

Art in America

## DIGITAL SCULPTOR

**Emerging from explorations of online databases and digital imagery, the mercurial art of Aleksandra Domanović tracks visions of the future from socialist Belgrade to contemporary Hollywood.**

View of  
Aleksandra  
Domanović's  
Installation  
"Things to Come,"  
2014, UV flatbed  
prints on polyester,  
7 panels, each  
approx. 25 by  
18 feet; at the  
Gallery of Modern  
Art, Glasgow.  
Images this article  
courtesy Tanya  
Leighton, Berlin.

**CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW**  
Works by  
Aleksandra  
Domanović in the  
2015 Triennial:  
"Surround  
Audience," at  
the New Museum,  
New York, through  
May 24.

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critic and the author  
of *The Artist's House:  
From Workplace to  
Artwork* (Sternberg  
Press, 2014).



**by Kirsty Bell**

Art In America, April 2015

# Tanya Leighton

THERE WAS NO Internet when Aleksandra Domanović was born in Yugoslavia in 1981, but a decade later, as the vast system of global networks that we know today was beginning to develop, there was no Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia's domain name, .yu, was registered in 1987, but within only four years the country ceased to exist as such.

This inverse alignment of a disintegrating nation with the establishment of a vast virtual territory is the subject of Domanović's film *From yu to me* (2013–14). Adopting an ostensibly documentary format, the half-hour work is built around Domanović's interviews with two women who were instrumental in establishing the domain, and thus bringing the wide-reaching potential of the Internet to Yugoslavia. Savvy, well-educated, and academically connected, Borka Jerman Blažič and Mirjana Tasić describe the technological developments of the 1970s and '80s and the political wrangling involved in setting up the domain at a time when Yugoslavia was a "no-man's land, just in front of and not behind the Iron Curtain." Nationalist conflicts, Cold War politics and technological advances continued to intertwine as the Balkan region began to splinter along ethnic lines. The newly independent countries established their own domains—.rs for Serbia, .me for Montenegro—and eventually "the .yu lived in a virtual Yugoslav-

via." It was deleted in 2010 but continues to exist now as a virtual artifact, having been acquired by the Museum of Yugoslav History (after the precedent of the Museum of Modern Art's acquisition of the @ symbol in 2010.)

While *From yu to me* relates the difficult birth and strange destiny of .yu, it also gives a portrait of the people behind this crucial development. "Thank goodness I did that," says Jerman Blažič. "We got the World Wide Web a year later, and the Web created a boom!" Interspersed footage from Slovenian and Serbian television of the time shows clunky desktop computers, black-and-white screens and banks of machinery from a decidedly pre-Web era. We see people plugging in cables, typing on keyboards and maintaining hardware. A vista emerges not only of antiquated technological trappings but also of people both responsible for and dependent on technology, people whose ordinary lives were subsequently affected by the violent breakup of their country.

These two types of visual material—original interviews and historical footage—are the meat and bones of documentary-making. But Domanović undermines her account by introducing other types of filmic material that deviate from the documentary genre. Outtakes from the interviews appear, in which peripheral details or even the artist herself can be seen, distracting us from the film's ostensible subject. We also see grainy black-and-white footage of a strange robotic hand, shown gripping objects and performing various tasks. Known as the "Belgrade Hand," this prosthesis was designed by Serbian scientist Rajko Tomović in 1963 as the first touch-sensitive robotic hand with five fingers. Its appearance interrupts the film's linear narrative, yet enhances the impression of an Eastern Bloc country that stood at the forefront of technological innovation, envisioning a future not only fully networked but also populated by cyborgs. Like errant footnotes, these interruptions suggest the malleability of the documentary format in the era of self-construed Wikipedia authority and YouTube broadcasting. Can there be a definitive history of such complex matters as the establishment of the Internet or the Yugoslav wars? Or does this film rather plot the pattern of its author's own subjective interests?

DOMANOVIĆ BEGAN studying architecture in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2000, but moved to Vienna a year later to pursue graphic design at the University of Applied Arts. It was during this time that she began to make what she considers her earliest artworks: animated GIFs posted online and websites populated by hyperlinks. Her video *Anbedonia* (2007) reconfigures Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* by replacing the visuals with stock photography and video from the Getty Images database, found by keyword searches and tagged word for word to the film's soundtrack. This random stream of oblique images transforms the film's psychological dialogue into an absurd sequence of signs, illustrating the reductive codes of the stock image industry.

