

ART FORUM

Interviews

Eva Kořátková on collaborating with children and reimagining social structures

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Eva Kořátková, *Room for Restoring Empathy* (detail), 2019, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.

Eva Kořátková is known for investigating societal rules and authoritarian codes via large-scale installations and collaborative workshops. While her earlier work centered on limiting performers' physical movement with metal cages and apparatuses—bleak exercises in regimentation inspired in part by her upbringing in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic—Kořátková has begun to use textiles to reenvision how the body can function within oppressive systems. As two solo exhibitions end their run—"In the Body of a Fish Out of Water" at Kestnergesellschaft in Hanover and "Confessions of the Piping System" at Copenhagen's Kunsthal Charlottenborg, on through February 7 and February 16, 2020, respectively—the Prague-based artist reflects on her changing approach.

WHEN I BUILD A CAGE AROUND SOMEONE OR SOMETHING, or create a metal construction that divides people and other beings from their surroundings, I'm limiting their movement in order to express their powerlessness. In these structures, the performers have a

reduced ability to act, to speak and to be heard, to enter into a dialogue. My hope is that this will spark further thoughts about bodily freedom and the restrictions applied to it from the outside. My use of metal isn't so much about material in a sculptural sense as it is about creating a spatial and mental diagram—a 3-D drawing, making these invisible forces visible. In fact, these works often begin as a drawing, which, for me, is a kind of curing material that forms the framework of these installations as well as my thinking, in general.

Many of my previous works involving constraint refer to my childhood in the Czech school system, as well as the apparatus of the former regime. The “Sit Straight” series from 2008 was one of the first things I did in which the body was confined. Groups of children sat in peremptory poses that were supported or framed by sticks, revealing the limited movements that are permitted in the classroom. More broadly, that series critically approached different forms of social control and how those processes can disconnect us from our environment, leaving little space for free action, unlearning, or revolt.

In the past year or two, I've embraced softer materials that relate to the body in a more mimetic and welcoming way. I'm using a lot of secondhand fabrics, transforming old shirts and blankets that are in need of repair into large textile works, as is the case in the work in Hannover, “Machine for Restoring Empathy.” There's a metal skeleton underlying the installation, but it's mostly shrouded by strips of fabric. It's soft and flexible—from the outside, at least. I imagined a group of humans and non-humans: animals, plants, even objects and machines—all deciding to meet in one place to share and act together. “Machine for Restoring Empathy” represents a meeting place and temporary structure to combine these bodies into one temporary organism, one collective and supportive body in which each thing contributes whatever he/she/it can offer. The work is activated by performers who share stories that speak for different oppressed or invisible groups, offering examples of empathetic behavior.

These works aren't less critical toward the institutions that control our bodies in the public sphere, but they are more focused on finding new ways of functioning within them. The first time I used textiles as a primary part of a work was in “Theatre of Speaking Objects,” in 2012: a series where participants, most of whom had no acting experience, would try to express themselves through objects or life-size marionettes. Speaking through a curtain, wardrobe, tree or a puppet offered participants a mediator that would make it easier to articulate personal, controversial or socially or politically charged thoughts. The aim was to search, both individually and as a group, for alternative means of communication wherein differences are welcomed, not suppressed.

I've always been interested in developing scenarios that test the limits of our imagination, that show how it's constructed and controlled. No matter how unrealistic these situations are in everyday life, they are intended as ways to push past conventional perspectives on the world and its problems. This is why I often collaborate with children: They come up with beautiful ideas, and their way of work and play is always thought-provoking. I'm currently preparing a piece with a group of children that focuses on a Czech village whose inhabitants protested against housing for a group of people labeled as handicapped. This case was not rare, unfortunately, but it did show the intensity of emotions—mostly fear—that arises from encounters with otherness.

In this piece, the children act as investigators who analyze the case and offer ideas for a world based on more equal and empathic principles.

This is also something I did recently at Berlin's SAVVY Contemporary, where I built a version of *Room for Restoring Empathy*, the piece currently on display at Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen. In these workshops, I ask children to combine sewing with storytelling. They bring a jacket or other piece of personal clothing and are encouraged to think about it as a kind of second skin, or perhaps as a surrogate who can speak about their emotions. Some of them took it as an opportunity to give away feelings that they didn't feel comfortable with, while others decided to speak for groups or individuals who are, for various reasons, unable to speak for themselves. These "emotional jackets" hold anxieties, phobias, and fears. As they gain human features, they often become quite funny as well.

Textiles have allowed me to branch out from working alone or with a few collaborators and organize sessions where personal histories can be shared or collected and later shaped into an installation. All at once, we are doing something with our hands, sewing stories together.

— As told to **Jonah Goldman Kay**