



IV. Dialogues

Masking Emotions. Fostering Connection Through Performative Art in the Digital Space. An Interview with Yuliya Tsukerman, Puppeteer and Mask Maker

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ABSTRACT

This interview focuses on the work of Yuliya Tsukerman, a puppeteer and mask maker working in theatre and film, and based in Brooklyn, New York. Her project, *Transmissions from the Ancient Forest*, is a series of video poems in which a community of lesser gods tries to make sense of human suffering. We discuss the mask-making process, the characters' emotions, and how these are perceived by online audiences. Her work has been supported by the Jim Henson Foundation, St. Ann's Warehouse, Franklin Furnace, the Jerome Foundation, Clubbed Thumb, Folly Tree Arboretum, the NYFA Playwriting/ Screenwriting Grant, Loghaven, Mana Contemporary, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

KEYWORDS

Mask maker; digital performance; ancient forest; spirituality; human connection.

Masks have occupied an important place in ritual, theatrical, and performative traditions across cultures. Whether used in seasonal customs, religious ceremonies, or contemporary artistic performances, masks mediate the relationship between identity and alterity, concealment and revelation, and the human and the non-human. While ethnographic scholarship has largely examined masks within traditional ritual contexts, contemporary artists continue to reimagine the mask as a medium for exploring questions of identity, emotion, spirituality, and community.

Rather than recreating existing folk traditions, Yuliya Tsukerman constructs an original cosmology populated by fictional "lesser gods" who communicate reflections on loneliness, grief, and compassion through short video performances shared on social media. Her work sits at the intersection of puppet theatre, mask performance, poetry, and digital storytelling, offering an opportunity to explore how contemporary artists reinterpret one of humanity's oldest performative devices: the mask. This interview does not seek to analyze a traditional mask ritual but rather examines how one contemporary artist understands the creative, emotional, and symbolic potential of masks. The discussion addresses questions of transformation, spirituality, artistic identity, digital community, and other themes that resonate with broader anthropological debates concerning performance, embodiment, and the cultural meanings attached to masking practices.

Martor 31/2026 – Mask-making and Mask-wearing: Shifting Im/materialities in Ritual and Performative Contexts



The interview was conducted online in 2025 as part of a broader research interest in contemporary mask-making practices and their relationship to performance, identity, and cultural transmission. The initial premise was to understand whether contemporary artistic uses of masks retain functions traditionally associated with masking practices, such as transformation, mediation between the human and the non-human, or the expression of emotions that are difficult to communicate through ordinary social interaction. A semi-structured interview format allowed the conversation to develop organically, while also following thematic directions related to artistic practice, symbolism, spirituality, and digital audiences.



Irina Apan: *When did you begin working with puppets, costumes, and masks?*



Yuliya Tsukerman: I found puppetry in 2012 through a residency here in Brooklyn, NY, called the St. Ann's Warehouse Puppet Lab, where a cohort of artists meets every week to develop new works of puppet theater. I was struck by how expansive and inventive the form was, and by the incredible ingenuity, playfulness, and creative rigor of the puppetry artists I met. I worked on my own small puppetry projects over the following years, but it took me a long time to make the connection to working with masks.



I started experimenting with mask-making a few years ago when I was feeling particularly creatively scattered. I had the sense for many, many years in my creative practice that I was being pulled in a million directions by my interests and dabblings, but that I didn't know what the center was. I made a mask on a whim, and when I filmed it to see what it looked like, I was surprised to see something more-than-me staring back. I had no idea what the project would be, but I sensed that the being I had created knew more than I did, and that it might be able to help me out of my state of creative and existential confusion. I had already tried everything, so giving myself over to the wisdom of a papier-mâché mask didn't seem that strange!

The following questions explore how Tsukerman conceptualizes the fictional cosmology that emerges through her masks. Rather than representing fixed characters, the masks become vehicles through which broader existential reflections are articulated.



