

Mousse Magazine

This Is Happening: Aleksandra Domanović

Aleksandra Domanović interviewed by Chiara Moioli



Aleksandra Domanović, *Turbo Sculpture* (still), 2010. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

"Frozen, golden in that light
Movement, open just a slight
Movement, and you brought me back to life"
—Henry Green, "Aiir," from *Another Light* (London: Akira
Records, 2018)

I'm holding Aleksandra Domanović's iPhone in my hand, its camera pointed at a pedestal on which is printed a series of lines forming a grid. Thus framed, the pattern becomes a voice—its tone warped into a metallic grimace by the device's high-pitched speaker—yelling at me, echoing in the Sala del Parnaso at GAM – Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Milano: "Why aren't you working?" On top of the pedestal, seemingly talking, is Medardo Rosso's *La Portinaia* (The Concierge, 1883-1884), the central object of interest in Domanović's latest project, *The Falseness of Holes* (2019). Winner of the Arnaldo Pomodoro Prize for Sculpture, Domanović has conceived a sculpture consisting of an app that, dialoguing

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with *La Portinaia*, is composed of different environments accessible through augmented reality (AR).¹ When she first visited Milan, the artist knew almost nothing about Rosso and his advocacy for “impressionism in sculpture.” But encountering his work at GAM blew her away: Rosso innovated many sculptural techniques, including considering the photographs he took of each work as others versions of it. Domanović immediately recognized a kindred spirit in Rosso, as she too has developed an artistic practice by working in a “prosumer” (producer/consumer) perspective—appropriating, remixing, and reworking heterogeneous materials in endless configurations. The story behind the portrait of La Portinaia—a peculiar one, involving a creative crisis (hint: “Why aren’t you working?”) and an allegorical exorcism—ignited Domanović’s curiosity.

In the following conversation, held during the installation of *The Falseness of Holes* at GAM, the artist describes the genesis of her project, including the narrative linking Rosso and his *Portinaia*; tackles the idea of what a sculpture can be today; recalls the amazement of her first time IRC chatting, and how her relationship to the internet (and her website) has changed over the years to follow the evolution of her practice; and describes how her work ethic with this project is taking her back to the tropes she used to explore, but under a new light. Impressionism, after all, was all about the light.

CHIARA MOIOLI: The title of the work you specifically conceived for the Sala del Parnaso at GAM – Galleria d’Arte Moderna di Milano, *The Falseness of Holes* (2019), was inspired by Medardo Rosso’s description of “impressionistic” sculpture in an interview to *The Daily Mail* at the dawn of the twentieth century: “A work of sculpture is not made to be touched, but to be seen at such or such distance, according to the effect intended by the artist. Our hand does not permit us to bring consciousness to the values, the tones, the colors—in a word, the life of the thing.”² Materiality loses its central role for Rosso, who likewise aimed for “impressionism in sculpture” by increasingly incorporating photography into his practice. I definitely perceive a correlation between your work and his description, as well as his progressive inclusion of virtual (or augmented) reality in everyday life. Would you recount the genesis of the project, starting with your first encounter with Rosso?

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ: Actually my first encounter was a virtual one. And it wasn’t with Rosso, it was with Sala del Parnaso. In preparation for the exhibition, I looked at images of the room on the GAM’s website, which has a 360-degree photograph of the space with 3D navigation. One can move around and zoom in and out. It already

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looked like VR. What I couldn't see online, but later realized when I visited the museum, was that all the surfaces in the room are hand-painted to resemble diverse kinds of marble. It's trompe-l'oeil, not the real thing. So in addition to my virtual experience, even the physical reality of the room seemed to be a simulation.

I'd never heard of Rosso before, but during the same site visit to GAM I saw his sculptures in the room right next to the Sala del Parnaso, including *La Portinaia*. (We didn't have to move her very far!) I probably wouldn't have paid so much attention to Rosso if Lisa Le Feuvre, who was part of the group I was visiting with, hadn't been so excited to see his work there. I got the sense that this artist was special. Once I got home I did more research on Rosso and realized just how amazing he was. I was stunned to hear that, among other highly innovative methodologies, Rosso used photography not only as a tool to document his own sculptures, but also as a means of sculptural production. He described photographs of his work as versions of his sculptures. For instance he'd make one in clay, one in wax, one in bronze, and one in photography. I see his photographs as augmenting his sculptures.

