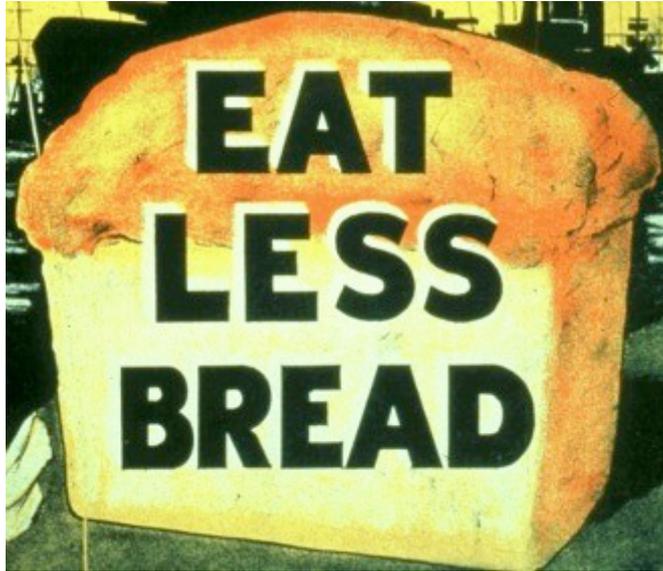


## New First Unexpected

### THE NOISE OF TIME: MAJA BAJEVIC AT THE JAMES GALLERY



In 1915, the British government issued a poster to encourage citizens to “Eat Less Bread.” Far from the early stirrings of the gluten-free movement or the rise of the Nanny State, there was more compelling interest in the idea than the promotion of a healthy lifestyle choice. With the country mobilized for war and few supply ships getting through to England--not to mention that most farmers and workers had already been conscripted into military service--it was a move to both promote food rationing and to rally a flagging, mostly female civilian populace behind an increasingly demoralizing war effort. Women and other civilians could do their share For God and Country by consuming less to make sure that the lads at the front had plenty to eat.

Of course, the poster had a less overt mission: to make people feel good about deprivation--and it worked. The messaging campaign fundamentally altered the context of the food shortages from “Give in to Germany or starve” to “We must do whatever it takes to defeat the enemy.” Civilians willingly tightened their belts and they *did* feel good about it, channeling the discomfort of family- and self-sacrifice into a patriotic determination that helped the Empire ride out The War to End All Wars.

Of course, propaganda works both ways, and the people united by bread will not be defeated. Take the case of that famous phrase forever linked with the legacy of Marie Antoinette when she was told that the French people were clamoring for bread (again, code here for a “food”): “Let them eat cake.” While she didn’t actually say it herself--it’s attributed to a certain Duchess of Tuscany in 1760 or earlier, but pegged to the French queen in 1789 by radical agitators who were trying to turn the French people against her--it stuck and heads rolled. The takeaway: Don’t mess with bread.



Maja Bajević, *To Be Continued/Slogans Game*, 2011. Courtesy of the James Gallery / Photo: Julia Sherman

One can still stumble upon original tin posters from Britain's pro-rationing campaigns on eBay, in vintage shops, and antique fairs. But absent the war tie-in, all that's left is the government telling you not to eat something that has been fundamental to much of human life for thousands of years. And, as Marie Antoinette learned the hard way, people are just too emotionally invested in bread to give it up so readily. When messaging loses its currency it becomes kitsch. And it really is hard now to read a slogan like "Eat Less Bread," however steeped in history, without first thinking about the Atkins and South Beach diets.

### **The Right Word at the Right Time**

Certain language emerges at particular moments to incite emotion and action. But what provokes those within earshot to

rally around a cause and when is it just so much noise? With *To Be Continued*, on view at CUNY's James Gallery from November 6 until February 23, French-Bosnian artist Maja Bajević gets under the tongue of protest rhetoric to take a kind of social temperature of language that rises and falls as the speaker, the intent, and the receiver change over time.

For the past few years, Bajević, known for her performances and installations that investigate the effects of conflict on identity, has been collecting social, economic, and politically charged phrases ("Silence = Death," "Equal Pay for Equal Work," "Better Dead than Red"), noting their appearance in the culture and marking the moment they fall from use or simply lose their meaning. *To Be Continued*--a reference to the Arab Spring and worldwide Occupy-related movements--presents the resulting archive of 149 slogans in multiple formats, both ephemeral and material. Rallying cries and declarations of discontent and inspiration that date back as far as 1911 are projected onto moving steam and also presented on laminated cards with detailed histories that viewers can physically handle, flip through, and learn about the original context of the expressions.



Maja Bajević, *Slogans Remix*, 2012. Courtesy of the James Gallery / Photo: Julia Sherman

Nine times over the course of the exhibition's run, scaffolding is temporarily erected and moved indoors along the gallery's Fifth Avenue-facing windows while paid members of the public dust them and use their fingers to write slogans taken from the archive on the glass. Over the course of five hours, the windows are continually redusted, and the slogans reapplied. The dust and steam obscure the individual words, further distancing them from the historical and linguistic context that gave them currency.

Finally, three concerts are presented while the exhibition is on view, at which three singers with voices of varying range and tone improvise a capella a type of children's game in which each sentence is begun with the last word of the previous political phrase. Between scheduled concerts, recordings of the pieces are played in an endless loop throughout the

gallery space. Expressive actions degrade into an absurd, repetitive game as the performances and audio recordings contribute still another layer to the already noisy room.



Maja Bajević, *Slogans Remix*, 2012. Courtesy of the James Gallery / Photo: Julia Sherman

Awash in noise, steam, dust, and time, the viewer is immersed in a sensory bath of language and history continuously broken down and reconstituted, by turns boiling over with urgency and tepid with distance and cliché.

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