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Behind the Scenes of The Immigrant Artist Biennial: Interview with Katya Grokhovsky

07/30/2019 by [KATIE HECTOR \(HTTPS://ARTEFUSE.COM/AUTHOR/KATIE-HECTOR/\)](https://artefuse.com/author/katie-hector/)



Image courtesy of Yali Romagoza, *Normal Is Good I Like America and America Likes Me*, video still.

New York City prepares to usher in its newest biennial, one which avows to feature the voices, stories, and diverse practices of immigrant artists. At a time when immigrant rights are under fire and border politics have risen to fever pitch [The Immigrant Artist Biennial](#)

(<https://www.theimmigrantartistbiennial.com/about>) seeks open up a space for dialogue by shining a light on the significant cultural contributions of contemporary immigrant artists. Founding Director and Curator Katya Grokhovsky aims to globally connect and unite international communities through ambitious and experimental multi-disciplinary programming. As The Immigrant Artist Biennial gets ready for its inaugural NYC launch this Spring, 2020 Arte Fuse sits down with Grokhovsky for an exclusive on what lies ahead.

KH: Hi Katya, thank you for taking the time to chat with us about this project. Can you tell us what TIAB is exactly?

KG: Sure, The Immigrant Artist Biennial (TIAB) is a platform for critically engaged multi-disciplinary contemporary art made by immigrant artists. The Biennial will take shape through a series of multi-venue exhibitions and public events throughout 2020 and will include performances, panel discussions, as well as a variety of ambitious projects.

In this time of extreme anti-immigrant sentiment, unrest, discrimination, and exclusion TIAB aims to facilitate diverse and experimental discourses geared towards constructing a globally connected international community. Through The Immigrant Artist Biennial we want to develop a platform which will enable innovative exchange between audiences and communities of artists whom are so often overlooked and or silenced. The Biennial will premiere in NYC in Spring 2020.



The Immigrant Artist Biennial logo, design by Ariel Diaz.

KH: How long has this project been in the works?

KG: The initial idea for the biennial has been percolating in my mind for a while, at least several years now. I have always had the desire to establish and direct my own long-term ongoing cultural endeavor which would encourage experimentation and exploration in the artworld.

For me, the institution of a 'Biennial' inherently symbolizes both exclusion and desirability. So, I decided to start my own about a year ago with the intention of focusing on immigrant artists. I think the idea of adding the word 'immigrant' to the biennial grew out of my work as a mentor, and once a mentee, in the NYFA (New York Foundation for the Arts) Immigrant Artist Mentoring Program.

When the time came to begin realizing TIAB I naturally sought to continue my relationship with NYFA and applied for fiscal sponsorship, which the project received. NYFA was our first sponsor and since then TIAB has partnered with several other institutions around the city. So far, we have staged fundraising events at Radiator Gallery in Long Island City as well as Assembly Room Gallery in the Lower East Side with more to come !



Katya Grokhovsky, *She Came to Stay*, TIAB Soft Launch Fundraiser, Assembly Room, photo Alex Sullivan.

KH: You're an immigrant artist yourself. What has your personal journey been like and what compels you to take on a project of this nature?

KG: I am a double immigrant, born in Ukraine and first migrating to Australia with my family in the 1990's, then to the US, on my own, ten years ago. I am a bi-lingual, Russian-English speaker and have dealt with various culture shocks throughout my life.

I came to the US to complete my MFA at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago 2009-2011, and then moved to New York City shortly afterwards. Having lived in many different countries NYC seemed like a great match for me. It's a moving beast of a home whose scale, chaos, and struggles somehow provide me with a lot of comfort. For me it was important that the biennial launch in New York City, a city of immigrants and outsiders.

I have built my practice in NYC as an artist, curator, and organizer over eight years and across the board my work inevitably deals with issues of alienation, memory, legacy, home, discrimination, gender, and identity politics. For example in 2014 I founded Feminist Urgent a platform for feminist discussions which served to unite communities through social engagement. In 2015 I was a Curatorial Fellow at Vox Populi in Philadelphia wherein I organized a seven part time-based program. Most recently, I was invited to curate the 2018 Art in Odd Places NYC Festival and Exhibition.

All of these experiences have led me to where I am now with regards to The Immigrant Artist Biennial. Based on my culmination of knowledge, experience, drive, curiosity, and, of course, pure passion now feels like the right time for me to build my own venture.



Performance by Pei-Ling Ho, Echolocation, TIAB Soft Launch Fundraiser, Radiator Gallery, photo Alex Sullivan.

KH: Considering the current political climate in America, 2020 holds a lot of significance especially for immigrants. Can you walk us through why you saw a need for this project and why now?

KG: The artworld is a harsh and inhospitable place for those who are somehow considered “other” and in my mind this unspoken standard is simply unacceptable in the 21st century. Yet, here we are. The world in general appears to be marching backwards and the artworld, although seemingly liberal on the surface, struggles greatly with acceptance and democracy.

So, a project of this nature, which focuses on culturally and racially ostracized artists, while highlighting issues of gender inequality, with a breakdown of 70% women, female identifying, gender non-confirming, and trans and 30% male artists, seems more urgent and critical than ever.

KH: The Immigrant Artist Biennial is set to launch next year, 2020. Can you describe how the programming is shaping up?