CM: While Rosso's sculpture is physically present, your work isn't—it's accessible through smartphones and tablets following the download of a specifically developed app. Your immersive environments enable different interactions with viewers such that they are open to endless configurations, just like the "impressionist sculpture" advocated by Rosso aimed to re-create the suggestive yet momentary life of a first impression registered by the human eye, not the hand.



Aleksandra Domanović, *Anhedonia* (still), 2007. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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What led you to create an “impressionistic” work, and what compels you about it?

AD: According to Rosso, a sculpture is not finished but “trapped” when kept in one form. Photographic technologies of the day allowed him to transcend the physical element of sculpture, to find new ways and new versions of capturing the work without recourse to the “original.” Unlike many artists of his time, Rosso was not devoted to the auratic object, but rather was engaged in the richness of reproduction, repetition, and variation. As early as 1907 he wrote: “The less objective a thing is, the more beautiful it is; the less one feels the material, the more emotion it arouses—the more it makes you feel, makes you think.”³ I went through the available sculptures in GAM’s collection and was drawn to *La Portinaia* in part because of how she looks—she’s this grumpy old lady, not your typical bust—but what I really loved was the story behind this statue. The woman portrayed was actually Rosso’s concierge when he was living in Milan. In his later years, when he resided very close to GAM, he had a creative crisis: he was walking around the studio unable to do anything, while his *portinaia* was walking around the building on her rounds. She’d pass his studio and scold him: “Why aren’t you working?” One day he got so pissed off, he thought that maybe she was the reason behind his creative block. So he got a chunk of clay, went downstairs to the box where she sat, and modeled her. After hours of an intense staring exchange (Rosso said his eyes were riveted on her and the clay, and she was looking back just as intensely) he felt like he had “exorcised” her from his system, and thus could work again.

Just as I am drawn to immateriality and what Rosso called “impressionist sculpture,” I am as well to Karan Barad’s notion that “matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers.”⁴ Rosso literally had to press *La Portinaia* with his fingers out of clay to get out of his creative crisis. It doesn’t get more material than that! Rosso once said, “How many ‘great masters’ would be unknown and would have not produced at all if the ancients had not preceded them? And also if Egyptians did not know about the falseness of holes, of emptiness, have not Romans or Greeks perhaps forgotten this unit and their works seem not bigger than the Egyptians’.” That’s where I took my title from. I was also asking myself what he meant—what the “false holes” are in our present moment.

There’s something special with Milan and its culture of having concierges in residential buildings. The entryways are so important—even the building where I’m staying now has a *portinaia* sitting in a little office. So yes, I loved that story, Rosso’s relation to that woman, and the fact that he generally made sculptures of real people.

CM: How would you define sculpture today, in relation to the available technologies and their means of accessibility, fruition, and distribution?

AD: Rosso said his photographs were versions of his sculptures; Marcel Duchamp said a readymade is a sculpture; and Nancy Holt declared that a view can be an artwork. I say this app is a sculpture, as I call myself a sculptor. The paper stacks that I make are printed-out PDFs, and for me the PDF is just as much of a sculpture when it’s on the computer as when I print it out. Maybe it’s about the potential

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(Above and below) Aleksandra Domanović, *The Falseness of Holes* (stills from the app), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro



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of becoming. The app is about opening passages, going through these portals/holes and walking around in different environments. It's about moving in space and thus connected to the actual scale and dimensions of Sala del Parnaso. Every time the viewer comes back to *La Portinaia* she scolds, "Why aren't you working!?" So you have to work for it, to move through the environment in order to keep her happy, or at least keep her from shouting at you.

CM: At the start of your career you and Oliver Laric, Christoph Priglinger, and Georg Schnitzer cofounded VVORK (2006-2012), an influential artist-run group blog of the Surfing Club era. Especially at the beginning you worked in a prosumer perspective—for instance remaking films with found imagery (as in *Anhedonia* [2007]). Can you connect your practice today to that earlier, appropriative way of working? What was your relationship to the internet then? I'm curious about your first memory of surfing the web, too.

