


## Rifts: Homecoming Experiences in the artworks of Adrian Paci and Maja Bajević

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**Abstract.** This article examines a body of artworks by Maja Bajević and Adrian Paci within their contexts of production in order to explore questions of exilic identities in relationship to homecoming. Both artists have lived the experience of exile. When war broke out in Yugoslavia in 1991, Maja Bajević was in Paris on a Beaux-Arts scholarship, and was unable to return to her homeland until the end of the 1990s. As for Adrian Paci, after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Tirana, he left Albania in 1997, during the financial crisis, and took refuge in Italy. From analyses of artworks, artists' statements, exhibition catalogues, historical research, and academic writings about the issue of return, I explore different relationships and temporalities of return: what does the permanent loss of exile mean in terms of homecoming?

**Keywords:** Albania; contemporary art; Europe; exiles; return migration; Yugoslavia.

### [ESP] Grietas: Experiencias de regreso a casa en las obras de Adrian Paci y Maja Bajević

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina un conjunto de obras de arte de Maja Bajević y Adrian Paci dentro de sus contextos de producción con el fin de explorar cuestiones de identidades exílicas en relación con el regreso. Ambos artistas han vivido la experiencia del exilio. Cuando estalló la guerra en Yugoslavia en 1991, Maja Bajević se encontraba en París con una beca Beaux-Arts, y no pudo regresar a su tierra natal hasta finales de la década de 1990. En cuanto a Adrian Paci, tras graduarse en la Academia de Bellas Artes de Tirana, abandonó Albania en 1997, durante la crisis financiera, y se refugió en Italia. A partir del análisis de obras de arte, comentarios de los artistas, catálogos de exposiciones, investigaciones históricas y escritos académicos sobre la cuestión del retorno, exploro diferentes relaciones y temporalidades del retorno: ¿qué significa la pérdida permanente del exilio en términos de regreso?

**Palabras clave:** Albania; arte contemporáneo; Europa; exiliados; migración de retorno; Yugoslavia.

**Summary.** Introduction. 1. Waiting. 2. In Transit. 3. Homecoming. 4. Bibliographic references.

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## Introduction

Exiles are generally defined as people who have been forced to leave their homeland for political, economic, or social reasons. Exile means therefore a brutal uprooting from the familiar and an emotional rupture, as well as a spatial and temporal disruption. As Edward Said outlines, exile:

is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted [...]. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said, 2000: 173)

According to Abdelmalek Sayad, the issue of return is embedded in the condition of the immigrant, which can result from a situation of exile. If exile entails a permanent loss, what does that mean in terms of homecoming? In *L'Immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité* (1991), the sociologist states that homecoming is

the desire and dream of all immigrants. To them, its meaning is to recover their sight, the light that the blind human lacks, but, like him, they know that this is an impossible task. The only thing left for them to do is to take refuge in unquenchable nostalgia or homesickness (Sayad, 2006: 86).

Envisioning return can help to recover from the trauma of exile. However, there are different relationships to return. Homecoming may not be possible for safety reasons, among others. If return is possible, homes, neighbourhoods, towns, and even countries, may have been destroyed or no longer exist as they were before exile, and friends and relatives may no longer be there.

If images of exile are a recurrent iconography in the history of art, such as representations of the biblical episode of the Flight into Egypt, how have artists addressed the issue of return in a context of exile<sup>1</sup>? In this article, I focus on a body of works by Maja Bajević (born in Sarajevo in 1967) and Adrian Paci (born in Shkodër in 1969). According to my bibliographic references, while their works have already been studied in relation to exile – as in the case of Paci's *Centro di Permanenza temporanea* (2007) in the book *Images de l'exil* (2021) by Maurice Fréchuret – the specific issue of return in relation to the historical context of the artworks seems to have been less addressed. In addition, while some of their works are often cited, others have been rarely analysed, such as Bajević's *Green Green Grass of Home* (2002). This article therefore brings together more and less well-known works by both artists, through an original approach.

Paci and Bajević were born in two recently created states within Eastern Europe: Albania (1912) and Yugoslavia (1918) (Soulet, 2011: 26). Following the Second World War, during which both countries were occupied by the German forces, two new regimes emerged around the two leaders of the communist parties: Enver Hoxha and Josip Broz Tito. The deaths of the two leaders marked the beginning of the collapse of the communist authoritarian regimes they had led. After the death of Tito (1980), communism in Yugoslavia collapsed and the society began to change rapidly. Yugoslavia's large debts from the 1970s came due, thus provoking a national economic crisis that became a breeding ground for bringing out animosities still present underneath the surface of national unity. Nationalist sentiments were encouraged, especially in Serbia, and new nations based on old ethnicities began to declare their independence. Consisting of six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia) and two separate regions (Kosovo, Vojvodina), the communist federation faded; in the early 1990s, Yugoslavia was torn apart by a series of conflicts: the war in Slovenia – which lasted only a few days – from 27 June to 7 July 1991; the war in Croatia, which broke out in August 1991 until December 1991; the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which began in the spring of 1992 and did not end until the summer of 1995; the war in Kosovo from March 1998 to June 1999. Following the death of Hoxha (1985), the Albanian people, particularly students, were increasingly vocal in their desire for freedom. Ramiz Allia's government made concessions, inaugurating a period of cautious toleration and openness about

<sup>1</sup> Homecoming is the topic of the recent exhibition *Revenir. Expériences du retour en Méditerranée* at the MUCEM in Marseille (18 de octubre de 2024 – 16 de marzo de 2025).

foreign travel restrictions, among others. However, the reforms did not resolve the many problems of the Albanian economy. In 1991, the economic crisis deepened; food shortages became critical. Six years later, the country's situation deteriorated sharply with the collapse of a series of pyramid investment schemes during which "maybe half of Albanian households lost their life savings" (King and Mai, 2008: 46), provoking widespread disorder.

