

HBO MAX & DANISH DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION present:

APOLONIA, APOLONIA

Denmark, Poland / 2022 / 116 min.

PRESS NOTES

**A film by
Lea Glob**

World premiere

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2022
IDFA International Competition

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

CONTACTS

Production:

Danish Documentary
Sidsel Siersted
+45 51 90 96 93
sidsel@danishdocumentary.com

Sales:

CAT&Docs
Catherine Le Clef
cat@catndocs.com

Aleksandra Derewienko
aleksandra@catndocs.com

Publicist:

NOISE Film & TV
Mirjam Wiekenkamp
+31 6 28652249
mirjam@noisefilmpr.com
noisefilmpr.com

Festivals:

Maëlle Guenegues
maelle@catndocs.com

SYNOPSIS

When Danish filmmaker Lea Glob first met Apolonia Sokol in 2009, she appeared to be leading a storybook life.

The talented Apolonia was born in an underground theatre in Paris and grew up in an artist community — the ultimate bohemian life. In her 20s, she studied at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, one of the most prestigious art academies in Europe. Over the years, Lea kept returning to film Apolonia as the latter sought her place in the art world, grappling with the agonies and joys of womanhood, the relationships with others and her own body and creation.

The result is a fascinating portrait of the young woman's trying voyage into the art world. Apolonia is confident in her talent, but her path is not always an easy one to tread. Life is not a storybook, and Apolonia learns that women painters have to make more sacrifices and overcome greater obstacles than their male counterparts. This also applied to the friend she lived with for a long time, Oksana Shachko, one of the founders of the feminist action group Femen. Apolonia's resilience is put to the test.

As time passes and a special bond grows between Apolonia and Lea, we witness a film being born and a painter rising to fame. 13 years on, the two women continue to reflect on each other's paths in this mesmerising film about art, love, motherhood, sexuality, representation, and how to succeed in a world dominated by patriarchy, capitalism and war, without losing oneself.



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR LEA GLOB

How did you first meet with Apolonia?

This film really grew out of chance. It started with a small film school project. When I was a young director and was studying documentary Film Direction in the Danish Film School, we had one of these assignments where you have to do your very first film. It was supposed to be about 20 minutes, and there were some limitations of what you could do. For that project, I was looking for a protagonist, a young female artist. I contacted quite a few people, and one of them was Malou Leth Reymann who is now actually a director. Back then she was a young actress. I saw her in films and thought she was wonderful. She decided not to participate in the project but she gave me Apolonia's number.

The first time I had a Skype conversation with Apolonia, I instantly felt like I was already in a film. I was watching this woman enter the frame, and as I was speaking with her, all kinds of people would come into view from all sides of the screen. There was a young boy saying something, and then a woman came. All of a sudden, I was witnessing three or four different stories unfold within our Skype conversation. And the whole time Apolonia was just capturing my attention. I knew at that moment that she would be the person for the film. As a documentarian, you know that some people are just creating a film with their presence, and you just need to frame it, in a way. That was my first meeting with Apolonia.

You know, how the production workflow is supposed to be divided into sort of boxes. First, you do research for a story, after the research phase you make decisions, then you enter pre-production and production, with all these schedules. And of course, none of these schedules ended up being anything close to reality. When I met Apolonia in person for the first time she had just decided to move back to her father's theatre in Paris to look after her younger brothers, a story we didn't follow in the film. She told me that she was born and raised in this theatre. Without much hesitation, I hopped on the train and travelled down there with just some student savings, a PD100 camera, and no understanding of any French. Apolonia had given me a note on a piece of paper with her number and address and said, "When you are there, just call my name in front of the window." So once I arrived in Paris and reached the theatre, I was just standing there in front of the building, calling her, "Apolonia, Apolonia!" As you can see, we kept it as the title of the film, the calling of her name twice. And after some time, Apolonia came down and started to show me around. And I, being a documentary filmmaker, said that I would film everything, and from the beginning. So I started to film from the first moment we met [in person]. What you see in the film is the actual first meeting with her.