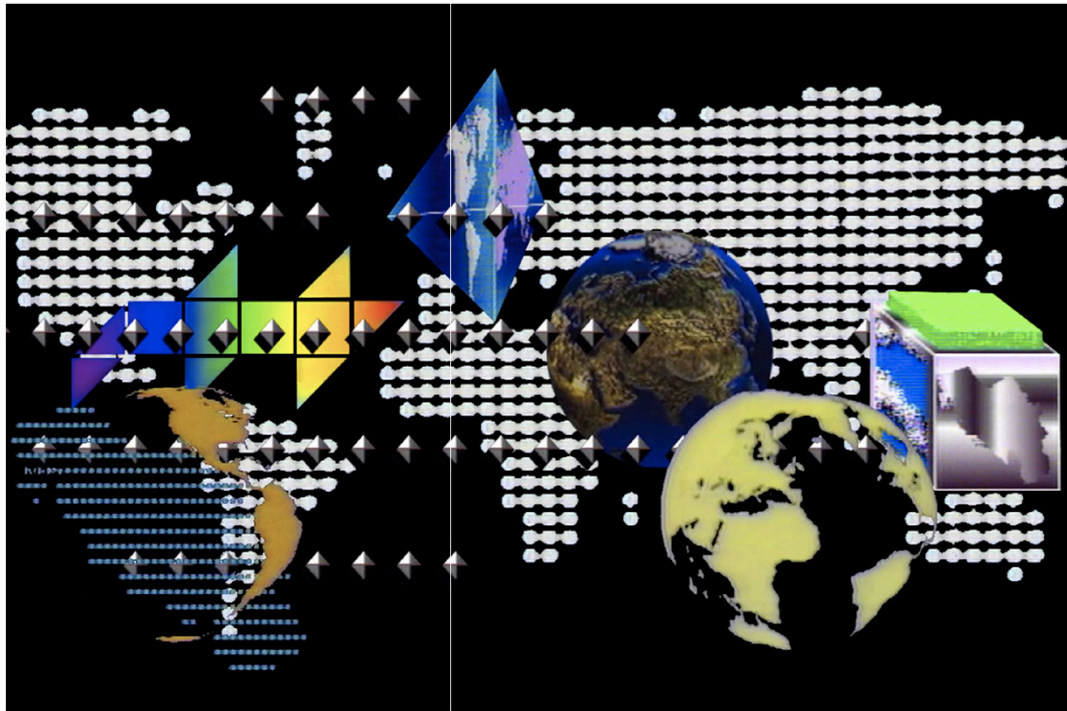
AD: I don't recall my first memory of surfing the web, but I remember the first time I had an IRC chat—that was a big deal because I was chatting with someone from England and I was like, "Oh my God, this is happening. This is a real person!" I was in Slovenia in a youth club that had an internet connection. I was about ten, and my older brother hooked me up on IRC. People were so friendly on the internet back in the day! In 2006 the internet was still a great place to be in terms of how people behaved on it and how one could connect. It was an incredibly generative environment, an era of blogs. Information online was not yet organized in an immediately accessible way, so one had to find it and filter it by oneself. It was exciting, like exploring a new frontier.

Together with friends from university we started making VVORK.com, which was a blog about contemporary art, but none of us was an artist, at least not yet. That was my start, exploring art online by myself, researching, curating. Like all artists from the Surfing Club era I started working with content sourced online because that was what was there. I was more or less reacting to my environment and what my online peers were doing.

Then I started *19:30*, a project about the musical history of television news in former Yugoslavia, and I got stuck, as the material I needed just didn't exist online. So I traveled the whole former country and gathered it, organized it, and put it online. That was the first time I had to go away from the keyboard to make art. The second milestone for me was the 2009 exhibition *AFK Sculpture Park*, curated by Dan Keller and Nik Kosmas. It was a challenge: they asked a bunch of internet artists to make real-life sculptures.⁵ That was the first time I made an object, which was a stack of paper with images printed on the borders. It was also around the time when .yu, the top-level country-code domain for Yugoslavia, was scheduled to be deleted from the web, so I took the chance to commemorate that and made a kind of monument to this born-and-near-deceased digital entity. That work was the PDF I mentioned earlier, which exists in two states: the printed stack and the PDF, its digital variation.

