ADA

Ksenia Perek
Selected press

NERO

3 February, 2022

[LAUGHTER]
“People say just be yourself. Like it would be easy. It’s not.” Xenia Perek at ADA

For her second exhibition at ADA, Xenia Perek conceived a live performance alongside an exhibition of photographs, in order to distinguish her multidisciplinary and global spirit signature, under the title The olympic sprint with the giggle laughter #1 and #2.

Xenia Perek, PC Dreams (by Xenia Perek & Arthur Guilleminot, 2021), 2022, FA Pearl print, wooden frame, 51,5 x 34,5 x 3,5 cm, photo credit Roberto Apa

#2 is an exhibition of photographs showing Perek’s far reaching exploration in visual art. Perek’s work is founded as a live event, however it can be well understood in the form of photography, expressing a critical account that otherwise does not fully resonate in the case of a club or theatre. In this context, the artist can highlight the visual aspect of her “body” image building showing how she understands and views what she is doing. Photography captures the energy of her work allowing for time to be still with the eye and the memory of the viewer, participating with the image in a retrospective aspect. Her presence is the predominant element in a still photo, holding a moment in time of what was a moving image. In a sense a photograph of live art can be seen as reductive. But in Perek’s work it is an extension of what she has created, and gives us permission to experience her live body again and again. Her message is multiplied when she devotes her artistic ingenuity in the stillness of a photographic image.

The #1 is the live performance which took place in December 2021, as the first chapter of The olympic sprint with the giggle laughter. This work has been born out of the character of the golden creature who comes out from a cosmic egg. The narration comes from the succession of image after image, element after element with text and lip sync alongside a physical score.

The following is an informal exchange between the gallerist and the artist.

X: Ciao Carla, tutto bene! It was difficult to come back to rainy Amsterdam from Roman paradise. Here I am, writing text for a new performance. At the same time, a big part of me is there alive within ADA's walls, the artworks. Tu come stai?

C: Xeniaaaa, I'm ok, a bit depressed maybe…you know it's January, almost everyone I know is quarantined. But besides that, after the performance and opening of the show, I have to get back to the office routine…I mean we had such an intense time in the last couple of months…I'm fine anyway, it's part of the job.

Nice to hear that Rome is a paradise from an Amsterdam-based artist. I know what you mean though, I'm not from here and for many reasons I opened ADA here.

I saw about the PC Dreams replica in Amsterdam soon, two photos from it are in the show, tell me more about it…

X: Cara Carla, hearing that I must say we were so lucky with the performance in December and opening last Saturday! I think we created together energy and momentum despite the situation. This will speak for itself! I'm very curious about our future plans. Yes, about PC Dreams… this wild piece is a very global view into what interests me in performance art. The main idea is that a performance and dream have shared parameters, as they both "suspend" reality for the time being. I think this extends also into the exhibition we made. The same way the photographs extended my performance artwork. Also our title "The olympic sprint with the giggle laughter" came from the final character of PC Dreams, her soliloquy. But then it went on to live as something much more than part of the text because in fact it was a thought, an image, not just "text". So the true message of that title is image based. That's really triggering in terms of the artworks we presented. That's something kind of timeless, and for me as a performance artist transcending time is the ultimate goal.

Tell me, how do you feel about the exhibition?

Xenia Perek, The olympic sprint with the giggle laughter #2, 2022, installation view at ADA, Rome, photo credit Roberto Apa

C: I'm very happy with the show! The most difficult thing in this project was to transfer the energy of your live practice on a tangible and static support as a photograph. But actually I have to say that, even the visitors who never had the chance to see you performing live, can catch the emotional charge of your practice through the images. I think you can really breathe that atmosphere and see all the work behind each single shot.

Probably the most complex thing to explain in words is that, despite the constant references in your work to the drag queen scene or to the nightlife and the theme of gender identity, those are the resources that contribute to creating your theatrical narratives. But you actually represent a flux of energy, a statue, a genderless or as you say, timeless image. Perhaps this is also why the photographic transposition was somehow natural… But in the end, this is something that doesn't need to be explained I guess. The works speak for themselves.

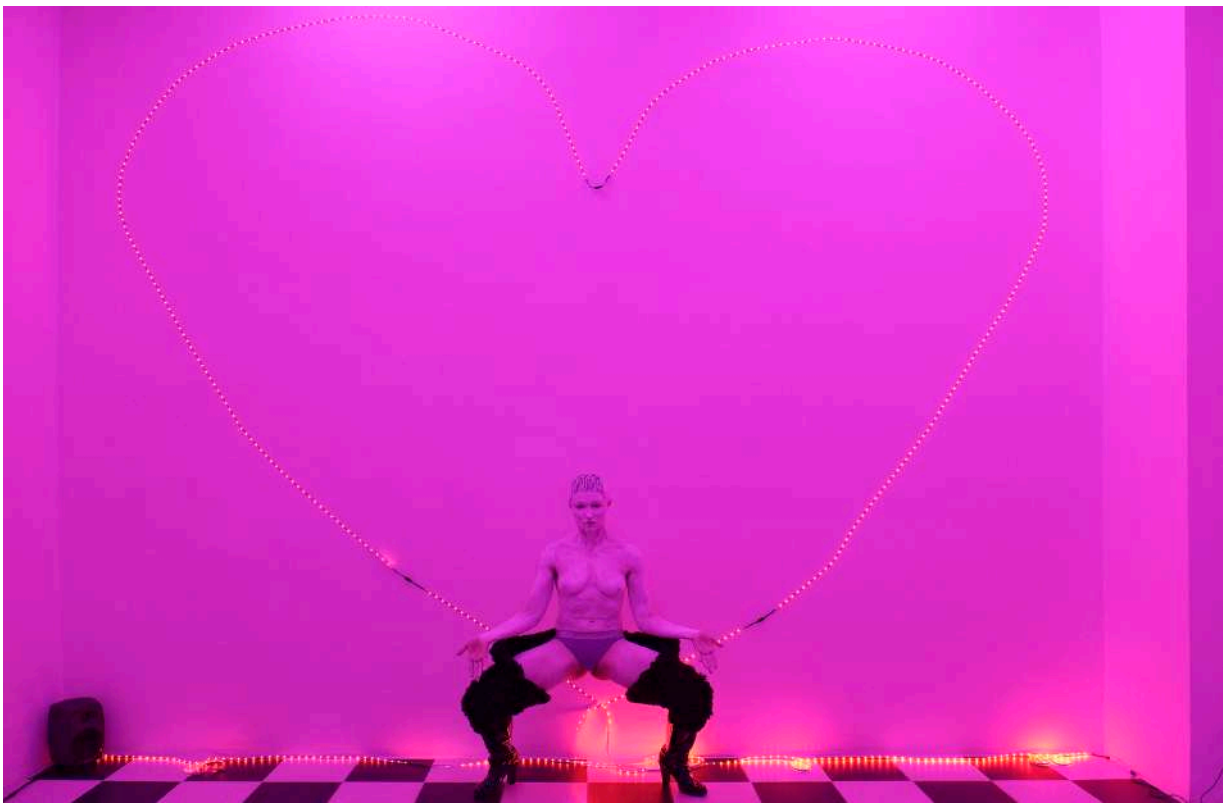
Ah, last night I went to our favourite Trastevere's restaurant. They miss you…don't know if they miss the "performance contest" we organised after the opening of the show though…but they miss you.

X: I am honestly happy you understand the works this way. I sometimes think I adopt an immediate bold style, but I am a second-thought type of artist, there's a lot on my mind, behind all of that. I feel we really have started and I am seriously excited where else we will arrive, Carla!

Please tell them I will be back very soon! Can't wait!

C: Ciao Xenia, a presto!

XENIA PEREK (PL, 1993) is a performance artist currently based in Amsterdam where she has founded her work creating performance art pieces. Her pieces are devised from physical and mental scores located in galleries, theatres and night life venues. She uses live body with sensorial imagery for her medium, using her personal experiences of gender identity as content to create a theatrical narration. Her shows are live body-built momentums which can be seen separately or framed in photography. Perek is a part of one of the oldest Amsterdam drag queen houses, the House of Hopelezz.
ADA is a Rome-based contemporary art gallery, representing six artists. ADA was founded by Carla Chiarchiaro in September 2017 as a project space and then converted in a commercial gallery in September 2018. Its program aims to promote young artists and share a path of growth and research with them. ADA produces curatorial projects, privileging solo shows, specifically created for the gallery space. In 2019, ADA has opened its program to live performances, alternating them with about five exhibitions per season. The gallery space is located in Trastevere, a historical district in the center of Rome, that stands out in the field of international art research.



Xenia Perek, Tanati & Eri, 2019, solo performance, 24 min, sound by DJ let go, premiered at ADA, Rome, photo by Roberto Apa

