

• ● neue
galerie

Chronopolitical Explorations Lana Čmajčanin

12.09.–08.11.2025

curated by Bettina Siegele

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Rennweg 1, Großes Tor, Hofburg, Innsbruck
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Mi–Fr 12.00–17.00 | Sa 11.00–15.00

Chronopolitical Explorations

Lana Čmajčanin

In her artistic practice, Lana Čmajčanin reflects on the politics of remembering and forgetting, as well as the interconnections between economic, geographical, historical, and imperial factors and their representation. Drawing on historical events and their correlation with the present, alongside the current geopolitical landscapes of Europe, for the Neue Galerie of the Künstler*innen Vereinigung Tirol, the artist creates a chronopolitical space that allows for multiple perspectives on (historical) events and the construction of history.

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In her work, the artist emphasizes the different layers of the past and the recurring narratives and systematic inventions of historical and geopolitical truths and ideas relating to the Balkans. In her essay *Post-Yugoslav Art – Beyond Social Utopia*, Jelena Petrović classifies Lana Čmajčanin's oeuvre as politically engaged post-Yugoslav art, which is not only characterised by the politics of memory, the examination of war traumas and the consequences of social decline, but also by the attempt to articulate a common truth about the war.¹

This confrontation and the ongoing search for the truth in Čmajčanin's artistic work is also reflected in the exhibition *Chronopolitical Explorations* at the Neue Galerie. Upon entering the exhibition space, a wallpaper (#1) extends along the entire left wall into the second room, showing historical illustrations of rape embedded in a floral pattern. The very

¹ Jelena Petrović, *Post-Yugoslav Art – Beyond Social Utopia*, translated by Milan Marković and Tijana Parezanović, in: *springerin*, Issue 1/2019 - Post-Jugoslavien. <https://www.springerin.at/2019/1/postjugoslawische-kunst-jenseits-der-sozialutopie/> (accessed on 09/09/2025)

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graphic depictions of sexualised violence are taken from the work *Balkangreuel* (*Balkan Cruelty*), consisting of twelve plates in light and copperplate engraving by Gottfried Sieben, who published them under the pseudonym Archibald Smith in Vienna in 1909 as a private print of the Society of Austrian Bibliophiles in a limited edition of 550 copies. The twelve plates show soldiers from various states and regions of the Balkans – represented by the time typical regional uniforms – and reinforce, in a very brutal and dehumanising form, a stereotype that was already prevalent in the Habsburg Empire at that time.

The original edition was available only to a privileged circle, but the illustrations from *Balkangreuel* soon became a popular template for pirated copies, which served the emerging fascination and Orientalisation of the Balkans under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Furthermore, the distribution of Sieben's illustrations and their copies was an ideal medium for spreading war propaganda and justifying the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary in 1908.

In these depictions, Čmajčanin is primarily interested in the women who, without their own identity or national affiliation, are turned into subjects of rape fantasies. In all twelve panels, the women are portrayed as tragic victims whose beauty and flawless naked bodies are reminiscent of the depiction of female figures in Romantic paintings ('Héroïnes romantiques'²) serving solely a male fantasy.

2 The term *Héroïnes romantiques* refers to the exhibition of the same name at the Musée de la Vie Romantique in Paris in 2022, which examined the portrayal of female figures in the Romantic era. A critical examination of these tragic heroines of Romanticism can also be found in *Witches, Bitches, It-Girls* by Rebekka Endler, published by Rowohlt Verlag in 2025.

At the same time the women depicted represent the raped motherland for Čmajčanin, and with the floral pattern consisting of twelve national flowers juxtaposed with the uniforms, she uses female stereotypes to create a contrast to the portrayed brutality. The medium of the wallpaper and its aesthetics are an allusion to the prevailing taste of the time and transfer the violence into physical space. The pornographic character of *Balkangreuel* is thus robbed of its usual interpretation and transformed. As a final act of feminist resistance, she also appropriates the title *Balkan Cruelty* for her own work, assigning it a new meaning.

While the work *Balkan Cruelty* focuses on Othering for propaganda and war narratives, ***Don't Dream Dreams*** (#2) in the first exhibition room, addresses the romanticisation of war. The starting point for the work is the oil painting *Northern Camp near Mostar during the Bosnian Campaign* of 1878 by Adolf Obermüller (landscape), Alexander Ritter von Bensa the Younger (staffage) and Alexander Kaiser (architecture) from 1878, which is now in the Museum of Military History in Vienna. The painting was created in the same year as the Congress of Berlin, at which representatives of the major European powers, together with Russia and the Ottoman Empire, ended the so-called Balkan crisis and negotiated a new 'peace order'³. As a further consequence, Austria-Hungary occupied the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The scenery depicted shows a romantic mountain landscape that is more reminiscent of the Alps than Herzegovina,

³ see: Wikipedia, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berliner_Kongress (accessed on 09/09/2025)

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drawing attention away from the marching troops and military buildings at the bottom of the painting – a softening of what is to come. Meanwhile, the neon sign ‘Don’t Dream Dreams’ mounted above the enlarged image fast-forwards more than a century in history, when in 1992 the British politician and mediator Lord David Owen advised the Bosnian people during his visit to Sarajevo: “*Don’t dream dreams ... don’t live under this dream that the West is going to come and sort this problem out*,”⁴ while the city was already under siege by Serbia and threatened by ethnic cleansing and genocide. A sentence with which he destroyed the last fragile hope for help.

