ZNetwork, July 13, Marina Grzinić

Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People: A Brief Hysteria of Our Time

Maja Bajević (b. 1967 in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia; lives and works in Paris, France) is an artist whose work incisively and wittily exposes the dualities of human behavior, particularly as they relate to power.

Her exhibition, A Brief Hysteria of Our Time, currently on view in Ljubljana (July 2025–January 2026), is a conceptually rigorous, artistically provocative, and politically urgent presentation. It offers a searing critique of fascism, nationalism, and the normalization of violence. In this conversation, we reflect on the exhibition itself, on the significant absence of a public lecture or guided tour by the artist—a missed opportunity—and on how the show unfolds like a journey, station by station. The exhibition confronts us with the rapid normalization of fascism, the global return of warfare, and the erosion of political memory. A Brief Hysteria of Our Time is more than an artistic intervention—it is a necessary alarm. And perhaps the works themselves speak enough? They resonate. They echo. They warn. They compel us to remember. What makes the works so powerful? Because these layers are palpable. Even in the most remote corners of the artworks, there is something I might call a massive deposit—a site where everything that remains accumulates. It is what is left behind after death, after gentrification prevails, after drones locate bodies at sea, or when the tide carries them to shore.
This is how I read this expansive terrain of the discarded—as something intimately bound to lived experience. In this interpretation, at least two layers emerge: one speaks to what is left behind by life; the other to our unrelenting consumption. The more we consume, the more waste we produce—the more we kill the planet.

I was also struck by something else—a specific historical and geographical experience shapes Maja Bajević's perspective. She comes from the Balkans, from the former Yugoslavia, and carries a depth that starkly contrasts with many of today's artists. There are many artists from the Balkans circulating through Europe's art circuits, but their work often centers on a single piece followed by repetitive iterations—everything feels surface-level, nostalgic for a past that no longer exists. They earn money, maintain their careers, but the political urgency that once animated artistic creation that is lost. It is painful to witness. Perhaps because the West, especially since the 1970s, no longer insists on political commitment in art. Since then, much has turned into ornament—into decorative, hollow aesthetics.

Bajević transcends this hollow aesthetic, now so prevalent. So often, when we are shown something about war, it is dramatized just enough to elicit feeling, but not enough to provoke thought.

It is fascinating how Bajević interpolates all these elements and exposes their force. I found truly profound political layers—confrontations with taboos: political economy, perverse shifts in values and temporality, our relationship to history, and our complicity in it. These are not abstract notions—they are tangible. And honestly, that is what fascinates me.

Gržinić: Maja, let's begin with the title: A Short Histery of Our Time. Can you explain its significance?

Maja Bajević: Everything in the exhibition has been profoundly thought through. I approached the show as if it were a living, organic entity. Each work is designed to speak to and with the others—they form a network of communication. The title reflects both our current political moment and what transpired in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, what we experienced back then—nationalism, fascism—is now re-emerging globally. When I left for France, I couldn't imagine that this ideology could return so forcefully. I received a scholarship for France in 1991, before the war began, and I stayed. I completed the classical academy in Sarajevo and then studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. My studies and Master degree spanned over seven years, including extended research visits to China and Brazil—formative experiences. It's crucial for young people to be immersed in radically different cultures. Displacement sharpens perception—both of your own culture and of the one you enter.

For those of us displaced by war, there's an acute sensitivity to dehumanization. When Trump called immigrants "aliens," or in Sarajevo when a politician called children from mixed marriages "bastards,"—or, earlier, when Jews were labelled "cockroaches"—these are not isolated incidents. Dehumanization is always the first step.

I'm even more concerned about France now than I am about the U.S. Because in the U.S., this hatred towards immigrants, the others, is still new, while in France—and in Europe—it's old. Perhaps it was only dormant, taking a nap. Now it's wide awake.