Back then I didn't know what an incredible paintress she would become, but I thought Apolonia had this incredible face for cinema, the face of a great actress. And she is an extraordinary person and character. Someone once said that she was very courageous and desperate at the same time. So all of these mixed sentiments and contradictions were coming into the lens. I guess in my generation

we did not get to see many women as these complex characters on screen. So I was deeply fascinated once I saw a woman of her own thoughts, choices and complexities of character. After I did a small school project (I shot a short film with her which was around 20 minutes and was much more controlled), I was just not able to shake her off. I couldn't forget about her. So the first chance I got—when I was already out of the film school, received a grant and could travel to Paris (at the time I was working on 'Olmo and the Seagull', whose protagonists Olivia and Serge lived in Paris)—I called Apolonia and said that I wanted to do another film with her, and this time it would be a cinematic portrait of her, because she was so much more.

And besides that, first of all, Apolonia is a real Paintress. She managed to do what very few painters manage to do—build a path for themselves and achieve recognition in their own lifetime. In ten years, I am sure that everyone will know her name.



APOLONIA, APOLONIA is also about your personal story. What were your motivations for including your own story in the film?

A fly on the wall approach, or editing it that way, felt a little cursory in telling this story, and we really wanted to go and challenge some stereotypes on portraying a woman artist in film. If I just followed her path as an artist using the tired model, many complexities would have vanished. For that, I really felt that including my own story, my contemplation and narration was a great tool, and it did a lot to overcome those stereotypes that you have within the dramaturgy of film. I really wanted to invite people into not only watching a woman and her journey from a distance but also to think with us, Apolonia and me, as we matured, and to be part of that experience of going into this life, taking these steps that you do when you are young, navigating these notions of status and different starting points in life as a young woman and artist.

I think if we edited the film without my own story, the film dramaturgy of 'a woman overcoming obstacles' would have sent us in the wrong direction, and this is not the story I wanted to tell. I also think there were so many layers in Apolonia's story. She is so good at being in front of the camera, which can really get interpreted in wrong ways. And it was important for me to go into those spaces of storytelling to create a nuanced portrait of her, without being exploitative, in a way. I must say that I have met resistance in putting my own story in there. I guess it's not so well looked upon, especially in the Danish cinema tradition. Narration and a personal story is not pure cinema. But to me, it really makes sense in this film.

I also wanted to take the audience on a thrilling ride of being a documentary filmmaker, getting this call one morning, seeing how much of an adventure it is, and giving the audience an opportunity to witness the magic of documentary film, when you are just there and life is really crazy. It was a long process actually to do it, to dare to do it. But I completed this portrait, it just took a really long time.

So you didn't just want to hold up a mirror and watch a young woman overcome obstacles in life and become this great woman and painter but also to invite the viewer to reflect with you and her. Your stories in life and in film intertwine. Could you elaborate how your relationship evolved during the course of 13 years that you were filming, and how it affected the project?

I think we started off with the director and subject relationship. And, of course, that relationship evolved over time. I was observing her as the filmmaker but I also really cared about her. Curiously, over the years, our positions shifted in a way. We both completed our education. She became a very well educated woman, obtained her Master's degree in the History of Arts and worked in a field where you can actually make a living and financially prosper, which is very different from working in documentary film. So the power positions, in a way, shifted during the course of filming. And I thought that was interesting.

As for our personal relationship, I think there were some defining moments. I was there for her during some hard times, at least I believe I was, and then when I got sick, she was actually one of the few persons that had the ability to stand in times of hardship with kindness and love. And I think that was a very important moment for me, also in terms of working on this film because I got so much respect for her then. Getting very sick, almost losing my life, movement, the ability to do anything, maybe I would have survived but in what condition? I was unsure of that for a long time. So I don't know if I could have continued working on the film if I didn't have that experience. And then, of course, I also went through some deep changes as a person because I became a mother.

Your voice also carries us through, tying all these different chapters in life, your own and Apolonia's. Why did you decide to use your own voice as voice-over?