In parallel with increasingly restrictive European asylum and immigration policies, new exiles were thus provoked by these conflicts as well as economic crises. Between 1991 and 1993, more than five million citizens of former Yugoslavia became refugees or displaced persons (Povrzanović Frykman, 2004: 120). By 2001, 600,000 Albanians had moved abroad in the previous decade, representing nearly 20 percent of the population of the country (King and Mai, 2008: 2). Both artists have lived the experience of exile. When war broke out in Yugoslavia in 1991, Maja Bajević was in Paris on a Beaux-Arts scholarship, and was unable to return to her homeland until the end of the 1990s. As for Adrian Paci, after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Tirana, he left Albania in 1997, during the financial crisis, and took refuge in Italy.

Based on analyses of artworks, artists' statements, exhibition catalogues, historical research, and academic writings about the issue of return, this article examines artworks of Maja Bajević and Adrian Paci within their contexts of production in order to explore questions of exilic identities in relationship to homecoming. To get back to Abdelmalek Sayad's research, the sociologist identifies different dimensions of return: a relationship to time, a relationship to the ground in its physical and social dimensions, as well as a relationship to the group. How do their artworks address these relationships? What experiences of returning home do they depict? How do they evoke the permanent loss, the "unhealable rift" in the words of Edward Said? Following the example of Odysseus (Ulysses in its Latin form), whose journey back to Ithaca after the war is followed by his return home in Homer's *Odyssey*, I delve into a body of works by Bajević and Paci through the different temporalities of return. I begin by examining the notion of waiting between exile and eventual return, using Bajević's performance series *Women at Work* (1999-2001) as a starting point. I then explore the ordeal of movement in the context of a potential return journey by analysing two of Paci's works, the video *Centro di permanenza temporanea* (2007) and the sculpture *Home to Go* (2001). Finally, I focus on the experience of homecoming through Bajević's performances *Dressed Up* (1999) and *Green, Green Grass Home* (2002), as well as Paci's photographs *Back Home* (2001).

## 1. Waiting

In her trilogy of collaborative performances *Women at Work* (*Under Construction*, 1999; *The Observers*, 2000; *Washing Up*, 2001), Maja Bajević worked with women refugees in Sarajevo. The series itself unfolded through displacements. Indeed, each performance took place in a different country: *Under Construction* on the facade of the National Gallery in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), *The Observers* in the garden of Château Voltaire in Ferney-Voltaire (France), and *Washing Up* at the Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul (Turkey).

In 1999, Dunja Blažević, the director of Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA), asked Bajević to take part in the Third Annual Exhibition, *Under Construction / Opres!Radovil*, being held on the facade of the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was being renovated. Established in 1946, the National Gallery houses an important collection of modern and contemporary art. The building was heavily damaged during the long siege of Sarajevo during which the population of the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina was trapped for nearly four years (April 1992-February 1996) as the city was surrounded by the Bosnian Serb forces.

After her return in 1998 to Sarajevo, the artist wished to work on a project involving women refugees. Through a humanitarian organisation, she met a group of women refugees from the area of Srebrenica (De Le Court, 2020: 83). These women were relocated to Sarajevo in 1995 after the massacre of Srebrenica – the largest genocide in Europe since the Second World War – that occurred during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In eastern Bosnia, Muslims were the victims of a brutal purge that involved murder, rape, and forced relocation. In 1993, the United Nations designated "safe areas" in the region, including Srebrenica, and sent troops to protect the Muslims. After it was declared a UN Safe Area, thousands of Muslims

from surrounding villages fled to the city in search of safety. On 11<sup>th</sup> July 1995, despite the troops sent by the UN, the enclave was taken by Bosnian Serb troops. Some inhabitants tried to flee to safety through the woods on the surrounding hills. The other ones sought shelter under the protection of the Dutch Blue Helmets within the Dutch Compound in Potočari, but most of the Muslim men were murdered as well as the older boys. According to the estimates of the International Commission on Missing Persons, there were more than 8,000 genocide victims (Leydesdorff, 2011: xi-xii).

Five of the women refugees accepted the invitation to participate in Bajević's performance project: Fazila Efendić, Zlatija Efendić, Amira Tihić, Hatidža Verlašević and Munira Mandžić. In line with the tradition of Bosnian embroidery, the artist and the co-performers created embroidery works directly on the scaffolding security net, using it as a framework<sup>2</sup>. Working together embedded their trajectories as exiles: the artist as an individual war refugee whose country has totally broken up, and the internal displacement of the co-performers because of the events at Srebrenica four years ago. When they were forced to leave their home, these women gave up their way of life, including its web of relationships. The collaborative dimension of the performance – making a mundane activity together – stresses the importance of the sense of belonging to a group that lessens a feeling of rupture. Despite their different situations, their destinies were linked by the outbreak of the country, thus provoking solidarities.

