArtReview

David Maljkovic

If our future is haunted by the past, does that mean we need to look back to look forward? And if we're constantly turning our heads to look this way and that, how do we know where we are right now? Such questions, and their political and sociological implications, form the basis of this artist's work...

by Oliver Basciano

Could an artist like David Maljkovic have come to the fore 20 years ago? There's nothing in his work that is technologically new – his films are on 16mm, and the sculptural installations that they're framed through, akin to crude minimalist theatre sets, are the product of basic fabrication processes. The artist's sculptures use traditional materials and do not look like they would have needed prior computer modelling; his photographs and collage works do not display any digital manipulation. Yet the answer is no, David Maljkovic's work could only have been made this millennium. It's not the medium that is new, but the world that the work is part of. It is a practice that is both symptomatic and reflective of our contemporary malaise, in which the spectre of the past is forever present and a radical vision of the future is unimaginable in the way it was for previous generations. Progress isn't what it used to be, you see.

Playing with and mixing up notions of past and future is a recurring feature of the Croatian artist's work. The references within a film will pivot back and forth, or the film will wrong-foot the viewer as to its historic setting. In the first part of the *Scene for New Heritage* trilogy (2004–6), a subtitle suggests the series is set in the future: May 2045, to be precise. Yet the opening scene shows only a crude attempt to visualise that promised future scene: a contemporary saloon car, entirely wrapped in silver foil, cruises down a country lane; the metallic material conjuring up references to early TV sci-fi, twentieth-century robots and the dawn of space travel. Its destination is a 12-storey curving, monolithic building with a similarly reflective facade: a monument, a bit of further research elicits, erected in the mountain forests of Petrova Gora, Croatia, for victims of the Second World War. Arriving at the building, the passengers of the car congregate

with others who have also come to the site in foil-wrapped vehicles. The original function of the building, now in disrepair, is lost on this throng – its purpose long forgotten in the transition between our present and theirs. In an incomprehensible yodelling 'language' (subtitled in English for the viewer), these people of the future discuss the function of this historic artefact. "Times were different back then," one howls. Another answers, "Yes, times that don't matter to us!" Or is time itself irrelevant to the future?

In the film *Out of Projection* (2009), the disorientation of time is less theatrical – perhaps more mundane – but nonetheless affecting. The 18-minute work intersperses images of a group of older people watching a track on which prototype cars are being tested with muted interviews with the spectators, former Peugeot engineers who used to work at the facility. A simple conflation of the past (represented by the retired workers), the present (the production of the film, the interviews) and the future (the prototype vehicles, some quite outlandish in their design) takes place. The present isn't simply now, the film says, it is a conflation of the past and possible futures. The work holds up a mirror to the contemporary idea of hauntology, the term introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (with recourse to Marx and Hegel) that addresses the preoccupation and fetishisation – the haunting – of contemporary culture by the past. Yet it cannot fail to be the product of it too.

A sense of place and architecture is fundamental to the artist's work – both onscreen and offscreen – but it is a use that is in service to Maljkovic's meditation on the spectral nature of the past's effect on the present. At the Baltic in Gateshead, the second stop for his current touring retrospective, Maljkovic used false walls to create a



Images with Their Own Shadow (film still), 2008

corridor that ran around the perimeter of the entire exhibition space. Our confrontation with the artworks was momentarily delayed as we were filtered through this passageway, encountering along the way the backs of film projectors, their lenses directed through holes in the wall, through which we first saw the exhibition, fleetingly and obscured, before the final reveal via an entrance at the far end of the space. In his 2010 exhibition for the Glasgow International festival, Maljkovic wanted to show *Images with Their Own Shadow* (2008) in a space devoid of institutional history or ghosts of previous shows that might have haunted the repeat visitor to a preexisting gallery. The artist found an empty shop space – a raw, concrete bunker of sorts – in which he was able to show his film, an archive audio interview with Vjenceslav Richter, one of founding members of EXAT-51, a group of Croatian artists and architects interested in geometric abstraction, spliced with images of trendy-looking younger people standing silently next to various Richter sculptures. Modernist design and architecture, Soviet brutalism and the utopian intentions they recall are recurring presences in Maljkovic's art. *Lost Memories from These Days* (2006), for example, returned to the Italian Pavilion, designed by Giuseppe Sambito, of the 1961 Zagreb Fair, which Maljkovic had featured in his earlier film *These Days* (2005). Built in a rare meeting between the West and Yugoslavia as a piece of Communist propaganda, the building now sits derelict. In the (six-minute) later film, silent, vacant female models – almost alien in their washed-out beauty – lean against cars. The wheels of the vehicles are clamped into geometric white sculptures that mimic the bases of the building's unique inverted-pyramid

In an incomprehensible yodelling 'language', people of the future discuss the function of a historic artefact

columns. The effect of these silent posing women isn't glamorous but unsettling – dreamlike.