In 2008 Domanović devised the website [www.hottest-tocoldest.com](http://www.hottest-tocoldest.com), a constantly updated list of the world's capital cities ordered by temperature—a deceptively simple gesture that attempted, she told me during a recent studio visit, to use weather as a medium for representing global complexities and natural forces with what appears to be a neat and logical system. In 2006 she joined the collaborative blog VVORK, a rolling archive of posted artworks that functioned as a shared public sketchbook and amassed over 5,000 entries before its end in 2012. Such projects, made with and existing solely on the Internet, used not only the Web's potential to produce and display work but also its capacity to consume all that is external to it—from artworks to classic cinema, from weather patterns to imagery tagged by subject—until nothing remains outside.



Three stills from  
*From yu to me*,  
2013–14, HD  
video, 35 minutes.





# Tanya Leighton

Conditioned explicitly by the terms and aesthetics of digital media, Domanović's work employs the Web as source, tool, medium and organizing principle. It wasn't until 2009 that Domanović, a self-described "Internet artist," began to make work that exists beyond the computer screen. On being asked to participate in an exhibition of Internet artists, she decided to use the ink-jet printer as a logical first step from Internet art to sculpture. She created a series of stacked columns of A4 paper, each sheet of which was printed full bleed to create images visible on the sides of the stacks. In addition to being materially present in the exhibition space, the works were available as PDFs for anyone with the stamina and ink supply to print a document of approximately 10,000 pages.

The first paper stacks, called *Untitled (30.III.2010)*, were made to commemorate the deletion of the .yu domain in 2010. The images faintly visible on their sides depict flares set off by rioters in Belgrade's soccer stadium during xenophobic brawling between

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Detail of *Untitled (30.III.2010)*, 2010, inkjet print on A4 paper in three stacks, each approx. 31½ by 8¼ by 11¼ inches.

Serbian and Bosnian fans. Aside from this specific geopolitical event, however, the paper stacks also allude to recent art history, from Minimalism's slick monoliths to the stack pieces of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (from whom Domanović borrows the title conventions for her sculptures). Whereas Gonzalez-Torres's works were repeatedly depleted through the course of their exhibition as visitors took copies from the stack of printed images, Domanović's sculptures are instead created through a cumulative process of physical layering that produces the image (an effect which, interestingly, prefigured the layering function of the 3-D powder-bed printers Domanović went on to use). The columns of paper have become a signature form for the artist; their simple, rigid format can absorb any kind of content.

DOMANOVIĆ'S INITIAL forays into physical objects have continued in subsequent sculptural works, but her practice nevertheless remains conditioned by digital technologies. "The Future Was at Her Fingertips," on view in 2013 at Tanya Leighton Gallery—her first solo exhibition in Berlin, where she now lives—investigated feminism and technological development, dual interests that she began exploring in *From you to me*. The Belgrade Hand, an infiltrator in that film, took a central role here. Four 3-D printed replicas were displayed either on Perspex plinths or protruding from the wall, along with a digital image showing the complex mechanical workings of the hand. In lieu of a press release, a typed timeline accompanied the exhibition. The lead item, dated 1843, read: "Ada Lovelace writes what is considered the first computer program," and the list went on to cover technological advances, various milestones of women's rights and other key

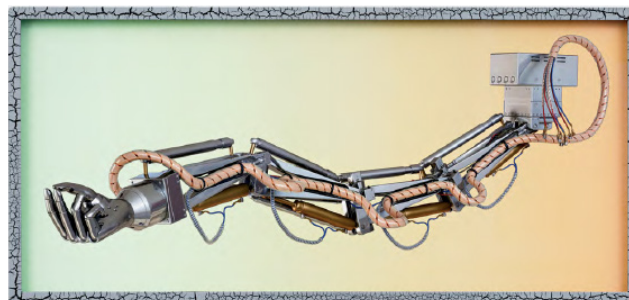
political events. Mixed in were bits of trivia: "1984: Jivamukti Yoga is founded in New York" or "2006: Spam intensifies to 96% of all emails." The timeline appeared to follow an obscure and subjective logic, like the results of an hour spent Googling a tangential range of interests. As such, it seemed to plot Domanović's own obsessions and thus became a kind of portrait.