Lana Čmajčanin thus highlights Europe’s divergent attitudes throughout history: the conquest, exploitation, occupation and colonisation of a region, the romanticisation and justification of these actions, followed by apathy.

Distorted narratives in the writing of history and selective memory are also the subject of the work *Once We Were Brothers* (#4) in the rear exhibition room. The work displays the phrase ‘Once We Were Brothers’ in Arabic script in blue neon tubes in front of a modern Op Art wallpaper, which is reminiscent of a poster design by Ivan Picelj for the 6th International Graphic Arts Biennial in Ljubljana in 1965. Founded in 1955, the Biennial aimed to bring together art from the East, West and former colonies of Asia and Africa. The neon inscription, on the other hand, refers to the *Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)* founded in Yugoslavia, which sought to initiate an alternative to the prevailing East-West

⁴ Ian Traynor, ‘Trying the tyrant we helped to create’, *The Guardian*, 16.01.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jan/16/milosevictrial> (accessed on 09/09/2025)

conflict. The movement united nations of former European colonies and pursued more intensive exchange and relations – a brotherhood – between Yugoslavia and other states from the African and Asian continent. The colour of the neon lettering is a direct reference to the present: Pantone Reflex Blue – the colour of the European Union flag. It alludes to the refugee movement of 2015/2016, when war refugees from Syria and Afghanistan fled to Europe via the so-called Balkan route. During this period, Europe's borders revealed their harshness: they closed themselves off with illegal pushbacks against people seeking help, and the former idea of 'brotherhood' was nowhere to be found.

In addition, the Arabic lettering and the words 'Once We Were Brothers' also recall the genocide in Srebrenica 30 years ago. One of the greatest war crimes since the end of the Second World War, of which we still know far too little today. Over several days in July 1995, soldiers of the Army of Republika Srpska murdered more than 8,000 mainly male Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians) between the ages of 12 and 77. Preceding the genocide was a growing conflict triggered by the break-up of Yugoslavia and growing nationalist aspirations.

The fourth work in the exhibition ***Anatomy of Speech*** (#3) is dealing with this fairly recent nationalism in former Yugoslav countries, using language that's now often shortened to BKS (for the West Slavic languages Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian). A soprano from a town in Montenegro, where it is said that the people speak the purest language, performs a phono-poetic Dada poem in

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a video. The poem, recited by a professional and trained voice, is based on a speech therapy exercise for treating speech disorders. She is surrounded by illustrations from a historical logopaedic textbook that illustrate the mouth positions for logopaedically correct pronunciation and articulation. The poem sung by the soprano is located on the opposite walls and in its printed form visualises its arrhythmic character. In *Anatomy of Speech*, Čmajčanin uses the Dadaist method of deconstructing conventional language to highlight the absurdity of the ethno-nationalist diversification of the languages of the former Yugoslavia.

With the works shown in the exhibition *Chronopolitical Explorations*, Lana Čmajčanin challenges prevailing hegemonic narratives, reveals the complexity and multi-layered nature of history and its inherent contradictions, and at the same time illustrates how art can help us to understand.

“There is no healing, we have to start from scratch,” states the artist, while trying our best not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