As embroidery merged with the architecture of the National Gallery, Bajević drew attention to the hierarchical division between fine arts and craft. Indeed, embroidery has been categorised as a minor art form that is rarely displayed in museums. The lack of recognition of embroidery by the artistic canon echoes the lack of recognition of the situation of the women of Srebrenica, both the trauma they have experienced and their living conditions at the time of the performance. This lack of recognition is also reflected in the women's silence during the performance whereas during traditional stitching produced at home, women often sing together (De Le Court, 2020: 75). This silence could underlie the need to listen to these women and take them seriously. Indeed, recognition of the genocide atrocities and their consequences is key to recovering from exile trauma and moving forward. As Selma Leydesdorff (2011: 207) writes, "To be denied recognition – or to be misrecognized – is to suffer both a distortion of one's relation to oneself and an injury to one's identity, because survivors need to reconnect to a society and a world that seems to have been lost". The historian recounts from her interviews with women from Srebrenica that "a number of them are still frozen in the trauma" (2011: 48). She adds that no psychosocial help was provided despite the fact that they had suffered enormously: "There are the remnants of families that were torn apart, victims of rape, broken-down men who fled from a death that was waiting elsewhere for them" (*Ibid.*). In addition, the women were deprived of widows' benefits as their husbands were still officially considered missing by the new Bosnian state, and all the money donated by states and charities didn't reach them. The survivors also needed to learn the truth, where their missing relatives were, and if they were buried, where and with whom. They needed to understand why they had not been protected by international forces, and how some of their former Serb neighbours had become enemies. These two issues are central in the two other performances of Bajević's trilogy, which I will discuss later.

Each of the six performers embroidered at different levels and places on the facade. This staging might convey the artist's will to highlight her co-performers as individuals, and not only as a group. As Kim Dhillon (2005: 73) writes, the performance "indicated Bajević's ability to make the complex, traumatic experiences that occurred within Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s comprehensible through an intimate and personal form of intervention". In this regard, the art historian Isabelle de le Court points out that during press interviews the artist always gave the full name of the women she was collaborating with. Otherwise, "the media commonly referred to them as *Bosnian women* or *Muslim refugees*, conferring on them once again the anonymity of the de-individualized and othered group" (2020: 84).

Using wool threads, the women embroidered for five nights, thanks to lights displayed next to each of them. They embroidered different patterns that they had chosen, such as colourful

<sup>2</sup> See photographs of the performance on the artist's website: <https://majabajevic.com/works/women-at-work-under-construction/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

geometric designs, flowers and birds. The act of embroidering on the façade of the National Gallery during its restoration evoked an act of care and healing; the women became one with the building. By taking part in the renovation of this emblematic landmark of the country's history, they asserted themselves in an active position. They expressed and used their creativity, thus valuing their competences as well as their role in the new society. As Isabelle de le Court (2020: 83) stresses, it was “the artist's intention to distance the women from the way they were usually perceived, that is, defined and stigmatised as victims of war”. In that respect, it is important to remember that women from Srebrenica were fighting for their rights. They organised regular demonstrations in the streets of Sarajevo since 1998: every July 11, they marched as a memorial to the murders<sup>3</sup>. They also gathered on the 11<sup>th</sup> of every month and visited the Office of High Representative and foreign embassies in order to draw attention to the fact that all the aid given to Bosnia was not getting beyond the embassies, and to demand answers regarding the missing men (Leydesdorff, 2011: 197). In this regard, the holes in the security net remained visible after the embroidery work had been cut off<sup>4</sup>, reminding the audience of the missing.

I would add that these embroidering women from Srebrenica evoke to Penelope's weaving repeated every day to prevent union with one of her suitors until Odysseus' return to Ithaca. But if, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope waited for her husband to return home, Fazila Efendić, Zlatija Efendić, Amira Tihić, Hatidža Verlašević and Munira Mandžić were displaced and were waiting for information about what happened to their relatives in Srebrenica – at the beginning of the 2000s, DNA identifications of the Srebrenica victims were still at an earlier stage. From this point of view, weaving could represent this long and painful wait. In addition, Bajević states that with *Women at Work* “we were putting out in public what normally happens in the home” (Dhillon, 2005: 74). In fact, the women's domestic tasks as embroiderers became public while they had been deprived of their homes. According to Isabelle de le Court:

The embroidering task carried out by the women is a cry and a testimony to the absence of a real home in their lives of refugees. Why, if you had the comfort and the warm environment of a home, climb on a scaffolding on the facade of a public building in order to produce these traditional embroidered patterns? (De Le Court, 2020: 94).

In the second part of *Women at Work*, Bajević addressed the issue of the failure of international forces. The title – *The Observers* – refers to the Dutch involvement in the massacre of Srebrenica. As the artist explains, the Dutch forces, part of the UN observers, “were supposed to protect Srebrenica, but instead let Srebrenica fall into the hands of the Serb army<sup>5</sup>”. It was reported that the Dutch soldiers had watched while the Serbs separated the Muslim men from the women before killing the men (Leydesdorff, 2011: xii); the Dutch battalion were powerless observers in the genocide. In 1996, the Netherlands government commissioned NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies to investigate the events surrounding the fall of Srebrenica. The report was finally published in 2002, and led to the resignation of the Dutch government which had sent poorly prepared troops on what may have been considered an “impossible mission<sup>6</sup>”. Prior to the performance, Bajević made a photographic portrait depicting her as well as Fazila Efendić, Zlatija Efendić, Hatidža Verlašević and Nirha Efendić. They posed like the five women in Frans Hals's painting *The Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* (c. 1664), which depicts the female administrators of the home for old men in the Dutch town of Haarlem. Hals painted them grouped around a table, with a wall painting in the background that could represent the parable of the

<sup>3</sup> In May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly designated 11 July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.