This brings another Felix Gonzalez-Torres series to mind—his "portraits" of people in which a frieze of dates and descriptions painted on a wall portray a life as a sequence of moments, both personal and public. While in the 1990s Gonzalez-Torres emphasized the relevance of subjectivity in the making of art and the construction of identity, some 20 years later Domanović extracts a thread of personal significance from the mass of intertwining events that can be called up by a search engine, memory's more comprehensive successor. Hence Tito's death in 1980 is recorded alongside the commercial introduction of the ink-jet printer in 1984. The final entry in the timeline is a prognosis: "2099: Most conscious beings lack a permanent physical form." Past and future collapse into a constantly modifiable present, symbolized by the cyborg presence of the Belgrade Hand.

The sociopolitical narratives that underlie the high-tech appearance of Domanović's work suggest that it is rooted in a process of research, not unlike the more anthropologically oriented work of artists such as Mariana Castillo Deball, Simon Starling and Goshka Macuga. While Castillo Deball and Starling use physical artifacts to help untangle the various contradictory strands of history and fiction that constitute meaning, Domanović investigates the history of technology, in which something as immaterial as a deleted domain name may be considered an artifact.

# Tanya Leighton

*Belgrade Hand on Minsky Tentacle Arm, 2013, inkjet print, wood frame with Soft-Touch finish and museum glass, 32½ by 71½ inches.*



In the exhibition "Things to Come" at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow in 2014, a sequel to "The Future Was at Her Fingertips," she turned her attention to popular science-fiction films, but again considered this cultural material in sociopolitical terms, focusing specifically on portrayals of women. Sheets of transparent polyester hanging in the museum's Neo-Classical atrium were each printed with over-life-size 3-D renderings of futuristic machinery, robots, costumes and high-tech props plucked from movies such as *Prometheus*, *Demon Seed*, *Alien* and *Gravity*. The walk-through installation seemed to manifest the Internet's interlayering of multiple windows, like a browser where threads of interest unfurl in various directions but do not merge into a synthesis.

The feminist link tying these images together is not immediately apparent; it begins to emerge only through a clue: superimposed on the glass hood of the Med Pod from *Prometheus* is a 1938 rejection letter from Walt Disney Productions, informing a certain Miss Mary Ford that "women do not do any of the creative work" in the studios' cartoon production. "The only work open to women consists of tracing the characters on clear celluloid sheets," it states. That the letter is illustrated with cartoons from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) drives the point home: both the flawless Snow White and the demonic Evil Queen are creations of an all-male creative team.

The third and final installment in what Domanović sees as a sculptural trilogy debuted in New York in February at the New Museum Triennial, and turns to medicine for a more personal take on science and role models. Three pairs of 3-D printed arms emerge from a wall to represent a conflation of body and machine. One hand merges into a transducer; the second set of hands is studded with teeth; the third pair is interlocked and held high, like the freshly cleaned hands of a surgeon entering the operating room. These substitute arms are enclosed in a kind of quarantine behind transparent PVC curtains, printed with patterned images: cascades of red blood cells;

krill crustaceans, which make up the largest biomass on earth, twice that of humans; and ovoid krill oil capsules, a source of Omega 3 and antioxidants, together evoke the transformation of living creatures into digestible pill form.

The feminist line here is more subtle than it was on the timeline or in the Disney letter; it is connected to the artist's personal history (her mother was a radiologist, her grandmother was a dentist). However, it also has to do with the precarious ground that medical science treads when using nature for its own ends. One of the inspirations behind this third part of the trilogy was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot's 2010 book about the African-American woman whose cells were harvested by her doctor in 1951, unbeknownst to her, when she was diagnosed with cancer. While Lacks died shortly thereafter, a genetic anomaly in her cells kept them alive in lab conditions beyond a few divisions, which led to their mass production and use across the world in biomedical research as the HeLa immortal cell line. Only 20 years later did Lacks's family discover what had happened and seek compensation.

This story balances on the delicate edge between progress and biological integrity, evoking the ethical consequences of decisions made in the name of science. Such gray areas characterize many kinds of technological developments: the Internet's two sides of subjective potential and commercial exploitation, and the economic benefits for some and drawbacks for others when robots take over manual labor. A recurrent image in Domanović's work seems to signify the ambiguous value of scientific advancement: the apple. A contemporary trademark of desirable gadgetry, it also represents original sin. While a poisoned apple almost put an end to Snow White, it purportedly did end the life of computer scientist and WWII codebreaker Alan Turing, who is believed to have committed suicide by eating an apple laced with cyanide. In her complex works, Domanović articulates shades of our ambivalence from within, to highlight the subversive potential of the technologies we live with. ○

*Opposite, From you to me (detail), 2013-14.*



Before, in Yugoslav times, we had the European Academic Network.

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