

All Is a Giant Meat Grinder: Katja Novitskova

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As if just born from another world, a pair of glassy eyes stares back at you from a slick, blue body that's smooth and wet-looking, uncanny and eerily familiar. Surrounding these blue creatures are "brooding squids" and mirrored octopuses on the walls, and they're all part of Katja Novitskova's "Mirror Life" (2025), her latest exhibition at Kraupa—Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin, where synthetic approximations of life—part algorithm, part animal—seem to be looking at us just as we're looking at them. It feels almost as if they have a soul.



Approximation III, 2013. Print on aluminium, cutout display.

Courtesy of the artist

Having explored the intersection of image culture, technology, and science—and how those systems shape the way we perceive—Novitskova's work has been shown in museums across the globe, including at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), and she was nominated for the Preis der Nationalgalerie in 2019.

In conversation with Stefania Basano, Novitskova discusses using AI as a “giant meat grinder” of human culture, and how transforming code, resin, and minerals has become her way of tracing evolution—organic, synthetic, and somewhere in between.

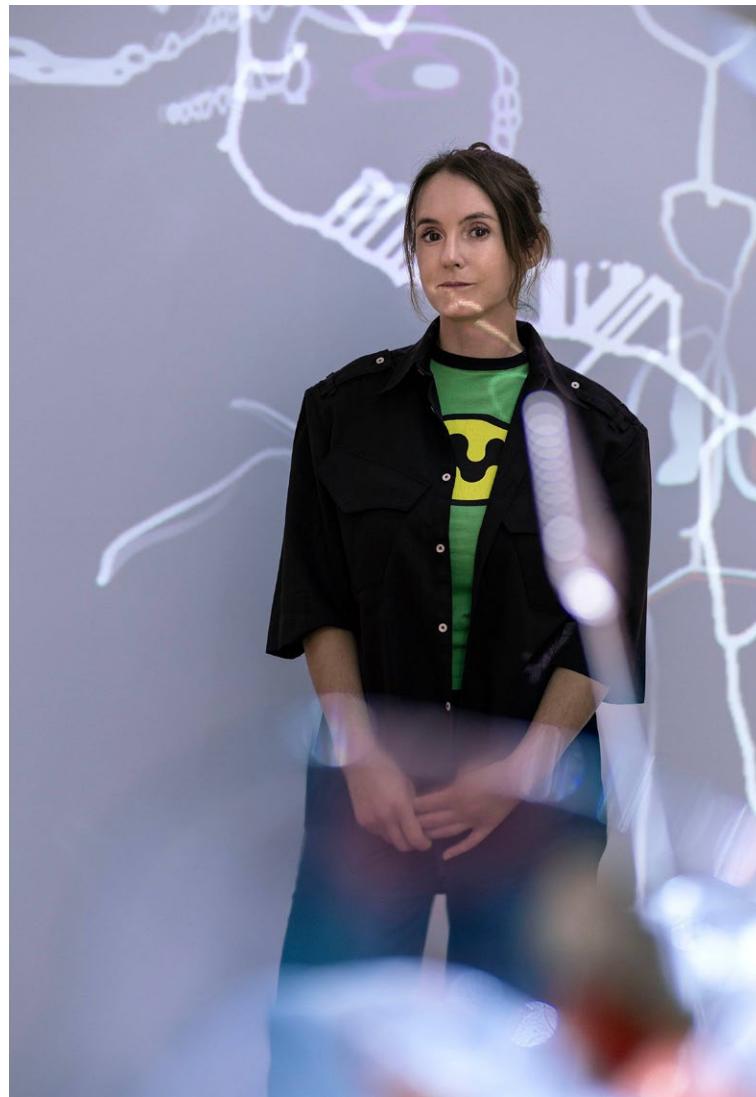


Photo: Philipp Ottendörfer

Stefania Basano: This show feels like it's imagining new life forms – not exactly in a sci-fi way, but in a very grounded, bodily way. It feels like these creatures could also be real. How did you go about shaping these hybrid beings?

Katja Novitskova: I've been interested in biotechnologies for a while – specifically the idea that you can now imagine creating life through digital code in the same way you'd write software. That includes programming genomes or creating synthetic cells. I'm interested in the interaction between digital technology, visual culture, and physical, biological life. So, this show is just another attempt to synthesize these questions into a series of new works.

These sculptures are also deeply rooted in my own practice. I crossbred documentation images of my previous works using generative AI models as a way to explore the relationships between these forms and see what happens. I also added some other visual signals into the mix. After hundreds of iterations, I settled on five I really liked and translated them into sculptures using various techniques.

