

CULTURAPI

Katarzyna Kozyra

by Karol Sienkiewicz,
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Katarzyna Kozyra is a Polish sculptor, installation and video artist who rose to prominence in the 1990s as a leading figure of the 'critical art' movement in Poland, creating works that confront social taboos (such as death, disease and nakedness), usually related to issues of the sick, old or marginalised.

Katarzyna Kozyra was born on February 1, 1963, in Warsaw. She studied German at the University of Warsaw from 1985 to 1988, then sculpture at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts. In 1993 she completed her studies in Professor Grzegorz Kowalski's studio, known as the «Kowalnia», and befriended Jerzy Stajuda, her drawing professor. After her studies she abandoned sculpture in favour of photography, video installations and performance art. In 1997 she was awarded the Passport of the weekly «Polityka» as the most promising artist in Poland, and she won an honourable mention while representing Poland at the 48th Venice Biennial in 1999. She lives and works in Berlin and Warsaw.

Controversial thesis project

Ever since Kozyra's *Animal Pyramid* (1993) – her thesis project – gained notoriety in the media, she has been known as the most scandalous artist in Poland. Inspired by the «Travelling Musicians» of the Brothers Grimm, she created a sculpture out of four dead stuffed animals standing one upon the other: a horse, a dog, a cat and a cock. Two of them – the horse and the cock – she had chosen and killed herself. The artwork is a combination of this aesthetic stack of animals and a gruesome video depicting the killing of the horse, Kozyra's attempt to draw out the paradoxical discrepancy between the end product and the process of its realization. The scandal that *Pyramid* provoked provided an example of hypocrisy from a society that accepts the killing of animals, but only if it serves a concrete, pragmatic purpose.

Her interest in corporeality dates back to the time of her studies, during which she created *Anorexic Nudes* in 1991 and *Black-and-White Polaroids* in 1992. In 1995 Kozyra presented a series of four large-

below
Katarzyna Kozyra,
courtesy of Zacheta National Gallery



format photographs entitled *Blood Ties*, depicting nude female figures against a background of religious symbols – the cross and the half moon. The piece was censored at the time, but two of the photographs were later reproduced on a billboard as part of the AMS Gallery project in 1999.

The taboo of the naked female body is also the subject of *Olympia* (1996). The work consists of a photographic triptych, a reference to Manet's famous painting, along with a video showing the artist, who had suffered from cancer since 1992, as she is given chemotherapy. Unlike Manet's *Olympia* (which was also controversial in its day), Kozyra portrays the female body as being old or ill. In so doing, she not only exposed social stereotypes of the female body – which are generally dictated by the «male gaze» – but she also breached the prevailing aesthetic canon.

below
Animal Pyramid, 1993,
photo Jacek Gladkowski,
courtesy of Zachęta Narodowa
Galeria Sztuki



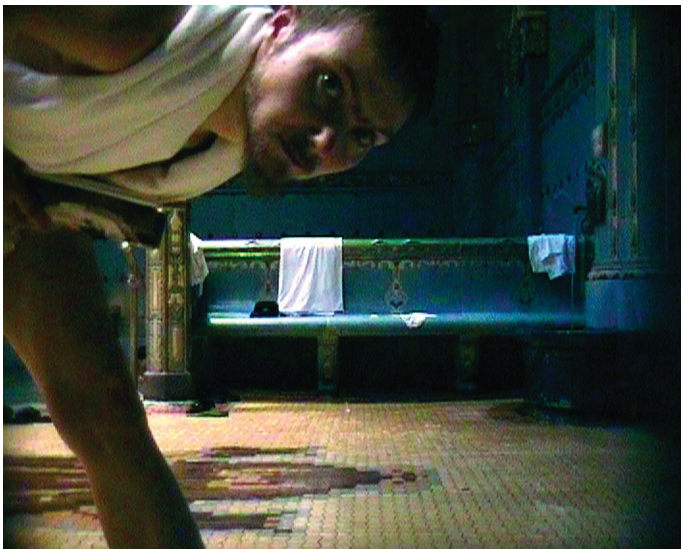
Laznia meska (Men's Bathhouse)