I love narration in cinema. A lot of the films that inspired me have beautiful narration. So it was a natural go-to, but it was insanely difficult. It was very difficult to find the right balance in the film of not being too much or too simplistic or too cryptic. So it was challenging, but I love narration in cinema and what words and images can do together, how they can elevate each other to a new

meaning, and the places you can go to with them. To me, that made the whole experience much richer. I also cherish that storytelling tradition when cinema feels like an intimate moment of someone confiding a story to you, telling something that one hadn't imagined or believed, contemplating together. I think that's very satisfying to, at least, thrive to give that emotion.

You used a very personal archival material in the film, which you got from Apolonia's parents, her family. Could you talk about the decision to bring in this archival material?

I had never seen such footage before. I thought that was incredible and beautiful, but it also gives you an idea of what it is like to be Apolonia. What kind of people her parents were, what kind of environment she grew up in and was part of. This free atmosphere with no boundaries between art and life, the creation of a human life and that of art, all of these non-boundaries really. If the film didn't have these archives, I would feel like something was missing from the story of Apolonia.



In the film, you mention that you kept filming, just a little while longer. When is the right time to stop recording?

If you want to do a portrait of an artist, you have to have a little more patience. I think stopping to film earlier would have been a wrong moment to freeze. It would have been a different film, for sure, if we finished it in Los Angeles, for instance. I also saw that there was a possibility to finish it then, dramaturgically there was enough substance for a film. But it would be just not a very good place to leave. I think at the time, she was floating artistically and maybe personally. I wanted to continue capturing this process of her maturing as a woman and evolving as an artist. When I turned off the camera actually, the social aspect to her art, which we see today, developed much more. You can see now that she is very engaged with social rights. I portrayed what I had access to

during those years, but, of course, her artistic development was much more than what I could capture with the camera.

When Oksana, an Apolonia's friend and Femen activist, came into the picture, so to speak, and when did you realise she would be an integral part of this story?

It was pretty early. I entered the moment of their life when Oksana and Apolonia were really close, they were together all the time. So she was always a big part of the film, from the very beginning. The three of us meeting in Paris—all were young artists with different starting points, social impacts and methods (Oksana being an activist, Apolonia a painter and myself a documentary filmmaker)—I felt like our lives crossed paths, and that was also an anchor in the film. However, I hadn't imagined that Oksana would not be there when the film came out. I wanted to make a film where I would respect Oksana and what she was fighting for. In a way, the images are also a memorial, and I came to understand that later. And it was also important to consider when the film would come out. I felt that it would be a wrong moment for the film to come out in the too near future of her passing, with little time for sorrow. It was not my place to take then, with my piece of cinema. When Oksana died, there were also ethical questions of how to treat her story with respect.

You said in the documentary that no motif has caught your eye as she did, and that motif was constantly on the move and you never really had control over it. Could you elaborate on that?

Apolonia has this gift of being a mirror to people. I think it is a gift but also a burden. I am not the only person who sees that in her. People get very angry with her, people fall in love with her, people become obsessed with her. She has something, I think, in her way of being. As I said in the film, I don't know who captured whom, actually—whether I captured Apolonia on film, or whether she captured me in her theatre.

Interestingly, Apolonia also has a way of challenging taboos (and my taboos). And perhaps that was the real reason why I could not let go of her. I had to grow as a person to complete this film, in a way. From sexuality, to grief, to love, to sex, to ambition, to doubt, to suicide, to religion. She was challenging everything. And at the end of the day, that's what I am most proud of with this film. We are not evading taboos, we are bringing them to the fore, and I hope we do that with care. I also really want that for our audience, to be able to have that challenge as well.

What is really the essence of this project? The essence is basically that I met this woman by chance and couldn't forget her. Actually, it was a bit of a curse being a documentary filmmaker. I would have liked to do many films. But I just met this star, and I knew she was going to be great. She was great, talented and interesting. She was constantly where everything was happening. We don't dwell upon that in the film, but she was in Hollywood just before the MeToo movement, and she was invited to have tea with Harvey Weinstein. She says that when she came there, they asked, "Oh, you want to be in a film?" She responded, "Hell, no. I am already in a film. I want to be a painter. I want to paint."

INTERVIEW WITH PROTAGONIST APOLONIA SOKOL

How did this project start for you?