That's why I chose histery—with an "i"—not just to reference history but to reflect the hysterical pace and emotional intensity of our time. Events are unfolding too fast to process. Before we digest one crisis, a worse one arrives. This leads to sedation. When the war began in Ukraine, there was a strong reaction. But when war started again in Israel-Palestine, many were already numb. And now with the U.S. elections and beyond, we are almost habituated to the abnormal. That's the danger.

Gržinić: Your works in the exhibition—recent and precise—reflect these realities with incredible clarity. They form distinct "stations," as you call them, but they work together in powerful harmony. Let's begin at the entrance. One of the first things the visitor sees is a melting ice cube containing the head of Karl Marx. Nearby, a bold slogan is inscribed on the wall. Can you elaborate on both?

Bajević: Yes – Marx is important not only for Eastern Europe, but for the entire world. The idea of political economy that he developed was foundational and once represented the mainstream of the struggle for rights demanded by the French, Italian, and communists of the world. Today, however, uttering the word "communist" is almost like saying "devil." People forget quickly.

The slogan originally comes from the Partisan greeting after World War II: "Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People." But in the exhibition, I reversed it: "Freedom to Fascism, Death to the People."

That's exactly where we are. Fascism is flourishing again, and people have been reduced to disposable objects—dehumanized, alienated, treated as surplus. Europe is rearming. And those of us who lived through war can recognize the signs—economic crisis, followed by nationalism, followed by fascism. It's a familiar pattern.

Gržinić: Absolutely. What you say resonates strongly with many of us from the former Yugoslavia. Even though the signs were there, it was still unthinkable—until it wasn't. What followed was genocide, displacement, and erasure. The Mothers of Srebrenica had to fight for international recognition of what happened. And for those like you who lived it as a young person, it was traumatic beyond words.

Bajević: Yes, it was terrible because I felt immense guilt for not being there. It wasn't my decision. I left earlier because I had a scholarship. But if I had stayed in Sarajevo, then I would have had to make the decision myself—whether to stay or to leave. As it was, it felt like someone made the decision for me. And that brings a profound kind of survivor's guilt. I survived while others died. Why me? Why did someone else die instead? When I returned to Sarajevo it was not easy. What's important to know is that I come from a background with four religions in my immediate family. My mother is Croatian, my father is half Serbian, half Jewish, and his sister married a Muslim. It used to be a typical Balkan family. I told my son that he must marry a Buddhist—then we'll have them all. His father is Protestant.

Maybe there were many of us like that. It gave me a particular perspective. I remember when I was very young, in puberty—my father was a communist, my mother was not—and I once told him, "I'll get married in a church." He was reading the newspaper and said, "Which one, darling?" My provocation fell flat. I didn't mean it—it was just to provoke him, but it didn't work.

What happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina is permanent. There's no going back. The ethnic cleansing happened, and it will never be the same again. Bosnia was a country that existed in a ethnically mixed form for 500 years, and it was destroyed in just four. Why am I saying this? Because when I tried to approach the Muslim women in Sarajevo, refugees from Srebrenica, to work with me on "Women at Work – Under Construction", I was a bit afraid. I wasn't there during the war, my name can be read as simply Serb. I thought they would say: "Who are you and where did you come from?".

But on the contrary, I explained my project, and they were incredibly supportive. It wasn't a problem that I wasn't Muslim. Not then. But now it is. Today, I can't get a job at the Academy in Sarajevo. I can't do anything. Right after the war, it was still more important that you were on the right side—that you were a good person.

Gržinić: Yes. I completely understand. And this collapse of the world is also closely connected to what the exhibition highlights so powerfully – this horrifying obsession with profit.

Bajević: Profit, yes.

Gržinić: Profit means money. Massive exploitation. Extraction. And I think this is very clearly connected to the piece Melting of Marx.

Bajević: Yes. Marx was one of the few who clearly outlined how capitalism works. But now everything has become a speculative discourse. In art, there isn't much direct engagement anymore. I thought it was a bold choice to connect Melting of Marx with the next room, where you see these carefully selected proclamations forming a narrative. What interested me is how you operate as a post-conceptual artist—you start with something familiar, but quickly flip it. You ask the viewer to see the "other side," the reverse, the underneath.

