

# the phantasmagoric world of artist kris lemsalu and her monkey skull named erik



*This article originally appeared in [The Radical Issue](#), no. 350, Spring 2018.*

"I enjoy music a lot more than art," says Kris Lemsalu, lighting a cigarette and smiling into the Skype webcam. It's late on a Sunday evening and, despite the fact she's spent the last few weeks traveling from city to city,

exhibiting her work and socializing with every gallerist, curator, and critic this side of Tallinn, she seems happy to talk about her work, and indeed music, for one more hour. "I've just got into country, but I like any kind of music that is made with some kind of soul and human core. Anything that is not a motorized robot thing." Surprising, really, considering she's made her home Berlin — the spiritual home of that motorized robot thing.

"Sometimes I like techno. It's hard to avoid."

Born and raised in, yes, Tallinn, Estonia, Kris first studied ceramics at the city's Estonian Academy of Arts, then sculpture at the The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. For the last decade she has worked across multiple disciplines, using a broad spectrum of materials to subvert classic notions of how traditional crafts like ceramics can be perceived, and push the boundaries of where performance can go. Today she's sat in a backroom of Koppe Astner gallery in Glasgow, the final stop of her tour, and about to take a break and head to Ibiza for a week to visit a friend. "I'm just going to have a week of relaxing. It's nice when it's off-season. Less people."

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Even though recently she's been working on constructions with two blacksmiths in Tallinn, Kris doesn't really consider herself part of the Estonian art scene, having lived most of her adult life in Vienna and Berlin. But that's not to say the country hasn't affected the lens with which she sees the world through, and the art she subsequently creates. "The more I travel, I understand what kind of barriers we had." For the first six years of Kris's childhood, Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. "There's a funny story with every Estonian from the early 90s — how they had their first banana. There was no foreign fruits, so everyone has a story about their first banana, how they were chewing on the skin, and licking it for hours." Fitting, really, considering to know Kris's art is to know the broad

spectrum of materials and objects she works with, and the subversive way in which she uses them. “I remember eating watercolors in about Second Grade, and painting my face. My parents lived next to a power plant, and when the wood fence burned down, I remember painting my face with the chalk.”

What, really, could be a better precursor to her famed work, [Whole Alone 2](#)? The piece, perhaps one of Kris’s most recognizable, consists of a large porcelain turtle shell resting upon a waterbed. When exhibited at Frieze New York, Kris herself lay motionless within the turtle shell for the entirety of the exhibition. “Some works somehow demand my bodily presence,” she says, when asked what compels her to place herself within some of her work but not others. “I always try to have a balance in materials. People are like ‘oh, porcelain, such a precious material’ so I always combine it with something considered cheaper. When these installations get bigger and bigger, sometimes I feel like my body is necessary as a material to balance it.” Nothing could more effectively communicate the existential nature of Kris’s work than her desire combine her own skin and bones with the ceramics she’s created. The performance lasted five days, with Kris laying flat and still within it for eight hours each day. “Once when I was in the turtle my iPod battery went off, and I was hearing people saying, like ‘Oh my God, maybe something happened and we should call an ambulance? How could something like this happen here?’” she says, laughing.

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When interviewing a distinguished and accomplished multidisciplinary artist whose work subverts and pushes boundaries, you'd be forgiven for imagining streams of esoteric answers in response to these more abstract questions about her work. But Kris laughs knowingly throughout the conversation. When asked how music influences her work, a lot of it boils down to her simple desire to work with friends, many of whom are musicians. "The last performance I did in New York, I did a piece with my

friend Kit Malone (TV on the Radio). Before that I did something in London with another friend, the singer Glasser. I want to find a way to include my friends in the projects because I'm traveling to see friends all the time." With regards to the elitist art world and her feelings towards it, she's simply accepted how "alike to any other business it is" and learned not to take anything personally.

So, what next? In 2018, Kris is going to create a short film. The film will star her and [her friend Erik](#). "Erik is a character and a friend of mine. My ex-boyfriend — who traveled to West Africa regularly — sent me a box of gifts from a market in Sierra Leone, and one of the artifacts in the box was a small monkey skull. One lonely, hungover morning I woke up and I was just like 'oh, hello Erik'. I made a body for him and played with him all day. We're going to have some domestic situation at my parent's flat in Estonia, and my friend is going to film it."



## Credits

Photography Maxwell Tomlinson

Grooming Shiori Takashi. Photography assistance Rory James Cole.  
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