CM: Actively working on the internet and investigating its vicissitudes, you used to own an international array of domain names: aleksandrromanovic.sk, aleksandrromanovic.rs,

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Aleksandra Domanović, *19:30* (still), 2010-2011. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

aleksandradoanovic.si, aleksandradoanovic.eu. The press release for your 2012 show at Kunsthalle Basel, *From you to me*, stated that a visit to your website was more productive than a studio visit.⁶ Checking your website today, we are welcomed by a huge yellow lettering reading "OOF" on a stark blue background. Does this choice reflect a change in your perspective over the means of distribution of your work online?

AD: *OOF*—it's a work by Ed Ruscha. It's an interjection in comics, like, "Oof, this is hard." Because it's hard, I can't do this anymore. When I started my website, my work was mostly sourced online and made for the online context, and the website was there to show it and to dialogue with my friends and co-artists. Then I started making a lot of objects, real-life objects, and it became important to have good photography and this and that—it was expensive and hard and it just wasn't the same. The website became a promotional tool, whereas before it was a space for showing work. My work ethic with this project, *The Falseness of Holes*, it's taking me back. I feel like a new door is opening for me as well.

CM: Works like *Turbo Sculpture* (2010-2013), exploring the role of Western celebrity sculptures in the Balkans; *19:30* (2010-2011), collecting the tunes used to introduce the news during the years of Yugoslavia's dismantling; *Hotel Marina Luciča* (2012), based on your childhood memories of a vacation right before the conflict in Croatia broke out; *From you to me* (2013-2014), surveying the unfinished business of the internet in the former Yugoslavian region; or the series

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investigating the origin of the Belgrade Hand, all exude a fascination with untold, obscure stories driven entirely by your personal history and provenance. In a way, you act like a documentarist with the twist of an intimist detective. What fostered your imagination, and how would you describe your approach to such intricate topics?

AD: This autobiographical approach, I just can't help it. It happens that way, you know? It's not a strategy; it comes directly from me. The obsession with ex-Yugoslavia comes from the fact that the country fell apart when I was ten years old and a bit too young to understand the reasons behind the breakup.

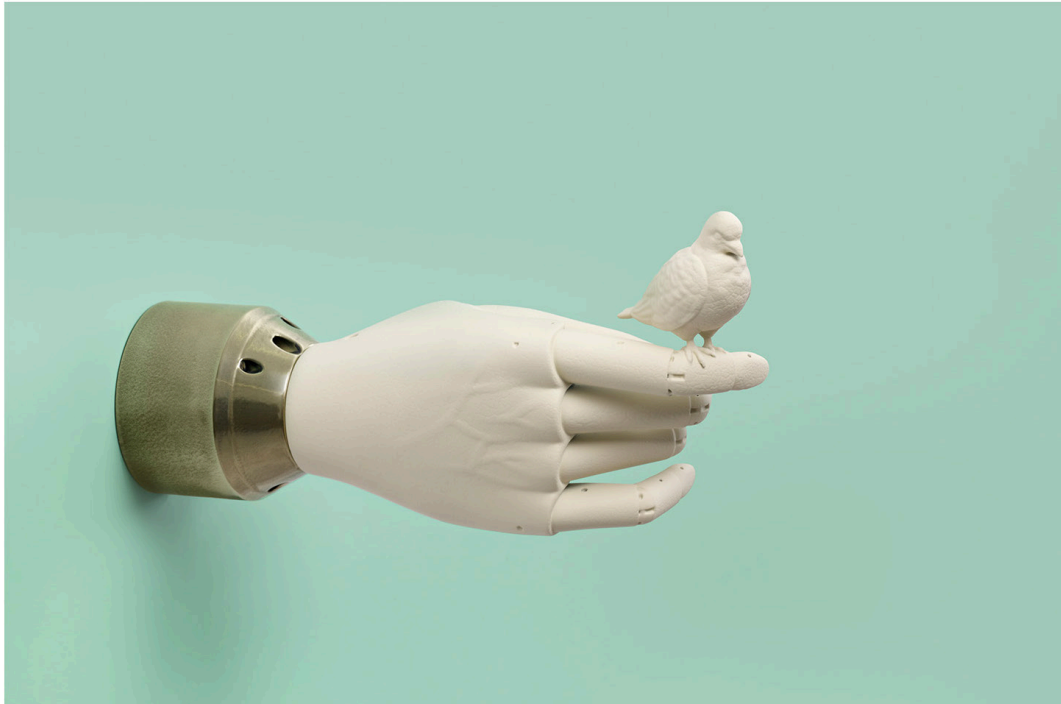
CM: Another recurrent theme in your practice are links between sci-fi, technology, and the representation of women. Has this something to do with your background, too?