After the Second Word War, we had slogans like "Death to fascism," but then you turn that upside down, and suddenly, we're in an absurd reality—no, that was another world. This is this world.

I also did a neon piece in France that said: Égalité pour les égaux, liberté pour les libres, fraternité pour les frères. Equality for the equals, liberty for the free, and brotherhood for the brothers. That's how France

operates today—and much of the world. What I found interesting in Marx was his idea of social progress. He imagined a future where machines would work for us—and that would give us more time for culture, leisure, human development. But the opposite has happened.

We are becoming slaves to machines. They perform tasks instead of us, but we are left without jobs, without money. Not working for us, but replacing us. And we become useless. Why? Because these machines are owned by oligarchs, not by the state.

Gržinić: And the state functions like an oligarch now.

Bajević: Exactly. Everything is structured for the benefit of the 1%. We live in a new techno-feudalism where people are disposable and only profit matters.
When I first came to France, I was 24. I was shocked. First, that women were paid less than men for the same work, something that didn't happen in Yugoslavia. Second, that people were constantly talking about money. We used to talk about Dostoevsky, theatre, and philosophy. And third, there were homeless people everywhere, and no one paid attention. They walked past them without guilt. And I felt guilty, walking by, not helping.

In a way, we lost two dreams at once: the dream of Yugoslavia and the dream of the West. The West turned out to be nothing like we imagined. My connection to it had been through music, through bands like The Clash, through travel. But the reality was far more brutal—and it's only getting worse.

Gržinić: This is strongly expressed as well in the transformation of the cross into a swastika in the next room of the exhibition, which is scattered with neon signs such as "democracy," etc. These slogans, these signs, respond to one another. Could you explain the idea behind this transformation—the cross, the swastika, and then the twist that ends with the word "Oops"?

Bajević: Yes. It's typical of what's happening. People are becoming real Nazis, but pretending not to be. They say things like, "We hate immigrants," or, "We only want French people here," or, "We want to clean up the society"—classic Nazi programs—but then they go, "Oh, I didn't mean it." I wanted to add humour as well. I don't remember who said it—you might know, "Humour is intelligence dancing".

Gržinić: Jacques Lacan said when you find yourself in the middle of shit, you don't cry, you laugh. Because the situation is so absurd, so grotesque, that laughter becomes the only response. Maybe deep down you even suspected this would happen.

Bajević: I also love the role of the Shakespearean fool—the one who speaks the truth, but can say it because he makes us laugh and nobody takes him seriously. But there's a more frightening stage after that. In Bosnia, there are no more jokes. Bosnia used to be the source of all jokes in Yugoslavia. All the jokes were from or about Bosnians.

Gržinić: Yes – the comic and painful archetypes, Fata.

Bajević: Mujo and Suljo. Yes, and now all of that is gone. I remember being in Sarajevo when the Twin Towers were attacked. Already the next morning, a joke was going around: Mujo is taking Fata to the airport and tells her, "When you get on the plane, say loudly: 'Allahu Akbar'—and if anyone responds, run as fast as you can." But now, after twenty years of categorical terror, there are no more jokes.

You know now Meggle is selling kajmak (a local specialty). It's like during the industrial era… I have a work on that – "Export / Import". In that era, they took patterns from African and Indian scarves and textiles, reproduced them industrially in England, Switzerland, and other European countries, and then sold them back to Africa and India, destroying the local handmade economies in the process.

Gržinić: So… it was theft to begin with.

Bajević: Yes, exactly.

Gržinić: Now, when we move from that room into the next, there are quite a few works—at least three or four, that have a clear dramaturgy—one flows into the next. There are strong references to fear and terror. Especially, as you mentioned, the use of Hitchcockian music—the tension that something terrible will happen. But nowadays, sometimes it has already happened. So, can you take us through each of those works and explain their main points? They are like small but powerful stations within the space.