It is no accident that the video installation *Bathhouse* (1997) begins and ends with paintings by Rembrandt and Ingres, showing that the canon of beauty in art is variable. For this project, Kozyra filmed the interior of a women's bathhouse with the aid of a hidden camera. The elderly women, immersed in personal hygiene, seem to naturally assume poses from old masters' paintings. Yet once again, the artist was confronting the viewer with a vision of aging, excluded bodies. This was the first time Kozyra thoughtfully arranged her videos throughout the exhibition space, a strategy that she continued to use in her future projects. But *Laznia meska (Men's Bathhouse)*, shown at the Venice Biennial in 1999 and conceived as a supplement to *Bathhouse*, cast the original work in a new light. This time, the artist had to disguise herself as a man in order to be let into the bathhouse in Budapest, donning a fake beard and a silicon penis. Once inside she was filmed by her friends, who had smuggled in cameras. Thus, the artist was able to gain access to a men's world that had been hitherto inaccessible to her, and she found that the men's behaviour was very different from the behaviour of the women in *Bathhouse*. The women, out of reach of the male gaze, engaged in personal activities and appeared not to notice each other; the men, however, still seemed to be conscious of the presence of others.

Kozyra examined the rules of male behaviour more closely in the film triptych *Chłopcy (Boys)* (2001-2002). Here, a group of young men was placed in front of the camera without any instructions, dressed only in sashes that looked like vaginas; still, the way they behaved was mainly an expression of sexual potency.

Swieto wiosny (Rite of Spring)

In two works set to the music of Igor Stravinsky, Kozyra created situations in which the body is deprived of its own free will and reduced to a marionette controlled by the artist. In the video installation *Rite of Spring* (1999-2002), the artist reconstructed Vaclav Nizhinsky's choreography of Igor Stravinsky's ballet – an interpretation of a pagan ritual – through a video animation of the bodies of the elderly. As in *Chłopcy*, she also changed their gender. The installation was made up of a concentric arrangement of screens facing either inward or outward, forming two rings. The screens in the inner ring portrayed the Chosen One's solo performance of the Sacrificial Dance, and on the screens in the outer ring was the dance of the old wise men. In Stravinsky's ballet the Chosen One dies, but in Kozyra's work he is obliged to stand back up each time he falls. *Dance Lesson*, 2001, a video inspired



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Laznia meska / Men's Bathhouse, 1991,
video installation, collection of Zachęta National Gallery of

by Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, also features changed gender roles and the transformation of the human body into a marionette. The work is a recording of a performance in which young men equipped with pink vaginas become marionette-like dancers.

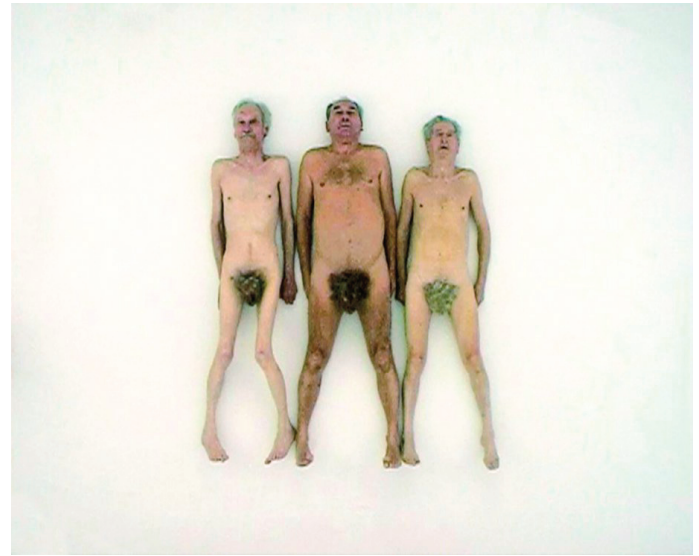
Kozyra continued to explore the phenomenon of dance in her later works. In the video installation *Lords of Dance* (2002), dancers dressed in golden pants and helmets perform a series of acrobatics across seven large screens. For part of the presentation Kozyra hands the camera to the dancers themselves, which results in interesting close-up shots. She also employed a similar technique in one of her most recent works, the video installation *Twarze* (*Faces*, 2005-2006), in which she filmed the faces of several dancers while they were performing different styles of dance (ballet, hip-hop, modern dance, etc.). The only aspect of the performances that remains visible is the expressions on the dancers' faces, something the public normally never sees.

For the video installation *Punishment and Crime* (2002), Kozyra filmed a group of men fascinated by military paraphernalia, who spend their spare time playing around with weapons and explosives with the sole aim of destruction. Not wanting to disclose their identities, Kozyra's protagonists wear masks and wigs. Once again Kozyra was filming boys' games, but this time with real guns and real bullets. The last sequences of the film depict human figures hanging from a tree. In inverting Dostoevsky's title, Kozyra blurs the boundary between the two until it is difficult to say what is crime, and what is punishment.