AD: The sci-fi elements come from my mother's love for sci-fi cinema. She took me to so many movies. From *Star Wars* to *The Fly*—I saw it all on the big screen as a very small child. Those were different times in a different country where you could take little kids to such films. My older brother got me into computers and games. My parents are both medical doctors, so diverse themes on science, including genetic editing, were never far from the dinner table when I was growing up. My practice has long been occupied with the ways in which women's labor has been overlooked or obscured in favor of heroic, masculine narratives. I'm thinking here especially of the purposeful erasure of Rosalind Franklin in the story of the discovery of DNA— a reference that has figured in some of my recent work.

CM: You also developed an interest in genetic engineering, which I think is particularly detectable in *Bulls without Horns* (2016). Can you talk about the evolution of your practice, interests, and working methods in the last few years?

AD: *Bulls without Horns* was a larger project that I started in 2016. I was following the buzz about CRISPR⁷ at the time but was not as interested in the technology as in the fact that two female scientists were paving the way. I'm talking about Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier who made the key breakthrough in the discovery of the genetic editing tool in 2012. A few years later I was at a CRISPR conference in New York and heard about the technology already being used to dehorn cattle. That is how I came to Alison Van Eenennaam an animal geneticist from the University of California at Davis; her project was the creation of the first two genetically dehorned bulls. I traveled to UC Davis to photograph Alison and the bulls and I also made a series of sculptures on the topic. Working with a scientist was fascinating for me. I had a residency in Los Angeles last year, so I was able to go back to Davis and monitor the development of the project and even witness the birth of the offspring of one of these hornless bulls. I got to talk to Van Eenennaam more, and she told me about an unrealized project of hers, which is something I would like to work with in the future.

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Aleksandra Domanović, *Little Sister II*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin



Aleksandra Domanović, *From you to me* (still), 2013-2014. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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Notes

[1] In Domanović's words: "The technology I am using is called augmented reality, but an accurate description of the project would be "mixed reality.""

[2] Medardo Rosso, "Impressionism in Sculpture: An Explanation," *The Daily Mail*, October 17, 1907, reprinted in *Mostra di Medardo Rosso 1858–1928* (Milan: Palazzo della Permanente, 1979), 68–70.

[3] Sharon Hecker; Tamara H Schenkenberg; Jodi Hauptman; Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* (St. Louis, MO: Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2018).

[4] Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (quod.lib.umich.edu., 2012).

[5] See: http://archive.rhizome.org/artbase/55583/www.vvork.com/index.html?page_id=17100.

[6] "A visit to her website aleksandradomanovic.com is much more worthwhile and informative than a visit to her studio in Berlin." See: <https://www.kunsthallebasel.ch/en/exhibition/from-yu-to-me-2/>.

[7] Read more at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CRISPR>.

Aleksandra Domanović (b. 1981, Novi Sad, SFR Yugoslavia; relocated to Slovenia in 1984) lives and works in Berlin. Selected solo exhibitions include *Untitled (In My Feelings)*, MOCA Cleveland (2017); *Kalbträgerin*, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, Switzerland (2018); *Votives*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2017); and *Bulls without Horns*, Tanya Leighton, Berlin (2016). Recent group shows include *Stumbling through the Uncanny Valley: Sculpture and Self in the Age of Computer Generated Imagery*, Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv (2019); *Computer Grrrls*, La Gaîté Lyrique, Paris, and MU, Eindhoven (2019); *Time, Forward!*, V-A-C Foundation, Venice (2019); *The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics*, New Museum, New York (2019); *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today*, ICA, Boston (2018); *I Was Raised on the Internet*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018); *Artificial Tears*, MAK – Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna (2017); *Hybrid Layers*, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe (2017); *Emotional Supply Chains*, Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2016); *Electronic Superhighway*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2016).

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