<sup>4</sup> The embroideries were then sold, with the proceeds going to the women who performed with the artist.

<sup>5</sup> See the description on the artist's website: <https://majabajevic.com/works/women-at-work-the-observers> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>6</sup> NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, “Srebrenica. Reconstruction, Background, Consequences and Analyses of the fall of a ‘safe area’”, 2002, p. 822. The report is available here: <https://www.niod.nl/en/publications/srebrenica> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

Good Samaritan, underscoring the notion of charity associated with the regentesses portrayed<sup>7</sup>. By choosing to refer to Hals's painting, Bajević might then consider how altruism and compassion are expressed in the treatment of refugees in a more contemporary context. In the performance, the women photographed came to life in the five-day performance, moving from inside to outside; they mainly sewed and embroidered in the garden of the castle. Bajević also invited Alma Suljević, another female artist from Sarajevo, to be part of the performance. Even though she is known as a performer, Suljević's role was to paint the portrait of the group of women. Bajević explains that the performance was a "game of appearances"<sup>8</sup> that could underlie the failure of international missions to defend the inhabitants of besieged territories, despite political rhetoric. The place of performance – the castle in Ferney-Voltaire (France) – echoed the philosopher Voltaire's exile in Ferney, at the border of the kingdom of France, in the eighteenth century. In that way, the artist pinpointed the exile of the women of Srebrenica in the long history of forced migration. She questioned the image of exiles, who, as the historian Delphine Diaz analyses, were considered heroes at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century before being associated with indignity in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact, numerous images relayed in the media have fuelled fears of immigration, which Bajević evoked in one of her more recent performances, *I'm Eating Somebody Else's Bread* (2006). During the opening of the 2006 exhibition *La Force de l'Art* at the Grand Palais in Paris, she ate an oversized loaf of bread without paying any attention to the visitors. Bajević highlighted the fear among Europeans that immigrants – referred in many countries to those who are "eating our bread"<sup>9</sup> – will take something away from them, such as work and lovers.

The issue of the disintegration of the communist federation is central to the third performance of the series *Women at Work*. *Washing Up* was performed over five consecutive days during the seventh Istanbul Biennial in 2001 in a traditional bathhouse, the Cemberlitas Hamam. The performance consisted of laundering pieces of white cloth, on which slogans from the time of Tito – such as 'Long live the armed brotherhood and unity of our nations' – had been embroidered. Following the rules of the hamam, the performance was restricted to a female audience, which brings to mind the separation of Muslim men and women in Srebrenica by Serbian forces. The female audience watched as the artists and her two co-performers – Fazila Efendić and Zlatija Efendić – washed the fabric. However, the cloth could never become cleaned as the launderers were using dirty water; the cloth and the slogans started to slowly disintegrate, becoming a metaphor of the breaking-up of Yugoslavia. Instead of washing it away, the obsessive and repetitive washing process retriggers the grief (De Le Court, 2020: 92), thus evoking the slow process of mourning to face radical changes in homeland. The multicultural Yugoslavia into which these women were born was the only model they had. However, although the inhabitants of eastern Bosnia had been living in harmony for many years, the nationalist ideology, mainly disseminated by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, led to a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign. Therefore, leaving home has meant giving up much more than a house. As Maja Povržanović Frykman (2004: 135) explains about the Croatian refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina,

it is a double loss, of home and of the homeland they knew before the war – 'home' encompassing the immediate socio-cultural context in which they had a name, a status and an occupation. Today, their homes are either destroyed or inhabited by other people, and the country has undergone not only political, but also radical cultural changes in the 1990s.

Some women could not have chosen to return to Srebrenica because of the terrible memories as well as the hard living conditions there; it would also mean returning to a completely displaced community – the fear of "returning to nothing" in the words of Peter Read (1996). For those wishing to return, many houses were damaged or in ruins, the deeds could have been lost, and there could have been a lack of money for repairs. Most importantly, the houses needed to be safe; Selma

<sup>7</sup> See the analysis of the painting on the online research platform of the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History: <https://frans-hals-and-his-workshop.rkd.nl/a3-paintings-frans-hals-and-his-workshop-assistants/a356-a364/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>8</sup> See the description on the artist's website: <https://majabajevic.com/works/women-at-work-the-observers> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>9</sup> See the description on the artist's website: <https://majabajevic.com/im-eating-somebodys-elses-bread/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

Leydesdorff asks: “How can you feel safe in Srebrenica, when those in power since the war and the Dayton Accords (1995) are the same ones who tried to murder you?” (2011: 17). Indeed, according to the Dayton Accords, Srebrenica was in the Serb Republic. The testimonies of women survivors of the Srebrenica genocide provide valuable insights into the return from exile. For instance, in 2002, Fazila Efendić, who could be one of the co-performers in the *Women at Work* series, decided to return to her home in order to move forward with her daughter. With her family, she had sought refuge at the U.N. compound in Srebrenica in the days leading up to the massacre. But when Serbian forces took control of the area, she and her daughter were separated from her husband and son, whom they have never seen again. In Sarajevo, Efendić, co-founder of the association Mothers of Srebrenica, enrolled in Women for Women International’s training program where she connected with other women also struggling to recover from the trauma of the genocide. In 2013, she was finally able to bury her son’s remains in the same cemetery as her husband (Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery) whose remains had been found in 2003 and 2005<sup>10</sup>.