In Art Dreams Come True

Since 2003, Kozyra has been working on a large-scale project, *In Art Dreams Come True*, in which she uses various forms of visual arts, music and performance. Each phase of the project is documented on video and then presented as a separate work, although these individual pieces are eventually meant to be woven together into a feature film combining fiction and documentary. Whereas Kozyra herself pulls the marionette's strings in the Stravinsky-inspired works, this time she is the one who is being manipulated as she strives to fulfil her dream of becoming a «real woman» and an opera singer. The project features Gloria Viagra, a drag queen from Berlin, and a singing teacher named Maestro (Grzegorz Pitulej). They introduce Kozyra to their respective worlds of night clubs and opera. These two worlds collide in the video installation *Non so piu* in which Kozyra takes simultaneous lessons with both Gloria Viagra and Maestro, eventually performing an aria from «The Marriage of Figaro.» She also performed the aria of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's *Magic*

below
The Rite of Spring, 1999-2002,
still from the video



Flute (Facade Concert) in Vienna in July 2006, as a part of the *Impossible Theatre* exhibition in the Kunsthalle), for which she appearing every hour in front of the museum dressed as a singing bird. She later repeated the same performance in Pelagio in Italy following a procession to the top of a hill; the procession was led by Maestro, wearing a rat mask and carrying a Madonna statue modelled on Kozyra herself (*Madonna from Pelago*). She put on a similar show in Regensburg (*Madonna from Regensburg*).

For *Diva - Reincarnation*, performed at Warsaw's Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle and the Barbican Gallery in London, Kozyra appeared in a metal cage dressed as a fat, naked opera singer – a costume that made it extremely difficult to sing. There were also other versions of this performance in which the emphasis was mostly on club life: as a birthday present for Gloria Viagra, for example, Kozyra dressed up like Viagra and sang a song by Robbie Williams at the Big Eden Club in Berlin. The show included a striptease that culminated in the artist revealing an artificial penis attached to her crotch, which she hid afterward in her bag Tribute to Gloria Viagra. In the video *A Winter's Tale* the artist impersonated a fairy princess and surrounded herself by midgets, whom she also used in the performance *The Midget Gallery* during the 4th Berlin Biennial and the 2006 Frieze Art Fair in London. For the latter, she created her own gallery spaces in order to expose the show-business mechanisms that pervade these types of events. What connects the various parts of *In Art Dreams Come True* is the variety of styles used in each piece, from high to low, melodrama to comedy. Kozyra is also playing with stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, changing roles freely and treating gender like a performance.



above

Katarzyna Kozyra working on video «Cheerleaderka» (from her serie «In Art Dreams Come True»), Zachęta 2006, photo Marcin Oliva Soto

While she was working on this project, Kozyra also created a series of works inspired by Lou Salome (2005). She put on a performance in the Viennese Schwarzenberg palace and its gardens in which she impersonated Salome training two actors dressed up like dogs, with masks resembling the faces of Nietzsche and Rilke (both friends of Salome). During another performance at the Roman Teatro Palladium in October 2005 - *Lou Salome a Roma. Teatro di cani* - dog owners and their pets were invited as an audience, eliciting unpredictable responses among the real dogs to the on-stage training of the dog-philosophers. Contrary to *In Art Dreams Come True*, Kozyra is the dominatrix here, and she takes total control over her charges.

In the video clip *Cheerleader* (2006), created for the exhibition *Teatr niemożliwy (Impossible Theatre)* at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, the artist sings the Gwen Stefani song *What You Waiting For?* and dances in a locker-room filled with well-built men. She doesn't attract any attention at first; only when she is transformed into figures from her earlier works (*Bathroom* and *Diva - Reincarnation*) does she arouse their interest, and then their hostility. Thus Kozyra returns to an issue she raises repeatedly in her work - the issue of the body as a costume.

Between 2010-2011 Kozyra presented her *Casting project*, which called upon members of the public to 'try out' for a part in a fictional film production based on her life. She held such 'castings' at the

Zachęta National Museum in Warsaw and in Tel Aviv. The project's motto is drawn from Kozyra's autobiographical pseudo-documentary *In Art Dreams Come True*: 'From my omnipotence comes my belief that I can accomplish anything, because potentially I am talented at everything.'