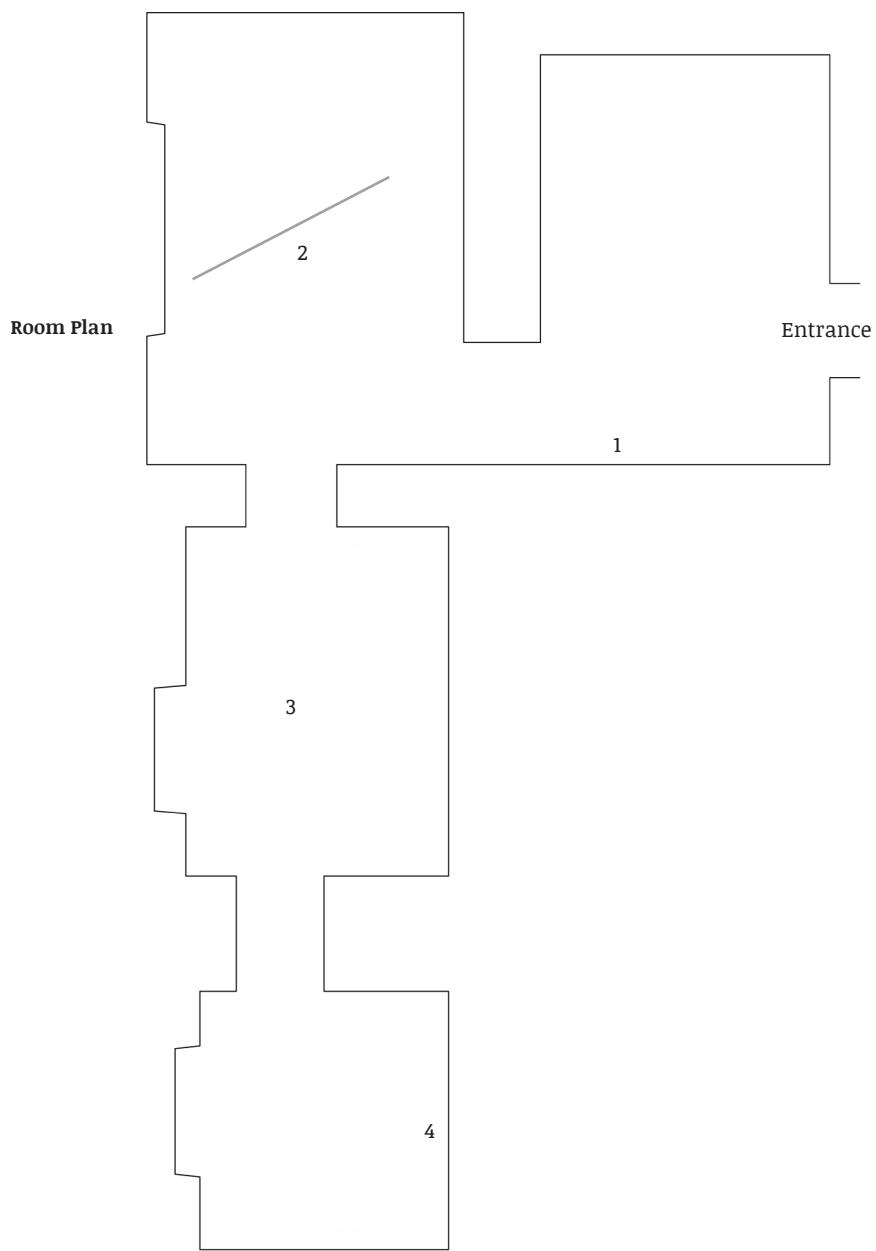
Bettina Siegele

Biography

Lana Čmajčanin born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, holds a Master's degree in sculpture from the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Sarajevo, and is currently pursuing a doctorate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Her multidisciplinary practice spans installations, video, sound, photography, and media art, focusing on geopolitical mapping, social power structures, and the impact of control mechanisms. Lana's work addresses issues of responsibility, manipulation, structural and gendered violence, and the politics of memory. Through extensive research, she examines historical events, cultural narratives, and personal histories, particularly within the Balkans' complex socio-political context. Her art challenges conventional narratives, amplifying women's agency and advocating for marginalized voices. Lana has exhibited internationally at prominent venues including the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Photography & Multimedia Museum, Tbilisi; MAXXI Museum, Rome; and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, among others. Her work has been featured in Manifesta 14, the Venice Biennial, and the Moscow International Biennial. She has received numerous awards, nominations, and scholarships for her contributions to contemporary art.

Biography

www.lanacmajcanin.com



List of Works

1 BALKAN CRUELTY

Wallpaper, color: red, 657,5 x 220 cm, 2020

List of Works

2 DON'T DREAM DREAMS

Installation: LED light, dimmable, wallpaper,
337,5 x 250,9 cm, 2023

3 ANATOMY OF SPEECH

Installation: textile, hd video, digital print,
220 x 496 cm, 2022

4 ONCE WE WERE BROTHERS

Installation: neon light*, dimmable neon sign
transformer, wallpaper, 200 x 66 x 15 cm, 2020

*Courtesy of

KOROŠKA GALERIJA LIKOVNIH UMETNOSTI
MUSEUM OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART
KOROŠKA
SLOVENJ GRADEC, SLOVENIA
inv. no. I 27*

Credits

Credits

Curator: Bettina Siegele

Technical installation and exhibition set-up:
Paul Irmann, Nicolas Rich

Production: Cornelia Reinisch-Hofmann

Exhibition Booklet: Milena Thurner

Exhibition Booklet Editorial: Bettina Siegele & Cornelia Reinisch-Hofmann

Graphic design Booklet: Marille. Büro für Grafik und Text

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The exhibition *Chronopolitical Explorations* was curated especially for the eponymous annual programme 2025 by Bettina Siegele.

Dates

Opening

Dates

Thursday 11.09.2025, 19.00

Welcoming: Sebastian Köck (member of the board)

Introduction: Bettina Siegele

curator's tour with Bettina Siegele

17.09.2025 | 17.30

exhibition tour Art & Coffee

18.10.2025 | 11.30

artist talk with Lana Čmajčanin

PREMIERENTAGE 2025

Current information on the events and outreach in the realm of the exhibition can be found on our website:

www.kuveti.at

Link to the digital version of the **exhibition booklet**:



Link to the **audio text**:



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