But the idea was to create something that looks clearly artificial – uncanny blue, slimy, but also convincing enough to feel like it has a soul. Each sculpture has eyes and egg-like forms.

SB: Your work often explores the relationship between technology and how technology shapes the way we understand biology. What drew you toward that intersection?

KN: There's something mystical about the idea of translating or approximating a living thing into code or into even a digital image. A real animal and an image of that animal share no material in common – one is a creature and one is just like pixels on the screen – yet there's a clear link. You can take this image and modify it and translate it again back into some sort of matter, like a sculpture – or even back to biology. I find the idea that an image is an approximation of a real thing, but also a model for something else that you can make very exciting. And of course, there's this cultural layer of how we see images as the real thing and how we approach real life.

In some cases, there are more images of a certain species than there are of the real animals left in the wild. I find it fascinating. It's also related to art because I think this is the great shift of our time, and I'm just trying to capture that shift and draw attention to it.



Soft Approximation (brooding life-form 03), 2025. UTR-8100 resin, PU resin, rock crystal, labradorite, pigment, aluminium pedestal. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa – Tuskany Zeidler, Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

SB: You described your sculptures as approximations: part human, part animal, part algorithm – not fully alive, but almost. When you look at the sculpture, there's some type of familiarity there.

KN: I think the way it's familiar is because generative AI is like a giant meat grinder that grinds up everything humanity has ever done or captured, and then spits out these kinds of approximations. I translate that into sculpture to make it look and feel real, capturing this uncanniness. I really wanted to try to find this spot where it doesn't look too cartoony, but it's also obviously not real.

SB: Do you see these prototypes and approximations potentially exist?

KN: Yes, in a way. There's already real research happening, basically hacking real developmental processes of creatures. There are labs growing two-headed frogs, trying to regenerate human limbs, creating synthetic proteins. There's a lot going on in the field of biotechnology that is trying to make this translation from code to real biological matter real. But the creatures that I'm envisioning are definitely a few steps ahead, were you to continue this trajectory. They're not outcomes of rational research but imagined glitches, something where the research maybe goes out of control, or something unpredictable happens.

SB: What was your process of sourcing and assembling ideas and materials for the exhibition? Does it usually begin with something visual or a physical object? Or, is it different for each sculpture?

KN: I start digitally – sketching and storyboarding on the computer. I still see myself as a digital artist who then translates forms into the physical world. I use generative AI very intuitively, generating hundreds of images until something sparks my artistic instinct. If I see a spark of life, I move forward, collaborating with 3D artists to model and print the forms. In the studio, we combine synthetic materials such as resin with minerals to make the creatures feel convincing. I could have potentially made a dozen of these creatures, but it's a very labor-intensive process. So, I created a small group that establishes itself as a population, and they all complement each other in how they present themselves, how they feel.

SB: Definitely with their aura as well.

KN: Exactly. That was the goal – to make an ensemble that makes sense together. I try something new each time and by using digital technologies and synthetic materials – all

things that wouldn't have existed maybe 20 years ago in this shape and form. That process of making also reflects the theme of what it's about. I consciously avoid using real biological material because the work must stay an approximation, not actual life.



Earthware (mirror octopus 02), 2025. Epoxy clay, UV-resistant ink transfer, aluminium frame, nail polish, PU resin, lenticular print. Courtesy the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

SB: You used resin but I also saw that you used crystals when creating these sculptures. How do you decide which materials to use and combine?

KN: I haven't fully understood why, but I think that I like the tension. Minerals – such as, rock crystals, obsidian glass, or carnelian – form over millions of years, through cosmic and geological processes. Resin, by contrast, is hyper-modern and industrial. One is very slow, and the other is very fast – like contemporary art or these new synthetic materials that keep changing. So, to combine something very slow with something very fast is interesting.

I also like to use minerals because they bring a bit of chaos and cannot be designed. I have to find them the way they already exist, with all the little imperfections you see in them. The same happens when you generate something. I'm not designing or making the work from scratch. I'm using something that is already out there – and then I transform it.

SB: You mentioned transformation: "an egg becomes an eye, a mineral becomes an image." Is that a kind of language for you?

KN: My initial academic background is in semiotics, a field that's all about translation – where one thing stands in for something else. I think about that in material terms. For example, an image of an animal becomes a translation of that animal's existence. That's the mysterious thing about art: it always points beyond itself, translating emotions, thoughts, or histories into form. I'm interested in those contradictions. What are the limits of synthetic life? How does it clash with the real? What problems does that raise? There's also this idea of morphogenesis – how one form can evolve into another. You can trace that lineage in my work: from a new sculpture, to an older one, to maybe even an image of a beluga whale. I find that the evolution of forms is really exciting.