The very same exhibition was thus not meant to be exclusively an exposition of Kozyra's classical works but to help the artist to prepare for her role as well. One room was changed into a reading room filled with catalogues, press materials and documentary films. An interesting part of the exhibition is also a catalogue that files Kozyra's life in two ways: by showing the artist's own texts that describe her private life (relations with friends, life partners and co-workers but also dreams) and a precise calendar of her career. Everything is illustrated with pictures of the artist's private life and travels and detailed information on how she works.

In 2013 in The Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle Kozyra showed her *Looking for Jesus* project for the first time, in which she took on the role of researcher and explorer. Kozyra started with information about Jerusalem syndrome - a group of mental phenomena described in medicine in the second half of the 20th century that involves the presence of obsessive ideas and delusions about being biblical characters (most often messiahs) which are triggered by a visit to the city of Jerusalem.

In 2012 Kozyra went to Jerusalem to find those who believe they are messiahs and came back with a material on the preparation of Easter in the Holy Land – pictures of Jerusalem being a scene for religious rituals and people of different beliefs, denominations, and colours; people who try to convince the artist about their holiness and authenticity; and the colourful mob of pilgrims and citizens.

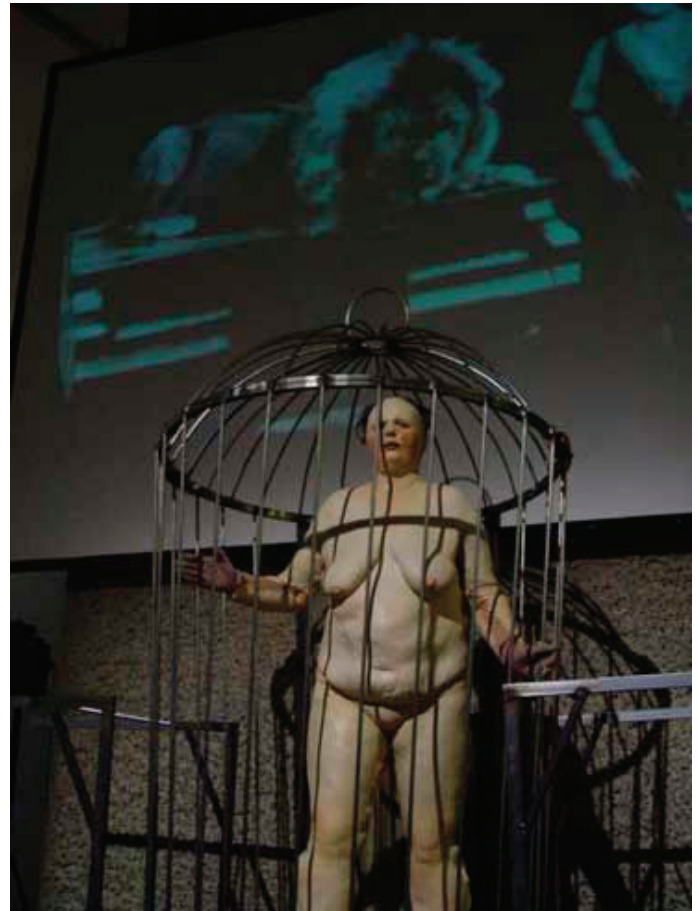
In front of Kozyra's eyes a constant performance goes on. She is not the main protagonist or a participant though, but only a recipient who tries to find and register at least a fragment of the occurrences in the city.

First Feature

In 2014 Kozyra became the fourth winner of The Polish Film Institute and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw Film Award. The award was established with the cooperation of Wajda School and endorses projects that work between visual arts and cinema. The first awarded artist was Zbigniew Libera in 2011. The prize is worth 500,000 PLN and should be spend on the production of a feature film.

The jury decided that Kozyra's *project X* fulfils the criteria of the prize most completely by using an original form and a radical idea that originate from her long experience of artistic search and notable life's work. This particular work of art works on the vital social problem of the experience of having cancer, which the artist went through and often expresses in her art.

In her project, Kozyra wants to engage women who have cancer and are in the process of curing it – the titular X – and propose them 'a journey' through the artist's works (including *Olympia* and *The Rite of Spring* from the past) believing that they will help X to deal with death and illness. Kozyra won her battle with cancer and now wants to become a guide for X, who face the same challenges as the artist did and do not know (just like the artist) if they can finally win their battle.



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Katarzyna Kozyra, *Looking for Jesus*, 2012,
photo: courtesy of Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation