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# The Worm Here Is Fluorescent Green: Katja Novitskova Creates an Alien Landing Site in New York's City Hall Park



BY ALEX GREENBERGER July 5, 2017 12:50pm



Katja Novitskova, *Earth Potential (Cuttlefish, Love, Earth)*, 2017, digital print on aluminum, cut-out display, steel and aluminum armature.

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The list of movies in which the apocalypse hits New York isn't short. There's *The Day After Tomorrow*, with the Statue of Liberty memorably freezing over after a global-warming disaster. There's *Cloverfield*, with the Statue of Liberty's head getting flung like a child's toy across Manhattan. And there's *Transformers*, with giant Autobots toppling skyscrapers in a moment that eerily recalls 9/11. In addition: *Escape from New York*, 2012, *Knowing*, *The Avengers*, *Independence Day*, and many other films.

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"As a foreigner, you think of Lower Manhattan as the place where shit happens," the Estonian-born, Berlin-based artist Katja Novitskova told me recently in the teeming streets of New York. "If Godzilla comes to town, he'll come through here. If there's a tsunami, it'll come here. If there are aliens, they'll go to Washington, but they'll pass by."

Novitskova was in town to oversee the installation of her own "alien landing site" in **City Hall Park**: an exhibition of photo-sculptures that opened on June 22 and runs into November by way of the Public Art Fund. The show's works—blown-up pictures sourced from the internet and mounted on aluminum cut-outs—are surreal combinations of nature photography and space imagery. An oversized lizard hand is superimposed over a shot of Earth; a ball of E. coli cells appears to be growing. Rarely ever are Novitskova's sculptures this dark and this funny.

Toward the end of the show's installation, a heat wave had just broken. It was sunny and nearly 90 degrees, but Novitskova, who wore black athletic wear and sandals, seemed unfazed by the heat, which—especially with a torrential downpour in store—seemed appropriately apocalyptic.

For Novitskova, the New York show, much like **her Estonian Pavilion** at the Venice Biennale, mirrors the mindset of many scientists today. It is slick and seemingly optimistic, though its subject matter is actually fairly nightmarish. When I suggested as much, she responded, "Yeah! That's good. That's the point. There's definitely a dark undertone to this."

She spoke of how researchers and companies are so determined to bring us to new frontiers that they'll mutate animals to get what they need. "If we're not genetically modifying [animals], we're dissecting them so we know how they operate," Novitskova said. "It's not about wilderness and saving the planet." It's instead about pushing the human species further, often through strange, violent means, she said. Sometimes that includes "dealing with embryos of human beings. It's like, 'Ugh! I hope you're a good person.'"

Novitskova's new work is sleek and clean, and almost resembles objects you might expect to find in a corporate lobby. In a strange way, it also recalls the tricked-out 3-D movie posters that can be found at multiplexes. The photo-sculptures are "something between a set in Disneyland and a poster," she said.

To make the works, she picks out images and sends them out to poster makers. "I really like the vibe of 'I'm making a file, and I'm sending it somewhere and getting back the result,'" she said. "It's a prosumer vibe."

Novitskova considers herself, first and foremost, a consumer of images. She typically appropriates images she finds on the internet, usually from nature documentaries on YouTube. Both her pictures and her subjects are altered in some way: her images are Photoshopped, and the things in them—mitotic cells, squids that can regenerate limbs—are engineered. She brought me over to one work featuring *C. elegans*, a worm that, in one work in this show, appears to wriggle across a moss-colored planet. The worm here is fluorescent green, but, according to Novitskova, that's only because scientists mutate them using certain proteins—they're normally see-through. "It's not how you would see it with your naked eye," she said.

Katja Novitskova, *Earth Potential (E. coli)*, digital print on aluminum, cut-out display, steel and aluminum armature.

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Katja Novitskova, *Earth Potential (Embryo)*, 2017, digital print on aluminum, cut-out display, steel and aluminum armature.

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The same goes for other images, which are sourced from research studies and NASA reports that Novitskova viewed online. The NASA photographs, in particular, appear edited. Look closely at one image of Titan, a moon of Saturn, and you'll see it's actually composed of a bunch of smaller photographs stitched together to create an image of the orange orb (which, of course, is not actually orange—that, too, is done through a photo-editing technique).

Novitskova's source images are made to go viral. "For NASA, it's pivotal to have viral content because they get more funding. It comes to this now," Novitskova said, with a tinge of remorse. "They're super-clumsy and funny, but they're trying—they're really trying."

The photographs aren't just for researchers, either, as evidenced by the ways they get ogled online by conspiracy theorists. "As soon as there's a new series of high-definition NASA images being released from a mission, the next day there's a bunch of dudes looking at every pixel," Novitskova said. "The grainier the image, the more open it is for interpretation."

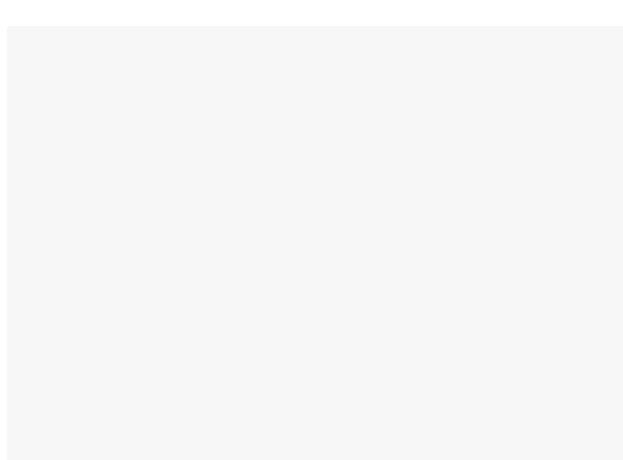
However weird her artwork might seem, Novitskova's work has its place in Lower Manhattan. "This is by far not the weirdest thing happening in this park!" Novitskova said. "It blends in very smoothly." We walked over to a sculpture of embryonic cells, which are shown multiplying. The image is grainy and strange, yet it went unnoticed by children consumed with ice cream and businessmen busy on their lunch break. Novitskova looked at the sculpture and said, with pleasure, "I'm sure some dog will pee on it."

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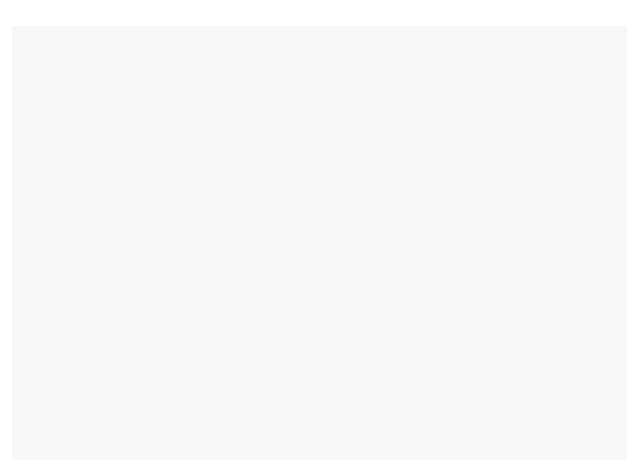
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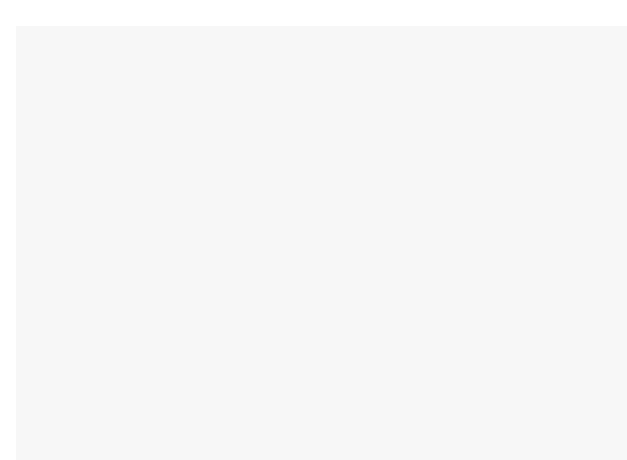
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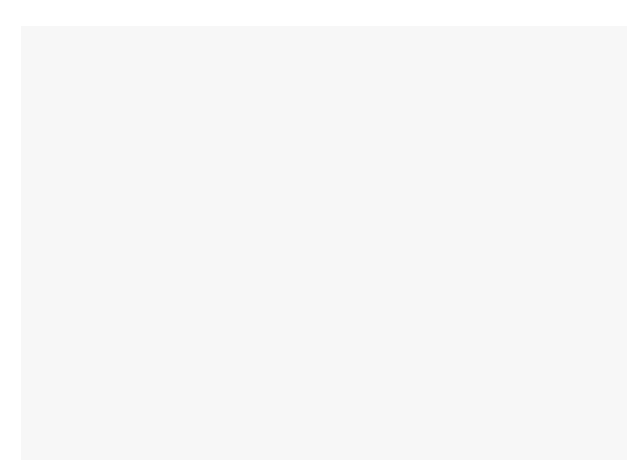
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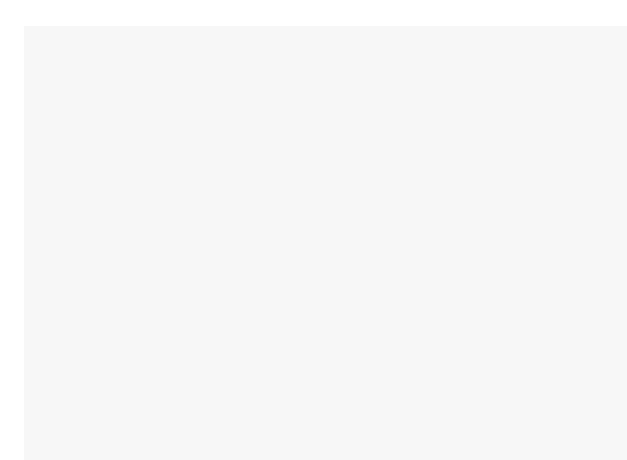
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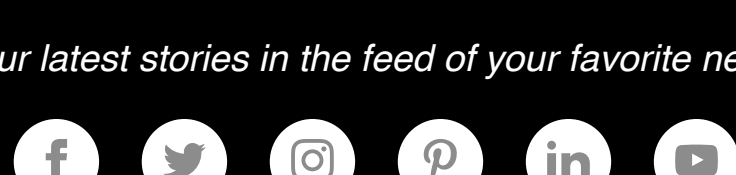
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