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GALLERY SCENE

BRUJAS Gather Around a Caldron of 'Tricky, Politically-Incorrect Ideas'



Herbal Workshop with Antonia Perez, Installation shot (image courtesy of Recess)

On a chilly but pleasant afternoon, a group of people sat at tables in Soho art space Recess, poring over strips of film. One person scratches designs onto a strip, another adds metallic star-shaped stickers. Croatia-born artist Željka Blakšić, who also uses the name Gita Blak, has been conducting what she calls a “direct filmmaking workshop.” In it, 16mm film strips are directly altered through the use of collage, drawing, scratching, and other tactics. Each person’s customized film strip is individual, but soon they will all be assembled into one motley creation, fed into a projector, and screened for all its creators to behold.

This is just one small portion of *Brouhaha*, a unique artist residency by Blakšić and the feminist collective BRUJAS being conducted for the past two months at Recess. For this time, Blakšić and BRUJAS were essentially given the Grand Street space to use however they saw fit. This has manifested in the form of skate sessions, herbalist workshops, academic panel discussions, political lectures, parties, and more.

“For me, collaboration is really important,” Blakšić explains. “What I’m trying to do is completely let go of my ego or artist aesthetics and really give BRUJAS and other people the chance to submit whatever they want.”

The varied nature of *Brouhaha*’s programming reflects BRUJAS’ wide spectrum of skills and interests, as well as Blakšić’s focus on art, film, and politics. The space itself is constantly shifting in order to reflect different vibes and to show work they have created along the way. And with a couch, plants, a makeshift skate ramp, and old posters on the wall, it looks far more like a hangout spot than a gallery.

“Having a spot like this that’s so accessible has a lot more possibilities,” adds BRUJA Julieta Varela. “It was really exciting that we can have a space to like, call home and host a lot of these experiences and try out a lot of new things that we have been imagining but have only really lived as house parties and trips to go skate and stuff.”

Everyone involved was careful to stress that *Brouhaha* was a collective effort, just as BRUJAS is. The collective’s identity is also more fluid: though they’ve been frequently billed in outlets like *The New York Times* as an all-female, POC skate collective from the Bronx, Arianna is quick to clarify that BRUJAS has been a “gender inclusive space from the beginning”—not all of them skate, and while many met hanging out in uptown areas, they are not all from those neighborhoods.

Blakšić met Arianna Maya Gil, one of the founders of BRUJAS and arguably the most recognizable member of the collective, about a year ago. Blaksic suggested they make work together, and together they applied for the Recess residency.

“We didn’t really know each other, we had like one friend in common. It’s interesting in that [Arianna] plays the bass, which I did not know [about]. I play the bass,” Blakšić tells me. “So on a ridiculous level I was like, maybe this is destiny.”



Direct Filmmaking Workshop with Željka Blakšić and participants (image courtesy of Recess)

Blakšić was also part of an open-form “girl collective” in the ’90s, and has been politically outspoken and aware since she was very young in Eastern Europe. “That’s also my big connection with BRUJAS,” she says. “They’re rare, rare young girls that found a way to connect each other and talk about tricky, politically-incorrect ideas.”

Since BRUJAS gives off vibes of being very accessible, inclusive, and anti-establishment, I wonder if they had any hesitations becoming involved with a space tied to the “art world,” a sphere often the antithesis of these values.

“I grew up in the downtown in Loisaida, we would have to skate through Soho to get from Tompkins to BPC or to the Brooklyn Banks,” Arianna Maya Gil says, clarifying that they (Arianna uses gender-neutral pronouns) had never before interacted with a gallery in the area.

“Obviously the Soho art world isn’t built for or by native New York City youth, especially those of color, but we were just going with the flow by applying for the residency. Recess is also a very special space that hosts a lot of extremely progressive art, they’ve hosted the Black Arts Incubator, as well as the Canaries. I think it made sense for BRUJAS.”



Studio Recording Workshop with Arianna Maya Gil and participants (image courtesy of Recess)

“Initially BRUJAS was a collective of girl skaters, and just a crew of friends who grew up uptown in the Bronx, Harlem, Washington Heights areas,” BRUJA and visual artist Julieta Varela adds. “But a lot of us are creatively inclined. For me personally it was a really exciting and large leap to feel like we could have this space. Because a lot of what BRUJAS is about is claiming that space.”

