

Crochet Crazy:

A New York Artist proves that the craft isn't just for Grannies any more!

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It is high noon in Manhattan's crowded Union Square, and I am surrounded by hundreds of strangers, any one of whom can tell with only a moment's inspection that I am just about naked. Aside from my skivvies and a pair of wool socks, all that stands between my skin and New York City is a layer of camouflage crochet lacy enough to look right through. And because it's fluorescent green and orange, I doubt it's helping me blend in. Luckily, though, it covers my face.

Hundreds of breaths — several hours' worth — have condensed on the fabric pulled tightly over my head like a ski mask without holes. Between the sweatey threads of crocheted yarn, I can see out, barely, to the sodden square. I am lucky it's warmed up some this weekend, though the snow has yielded to a silvery mist of raindrops that slide right past the jumpsuit's twisted loops to prick my shoulders, chest, belly, legs. As I move, the suit stretches into a new skin, every part of my body in tension with every other. I'm wound up, an elastic being, a human sculpture, faceless, and at the same time, turning heads all around me. And I'm not even the art piece. Or so says my creator, Agata Olek.

For Olek, 29, the real art is the observer — so although I am "performing" her piece *Thank You For Your Visit, Have a Nice Day* in NYC's Art in Odd Places festival, it is I, hiding behind a crocheted scrim, who am being treated to a show.



Above: Views from *Thank You for Your Visit*. Photo Courtesy Agata Oleksiak

The next morning, when I sit down with Olek to share a bottle of wine and talk about the performance, she elaborates: getting behind the fabric, peering out, watching everyone's reactions, Olek assures me, *I was the one in the audience.*

"I grew up in a place where everyone was white, Polish and Catholic," she says. "I was the weirdo. Then I create these pieces that totally cover the whole body. Once you camouflage something, you make it invisible. But these colors and forms I choose pop in your face." This confrontation allows Olek to put her viewers on the spot, and to subject their responses to scrutiny from behind an anonymous mask.

"My art is about the deconstruction of personality, but also, hyper-personality. If you're different, you're hypervisible."

Even on a normal day, Olek is hypervisible. Her handmade, ruffled pants and velvet embroidered tailcoat flutter as she bounds up the iron staircase that leads to a brand-new Brooklyn studio space in a refurbished florist warehouse. She has just signed the lease and has yet to move in, but she says grinning, "I have to come here every day, just to say it's mine."

Once inside, I set down my tape recorder, and she, something bubbly in a brown paper bag. The floor was recently refinished and is covered in dust, but no problem: Olek unfurls a heavy roll of crocheted fabric — the sort of thing that looks like it may have a corpse inside — which we have wheeled the few blocks from her home, balanced precariously on the seat of her bicycle.

We settle on the wide white swatch of crocheted twine, and I click *record*.

"Interview with Olek, Sunday morning—"

"It's not the morning," Olek interrupts.

"Scratch that, Sunday afternoon."

"But it *is* Olek's Sunday morning. Morning for Olek," she admits, pouring glasses. "Cheers."

If she has had a late night, it's certainly not the first. Born Agata Oleksiak, the artist now prefers to go only by Olek — a one-word title that, like *Cher* or *Madonna*, indicates a certain sort of lifestyle, and the excesses that go with it. But Olek's long evenings *qua* New York artist aren't only about wild parties: she's just as often alone in the darkness, burning the midnight oil, her fingers flying.

Some of Olek's installations have documented her in action. For instance, the white expanse on which we're seated is a "ceiling" she wove for a show back in Poland that focused on the invisibility of women's work in every day life. After the piece was hung over the gallery's existing ceiling, Olek explains, "They invited me to come to the opening to complete the work. Now, by complete the work, I mean I wanted to perform it also. We had this really really tall chair. I sat naked for nine hours next to the crocheted ceiling. I was crocheting a dress for myself. I put on the dress." Then, she explains, she plucked a string from the hem and began to crochet a new dress from the same yarn, slowly unraveling the first dress to reveal herself once again.

"And when that one was finished, I put it on again."

She notes that it is "hard to find places that will allow you to do a piece in eight, nine, twelve hours. I find a place that wants me, and they say, 'can you do it in an hour?'" She rolls her eyes, because for Olek, art is a process, not simply something dead that hangs on a gallery wall.

Olek doesn't consider herself a performance artist, but rather, a sculptor. "The piece that I crochet on my body, it's just me sculpting. It's what I do all the time in my studio. The only difference is that now, I put myself in front of people to see it."

Thus, the audience is the crucial part of the equation. “Performer, participant, audience member: the triangle has to be moving all the time. It’s always shifting. It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing — it’s always a costume. You wake up in the morning and design yourself through what you wear.”

For Olek, it is easy to blend the expressive and the everyday. Perhaps part of the reason is that her medium is crochet, a traditionally a utilitarian craft that originated in 19th century Europe. Olek learned the skill as a child in Poland, and appreciates that it is a poignant symbol of the feminine. At the same time, she has grown tired of the obvious and comfortable metaphors such an interpretation can evoke. As *the reclamation of handiwork* wears into a threadbare reading, Olek continues to pursue the art form for simpler reasons: “I have ideas in my head and I want to produce them. The easiest way for me to express my thoughts, you know, it’s by crocheting.”

These expressions have ranged from the large-scale (covering entire buildings or cars with multi-covered camo) to the intimate (creating cozies for fruit). They’ve ranged from cheeky (in *Text Machine*, a series of tapestries with messages like “UR pussy is my soul mate” remind viewers of the [d]evolution of our tech-mediated society’s idea of romance) to the truly bizarre. In one work, she crocheted 8-mm film into a bodysuit, and then slowly unraveled it by feeding the tape back through a projector. As the film played and her subject was denuded, Olek used the spent end of the reel as the filling for a series of grilled-cheese sandwiches; a Panini press melted the sandwiches to the tape like beads strung on a necklace, which snaked its way through a hungry audience as it slowly lengthened.

Olek graduated Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan with a degree in Culture Studies, and moved to New York in 2000 for a residency at Sculpture Space. Not without some bitterness, she recounts an interview with an art critic who asked her to describe her experience growing up and moving to the States.

“No no no,” he had said, when she finished. “You have to say it was so *hard* for you, coming from *Poland*, being a *woman*.”

She shrugs. “I’m like, no, it wasn’t. I was a hot chick, you know? I had great ideas. And now I’m here, and this is awesome, too. But they only want to hear about the hard times in Poland.” Olek finishes her glass of wine.

“So yes, you know.” She winks. “It was so hard for me. There were no crochet hooks. I was dreaming my whole life. Of crocheting. So I had to come to America. To buy crochet hooks.”

She pours herself another glass, and takes out a pouch of tobacco to roll a cigarette. When she’s done, she stretches out on the crocheted floor of her bare studio and studies the ceiling.

“I really don’t know much about art, you know. I just like doing it. It’s too much fun not to.” With that, she pops back up and squints around the room, perhaps already planning her next move. I watch this woman, whose boundless energy reads in everything from her clothing to the way she surveys the space around her.

“If you had infinite time, and infinite ability,” I can’t help but ask, “would you—”

“Crochet over everything? Yes.”



Above: Olek. Photo Courtesy Agata Oleksiak