Could you please tell us a bit about your performance art and how it started off?
Let's define what means beginning, because certainly I am reworking material I have created when I was 5 to 10 years old. It's the most deep and unconditional content. As a kid I knew there are spirits to talk to and actions to take, which bridge world of hardware and world of emotions. I literally thought this is the way to live! I want to see one line between back then and now, and for that I cannot have another profession. In 2016 I hesitated to buy a book about Butoh, it was 10EU, solid publication but I was broke in my mind, more than in my pocket. I bought it, whatever. I got to know Kazuo Ohno's world, his soul. Same year I went to Japan with friends and for sure I wanted some Butoh experience. But time-wise I missed collective classes all over. I hesitated again, but I wrote to the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio if I could come alone for a class. So I did go to Kamihoshikawa to his studio and danced three hours with his son Yoshito Ohno. I will never forget it. R.I.P. I love you. It really redefined me, and yeah I hesitate nothing anymore.
And now I can tell you that I create physical and mental scores in nocturnal venues and nightlife, that's what I do for living, is amazing, beyond my happiness. My first solo show was this fearless III acts performance in infamous gay Club Church. I remember I entered that state of power and synergy. Taka Taka, Church's producer now also my friend, introduced me to the club based House of Hopelezz, one of the oldest Drag Queen houses in town. BTW we are in Amsterdam in this point of the story. The Queens took me in. The genesis of my today's practice is the line of those Thursday shows at a party called Blue.

What is it you want the viewer to receive or walk away with after experiencing a performance by you?
First of all, I really don't want them to walk away at all, haha. Once my show made a guy cry, and he later recognized me outside the club. I had a cigarette, and he spotted me. He had like, a let's say euphorical cry and at the same time talking to me so dramatically. His face was so baroque, all those muscles, popping up here and there. He was high, intense and kind. This is what you are supposed to experience hahah. My work leaves unforeseen marks on me too. I want special psychic energy, in my whole life not only for my shows. But at the same time I won't chase the waterfall and tell you what it is all really about. You gotta be present..

We are curious to hear about your thought process and development of personalities you seem to engage with.
I use subversive, radical, subjective, exaggerated and improbable personalities to drive away from moralistic directives, the rights and wrongs. I do that because I see people constantly looking over their shoulder what other people may say or think of them. I want to remind them of their body, intuition and certainly that they can have a vision for their lives as an entire picture. My characters are an essence of that..

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Do you have a specific space or place where you'd like to perform in the future?
I am kind of obsessing now about the Egyptian Book of the Death somebody lend me. I'm also reading an autobiography of Myke Tyson where he's describing a friend, a pimp, who's so arrogant he would die just to see who comes to his own funeral - he wants to know that the whole world came, that's what counts. I'm even worse. I want it as a performance, so I can also get some clapping at the end and then tell the stories after. I am supposed to die in a metaphorical sarcofago in Paris, I look forward.

Please explain the way you move in your performances?
It is all about tension and release. It is a basis of child movement developmental studies, so I'm not digging anything crazy new. I'm actually down to basics, the very first movement of taking a shit.

If you're working on something interesting at the moment that you wish to notify people of, here's a good opportunity to do so:
You see me when I'm there.

Xenia Perek, About Zu, 2019, in collaboration with Artur Guilleminot, Vertoon: Queer In Transition, Compagnietheater, Amsterdam, photo by Raymond Van Mil

“People say just be yourself. Like it would be easy. It’s not”
Artist Xenia Perek is whoever she feels she needs to be in her performances.

28 April 2021

Xenia Perek, *Rotterdam rain*. Photo by Leroy Verbeet

People say just be yourself. Like it would be easy. It’s not. We’re so good at performing, luring people into acclaiming or loving us. I can say that my family as a whole loves me, to the extent that they are capable of. Later you realize that your parents had parents too, and that they all grew up in a different time. It complicates things a lot.

Communist Poland produced my parents. I suppose my older sister and brother and myself disappointed my father. All three of us are queer in a way. We are not living up to Polish catholic tradition, nor to that of the tiny village in which we grew up. We have no interest in taking over the family business of 150 years old.

“I try to make sure there are elements in my characters that make it impossible to agree with everything they do or say”

I come from a family of gardeners. Many of the people living in our village were uncles and aunts. Most of my childhood I spent with my brother and sister and three cousins. The six of us stayed close to each other while my parents were busy transforming their local business into a bigger. My mom told me that initially we didn’t always have money to put food on the table but I don’t remember us being poor. I was the last child born when things started getting really good.

I was a really weird kid. Disconnected in a way, singing to trees. We were doing funeral ceremonies for animals we found dead. We made them a coffin and built a graveyard. Straight away I refused to go to school as much as I could, even if later it was only three hundred meters from my house. I could see it from the window of my atelier where I would be painting and hanging with my artsy friends instead.

I had a lot of liberty but my family was far from perfect. There was stuff going on. I want to express it but at the same time I don’t want to talk about it, at least not in a literal way. I think this is why I create characters as a performer. It’s how I express myself. Yo, if I was able to put it in linear words, I would probably do that instead.

