

# ArtReview



Eva Koťátková

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## On and Off the Page

*by Mark Rappolt*





*above* *Untitled (Circus)*, 2013, collage on paper, 30 × 45 cm

*facing page* *Not how people move, but what moves them*, 2013, collage, framed, 45 × 30 cm





*Untitled (Theatre of speaking objects), 2012,  
collage on paper, 50 × 35 cm*

It all starts on the page. At least it seems to in the work of Czech artist Eva Kořátková. Not only because so much of her two-dimensional output, which is characterised by equal measures of surreal perversity and darkly comic humour, comprises adapted and collaged images and diagrams extracted from textbooks, magazines and photo albums, but also because of the prominent role that books themselves have played in her artworks. The connection is literal in an image documenting a performance from the series *House Arrest* (2009), in which textbooks are piled up around the artist's body as she stands against a white wall such that a vacant silhouette remains once she walks away. Confronted with that image, you're left to wonder: did the person shape the books or did the books shape the person? In either case the books have become a carapace or sarcophagus, a theme picked up in later works such as *Parallel Biography (Speaking Library)* and *Mobile Library* (both 2012).

Another early, untitled work from *House Arrest* features an apparatus incorporating seven metal arms projecting out of a metal stomach-plate (the latter looking like a spare part from a suit of armour) and seems designed to enable the wearer to read seven books at once, as if they were so many open windows on a computer screen. It's a home-made tablet, if you like. The possibilities for page-turning look awkward; the metal plate and the harness that supports it appear slightly uncomfortable; reading anything seems impossible; indeed brainwashing could be a more likely use for this device. Perhaps rather than *enabling* contemporary-style reading, it has been designed to *force* its wearer to engage in that. Needless to say, implicit violence is also a running theme in Kořátková's work, most obviously in *Sit Straight with your Arms Behind Your Back* (2008), a video of seated children enmeshed in various wooden contraptions that force them to assume the 'correct' bodily position of the attentive pupil, or in another photograph from *House Arrest* in which a male actor is inserted headfirst, arms by his sides, into a steel cage that has been driven through a wooden table.

Indeed, many of the themes introduced by this series can be seen, in greatly evolved form, in Kořátková's more recent multimedia productions, which incorporate some or all of drawing, photography, video, collage, sculpture, installation, live performance and theatre. A riff on the multiwindow display, fused with the formal language of museological presentations, informs installations such as *Asylum* (2013, exhibited as part of *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 55th Venice Biennale), which explores the dreams and visions of psychiatric patients. In that work a single mid-body-height plinth, or stage, supports a series of objects that include cages, photographs, drawings, diagrams, miniature architectural elements (which had been used, at full scale, in previous works), gibbetlike structures and the arms and

heads of people interacting with these last through holes in the plinth, seeming to animate the display.

And when it comes to pages, here's a thing. You get a book in the post. It's heavy. You unwrap it. It turns out to comprise two volumes. The first contains 267 collages, images and drawings created by Kořátková between 2013 and 2015. The second contains 22 sets of exhaustive regulations – relating to everything from the operation of children's homes to the management of cemeteries – issued by Czechoslovakia's communist regime between 1961 and 1989. These were gathered by the artist following extensive archival research, or 'archaeology', as she sometimes calls it (in a way that brings to mind the analytic methods deployed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault – with whom Kořátková shares an interest in the educational system, the clinic, the prison and the asylum as loci of

social control). Collectively, these lists of rules describe the central theme of Kořátková's works: the regulation of your person, and of persons relating to each other within a social group, from the cradle to the grave. And even beyond: 'After one year has elapsed after the dissolution of the right to the burial site, these items [the accessories to the grave] will be handled as though they did not belong to anyone', reads one of the operational rules for cemeteries. Some elements of these lists have been redacted. It's not clear by whom.

On the back of both books is the warning that this is 'a book that is not intended to be read and contains but few words'. There are more than 200 pages of text in volume two. But even before you've opened the books, you're wondering about what kind of person publishes books that are not intended to be read. Once you have opened them, you're also wondering about the kind of person who would wish to mislead you about the number of words their published book contains. Given the Czech context, you might even think

of the opening lines of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925): 'Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K.' Perhaps, deeper down, you are wondering about the existential status of a word that is printed, but not intended to be read. And perhaps, in the light of that back-cover warning, you're feeling somewhat unclear as to for whom these texts were written, without the intention of any reading of them taking place: the people operating children's homes and cemeteries in Czechoslovakia during the era of the Warsaw Pact, or yourself, the contemporary art lover. Perhaps ultimately, the whole enterprise is a warning about and an undermining of the power of words.