If dreaming is connected to memory, then perhaps the hallucinatory feel of Maljkovic's work is a signal that his use of Modernism isn't just a case of fetishised retrofuturism. The teachers of Ancient Greece would advise their students that being able to visualise places and images that might 'hold' their memories – a type of time travel was the key to mnemotechnic success. Focusing on the link between the empiricism of buildings and the abstract notion of time (a link that explains the purpose of memorials and the preservation of sites of trauma), the artist uses decaying architecture to further underline

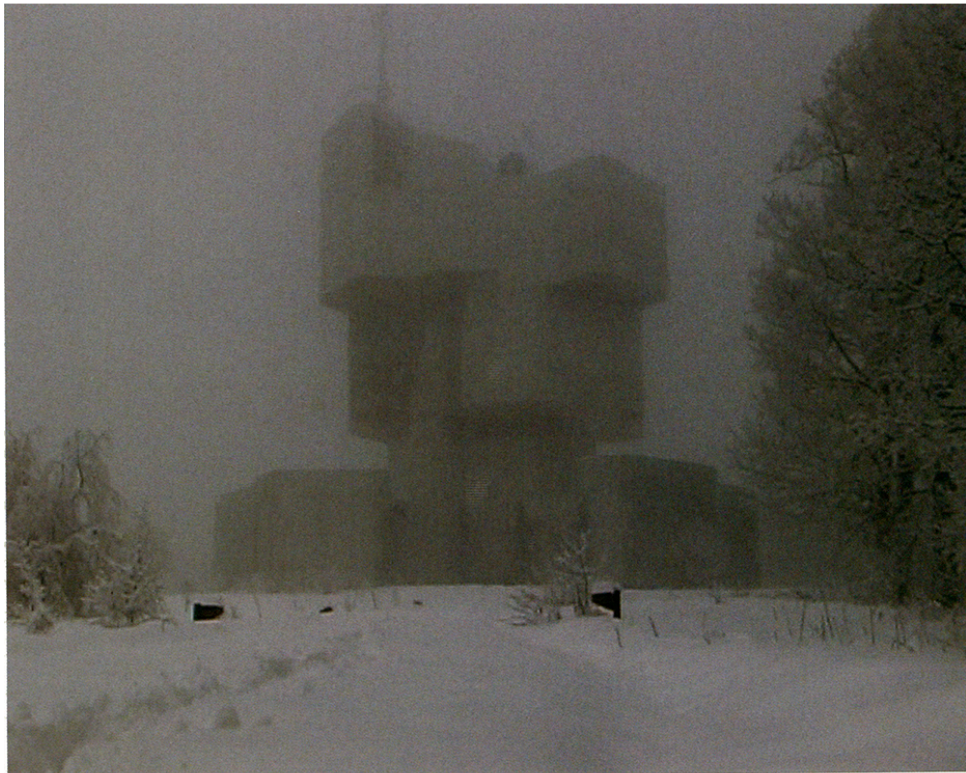
the idea of the past as being an active facet of the present, both in the work and the wider world. While the details of Francis Fukuyama's 1992 claim that we have reached the 'end of history'

have been rightly derided as neoliberal cheerleading, the wider statement that capitalism has subdued the fight for political and cultural progression does seem to ring true. Hauntology is a symptom of this lack of political development. In Maljkovic's work the past and future are conflated because the politically utopian visions of the future that the artist portrays – from the design ideals of EXAT-51 to the various facets of modernist architecture referenced – are only to be found in the past. His films feel floaty and hard to pin down because they operate without a clear delineation of what is now, of what has gone and of what is to come. We might term this style of filmmaking antirealist, but perhaps it is just a true reflection of our place in time. ar

An exhibition of work by David Maljkovic is on view through 19 October at Metro Pictures, New York; Maljkovic's show Sources in the Air is at Galleria d'Arte e Contemporanea (GAMEC), Bergamo, from 4 October through 6 January



Out of Projection (film still), 2009



Scene for New Heritage Part 2 (film still), 2006

*all images © the artist. Courtesy Sprüth Magers,
Berlin & London*