In the mid '80s my parents took over an abandoned washhouse in a diverse neighbourhood in the north of Paris. They transformed it into a local theatre, a free space for the people. I was born there but had to move away as a child due to some family intrigues. I went back there in my twenties to help my father and to keep this experimental project alive.

There were a lot of things going on in the theatre. People would come and go. We would host all kinds of artists, writers, poets, comedians, painters, political activists, but also social workers, patients from a mental hospital, associations supporting sex workers, free food distribution, and, of course, theater companies, mainly Afro-European projects. We would help them produce their art and activities, with the few resources we had. The theatre was a place of resistance but also of experimentation. Personally, I had a connection with an art scene in Denmark, in Copenhagen, and I assume this is how Lea heard about me. When Lea introduced herself and asked if she could come to film, I agreed to participate and let her do her project as she wished, without interfering with her vision; that was our lifestyle. At the time, she was a film student working on a school project. Over the years, I would call her when some events were happening, so she was more or less aware of what was going on in my life. She would try to follow up even though she was from a very different world, and she would find ways to join me in different cities and continue filming while working on other projects.



And what was your relationship like at the time, and how has it evolved over the course of 13 years while Lea was filming?

Being quite a social person, I got used to sharing moments of my life with Lea and her camera. Retrospectively, I can see that I am a part of the 'home video' generation whose childhood was captured through the lens of the first popularised and accessible VHS cameras. My parents were obsessed with video-art in the late '80s, and my father was quite well equipped with cameras. We actually had an editing studio in the Theater where he would edit the commissioned educational footage from VHS tapes. I remember the huge back and forward buttons on the panel. So I kind of grew up being filmed; my parents recorded the first years of my life. Later on, when Lea's camera took over, it felt natural. She is so thoughtful and respectful, I felt like she would totally disappear and film us in a way where we did not feel invaded at all. We have a relationship of trust; I trusted her to film my private life over the years. She was observing my life, and her camera became a part of it. And we care a lot for each other, although I feel it diminishes her work when people assume that the film is about our friendship. Lea never "simply" filmed her friend, and I wasn't her friend when she began filming. I believe she was in search of answers as she was becoming a female artist in a man's world, herself. Perhaps, she found her answers by observing and capturing our lives with the camera. Since Lea turned off her camera, a lot of things have happened. I am now a professor at the art academy of Caen (Normandy) where I teach young women, boys and non-binary individuals, cis and queer, to become artists in a safe environment. This is a new challenge, it has its battles but it is the most beautiful place to be in the world, a place of conversation and care, where I learn as much from my students as they do from me. If you ask me, I feel Lea could have kept on filming as life goes on, but then the film would never end!

The film follows your journey as a woman artist, with all its agonies and joys. We witness your exploration of your family's history of expulsion, reflected in your paintings that were very complex and full of love. And then we see how your paintings were changing and you were seemingly in a pursuit of your artistic voice or maybe the reflection of it on the canvas. At some point when you were in the US, an art critic said that you had painted the people as if they were all dead. Tell me more about this journey of yours, which we partially see in the documentary.

When I was a student, I was in search of understanding my identity and the grief we carry in my family. I could feel transgenerational pain and suffering on my mother's side, so I had to understand it. It's a common thing to do when growing up as an artist from any kind of diaspora. So I travelled to Belarus and met my cousins and aunts living under the repressive dictatorship of Lukashenko. On a visit to Poland, one of my aunts took out from her deep closet a treasure packed in old newspaper sheets. It was a pony tale of her hair from her youth, perhaps from the time before she was sent to the gulags, or after, I don't really know, but I was collecting these objects from my family members. I would find inspiration in all of these artefacts for my paintings. Then we had a terrible fire where I lost a lot of these items and my paintings. Later on, I actually lost my home.

At that point, perhaps in an act of sadness, I covered all of my remaining paintings in grey. Gray has an infinite amount of tones, which can be made by mixing all the colours. I thought there was

nothing more difficult and challenging than being simple, so I painted simple portraits of people I loved, on top of that grey hue. They were keeping my secrets. I knew all my memories and ghosts were behind these simple paintings. I was finding spirituality within the pigments, in the actual act of mixing colours.