The performance series *Women at Work* brings to light the work of mourning, resilience and healing of the women of Srebrenica as they were waiting for a possible return home, or a move elsewhere if a return was out of the question. After their loss of home and homeland, these women were waiting for recognition of responsibility for the massacre and the difficulties of their situation as well as for information about what had happened to their loved ones. Bajević’s trilogy stresses that returning is not a matter of course after a violent rupture with everyday life and the familiar; it can be a long process. It also expresses emotional attachment to the homeland, as well as the importance of the sense of belonging to the process of recovery from trauma and moving on. After the wait, another temporality of the homecoming is the movement in the context of a potential return journey: how did Adrian Paci address this transitional stage?

## 2. In Transit

While he was a painter, Adrian Paci made his first video work (*Albanian Stories*, 1997) after his exile in Italy. As he describes, “the radical transformation of life coincided with my desire to explore the new expression of contemporary art”. (Rhomborg, 2019: 14) The artist felt the need to enter into a more direct dialogue with reality, making the transition from an artist who invented forms and figures to an artist who becomes a witness to what he has experienced. Two aspects have since become central to his artistic practice: the process of continuous transformation and the question of what remains.

*Centro di permanenza temporanea* (2007) is one of his most well-known works<sup>11</sup>. If the title refers to the Italian official name for the government areas that receive undocumented immigrants, the video was supported by New Langton Arts, an artist-run organization in San Francisco, and was shot in San Diego. It embraces immigration to Italy, including Albanian exiles<sup>12</sup> – Italy having colonised this country in 1939 – and Italian emigration to the United States at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, the video encompasses a transnational history of migration through the multilayered history of Italians’ relationship to their history of emigration to the United States and of recent arrivals of exiles from Eastern Europe.

To be more specific, the video was shot at San Diego airport. From the top of an airport footbridge, as if from the perspective of the flight attendants, a line of people approaches. Then the camera films their steps from the front; the trousers are wide, the shoes sturdy, evoking workers. It may sound like a prison march, as if they were constrained in their movements. The shot widens to a profile, and they climb onto the airport footbridge. Then, once again, the camera moves on to the top of the airport footbridge, this time filming the upper bodies of the potential passengers, showing their clothes and faces. Various close-ups of the faces follow one another, showing mostly non-white men and a few women. The faces are not very expressive, but there is a

<sup>10</sup> Read the testimony on Women for Women International website: <https://www.womenforwomen.org/blogs/sheinspiresme-fazila-efendic-bosnia-and-herzegovina> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>11</sup> The art video can be watched here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bju6uA-A\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bju6uA-A_o) [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>12</sup> In Italy, Albanians became the second-ranked foreign nationality in 1996 (King and Mai, 2008: 86).

sense of seriousness and sadness, and sometimes glances at the camera, as if to challenge and confront. The video conveys a feeling of expectation. Finally, the camera pulls away, revealing the group at the top of the airport footbridge which is not intended to lead them to a plane, but leads nowhere. A side shot shows the group amassed on the airport footbridge while aircraft circulate in the background before shooting the group from the front, three-quarter view.

The camera becomes increasingly distant, gradually abandoning the characters, who are certainly temporarily stateless people, perhaps exiles, as the title of the video suggests. The silence of these passengers, seemingly stuck in this place, contrasts with the noise of the surrounding aircraft; their temporality seems to be suspended. This silence reflects the fact that immigrants, including exiles, are given little or no space to speak out, and that their words are very often confiscated in the dominant political and media arenas. As Paci explains, the video expresses the human condition between two states<sup>13</sup>, as if maybe lost on the way home, or on the way to a new home base, along an “anxious odyssey” to quote Delphine Diaz (2021: 285). Their return could depend on a change in the political situation or the end of a conflict. The video illustrates that return is not easy, it can be an ordeal. *Centro di permanenza temporanea* also evokes a possible impeded return which can be considered cruelty; as the philosopher Céline Flécheux (2023: 8) writes: “to let return is to deliver”. In that regard, five years earlier, Paci created the video *Vajtojca* (2002) in which he returns to his hometown to stage his funeral, following which he leaves alive. To refer again to Homer’s *Odyssey*, the artwork evokes Circe who sends Odysseus to the “under world” and sees him return. To return home, Odysseus has to come back from the world of the dead (*Ibid.*: 63). Returning home is like starting a new life, a new beginning. In this sense, returning could mean being reborn.

