

Eva Kořátková

Recongluation of the World



Different time periods and different generations bring new issues. But what about the old ones – still present and still urgent issues? Foucault's analysis of repression and power is compulsory reading today, but the reasons why it was written still persist. The relations between the structured society and so-called anarchy are closely examined by Eva Kořátková. To her, the human body is the home of hidden aggression, learnt patterns of behaviour, and defensive reflexes. Kořátková proves that individual problems are not problems of individuals, but the consequences of enforcement methods used by the society. She is not interested only into people, but gives a voice to animals, plants, organisms, and objects as well. With surprisingly radical illustrations, backed up by her research, Kořátková combines what was left of the avant-garde, the current, often feminist theories and activism to create large exhibition "machines" and small details. She cuts out pictures, glues clippings and draws pictures to make collages based on the psychoanalytic tradition, dreams, fragmentarization, deconstruction and construction and openly reminiscent of the Czech interwar avant-garde (Štýrský, Teige, and Toyen). She also creates large installations and static performances where subtle changes of postures represent the stiffening of bodies in the globalized system of alienated or isolated work, rest, sleep, movement, time, and what we call the nature. These creations share a kind of subliminal theme – the concern over the established forms of art presentation, exhibitions

and galleries that the author applies to areas of social engagement. The frustration of the artist meets the frustration of the activist. Eva Kořátková, together with Barbora Kleinhamplová, has been trying to cope with this long-standing problem by initiating the establishment of an institute dealing with the causes of social anxiety. The two artists see the anxiety not like a diagnosis that weakens the individual, but rather as a shared experience that can stimulate people. Various social initiatives and individuals spend so much energy to promote various ways of functioning in many fields that they do not have the strength to join forces in an interdisciplinary approach – and they often do not understand each other since they do not speak the same language. Together with her colleagues, Eva Kořátková seeks connect them so that art is not isolated from active behaviour, all alone in art institutions.

Edith Jeřábková

p. 38, from the series Theater of Speaking Objects, collage and drawing, 29,7×42 cm, 2013

p. 39, from the series Not How People Move but What Moves Them, photography, collage, 21×29,7cm, 2012

p. 40, House Arrest, photo © Jiří Thýn, 29,7×42 cm, 2009

p. 41, Me and Others, Me from Parts, performance documentation, 2018

p. 42, Stomach of the World, video frame, 46 minutes, 2017

p. 43, Stomach of the World, video frames, 46 minutes, 2017

They were hidden in a vase, covering their heads with various objects

Edith Jeřábková interviews Eva Koťátková

I'm reading your Manual for Unlearning the Body¹, and I think that readers might want to know what the process of unlearning means to you.

I sometimes imagine a body that wakes up one morning and doesn't remember any learnt movements – doesn't know what its movements and actions mean. It doesn't know if it's a woman or man and what burden the affiliation to a particular gender is. It doesn't know its life; it doesn't feel pushed to do the things the people around are expecting from it. It doesn't feel so obliged and subordinate. It doesn't have a sense of loss or confusion. On the contrary. It feels free, light, and self-confident. The question is, of course, how the behaviour of such a body would influence the other bodies that have not unlearned anything overnight. They would probably catch the body, make a diagnosis, and put it on sedatives. But unlearning isn't only about forgetting – it's not that simple. It doesn't work like a button that erases everything. We don't have to stop doing what they have taught us, but while we're doing it, the process of unlearning makes us do the things differently. If learning is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills, but also about repeating and confirming the existing power relations, then unlearning can be a way of disrupting these power relationships and patterns. I think the process of unlearning isn't just a process of self-reflection, but a process of learning to unlearn, a way to reject the dominant, privileged, and violent. Spiwak describes it as weaving invisible strings into an existing texture; Butler calls it undoing (undoing the gender). The book you've mentioned got its name after a joint exhibition with the late Italian artist Ketty La Rocca. The exhibition curator thought the title, *Unlearning the Body*, is an accurate description of what we deal with in our work, though for different reasons and at different times.

People still talk a lot about themselves, their problems, and the future of humankind, but what if we talked as much about the problems of animals, about their future? How could the process of unlearning or de-institutionalisation be related to them? How can animals use your great theme of normative environments that is manifested on our bodies like on some kind of cases?

It's difficult and the crucial thing is that one tries to speak on behalf of someone who cannot speak or correct us as the speaker. Animals need an advocate because they're now fatally dependent on people. They are allowed to live on islands of wild nature, but these islands are regulated from the outside and they are getting smaller. Some animals are selected, privileged or hired into human service to hunt other animals or fight each other (for example, hunting dogs or animals in animal fights). And there are also animals that are rather seen as things although they haven't been legally considered things for some time – animals in factory farms. We treat these animals according to the social construction we have built for them. I can see the process of unlearning in breaking down these artificial constructions. Despite all the consequences this and our lifestyle have for us, we have to admit that animals are sentient beings, and we have to treat them accordingly. It's a mistake to think that the liberation of animals won't be possible until a social revolution, rectifying inequalities, takes place. Farm animals shouldn't be the hostages of this fight.