Katja Novitskova, exhibition view, "MIRROR LIFE", Kraupa – Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, 2025.
Courtesy of the artist, Kraupa – Tuskany Zeidler, Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

SB: The exhibition mentions that "the look inside has somehow replaced the gaze into the future." What do you think this shift says about our present relationship to technology and imagination?

KN: In the end, all technologies are reflections of ourselves – our systems, our priorities. What we prioritize could have been vastly different, but they weren't. So, when we look at technology or even at these creatures, we're looking at ourselves and the systems we built.

That can be healthy, because you just see what you extrapolate – what could be the consequences of the trends we're setting for ourselves. We cannot escape the culture, so we are always looking at ourselves.

Even when you look at a photograph of an animal underwater, somebody went to capture that animal with a camera; it's a human instinct and still a human-centered act. We view the world almost entirely from our own perspective.

SB: How do you approach research? Do you look at science journals, online archives, and visual media?

KN: I'm subscribed to scientific journals and message boards, and whenever something catches my attention, I save it – a line of text, a link to an article, or an image. I screenshot a lot. When I begin a new project, I go back through everything I've saved over the past few years to look for a starting point.

For this exhibition in Berlin, I became obsessed with images of eggs and egg sacs – especially ones that looked like googly eyes. I had this feeling that I wanted to create creatures with eyes and eggs, where it's unclear what exactly is inside. At first, they were just amorphous. But once I started combining them with elements from my earlier works, they began taking on more recognizably creature-like forms with faces.

It started with this weird, obsessive few weeks of collecting images of egg sacs from all kinds of species. After that, I had to ask myself: "Okay, what can I actually do with this?" That's because the ideas I have sometimes aren't technically possible or they're too expensive to produce. I have to calculate what I can actually do.

SB: You also mentioned that you worked with AI generation. How do you see these systems evolving over time in the field of art?

KN: It's a giant topic, of course, but I kind of use it as a tool, and I always use the word "meat grinder." It grinds every aspect of human culture. You can use it for your own means, but you also have to constantly be aware that it's processed input from everything that's out there – including copyrighted stuff and things people didn't consent to be in there. Basically, the internet has been that meat grinded up, and now it can produce new forms.

I find it interesting as a tool – it really fits with my previous work. You can use it as a step in a process. I'm also interested in the architecture of it: things like large language models, smooth approximation algorithms, activation patterns, random forests. These were all words and ideas that were already part of my work. When AI became so widespread and advanced, it only made sense that I would engage with it.



Installation view *Microbial Oasis*, 2021. Solo exhibition at Kunstfort Vijfhuizen, Netherlands. Courtesy of the artist, Photo: LNDWstudio

On the other hand, of course, there's this huge issue of control – who has it, and how it can be used for harmful purposes? One of my projects from 2021, "Microbial Oasis," addressed the idea that AI could be used to synthesize novel proteins and virus structures – to basically make bioweapons. There are systems pushing against that, but it's still within the realm of possibility that AI could be used in these extreme, dystopian ways. That's why I'm cautious.

I'm more of a "look and see" kind of person. I use it as a tool, but I don't use text prompts – I do everything but that. I usually use another image as input whenever I try to generate something. I think that's because I'm someone who can't really put thoughts into words easily. It's much more natural for me to use images.



Soft Approximation (brooding life-form 01), 2025. UTR-8100 resin, epoxy clay, PU resin, hematite, pigment, aluminium pedestal. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa – Tuskany Zeidler, Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

SB: That goes hand-in-hand with how you start projects – by visualizing them. Is that usually where it begins for you – starting with something visual to create from?

KN: I normally go on Google search and save actual photographs of real animals. I also do collages and use Photoshop. I don't always use AI, but sometimes I want to morph these images into a sculpture I made five years ago with one from two years ago and see what happens. I take the result of that morph and mix it with something else.

SB: It's this kind of idea of reproduction and merging.

KN: Yeah, there's no language or logic to it. It's different every time. It's more about feeling it. I could never put it into words, so that makes me a bit immune to the ChatGPT conversations. I never use it.

SB: Standing and looking at them, I thought the sculptures felt really familiar as well. They felt like something that might exist and using crystals or stones for their eyes made them have a certain realness.

KN: Yeah, it's not just plastic. I didn't want them to look plastic. I wanted them to have a reflection – one of yourself within them.



Pattern of Activation (Biobanks), 2022. Print on aluminium, cutout display. Courtesy of the artist and MARTa Herford Museum, Photo: def image

Katja Novitskova's exhibition "Mirror Life" is on view from June 13 to July 26 at the Kraupa – Tuskany Zeidler Gallery in Berlin. Tuesday to Saturday, 11AM to 6PM.