While the media very often portray the line-up or mass of exiles to represent the collective nature of this uprooting, Paci chose to individualise them by focusing on their faces, thus favouring an intimate story connected to others. The video also refers to the disparities of mobility which depend on the identity of the traveller. In other words, it deals with the unequal distribution of the right to mobility around the world. As the art historian T. J. Demos (2013: xiv-xv) states:

Globalization [...] is less a smooth space of the free flow of people, as many utopian narratives of the 1990s wished to see it, than a fractured geography of borders and archipelagos that divides the uninterrupted transmissions of goods and capital from the controlled movements of people.

From the second half of the 1990s, asylum and immigration policies in Europe became increasingly restrictive in order to discourage exiles from crossing the borders of the European Union. For instance, numerous restrictions were imposed by Northern and Western European countries on asylum applications from former Yugoslavia. At the Edinburgh European Council of December 11 and 12 1992, the ministers responsible for immigration in the governments of the European Community noted that the exile of victims was “likely to encourage the inhumane and illegal practice of ethnic cleansing”. This may be interpreted as a desire to circumvent the Geneva Conventions and, in so doing, to avoid receiving hundreds of thousands of refugees (Krulić, 2015: 97). Furthermore, in 1998, Italy adopted a new migration law to deal more firmly with the arrival of exiles, who had been fuelling fears of an invasion of Italian shores (Diaz, 2021: 273). Indeed, many images of Albanian boats in Italian newspapers and TV news had extensively circulated especially while covering the two major migration arrivals Albanians in March and then in August 1991 (Purpura, 2011). After March 1991, most of the Albanians were sent back by sea; those who refused to go were repatriated by air, “duped into thinking they were being flown to another destination in Italy” according to Russell King and Nicola Mai (2008: 107).

Six years earlier, Paci had represented himself as part of a migratory movement. The sculpture *Home to Go* (2001) is a marble cast – to be more precise marble powder and resin – of the artist’s body, wearing a loincloth and carrying a tiled roof on his back<sup>14</sup>. His body is curved, expressing

<sup>13</sup> See the interview of Adrian Paci on the Jeu de Paume website: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEBApZz\\_CU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEBApZz_CU) [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>14</sup> *Home to Go* is also a series of photographs.

suffering and the pain of a burden. This weight can be that of memories, of a sense of responsibility to those left behind, to homeland, what Andreas Hoffer calls the yearning for “the community left behind” (2019: 86). The country, the relationships with loved ones as they were before exile, are now out of reach; they are forever inaccessible, thus provoking nostalgia and homesickness. The sculpture suggests the importance of “the effect which the loss of dead and dying places has on our own self-identity, mental well-being and sense of belonging” as Peter Read points out (1996: xii). Drawing from the psychologist Marc Fried’s research, the historian explains that an individual’s sense of continuity of person and community is intimately bound with spatial identity.

The sculpture also evokes the Crucifixion, which is particularly interesting in a context where religion had been banned by the communist government, which declared Albania the world’s first atheist state in 1967. This brings to mind exiles forced by religious conflict. Paci’s near-nudity could mean vulnerability, reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life, often quoted in connection with the works of Paci – “the depiction of those who have experienced forms of depersonalization of their individuality” (Kealy, 2019: 166). This near nudity is also a universal condition; every human being knows the sensation or state of being naked. In this way, the artist distances himself from any stereotype of the exiled figure. It is also relevant to note that the human-scale sculpture does not stand on a plinth, but is placed directly on the ground. This fosters a sense of closeness and empathy between the person depicted in exile and the audience. Are we not so different that we might find ourselves in a situation of exile as a result of a political change or an economic crisis? In addition, choosing a material that is considered noble in Europe enhances the individual’s status as a person who deserves the same dignity as other citizens. Paci deconstructed how the media and the political discourse characterize these individuals frequently portrayed as invaders or criminals (Massena, 2020: 88). Indeed, Italy appeared to many of its inhabitants to be threatened by an exodus associated with negative representations, as if they had forgotten the discrimination endured during Italian mass migrations. As Russell King and Nicola Mai write:

Whereas the first Albanians arriving in Italy in March 1991 were granted asylum as ‘deserving’ political refugees, those who came after were forcefully repatriated as ‘economic’, indeed ‘illegal’ migrants, allegedly deceived by the consumerist and utopian dream provided by Italian television (2008: 101).

This shift in representation and immigration policy from welcome to stigmatisation was closely related to how the media treated Albanian exiles. The two scholars point out that the Albanian exiles’ representation in the media served as a scapegoat for Italians’ fears during the political and social crisis of the First Republic (1946–1992) (King and Mai, 2008: 124; Purpura, 2011).

The sculpture also stresses that notions of home are central in migrations. As a multi-layered concept, home alludes to the physical structure of house or dwelling as well as it refers to relationships or connections. According to Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, “home is a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two” (2006: 2-3). The everyday lives of many exiles, who have been forced to flee their homelands, are closely shaped by memories of home. As Paci points out, the idea of returning home is never simply a question of nostalgia for one’s birthplace or family. Home is not just the house, the roof, the family; it is also a state of stability, connection, affection and identification. Therefore, homecoming is a:

more profound question of searching for a lost stability. In a context of powerful transformation and change, we need to develop strategies of survival and continuity, and the idea of homecoming is part of these strategies (Gili and Fraser, 2013: 40).