I.A.: *Your characters are very spiritual and very encouraging with the public. How and why did you choose to make them this way?*



Y.T.: When I started making the masks, I had no idea who they represented. I experimented for a while with them being some kind of folk art from the future, but it didn't feel right, and there was maybe a year-long period of frustration where nothing stuck. I think I was looking for a way for my artistic practice to be connected to something larger—a cultural or spiritual identity, some lost sense of place. Somehow, again, in a state of resignation, I gave myself over to the sense of naive wisdom that seemed to be present in the faces I was making—there was a kind of compassion in their expressions that was maybe a happy accident of my limited technique as an artist. Whatever it was, when I saw them looking back at me, I realized I had a longing to be seen by a being like that, and that maybe there was something divine in the gaze they met me with. I sensed that the longing I felt—for compassion, belonging, understanding—was probably shared by a lot of folks like me who don't feel particularly at home in the world. I became interested in creating work that would be an outlet both for the understanding I needed for myself, and for the compassion I felt for others but couldn't quite express in my real life.





"The Sun," character from the *Ancient Forest*, a series of video poems in which a community of lesser gods tries to make sense of human suffering. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



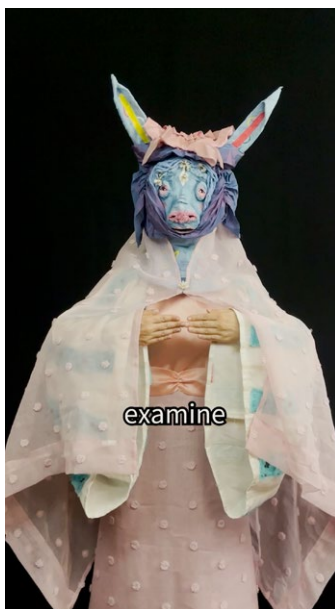
"Nostrils," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"Your prayer," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"We always imagined," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman



Character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"Frog," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"The rabbit," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



I.A.: *Where do you find inspiration for your poems? What are your roots that emerge in your work?*

Y.T.: I spent many years trying to write plays and stories and novels and always felt profoundly overwhelmed and stuck trying to figure out plot and characters and all that. When I started writing the *Ancient Forest* poems, I felt immense relief that I could write simply, and that the words wouldn't have to stand on their own—they'd have the masks and costumes to help carry them. I usually write poems on my walk to my studio, when some bit of suffering has overtaken me and I'm trying to sort it out. They all roughly take the form of: what if this fear/heartbreak/longing/anxiety was part of the design of life—what if instead of being a personal anomaly or failing, it carries some universal truth that could help us all? I find this thought experiment incredibly helpful in times of duress, and I always hope that whatever small insight finds me might resonate with someone else.

I.A.: *What exactly are the spirits of the Ancient Forest? What did you have in mind when you brought them to life?*

Y.T.: This is a good question! I think of the animal forms they take as a kind of hologram for human convenience—when there's a transmission to send, the lesser gods of the *Ancient Forest* do their best to make themselves present in a way that's legible to us. To me, they have something to do with the divine fumbling of creation—a way of understanding the universe as equal parts compassionate and flawed, misguided, absurd.

I.A.: *In Romania and other European countries, there are winter traditions in which people dress up in real bearskin, goat skin, and fur to scare away evil spirits and to*

✂ *make room for the good to come. Even nowadays. people keep these traditions alive, and participants say that the spirit of the bear possesses the person while they wear its skin and they feel the power of the animal. Do you ever have this feeling of strength, energy, or force that you might draw from your characters?*

Y.T.: I would love to see this sometime! I don't personally have any connection to a folk tradition—I was born in the Soviet Union but left as a small child and have always felt disconnected from any sense of cultural rootedness. But I do think masks have an innate and universal power that accounts for their importance in folk traditions across human cultures. And I find it interesting to attempt to access this power outside of a folk tradition or a specific cultural context—at times I wonder if the attempt is hollow, or appropriative, grasping at something that doesn't belong to me.

At the same time, I'm grateful I have access to a form that creates little opportunities for transformation and play, and I think these opportunities should be available to all of us who don't have the good fortune of keeping our traditions of origin. I wonder if playing with masks can access something in the subconscious that we share with our ancestors, if it's a form of knowing that can transcend the formal passing-down of traditions and fill a gap in what's been lost or erased.