The two volumes are collectively titled *Pictorial Atlas of a Girl Who Cut a Library into Pieces* (2016), and its two volumes (the second of which is subtitled *Institutional, Operational and Organisational Rules and Regulations 1961–1989*) comprise 703 pages. Kořátková was seven when



Untitled, from the series *House Arrest*, 2009, c-print. Photo: Jiří Thýn



*Asylum*, 2013 (installation view, *The Encyclopedic Palace*, 55th Venice Biennale). Photo: Michal Czanderl





the last of the regulations were written, and she doesn't have particularly fond memories of her time in school in Prague, despite its coinciding with her country's transition from communism to democracy. Or perhaps her sceptical take on systems of education is both because of that and a false hope of liberty upon which Czech educational institutions didn't deliver. Whatever the case, this publication is in many ways Kořátková's most ambitious work to date, featuring, among other things, installation shots of her exhibitions, anatomical drawings, maps of interpersonal relationships, photographs of social-housing blocks, educational facilities, various cages, birds with structures drawn onto them to bind their beaks, a child's head emerging from a snail shell, a drawing of books used as stilts by a person without a head, bizarre prosthetic arms and legs, and a loudspeaker system designed to be used by groups of schoolchildren that might best be described as something the English cartoonist William Heath Robinson could have produced had he been into s&m. It's as if the regulations and restrictions of volume two have been translated from words to images in volume one, rendered visible, everywhere, ridiculous and terrifying, exploded into space.

And for the record, there are even pages of text, written in a variety of hands, littering the collection of collages: 'is obliged to remove, is obliged to clean up, is obliged to sprinkle, is kept, is forbidden to place, mean, one collected, applies, are placed, is organized...' starts one such scrawl, as if litanising aspects of the rules in volume two. Despite what the artist asserts about reading not being the intended results of these pages, before you're even halfway through them you start to believe that everything, not least her own work, begins with a written trace on the page. And on the wall as well: as seen in *Drawing Exercise* (2006), an early work in which the artist, wearing a set of coloured pencils projecting horizontally out from a homemade back harness, draws blindly on the walls of the gallery space as she shuffles around it.

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While that student work might immediately conjure associations with Rebecca Horn's *Pencil Mask* (1972, in which the pencils are on the wearer's face, rather than her back), it also speaks to a more immediate artistic heritage upon which Kořátková's work builds. For there's certainly an echo of a work by fellow Czech artist Jiří Kovanda: *xxx Pressing myself as close as I can to the wall, I make my way around the whole room; There are people in the middle of the room watching... November 26, 1977, Hradec Kralove* (1977). In it, the older artist (who taught Kořátková while he was an assistant in the painting department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague), having announced his performance, slowly navigates the boundaries of his performance space while ignoring

those who have gathered within it to watch him. That work's exploration of perversity, regulation, a naive and child-like shyness, the communicative potential of small gestures and a measuring of space and sociability's limits obviously runs through Kořátková's output as well. Her early works, such as the series *Behind Between, Over and Under in (the Room)*

(2007), in which, among other things, the artist installed a false floor, under which she crawled and made her nest, in her grandmother's apartment in Prague, focus on personal space. Her real achievement is to have moved on from the truths of her own experiences (at school, in social housing), via her research into archives (and recently completed doctoral research into the framing and exhibiting of 'outsider' art) and direct exposure of hidden regulations, to create works that speak to the structures of power and find their truths in a more universal way.

The page becomes a structure, the structure governs a performance, the performance makes the structure seem real and provides a 'truth' of what was on the page. Repeat and find a different truth. Feel a loosening of structure and the potential for alternative behaviours. Then start again. **ar**

*Storyteller's Inadequacy*, 2013–14  
(installation view, Modern Art Oxford).  
Photo: Stuart Whips

all images Courtesy Meyer Riegger,  
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*A solo exhibition of work by Eva Kořátková will be on view from 3 May to 18 June at Maccarone, New York*