When we lost our home, and the situation became extremely precarious, I needed a structure, and I could find myself again in these simple shapes and flat tins. One of my professors was disappointed that I got rid of the labyrinthine expressions, but he simply didn't understand it. I began painting something simple and spiritual, like religious icon paintings. As a matter of fact, as we see throughout the film, professors and different male figures are simply judging me.

Having lost everything in Paris and finding no support in my hometown, I decided to game it all and try to move to the USA, in hopes of a better life. Out of despair, I believed in some kind of American Dream. But I counted on the wrong people and was commissioned to paint commercial pieces. Critic Andrew Berardini saw it right away and told me that my paintings were about to lose their souls. I was painting people I didn't love, and they felt dead. I will always be grateful to Andrew for taking the time to tell me his truth. It was a wake-up call. I am painting because of my love for the arts and the care I have for others, not because I want to become a commercial product. That's how; I decided to return to the Old World and go back to painting people that inspire me.



It's not really possible to capture all the complexities of this journey as a woman artist in a two-hour documentary.

Exactly, this is what makes this film so relevant. It is not about my work as a painter, or about my activism or my political views; actually there is very little of that in the film. A film about the art world and my political stance would have been very different. It would have been relevant to a

limited audience. But this film is about how we try to exist in a world that is quite tough on women, even privileged women. Anybody in the western world can watch it and relate to the struggle. The film has three main female protagonists, myself, my friend Oksana and Lea, the film director. You were asking about our relationship—the three of us setting out to simply exist and work as female artists—this, I think, is the bond between us.

Apart from your journey as an artist, we also witness very personal, even intimate images of you being born, the very first years of your life.

Yes, we actually see my conception. My parents staged and recorded themselves making love, creating me. They documented their lives, and on that tape they are talking to me while looking at the camera as I am in my mother's belly. I think my parents filming themselves while making me is an act of violence, as no one is supposed to see their own conception. Some people might see it as a gift, my parents saw it that way. They were documenting the gift of life, and, in a way, it is beautiful. I don't really know what they thought, perhaps, it was a mix of love and narcissism; anyway, I had these tapes, and I gave them to Lea. Putting my feelings aside, I can see that this is a rare and stunning footage of a life being created. As a matter of fact, we have very few images of birth-giving in western art (both in film and fine arts) as it incarnates the power of life and death through the woman's body. An ultimate power is usually represented through male characters. The act of giving birth is so banal somehow—as anybody was brought to this world that way—and paradoxically, the imagery of it is an absolute taboo. I am very proud of that scene being shown to the world.

Another taboo is brought to light as we witness a horrific situation of yet another birth-giving where the mother is between life and death. The film's voice pauses as we watch Lea struggling for her breath. This is such an overwhelming scene that tears rush to my eyes when I mention it. Lea breaks all the cliches of idyllic motherhood by documenting her own sickness and showing the possible difficulties of giving birth. As she says, she never thought that bringing a new life into this world could cost her own life.

There is the terrible fate of Oksana, of course, and the subject of grief. These are extremely personal and intimate images, but they are important to share with people as death and sickness are such a strong part of life. I am proud of being a part of this project, and that it evokes all of these private subjects, now that abortion is being renegotiated as a fundamental human right. The unspeakable is being spoken of.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Lea Glob (b. 1982)

Graduated as a director from The National Film School of Denmark in 2011 with the short film MEETING MY FATHER-KASPER TOPHAT about the directors' involuntary journey into a stranger than fiction story of her own origins.

Glob co-directed OLMO & THE SEAGULL with Petra Costa in 2014. It premiered at Locarno where it won the Young Jury Prize. It also won the Best Nordic Dox Award at CPH:DOX, Best Documentary at the Rio Film Festival, Best Documentary at the Cairo Film Festival, and Best Narrative at the RiverRun International film festival, among others.

In 2016 Glob co-directed the feature documentary VENUS together with Mette Carla Albrechtsen about sexuality from a female perspective, which became a moment to share thoughts on sexuality and identity, in an attempt to formulate a language and reclaim the female body. The film premiered in IDFA's First Appearance Competition and won the audience award in IndieLisboa IIFF.

