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The Ukrainian Museum: Molly Gochman's Community-Based Work Invites Celebration of Life and Culture

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Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Alex McTigue

By **KENDALL KRANTZ** October 23, 2024

“When I create work, I want it to be accessible and bridge gaps between the ‘art world’ and those who think they don’t have tools to engage in art.”

- Molly Gochman (2024)

In front of The Ukrainian Museum, I sat on one of the most significant benches in New York City.

This seat—an assemblage of reclaimed wood, glass, and metal—seemed to emerge from the pavement, supported by rubble, as if a fragment of the street had erupted violently upward. Part of Molly Gochman’s *UKR|RUS* installation, the bench is a sculptural work that “draws parallels between physical and metaphorical boundaries, explores the complex dynamics around borders, and creates a space for reflection on Ukraine’s ongoing struggle.”

Contrasting this solemn reminder of conflict, the streets around me were full of life. The Ukrainian Children’s Choir sang in front of vibrant graphic posters by Olga Severina, their performance setting the tone for the day’s celebration. Families gathered on the blocked-off street, engaging with Ukrainian crafters, performers, and local organizations. Bratko Art Studio guided visitors at a pottery wheel, while Liberty Ukraine hosted a letter-writing station for soldiers on the front lines. A traditional loom-weaving practice led by Halyna Shepko and knot tying performances invited participants into collective textile production, a metaphor for Gochman’s own Ukrainian-Jewish family reunions—a vital source of strength amidst the conflict.

“This is a beautiful celebration of Ukrainian life and culture,” remarked passerby Margaux, who was drawn into the event by the choir’s harmonies.



Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Alex McTigue

Inside the museum, Gochman's sculptures sat in jagged rows before a short, futuristic Ukrainian film. Throughout New York City and Brooklyn, Gochman's benches are installed in historically Ukrainian neighborhoods. Many are positioned near her *Dispersed Geographies* works, vinyl sidewalk decals rendering borders into a two-dimensional form. Both projects are charted on a Google Map (https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1jE5IP0BbXL8g9jmE7Z3eiVypSUi_Wqk&ll=40.652494914582654%2C-73.97337329999999&z=12), inviting intentional engagement.

“When I was making sculptures and paintings in my early 20s, I saw how museum archives held incredible and historic artwork, just sitting in storage,” Gochman explains. “It made me question the purpose of creating more physical objects. I shifted my focus to creating experiences.”

UKR|RUS and *Dispersed Geographies* create platforms for viewers to engage with the ongoing conflict, both as witnesses and as active contributors to community organizing for peace. The combination of community programming and sculptural installations reflects Gochman's commitment to fostering public participation in the arts.

Gochman's career spans a broad spectrum of mediums, with her recent work combining community engagement, activism, and aesthetic consideration. A significant precursor to her current efforts is the *Red Sand Project* (2018), which engaged with the pressing issue of human trafficking. In collaboration with Freedom United, Gochman created participatory installations that raised awareness and called for action, including a 650-foot-long trench filled with red sand in the shape of the U.S.-Mexico border at Houston's International Airport, visible during planes' takeoff and landing.

Central to both *Red Sand Project* and *UKR|RUS* is the visualization of borders. "Borders represent relationships," Gochman says. "Every relationship requires unique care."



Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Alex McTigue

The magic of Gochman's work lies in its inviting nature. While it addresses difficult topics like war, violence, and displacement, her focus remains on thawing us into action. Whether through community gatherings or solitary reflection at one of her benches, her work offers countless opportunities for meaningful engagement.

From joining community gatherings to spotting a *Dispersed Geographies* decal on a casual walk, her projects invite even the most casual observer to participate in broader conversations about place and identity.

This project's many accessible touchpoints have been carefully planned by Gochman herself: "I want to create things in dialogue... How can this work reach different audiences and possibly connect them?"

The Community Activation moment outside The Ukrainian Museum culminated in a recreation of Ukraine's "Chain of Unity." Everyone at the event linked arms, making both physical and intellectual connections to the collective dream of peace.

Whether one gravitates toward street interventions, museum installations, or immersive, participatory experiences, her practice offers points of entry for a diverse audience. The family-friendly nature of her projects also presents a unique opportunity to engage younger viewers with conceptual art and pressing geopolitical themes, fostering crucial dialogue across the city and beyond.

Gochman’s Community Activation (<https://www.instagram.com/mollygochman/?hl=en>) sessions will continue throughout the fall, and *UKR|RUS* will remain on display at The Ukrainian Museum (<https://www.theukrainianmuseum.org/ukr-rus/>) until January 19th, 2025. **WM**



KEN KRANTZ

Ken Krantz is interested in the intersection of business, culture, and bravery where great artwork emerges. He can be found on Instagram as @G00dkenergy or online at goodkenergy.com (<http://goodkenergy.com/>).

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