The experience of longing for home is part of exile life; thinking of home, of the possibility of return, is a way of trying to escape the reality of distance. As Christelle Colin highlights about Spanish Republican exiles, the obsession with return “seems to delimit the duration of the exile experience in their imaginations. The return is then a landmark that defines the exile’s present identity as a transitory one” (2016: 184-85). However, in Paci’s sculpture, the roof is upside down. It doesn’t represent shelter, but wings. If Paci’s artwork emphasizes the importance of roots, the

roof on his back does not anchor him to home, but instead points elsewhere<sup>15</sup>". In this way, Paci's sculpture can be linked to the notion of "double perspective" in Edward Said's words describing exile (2020: 397), resulting from the bicultural knowledge produced by living in a foreign environment. As T.J. Demos points out, it is important to avoid reading dislocation exclusively in the negative, as solely melancholic or chaotic, as if its identity were metaphysically rooted. In other words, "mobility designates a ruptured psychogeography of fundamental ambivalence, calling up the longing for home and the embrace of elsewhere" (2013: 4).

Paci thwarted the negative stereotypes associated with exiles, focusing on their individuality. He evoked the difficulties of wandering, a temporal movement suspended between past and future, between departure and arrival, which can be the return home or the anchoring elsewhere. While this journey can be a complex ordeal, involving obstacles to mobility and stigmatization, it can also mean hope, towards a future to build. After analysing how the two artists dealt with the notions of waiting and the journey home, how did Bajević and Paci express the return experience?

### 3. Homecoming

After her return to Sarajevo, Maja Bajević expressed the consequences of war and political changes in former Yugoslavia since the beginning of the 1990s, such as in *Dressed Up* (1999) and *Green, Green Grass Home* (2002). The backdrop to *Dressed Up* is the Kosovo War provoked by the escalation of violence between the Muslim Albanian population and the Serbian authorities, who had refused the country's independence. In the city gallery of Sarajevo, Bajević printed a coloured map of the former Yugoslavia on fabric, and then sewed a dress out of that fabric. The performance lasted more than seven hours and was punctuated by the noise of the sewing machine – close to the sound of war machines – and the amplified sound of the artist's breathing. At the end of the performance, the artist put the dress on and walked out of the gallery<sup>16</sup>. Bajević emphasized the symbolic loss of a home country and its impact at a personal level, its impact on flesh through movements and emotions: "Tragedies like war and the disintegration of a country are usually seen as political, general things. Actually, they are personal, very intimate events in our lives that we carry, pasted on, like a dress<sup>17</sup>". How do you find your bearings in a country that has been profoundly destabilized? How do you get on with your life? Her performance brings to light that there can be no return to the identical. While it is possible to return to the point of departure, it is impossible to return to the time of departure, to go back to who you were, or to return to the places and people you left behind (Sayad, 2006: 87). The performance also conveys the importance of remembering so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The video *Green, Green Grass Home* is the result of a collaboration between Bajević and the artist Emanuel Licha. In the video, Bajević stands in the middle of a huge meadow describing the flat in Sarajevo in which her grandparents, and then she lived. During the war in ex-Yugoslavia, this flat was occupied by other people, and despite a restitution law, they refused to leave it, even many years after the end of the conflict. Bajević had not returned to her apartment in over ten years. In the video, she tries to reconstruct it mentally, moving through the space as she would move from one room to another, describing them as she remembers them and telling stories about them. She mentions, for example, the kitchen table around which family meals were held, the impressionist painting above her grandmother's bed and her cat Achim, who used to lie on the sheets while she drew in her grandparents' old bedroom, which she had transformed into a studio. In the entrance hall, she had arranged photographs and objects belonging to friends such as Sasha, who passed away. As she says, "I don't know where all these things are now<sup>18</sup>". The artist addressed the suffering caused by the loss of significant and meaningful objects in the

<sup>15</sup> See the interview of Adrian Paci on the Jeu de Paume website: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEBApZ\\_CU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEBApZ_CU) [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>16</sup> The video of the performance is available here: <https://www.peterkilchmann.com/artists/31-maja-bajevic/works/16039-maja-bajevic-dressed-up-1999/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>17</sup> Read the description on the artist's website: <http://majabajevic.com/works/dressed-up/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>18</sup> The art video is available here: <https://vimeo.com/7204564> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

construction of oneself and one's relationship with the world as well as the psychological effects of place deprivation. To this point, the title of the art video is the same as that of the famous country song, first recorded by Johnny Darrell in 1965, about a man sentenced to death who dreams of going back to his childhood home as he prepares to be executed.

The home is a place deeply linked to our personal experiences (Borja-Villel, 2017: 69). As Bajević notes: "In the same way as we occupy our home, it also lives in us. We identify with specific places and these mark our lives. With the disappearance of these places, we also lose everything that we lived through in them"<sup>19</sup>. When these places are lost, the fear arises of losing the memories of what it was like to live there. According to Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, "home is an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings"; it is a "spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings" (2006: 2). Home is indeed crossed by complex socio-spatial relations and emotions. From this perspective, home is an essential place for the grounding of identity. As Abdelmayak Sayad explains, space is by definition a living, nostalgic space, charged with affectivity (2006: 87). However, Bajević's performance is not a sacralization of the birthplace, but rather portrays a place made significant by personal memories. The artist shows her affection for her home, inaccessible to her, whose walls enclose "loving actions and emotions" (Read, 1996: 110). From this filmed description, Licha drew up a plan of Bajević's flat. Based on this plan, Bajević and Licha built a model representing the outside walls of the flat, and placed a background, and then went to a photographic studio to pose as if they "were a young couple of lovers, inside the model, inside that 'home' that is no longer ours"<sup>20</sup>. They stressed the attachment to these places, full of emotions and stories, and the importance of getting them back in order to move on from the experience of exile and the losses associated with it.