“I don’t want to be hashtag identity hashtag gender. I think my work is broader than that”

For the same reason I try to avoid talking about my performances as much as I can because I think you have to see it. The characters I create don’t have a name or a storyline. People tend to bring the word theatrical to what I do but that’s wrong. They are more like attitudes, rendered in a time and space. I try to make sure there are elements in there that make it impossible to agree with everything they do or say. I want them to be problematic, I like polarities. People’s judgement is a big part of my work.

Some of my characters are very masculine built. Physically strong, with a certain muscle tone that I will pick up before I do a show. I may use a jockstrap that suggests I have a penis.

Months in advance of a performance I start training. I pick up weight lifting, along with running and

isometric exercises. Three or four days before I'll only eat carbs. On the day itself I will not drink much. It sets a tone that will shrink your skin back to the muscle. I apply paint, add light, and that's how I build an image. And then I get kind of fat the next week, from all the carbs.

For a show in Rome I'm learning to play the saxophone. Is it worthwhile economically? Absolutely not. But I do it because I'm an artist, I create according to my vision. I don't wait for funding to come my way, I try to create my own economy instead.

Xenia Perek, *Before I turn into an image of love*, courtesy of ADA Gallery, Rome. Photo by Roberto Apa

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"Sometimes I see footage of myself and think: oh my god, that came out quite extreme"

Once a guy came to me after a performance: 'I thought you were a man, then I realized you are a wo-

man. But now I see that your boobs are fake.' I replied: 'Is that important?' Then he said: 'Now I hear your voice, I know that you're a woman.' When I speak, he gets his point. So in my next show I want to use a mic to emulate my voice, though actually I found it more interesting to go on a higher pitch.

I like to play with gender. Gender and identity are not so much a subject to me as they are a medium, a form. As themes they are so on the table right now. I don't want to be hashtag identity hashtag gender. I think my work is broader than that.

Photo by Paul Sixta, shot for W.A.T, holding a picture of her big inspiration Kazuo Ohno

I had never heard of transgender people before arriving to the Netherlands. What, you can actually change your sex?! I didn't know that.

At the time I was in love with a transgender man who like myself was studying at Gerrit Rietveld – an art academy in Amsterdam. He turned out to be in the process of transitioning. I didn't understand why I was so triggered by this person until I realized: this is what I want, a sex change.

"It's not that I need to be a man, there is just a lot that I hate about being a woman"

I started to change my clothes, I shaved my head and asked my friends to call me he. I had a boyfriend who agreed to refer to me as his boyfriend – which was a bit of a thing because he was a heterosexual man and suddenly it seemed like he was coming out.

Strangely enough none of this provided relief. There was a deep pressure inside of me. I could not look in the mirror. I hated all my female characteristics. That I have boobs, the shape of my body not being straight, the tone of my voice. I moved into some dark corner with my life.

That I didn't have a penis didn't bother me in a sexual aspect. I enjoyed sex. Lucky me! But socially I found it more comfortable to be perceived as a man. It was a very strange dynamic where perhaps technically I was in a weird disguise. Though to me it felt like being in disguise whenever I was perceived as a woman.

A year or two passed and my sister found me an amazing therapist in Warsaw. She said: if you want to do a sex change, we will work towards a sex change. If you don't want that, it's fine too, the door is open. That was the moment I felt complete freedom and security to look at the whole puzzle: what are clothes, what is disguise, who am I?

"We pay so much attention to how we look nowadays as an expression of freedom. But is it really?"

Very soon after I realized I don't want a sex change. It's not that I need to be a man, there is just a lot that I hate about being a woman. In part this is a result of growing up in an old fashioned patriarchal catholic environment, some coordinates I received from both men and women.

I was not transgender, I did not have body dysmorphia. I had an identity crisis, which is a very real thing, too. And I was identifying with anything that potentially offered a solution.

At this stage I completely didn't know who I was anymore, but it stopped being a problem as soon as I was fine with knowing who I am not. I fully validate transgender people and sex change. For me a sex change would have meant a very big detour around the matters that I realized I need to face straight on.

Immediately I started performing. I got really into it. Sometimes I see footage of myself and think: oh my god, that came out quite extreme. But I don't stop or back up. I just don't look at the footage. If I was meant to see myself performing, I guess I'd have a second pair of eyes somewhere, maybe in my butthole?

My art is how I relate to the world. I turn it upside down. Who put this like that? I raise questions, play with assumptions, challenge notions of right and wrong. It doesn't have to make coherent sense – preferably not.

They say my generation is the generation that really knows how to find themselves and really knows how to be. I doubt that. We pay so much attention to how we look nowadays physically and also conceptually as an expression of freedom. But is it really? Even my own artist friends are doing it. It gets me down.

I do propose to have a vision of your own. You can be who you want to be, but that's partially true – you are somebody already. So deal with that. And when you make peace with it, you can grow from there."

Xenia Perek, *On my way to a bodybuilding contest*, for Supper Club