KG: The premier presentation of The Immigrant Artist Biennial will be conceptualized around the theme of otherness, separation, and alienation. TIAB will select first generation immigrant artists, based in the US, who work in various mediums such as: interdisciplinary works, performances, installations, ephemeral mediums, sound, sculpture, video, digital and virtual technologies, text, books, and public art.

So far, our partnering venues for 2020 include the EFA Project Space, NARS Foundation Gallery, Artists Alliance, Greenwood Cemetery, with even more forthcoming. The programming will be comprised of several group exhibitions in multiple venues across the city. Additional programming will include performance events, panel discussions, symposiums, talks, public projects, parks, and storefront interventions.

TIAB will officially launch this upcoming Spring, with a number of concurrent programs which will continue on into the Summer and potentially even the Fall. My idea is to actively engage the city and create an ongoing conversation between artists, organizations, and the public.



TIAB Soft Launch Fundraiser, Radiator Gallery, photo Alex Sullivan.

KH: Word on the street is that there will be an open call component to this biennial. Can you tell me more about that, when will it be, and who is eligible to submit work?

KG: Of course! Most biennials are not open to submission and the open call is one of the ways for us to expand this opportunity in NYC. I am interested in exhibiting works by a mix of established, emerging, and underrecognized intergenerational artists. Through the open call I am looking for diversity and various multicultural voices. I have to say that I am particularly interested in thematic, rigorous, experimental, and genre bending multimedia project proposals, which might otherwise not have a place to exist.

TIAB plans to host a total of 30-50 artists with about half curated by me through invitation and half selected through a nationwide open call. The open call functions as a diplomatic gesture of open submission to US-based immigrant artists who were born overseas. The open call will take place in the Fall of 2019 so stay tuned.

KH: What do you envision for the future of this Biennial? Where would you like to see it go and how would you like to see it grow in years to come?

KG: My future vision for The Immigrant Artist Biennial is to eventually find a home for it in one of NYC's major museums and for it to have its own permanent physical and notable place on the world's cultural map.

Logistically speaking, I intend for the biennial to be a fully funded operational enterprise under the umbrella of which magical and grand things might happen. A future dream is to include an exhibition of historically significant immigrant artists alongside living practicing artists. Merging the historical context with the present speaks to where we've been as well as where we are going. Ultimately, I want to shine a light on the substantial contributions of immigrant artists to culture in New York City, the USA, and the world.

Call me ambitious, please! I take it as a compliment haha!



Performance by Natacha Voliakovsky, Daily Reflections, TIAB Soft Launch Fundraiser, Assembly Room, photo Alex Sullivan.

KH: Considering the launch year is fast approaching. What resources are you still looking for before things kickoff?

KG: We are currently in fundraising mode and seeking funding through individuals, grants, and institutions. Because NYFA is our fiscal sponsor TIAB is set up to receive fully tax exempt donations which is a big plus. Okay, shameless plug: individuals who wish to donate can do so through either our Go Fund Me (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/the-immigrant-artist-biennial>) page or our NYFA Donate (<https://www.nyfa.org/ArtistDirectory/ShowProject/2583d8d2-ca1a-40d9-8069-214cf7cb3885>) page.

We are also looking for additional venues who are interested in partnering with us for group exhibitions, performances, and public interventions in Spring/Summer/Fall of next year.

TIAB is also currently seeking media sponsorships, publicity opportunities, as well as volunteers to join our team. We are namely looking for an exhibition and install manager, a press and marketing coordinator, as well as an administrator. All positions are currently on volunteer basis.



TIAB Soft Launch Fundraiser, Radiator Gallery, photo Alex Sullivan.

KH: You've had a number of soft launch events at various NYC galleries this year? What's next in 2019?

KG: Lots! We still have a number of Soft Launch events taking place before the year is up. Coming up August 4th we will host Soft Launch Fundraiser event at Assembly Room Gallery's Sidewalk Cellar Space featuring a solo performance by Kathie Halfin.

After that, we are gearing up for our next Auction Fundraiser exhibition event set to take place on Sept 7th at East Village Art Review, an apartment gallery in Manhattan, run by immigrant artist Julia Justo. The exhibition will include small works by ten immigrant artists which will be auctioned off to raise funds for TIAB's 2020 programming.

We will also be launching a major Kickstarter campaign in late Fall which is really exciting! We are planning to end 2019 with a Benefit Gala to celebrate the 2020 launch with a final fundraising push. At the moment I am writing millions of grants and having meetings all over the city to fund and move the Biennial forward. We are on our way!

Thank you Katya for giving us deep insight into this project. We'll be sure to continue watching over the next launch year for The Immigrant Artist Biennial.

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KATIE HECTOR IS AN ARTIST, CURATOR, AND WRITER LIVING AND WORKING IN NEW YORK CITY. WHILE HOLDING A STUDIO PRACTICE HECTOR IS ALSO AN INDEPENDENT CURATOR AND PARTNER AT THE ROYAL GALLERY IN WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN. SHE HAS WORKED TO ORGANIZE AND FUNDRAISE A VARIETY OF PROJECTS INCLUDING INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS, SITE-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL INSTALLATIONS, AND OVER TWO DOZEN GROUP SHOWS, SCREENINGS, POP UP EVENTS, AND PANEL DISCUSSIONS.

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