In *Back Home* (2001), Adrian Paci also used studio photography to raise the issue of the homecoming experience. His artwork consists of a series of four large photographs. They show a single man and three families (children, parents, and grandparents in two of them). In the photograph showing the mother and father with their two daughters, the staging expresses the strong relationship between parents and children as well as that of the couple through gestures and glances. In another one, the photograph bears witness to an important milestone: a child's first steps. The other photograph devoted to a family portrays the grandmother standing in the centre, the couple sitting in front of her and the two children in the foreground, testifying to their intergenerational ties. The other photograph in the series depicts a lone man, looking into the lens, sitting serenely in a chair. In all four photographs, the subjects are elegantly dressed; they adopt Western European dress codes to affirm their social value, thus contradicting stereotypes of marginalized people. This type of photography is also very common in Italy, making them part of a shared experience. In addition, the choice of a large format reflects a desire to assert identities and choices. While each photograph is in colour, the backgrounds are painted in grisaille. Paci painted these backgrounds from images he took in abandoned houses – two exteriors and two interiors – in Albania at the time of the exile of the subjects photographed, who then settled in Italy. The contrast between the colours of the photographs and the greyness of the painting evokes two temporalities, past and present. The work is not imbued with nostalgia. As in *Home to Go*, past and roots are essential parts of exile lives, but are not shackles. It seems important that the future should be open, with no obligation of residence. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling emphasize that "home is not a fixed and static location, but is rather produced and recast through a range of home-making practices that bind the material and imaginative geographies of home closely together and exist over a range of scales" (2006: 228). In this sense, home is more than a physical space, the interrelations go beyond it. It is a conceptual and affective space, "one that can be transformed, newly invented, and developed in relation to circumstances in which people find themselves or choose to place themselves" (*Ibid.*). It is interesting to note that since 2015, Paci has transformed his birthplace in Shkodër into an art space called Art House (Coraboeuf, 2016: 49).

In Paci's artwork, homecoming occurs in the mode of the imaginary. Russell King and Nicola Mai highlight the weak propensity of Albanians to return because of "a still-backward economy,

<sup>19</sup> See the MACBA website: <https://www.macba.cat/en/obra/r2706-green-green-grass-of-home/> [Consulta: 10 de julio de 2025].

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

extremely low wages and incomes, lack of infrastructure, a general climate of political venality and civic corruption, and a sense of pessimism about possible change" (2008: 238). As they explain, "Despite their continuing stigmatisation by Italians, Albanians have come to identify with Italy and Italian popular culture, and increasingly see their future – and that of their children – there rather than back in Albania" (*Ibid.*). The photograph series also brings to light a complex relationship with time and space. Will we find what has been left behind? Will we recognize our home and our belongings? Will we find the same bonds with our loved ones? We can feel a sense of strangeness and otherness produced by returning to places that no longer resemble our memories (Colin, 2016: 183). Indeed, between leaving and returning, time has passed (Flécheux, 2023: 182). In addition, if for Albanians the meaning of emigration is about economic survival, the ability to travel abroad is also important to take into consideration within the context of the country's communist past. To quote again Russell King and Nicola Mai:

Albania's history of extreme isolation has left a scar on the collective memory of the people who draw a direct connection between democratisation and the freedom to go abroad. But nowadays restrictions on freedom of travel derive not directly from Albania's own government, but from the denial of visa-free movement on the part of so many countries (2008: 252).

Bajević's works explore the ways in which, on returning home, people cope with the profound social and political changes taking place in their country, and the loss of their home and intimate connections. How to build yourself out of these losses? Paci dealt with the return from an imaginary point of view. While the attachment to one's native country is present, the return is not always desired at least initially; it is the freedom to choose that matters.

## Conclusion

In relation to the context of the geopolitical and economic turmoil of the 1990s in Eastern Europe, both artists considered homecoming a complex and multi-layered concept. In their artworks, they addressed the issue of waiting, the ordeal of being in transit in the context of an eventual return journey, and different experiences related to homecoming. They evoked the importance of the sense of belonging and the attachment to homeland. How to cope with missing loved ones? How to build new relationships? How to deal with stereotypes? How can a new routine be established? How to adapt to profound geographical and political changes? How not to lose your bearings completely? Bajević and Paci's artworks also point out that the notion of home is key in exilic identities, how this loss is a source of suffering, how it shapes identity and relationships with others, and how it can be rebuilt. Their artworks give different interpretations of return, which is not always possible, or even desired. Homecoming can be prevented or forced. In all cases, the return cannot be a return to the point of departure, the country, the neighbourhood, the home is no longer the same, or even accessible. It is not possible to fully recover what must have been left behind; time has gone by. Homecoming may remain a possibility in the imagination, or it may become a reality, but even if it helps people to recover from trauma and move on, it does not completely repair the brutal uprooting of exile. In other words, it does not completely heal the multidimensional rifts (spatial, temporal, emotional, identity-related) produced by the loss of place and community.

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