Bajević: I'll begin with the video—the one using only the end credits of a Robert Zemeckis movie repeated in a loop. I didn't choose it for the film itself, but for the music. It's very Hitchcockian—music that builds tension: something will happen, something terrible will happen. But then… we're stuck. We're trapped in that moment. Constantly waiting for the terrible thing to come. Constantly on alert in an eternal ending. The work is titled "If this is the end, what is the beginning?" Because clearly, the world is changing. But into what?

The second video was created using the program Synthesia. I started working with it a few years ago, back when it still allowed for the creation of humanoid avatars—highly convincing ones. I programmed them to say exactly what I wanted. But I also deliberately included elements they couldn't pronounce—because they're not human. For example, something as simple as "Mhmm" was rendered by the avatar as "M-H-M-M-M-M." That's where I began breaking the illusion—first constructing it, then dismantling it. I wanted to say: "No, this is not real."

I combined excerpts from Foucault—texts on power, universities, and the invisible locations of authority, where knowledge about how power functions circulates—with complete Dadaist nonsense. It was great fun, but also unsettling. Today, it's no longer possible to make such videos. The application blocks that kind of content.

Gržinić: That's significant. We see this also with other AI tools—many types of content are now monitored or blocked. ChatGPT says: "I can't do that – it's an error." If AI is a tool, great. But only if you can control the tool, not if it's already ideologically programmed.

Bajević: Exactly. Ideology is everywhere, yes, but now it's embedded in the code. One kind of ideology is allowed to pass—others are blocked. I wanted to add to that work now, but I couldn't. Luckily, I started it in 2022, when it was still possible. I just finished the final version for this exhibition.

Then there's the neon piece that says "More or More"—a classic slogan of neoliberal capitalism. It's never enough. I mean, what does a person with 30 billion do with it? Why do they need another billion? These are numbers I can't even comprehend. But they always want more—and always at our expense. In front of the neon is the barbed wire installation, a piece I've shown before—twice, even three times—but each time in a new version. This time, the subtitle is "Aliens." For me, the barbed wire, with clothes tangled in it, suggests someone tried to cross, and their clothes got stuck. They didn't make it through.

And finally, there is my chandelier, which brings me immense joy. I think it's vital for an artist to feel joy in their work. I felt joy in all of these, but the chandelier was something completely new. I've worked with slogans before, but this was different. I wanted to capture the madness of the world we're living in. The chandelier spins out of control. The sound is a mix—camera shutters, mechanical turning, and fragments of the Sex Pistols' Who Killed Bambi? I love that song. It seems naive at first—who killed Bambi? —But it isn't naive anymore. Today, we're killing nature. We're killing the planet.

Gržinić: My last question concerns resistance on the political level, but articulated through aesthetics and art, not as declamation, but as a profound engagement. How does the form rework the content, and how does the content persist? How do you see this current exhibition in the trajectory of your practice? Do you perceive a rupture or a continuity? When you look back—perhaps to the 1990s, or to works from 2010 or 2011—do you recognize themes you've already addressed? I'd love to hear your reflection.

These works are, in a certain sense, brand new for all of us. Do they represent a break in your artistic trajectory? I've followed your work for decades and remember your remarkable contributions to major European exhibitions like Group and Soul. I was there at Documenta.

Bajević: Well, my career began in Ljubljana, at Manifesta in 2000. That's where I presented Women at Work—Under Construction. I remember it vividly: it was shown on a small TV, behind a door. Before I saw it, people warned me, "You'll be disappointed." But I said, "It doesn't matter." I was young, ready for anything. And in fact, the piece received significant attention.

After that, I made two more Women at Work pieces. One was in Voltaire's castle, where we posed for a painter to recreate a Frans Hals-like scene, referencing the Dutch UN forces, who at the time simply watched and did not intervene in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Srebrenica.. The third was at the Istanbul Biennale in 2001. We washed Tito-era slogans for five days, until they slowly disintegrated into rugs. That, for me, marked the end of that cycle. I was engaging with the present, during, after, and even before the war.