The primary feeling I have in my masks is that my face is very sweaty (laughs)—but alongside that, I do feel transformed in them, like a little bit of wisdom or insight becomes available to me when I put them on and take in my new reflection. They also engender a kind of confidence through anonymity—when my identifiable self dissolves, I'm no longer stuck in what "I" would do. I also experience the expression on the mask's face becoming my internal experience—and because most of the masks are sculpted with expressions of compassion and concern, they have a way of transporting me into this consciousness.



Yuliya Tsukerman in the studio. Photo credit: Shawn Poynter.





Yuliya Tsukerman in a suit.
Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.

I.A.: *Which is your favorite character, and why?*

Y.T.: I see the “characters” more as avatars that the gods take on for human legibility—as if, when we aren’t watching, the gods become utterly shapeless, incomprehensible, mysterious. There’s also a bit of a joke in one of my poems that the gods wore themselves out naming everything, so they didn’t get a chance to name themselves. As a result of these two elements, I don’t really see the “characters” as disparate or unique, having distinct voices and personalities. They have an interchangeable quality. I often have a sense of who might be the best channel for a particular story, but beyond that, their individuality is vague.

I.A.: *How do you choose which character comes to life and which one doesn’t?*

Y.T.: I’ve made a handful of masks that didn’t feel right for various reasons, in terms of being part of the Ancient Forest community. I find that, [for a mask] to feel right, there needs to be a sense of openness and compassion in their expression, which can be hard to capture with the quick papier-mâché process I use. I also like it when the character’s animal identity is a little open to interpretation, blended with the right amount of human anatomy to allow for a more spacious experience. There’s one that some people see as a donkey, others see as a pig, and still others see as a rabbit—I really like that.



I.A.: *Was there ever a character you wanted to bring to life, but you couldn’t?*



Y.T.: I’ve come to this project with a really improvisational approach, so I don’t have a lot of top-down ideas that I hope to realize. Instead, I make something with my hands and play with it until I get a deeper sense of what I’ve made and its narrative possibilities. I do think there’s an emotional range missing from this world that I’d like to get closer to expressing—there’s no anger here, and the playfulness and humor are somewhat boundaries. I think this mirrors my own discomfort with anger, as well as my own self-consciousness, so there’s a lot of room to grow and expand once I’m ready.

I.A.: *Do you think you would be able to make your poems public if it weren’t for the masks?*

Y.T.: I sometimes see the videos as a way of making poems more digestible in our distracted world. I often find it hard to read on a screen and feel pulled in a million directions, so feeding the text line-by-line makes sense to me. I think the videos also help establish a tone that’s not always present in the text, and I like experimenting with the interplay of gesture, mask, costume, language, and music. I find that in layering these elements, I get closer to whatever ineffable thing I’m always circling. Sometimes the poems feel a little sterile on their own. Other times, I end up preferring the text by itself, without the distraction of the video!



Conclusion

Although detached from any inherited mask tradition, Tsukerman's work demonstrates that masks continue to function as powerful cultural technologies through which individuals negotiate identity, vulnerability, and belonging. As Anthony Giddens argues (1991, 75), "the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible." Although Tsukerman does not feel that she belongs to a particular tradition, she consciously constructs a symbolic world through her artistic practice. The interview suggests that contemporary digital performance does not replace older symbolic practices but rather reconfigures them within new environments where ritual, storytelling, and community are mediated through online platforms. The idea of creating "folk art from the future" reflects her search for cultural rootedness, while her creation of the Ancient Forest shows how new symbolic worlds can emerge outside inherited frameworks. She develops an original cosmology that performs functions commonly associated with masks across cultures, such as transformation, mediation, and the exploration of human experience. Rather than recovering a lost tradition, her work illustrates what Hall (1990, 222-37) describes as the continuous production of cultural identity and creative practice.

Tsukerman's project generates meaningful social connections without claiming authenticity through tradition. Masks continue to function as powerful cultural mediators even when detached from their historical ritual contexts. As Ingold (2013, 21) argues, making is not merely the production of objects but a process of growth through which people establish relationships with the world around them. In increasingly mobile and globalized societies, many artists no longer inherit cohesive ritual traditions or stable cultural frameworks. Instead, they construct new symbolic worlds by drawing on elements of mythology, nature, and spirituality. These creations respond to contemporary experiences of loneliness, uncertainty, and fragmented identity.



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