

Sarah Moroz, Artforum, April, 2022



Maja Bajevic, *A Conversation / You Take My Breath Away* (detail), 2022, LED holograms, fans, dimensions variable.

Maja Bajevic

CENTRE CULTUREL JEAN COCTEAU

In her book *Everybody* (2021), Olivia Laing describes corporeality as involving a “system of control and punishment that is invisible until you happen to transgress it in some way.” Maja Bajevic would likely agree. Born in Sarajevo, she arrived Paris in the 1990s and remained through the Yugoslav Wars. Since then, she has been grappling with the shattering effects of violence on personal identity. In new works created for her exhibition “Echos,” Bajevic conjured, through video and installation, the anxiety stemming from collective sociopolitical crises (so many to choose from). Sampling from archives and media resources, she drew attention to contemporary American racism, the anger of French *gilets jaunes*, and prisoners once held by the Gestapo within the area neighboring the exhibition space.

In the second room, the visitor encountered *A Conversation / You Take My Breath Away* (all works cited, 2022): two tall ventilators positioned face-to-face, with LED displays flashing words as though the steel structures were animated by consciousness and were conversing. One flashed inquiries: *POURQUOI? / PEUR DE QUOI? / QUE VEUX TU DIRE?* (Why? / Afraid of what? / What do you mean?). The other discharged confessions: *JE SUIS TRISTE / J'AI LA RAGE* (I'm sad / I'm furious). Nearby, in a work titled *Je suis une voix française* (I Am a French Voice), a mobile phone emitted mechanized vocals among which one could pick out politicized words like *peuple, taxe, progressivité, revenue, commerciale, économie, solidaire* (people, tax, progressiveness, revenue, commercial, economy, solidarity). The impassive robotic delivery fittingly reflected the work's very unsentimental content: Concerns around safety and survival are mounting, while quality of life is ever unraveling.

In the next room, six embroidered white cotton fabrics were draped over wires like drying laundry. Their delicacy was deceptive, the handwork underpinned by troubling allusions. On one, the words HEY MAN. I'M SORRY! —one of George Floyd's last utterances before he died—were written backward, reflected legibly in a mirror. Another depicted broken bones—a reference to Jean-Michel Basquiat, who schooled himself in anatomy during a boyhood stay in a hospital and repeatedly created fractured depictions of the body to highlight how easily it can break. Nearby, the words *MA SEULE PENSÉE* (my only thought)—emblazoned over and over in a frenzied overlay—were excerpted from a letter written by a World War II-era Yugoslavian resistance fighter. Noticing those words while searching for such missives on eBay, Bajevic seized on the single-minded and poetic preoccupation with a single idea. This obsessiveness crystallized the anxieties that lingered inside the show and outside it. The decorous setting of the Centre Culturel Jean Cocteau, housed in a mid-nineteenth-century former *hôtel particulier*, made Bajevic's unsettling pieces all the more so. However, the themes of marginalization and agitation treated here haunt the territory: The nearby Fort de Romainville once functioned as a Nazi internment camp, and while the arts institution is located in a quiet corner of the Paris-flanking working-class suburb of Les Lilas, the French banlieues have widely been a locus of sharp socioeconomic and racial inequality.

In a side room, the seven-and-a-half-minute video *Once Upon a Time in the West* played on a loop. Images of a backlit middle-aged chorus (the Centre Culturel's gospel ensemble, with whom Bajevic worked directly) flicker and then are intercut with the shaky bone-chilling body-cam footage of George Floyd pinned facedown to the ground. The HEY MAN embroidery is suddenly, agonizingly embodied. Placed within an art context, this video pulls at our intestines and afflicts us with its violence, horror, and despair while we sit in a dark box. Led by a gesturing conductor, the on-screen group sings, "Soon I will be done with the trouble of the world," while the homicide gradually and savagely unfolds. It's startling to watch the singers wield their breath to sing, while another man's breath is extinguished altogether.