All along those years Glob followed the story of Apolonia Sokol, creating a sort of double sided portrait of the artist as a young woman. APOLONIA, APOLONIA is the director's first documentary feature as a solo-director.



ABOUT THE PROTAGONIST

Apolonia Sokol

Born in 1988 in Paris, Apolonia Sokol is a French figurative painter of Danish and Polish descent. After graduating from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, she moved to the United States and settled in New York where she worked in Dan Colen's studio. She later moved to Los Angeles where she befriended other artists and painters with whom she started an ongoing conversation on figurative painting.

Sokol is known for her political stance on the art of portraiture, claiming the need to use it as a tool of empowerment and deconstruction of marginalisation and domination. That is why she addresses multiple issues such as feminisms, queerness, women's representation throughout art history and body politics in general.



Apolonia Sokol exhibited her work in Copenhagen, Brussels, Paris, Istanbul, Mexico City, Rome, Los Angeles and her work has been included in institutional exhibitions, such as: *Tainted Love | Club Edit* at the Villa Arson in 2019 (curated by Yann Chevallier), *Aux sources des années 1980*, at the Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Sables d'Olonne, in 2019 (curated by Amélie Adamo), *Mademoiselle* at the Crac Occitanie in 2018 (curated by Tara Londi), *Tainted Love*, inaugural exhibition at the Comfort Moderne in 2017 (curated by Yann Chevalier), *Peindre, dit-elle* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole in 2017 (curated by Julie Crenn).

Her recent institutional exhibitions include *Possessed* curated by Vincent Honoré at the MOCO Museum and *Conversation Piece VII Verso Narragonia (Towards Narragonia)* curated by Marcello Smarrelli at the Fondazione Memmo in Rome, *Women Painting Women* at The Modern, Forth Worth, Texas USA and *Women in Arken* Museum of Modern Art, Denmark.

In 2020, the artist was granted the prestigious Academy of France in Rome, enabling the artist to benefit from a one year residency at the Villa Medici.

Photo credit: Joan Brown

ABOUT THE PRODUCER

Sidsel Lønvig Siersted

Starting her career in public programming in 2004 Sidsel has produced TV, documentary films and series for almost two decades. Sidsel has worked on widely distributed and award-winning titles such as “Democrats” (2014/PBS), “Something Better to Come” (2014/HBO Europe), “Aquarela” (2019/Sony Classics), and “The Kingmaker” (2019/Showtime). She is producer of Jepsen's “Natural Disorder,” selected for IDFA's feature-length competition 2015, and nominated for a Danish Film Academy Award and Danish Critics Award. The film received the Best Documentary award at DOK.Fest München 2016. Sidsel is producer of Mulvad's IDA nominated “A Modern Man” (2017), a local producer on Costa's Oscar-nominated “The Edge of Democracy” (2019/ Netflix Original), and development producer of Grønkjær's “Hunting for Hedonia” (2019/Amazon Studios) and Mulvad's “Love Child” (2019/PBS). Most recently Sidsel co-produced Yankelevich's “My Darling Supermarket”, which premiered in IDFA's First Appearance Competition, and she was development producer on Lorentzen's documentary series “Absolute beginners”, which won the award for best European documentary series at the Grand Prix Europa 2021. Sidsel has a MA in Film and Media from the University of Copenhagen.



CREDITS

Writer & director	Lea Glob
Production	Sidsel Siersted for Danish Documentary Production
Co-production	Malgorzata Staron for Staron Films
Cinematography	Lea Glob
Editing	Andreas Bøggild Monies, Thor Ochsner
Sound Design	Anna Żarnecka-Wójcik
Music	Jonas Struck
Involved TV channel	HBO Max, ARTE - G.E.I.E., AVRO-TROS, DR, SVT, YLE, VGTV
Screening copy	Danish Documentary Production
Sales	CAT&Docs

FORUMS & MARKETS

2022 : IDFA World Premiere / International Competition

2020: IDFA Forum (Rough Cut Project)

2018: IDFAcademy Summer School (Editing)

2020: IDFA Forum (Round Table)

2015: IDFAcademy Summer School (Script / Development)