



KULOVART

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

A Personal Account of My Work Over the Years

As arts editor of the *LA Weekly* Shana Nys Dambrot wrote about my work, “Interdisciplinary artist Kulov is something of an agent provocateur. Their* work across performance art, public installations, publishing, video, mail art, billboard campaigns and more, repurposes visual strategies of a post-Cold-War youth to insightfully comment on the current state of society and politics — in the art world and beyond. Using style, fashion, commerce, advertising and spectacle, the work often sparks controversy, but always aims for progress toward a greater, more inclusive good.”

I completely agree with Shana — it’s a rather accurate summary of my art practice. Within my creative process, I always try to recycle American popular culture through my own inescapable socialist upbringing — unwittingly approaching every undertaking from a distinctly activist, queer, and anti-institutional perspective. In other words, for me art can be a dramatic medium that can be employed as a lightning rod for social discourse.

When I look back on my work over the years, it can be divided into three different, although invariably connected, artistic periods. The first, best characterized as “Political Activist (and Rebel Artist),” encompasses my work in the 1990s — a time during which I focused on political public art projects under the umbrella name **THE X-GIRLFRIENDS**. Throughout this decade, I produced numerous political campaigns, visual commentaries, mail-art projects and outdoor billboards examining various social and political topics of the time. I tackled freedom of expression, the Gulf War, the Bush administration’s unsuccessful drug policies, separation of church and state, and the Catholic Church’s attitude towards AIDS education, among many others.

This period also includes what I consider an important installation project **Linda (out of context)** at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In this exhibition work, I disrupted, and as a result decontextualized, all of my political public art under THE X-GIRLFRIENDS in order to substantiate an undeniable fact — that the work belongs exclusively in the public sphere rather than in the rarefied atmosphere of the white exhibition cube. I was able to achieve this in part by casting the political T-shirts and visual commentaries in synthetic resin, displaying them on shelves just as Andy Warhol’s Campbell-soup paintings had been originally shown, and thus turning them into unwearable (and unreadable) art objects. In addition, by creating a labyrinth of crowd control stanchions throughout the entire floor of the gallery, I intentionally “manipulated” viewers — stripping them of any potential choice of the order in which to experience the various parts of the installation. The latter, of course, is a direct reference to overt institutional control, be it cultural, financial, governmental, and the like.

For my work throughout this period, I was awarded several grants and fellowships from the Illinois Art Council, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Art Matters Foundation. One of these funding accolades sent me on an exploratory art trip of Europe, and for the next several years I ended up being based out of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This change of locale was actually parallel to a major transformation in my work, which I would later identify as “Gender Warrior (and Radical Faerie)” — a transitional chapter in my art practice, during which I drifted



away from visual public art and turned to writing and performance. Here, I experimented with “gender-fuck” drag and tackled much more queer-specific issues such as sexism within the gay community, as well as the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) U.S. military policy. My involvement with the Radical Faerie movement at the time, particularly the EuroFaeries, permeated throughout this body of work and also included some large-scale ritualistic performances for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

The last significant phase in my art practice up to this point has been the creation of the unapologetically queer (and even trans-positive) performance art character **Malgorzata Romanska**, which I developed in Los Angeles in the mid-2000s, a few years after I had relocated back to the United States. The main concept behind this self-made, wealthy art collector and philanthropist is to give financial power and agency to a fictitious individual who would normally be considered an outcast, or even a clown, and thus expected to exist and operate only within the periphery of influential social and cultural circles, if at all. Then through interactive performances, track how the public, and more specifically players in the art world, would respond to her. For close to a decade, I embodied and lived as Malgorzata Romanska for days at a time, and attended numerous fundraising auctions and art fairs throughout the U.S. and Europe. As her, I also bid at those auctions and purchased contemporary art from galleries at the art fairs, intentionally blurring the lines between performance and reality.

In order for the character not to be dismissed as mere entertainment, I was diligent in building every detail of her world — from a fully-branded, multinational corporation deliberately named MRIndustries (with a website, business cards, 800-number, and personal assistants/chauffeurs) to an official corporate statement on philanthropy. In addition, Malgorzata Romanska’s ubiquitous presence at VIP previews and vernissages was strategically reinforced by her company’s official “corporate sponsorship” of those events, listed together with the likes of financial institutions such as Citigroup, Chase and the *Financial Times* through full-page advertisements in auction and fair catalogs.

By examining art philanthropy through performance art, I was fascinated with the shift in power dynamics this multi-level “performativity” brought to the surface of somewhat flashy and seemingly progressive (while profoundly conservative) art-collecting world. During my many performances as Malgorzata Romanska over the years, the dichotomy of palpable discomfort (and even resentment) mixed with awe and intrigue from the art world was both thrilling and exhausting for me. But in the process, I was energized by the ability to be able to change, even in a small way, people’s perception of what a person of financial independence, and with social clout, “should” be and “should” look like.

As Los Angeles cultural writer Ezraha Jean Black stated in an essay about my work, “My impression is that Malgorzata Romanska (and her multinational corporation MRIndustries) cannot be isolated from the entirety of Kulov’s work. It is not so much that it is the final or penultimate evolutionary stage or iteration of a specific category of performance or political engagement; rather, their long career of social and performance work encompasses many, if not most, of the ideas and motives that are brought to a kind of zenith in the character’s actions, performances and documents. This encompassing is operational from the most fundamental aspects of the work (its terms, conditions and definitions) to its larger critique of the social, political-economic and cultural structures with which Malgorzata Romanska (along with her ‘corporate/philanthropic’ identity) intersects and interacts.”

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In the spring of 2018, as I was going through my work for my retrospective artist’s book *Kulov 90–15*, I realized that a lot of the issues tackled in it were unfortunately still topical, under the current (at the time) U.S. political climate and White House administration. It seemed as though the United States hadn’t really moved further at all as a country in the last twenty-five years — the topics were the same and just the name of the players (or politicians) had changed. And my art practice since that time simply intended to expose that very dynamic through re-presenting (and re-working) some of my older projects.



Hence right before the 2018 mid-term election, I re-presented my **Quotes** project at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), along with a larger public campaign around the city of L.A., with the goal of encouraging people, and especially other artists, to vote. Throughout 2019 and 2020, I took the spirit of my **Hey Saylor/Lift The Ban!** project, dealing with the DADT policy from the 1990s, and re-structured it for a visual campaign called **BANd Together!**, which brought attention to, as well as aimed to end, the transgender ban in the U.S. military imposed by the Trump administration. In addition, on Election Day in 2020 I released my very first photo-based edition entitled **The Equality Series**. The project adapts one of my early-1990's political visual commentary statements *Exploit = Liberate* as a starting point and builds upon it by adding a couple of more such critical, yet ambiguous, declarations, with the hint "a public service message" appearing under each one of them. I plan on expanding these series by continuing to add more such "equality" statements. And during 2021 and 2022, I started writing again as my performance-art character Malgorzata Romanska, culminating in a collection of cultural and political essays entitled **The East, The West and The Restless**, which merge the performative, the narrative and the critical together in an unique blend that makes art theory more accessible to a mainstream art audience. It was released as my third artist's book in November of 2022.

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My creative process has always been to identify a social injustice or hypocrisy, then develop a visual or performance project aimed at exposing it and possibly finding solutions to obstruct it. I continuously champion issues of the underdog or the underrepresented community, while approach each undertaking from a distinctly activist, queer, and anti-institutional perspective.

*I identify as Gender Nonconforming and prefer the pronouns they/them/their.

exploit = liberate
a public service message