I was fortunate: Yuko Hasegawa saw the Ljubljana piece and immediately invited me to create a new performance for the Istanbul biennial. That was back when curators still trusted artists. She gave me a carte blanche. She had no idea what I would do, but she believed in me. Sadly, that's rare today. Now, everything must be justified and explained. No one offers you a carte blanche anymore, and that's what kills art—when there's no room to fail, when it has to be perfect and approved.

Later, I created a work closely tied to Sarajevo, "Green, green, grass of home", but my next piece—Double Bubble, a video exploring religious hypocrisy—was interpreted as war-related. Yet, I never saw it that way. Its themes remain deeply contemporary. We are again seeing divisions—Muslims, Jews—what happened in Yugoslavia in the '90s is reappearing globally. The references in that piece were international: scandals involving clergy and abuse. For example, the line, "My religion doesn't allow me to sleep with women, so I sleep with boys," was far more controversial in France or Italy than in Sarajevo. It was never just a piece about Sarajevo.

But the real turning point for me came with my solo exhibition at Reina Sofía. Even though a thematic line runs through all my work, I remain true to myself—I resist being categorized as an "artist of the Bosnian war." They try, of course. Institutions and even some artists exploit that label. But I'd rather stay myself.

People wanted me to restage Women at Work elsewhere, but those performances were site-specific and time-specific, rooted in time and space. I didn't want to become a "flying circus." Maybe I'd be rich by now, but I refused.

At Reina Sofía, in the 2011 exhibition To Be Continued, I created an entire show around slogans, spanning 100 years. I didn't just pick the ones I liked: there were Nazi slogans, Communist slogans, and so on.
Even before that, I did Avanti Popolo—a piece built from patriotic songs of 30 different countries. These anthems share an aggressive rhythm: action-driven, often militant. That work was shown in New York at PS1, MoMA in a solo show of mine, back in 2004.

At Reina Sofía, I assembled an archive of 130 slogans, each documented on A4 sheets with origin and first appearance. Some slogans evolved over time. For example, during the First World War, “The walls have ears” served as a warning—be careful, someone might be listening. In 1968, students flipped it: “Your walls have ears.” I love how these ideas recur, transform.

Strangely, when the exhibition opened in 2011, mass protests erupted in Madrid. Protesters adopted To Be Continued as one of their slogans. So, life became art, and art returned to life.
I even composed songs for the slogans. Each slogan ended with a word that began the next, like a children’s game. There was also a steam machine projecting a slogan—ephemeral, like steam itself: visible, then gone. What’s true today might not be tomorrow, and could return again.

There was a monumental anti-monument—a pedestal so large that, had a sculpture been placed atop it, it would’ve broken the glass ceiling of the Palacio de Cristal. Symbolically, it would have shattered that ceiling. On the reverse side, there was a slide.

We also “dusted” slogans onto the windows. In English, you say “dust the windows” to clean them. We reversed it—adding dust, then writing with our fingers. When finished, we wiped it away, reapplied the dust, and began again. Like history—building, erasing, repeating.

This exploration of slogans, language, and ideology continues in my current work. The installation uses not slogans but direct political statements—what politicians say, what we hear. It still engages with ideology and its mutations.

Gržinić: That’s incredibly rich. You’ve made such compelling connections. I’m truly glad we had this conversation.

Bajević: Thank you. It was a great pleasure talking to you, thank you for the inspiring questions!

Gržinić: Because this is precisely what I felt was missing—not from you, but from the institution: to truly engage with your presence here and your deep, complex body of work. What you offer adds profound value to contemporary art. It’s not just about rushing through. It’s about grasping the complexity—about understanding how real contemporary works engage not only within the institution but also with society itself.

Bajević: Yes. I hope that we will be able to publish a catalogue and organize a lecture or symposium at the end of the show, but unfortunately, everything depends on the funds we receive – or do not receive.