Brouhaha comes hot on the heels of another major BRUJAS success: a crowdfunded streetwear line called **1971** whose profits directly benefits those affected by the prison system. Named for the 1971 Attica prison strike, money raised will go into a general fund for both incarcerated people in the BRUJAS network and queer and trans people of color in the New York prison system. They ultimately raised over \$22,000, exceeding their Kickstarter goal by more than double.

Arianna tells me that 1971 was in part born out of the “media reductionism” BRUJAS has experienced in their press coverage, in that focus has been on the “cool” factor of the collective and “identity politics” rather than centering their radical political and community organizing efforts. With 1971, BRUJAS were turning “cultural clout into material resources.”

A central factor of the 1971 campaign, and of BRUJAS and *Brouhaha*, is welcoming and normalizing the act of “deviance.” With 1971, money raised goes to anyone incarcerated, rather than prioritizing who is “more innocent.” In *Brouhaha*’s popular November discussion event “Hood Witches,” featuring Silvia Federici and Arlene Davila, Arianna as moderator stated that deviance was one of the ideas central to the cultural politics of BRUJAS.

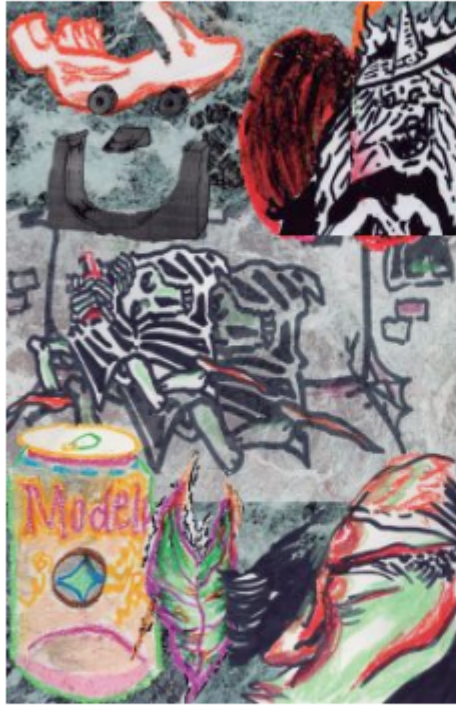
“Deviance is about attacking the system from all points,” Arianna later clarified to me.

Julieta added this focus also means framing “deviance as something to represent with pride, as opposed to feeling like you have to claim your innocence. Deviance is a really manipulative word in certain ways to make us feel we’re in the wrong.”

Blakšić embraces “deviance” in a more personal way, a welcome rebellion from rules and regulations.

“I really have zero respect for any form of authority. I usually see it as pure evil,” she adds. “For me, I’m really trying to escape that. Always. Honestly, any time I’ve made something good or great, it happened when I was going against all the rules. [Rules are] a form of control.”

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*Drawings from the Brujas Living Room party
(image courtesy of Recess)*

Brouhaha started before the election, but the majority of the residency has happened in a world where Trump is the President-elect. Thus, *Brouhaha* has also served as a space to grieve, process, and gain knowledge in the wake of an uncertain political climate; most of the events at Recess post-election have been political lectures or discussions, as well as a self-defense class that was not part of the original programming. The residency deviates from the expected use of a fine art space, is always modifying itself, and facilitates radical and revolutionary thinking and

skills. *Brouhaha* has effectively become a hub for deviance.

“Every day [of *Brouhaha*] I’m expecting a failure and I’m open to that,” Blaksic says. “But then again what does it really mean, a failure? Because the piece itself is that we are actually here and making this together and are just becoming stronger like that.”

“Few are ready to accept women in their skateparks, fewer will fathom the queer, liberated, radical future we want to inhabit. Never will we find ourselves in a situation where we limit what we create for the purpose of adhering to an image produced by external forces, including media sources,” adds Arianna. “We will continue to resist legibility, as legibility propagates the compartmentalization of genders and sexualities. Making art, especially socially engaged art designed for the public and using [Recess’s] space as a resource to do that has been part of building the space and vision that resists heteronormativity and patriarchy.”

Željka Blakšić and BRUJAS’s Brouhaha continues through December 22 at Recess, 41 Grand Street. The residency will be having a closing party that night from 6 pm to 8 pm.