Pedagogical restrictions can be seen as an important theme in your work as well, but I'm more interested in the classical philosophical background. You come from a family of philosophers, and I can't help feeling the strong thematising of the mediaeval separation of the soul from the body in your work. All the metal construction for bodies, skeletons, cages and prosthetic devices look like both objects of torture and houses for something internal – and, paradoxically, shelters for disturbed bodies and psyches. I started to create the metal constructions and cages as 3D diagrams

to express the relationship of the body to its surroundings – to other bodies and the social pressure. As if you create a diagram of relationships, communication flows, or pressures among the family members or in a school or work team. Or as an externalized body that pulls out its entrails in the form of different supports, barriers and boxes, builds defence shields, and so on. A cage can be many things: something that shows the exclusion of the individual, something that stigmatizes something that exposes the body to others, but also a protective skin against what is going on outside – like when we protect a hen with different colours so that the others don't peck it to death. I actually see the body not only as a house or vessel, but also as a prison for those who don't identify with their body, who are limited in what they want to do or what role they want to play in the society.

In your collages, you combine human and animal bodies, which is one of the oldest iconographies of transformation. What exactly do you want to express? Is there any relation, for example, to feminist theories and the performativity of gender and species?

The combination of the animal and the human fascinates me, and so does the deliberate and outdated cultural separation that makes no sense. I think it's essential that the current feminist theory deals with the relationship between humans and other animals as a form of choreography or co-creation of behaviour, and that those animals are given the role of participants in shaping and re-establishing the world. Collage is just one of the means that I can use to show such combinations – and the cuttings I usually collect in boxes meticulously marked as "humans" or "animals" help me construct one body in the process of formation or several bodies in a mutual dialogue.

Can you imagine that you will be able to choose and build your own body in the future?

I think I can; I often dreamt about it as a teenager, actually. Paul B. Preciado suggestively says that his body doesn't exist, that there is no column for it in his passport during the process of transition. I see the body as a homestead, vessel or snail shell that can be left and replaced with another, more fitting one.

In the book, I look at the objects on pedestals in the audio installation Theatre of Speaking Objects, and I cannot hear the audio, of course. But the objects are very impressive, more like statues or almost actors – a drum, a door, a wall, and a wardrobe. They don't look like theatre props but rather rejected objects, abjects. But their passivity seems temporary. They lack a subject, but this fact seems to have given them power, power over themselves or power over us who are watching them. There are many of them and it's obvious that sometimes they come to life. It's like the theatre of the oppressed. Judith Butler writes about the materiality of gender in relation to identification: "... the subject is constituted through the power of exclusion and abjection, the power creating the constitutive exterior of the subject, the subject abjectively rejected that is, after all, "inside" the subject as its founding rejection." What do the body-like objects express?

The theatre of talking objects has transformed several times over the years. At the beginning, it was a theatre performance where objects were used as props, mediators for the discourse. Performers, who shared the reasons of their communication difficulties and their problems with socialization and integration with the audience, talked through a hole in the wardrobe, they were hidden in a vase, or they covered their heads with various objects. Later, the objects became independent, started to travel to exhibitions like a group of performers, and kept performing the same thing all the time, only assuming different positions in the space. Each object had its voice and story it was telling to the visitor until it was interrupted by another object. In the latest part of the series, people try to become objects, following audio instructions.

I'm interested in the combination of the object and the real body: your body in the early installations, the real bodies of children or adults, forced by a structure to assume a certain position. Is the reality of the situation, of the body, important to you?

It is. I want to know what the object and the body can be to each other, what they form together. That's why the situations and performances are often static – it's important create an image, to build a body. For the performers, it's about getting used to the object, becoming a part of it. They activate the object, make it complete with their presence, but at same time, they submit to it.

The reality of the body is particularly emphasized in your collages where you – the reality represented by a photograph – act as a more passive object, instrumentalized by the snapshots of sportsman, children, and things. How did you think of this "Gulliver's" effect?

It's related to the perception of the body as an object, a thing, something exploited and abused. The body of a person serves as a mat, a playground, a stage, a pedestal for other bodies that walk on it like on a bridge, practising a kind of dance choreography, waiting for a date, sitting around, sleeping. I used the different scales to show the relationship between the body and others who profit from it. As if someone saw the other side of the children's playground and found out that the climbing frames are held by other people so that children could play.

You often portray specialized activities, whether pedagogical processes, sports, the circus, playing a musical instrument, etc., that make our bodies and our performativity repeat one-sided fixations. Originally, they were supposed to help us achieve the best results. By drawn and glued interventions in the reproductions, you fixate the eyes of the viewers, their voices or breath, their postures, communication, attention. Is it a critique of modern people who have no longer any relation to diversity?

It is rather about preventing people from looking the other way and about the possibility to choose otherwise than about unilateral abilities or activities. What the characters do isn't often their choice; it's something unnatural, something decided by someone else. They get various props to have their lack of freedom monitored: they are blindfolded, their hands are tied, they sink their feet in the floor, etc.

We have recently talked about your animal dreams. What do you dream about?

I dream about everything. I sleep very little, like my father – if that's something handed down from father to daughter. But in this short period of several hours, I manage to do quite a lot: at night, I go back to elementary school, talk to my dead grandmother and grandfather, or take part in setting animals free. Last time, I had a dream that Prime Minister Babiš's and other businesses involved in the suffering of animals go bankrupt. In the dream, people stopped believing the campaigns of big companies and decided not to buy meat of animals bred in factory farms. Suddenly, the streets were full of animals and one couldn't see any clouds for all the birds and poultry that suddenly grew wings and could fly. Nobody was taken aback by these new unexpected inhabitants. It was beautiful, at least for a moment.

Do you think the animals are you? Or do they represent someone or something? Since the times of ancient Egypt or even earlier, people have used animals in iconographic images, personifications, and allegories to describe themselves. We could say that people don't eat the animals only as food but they consume them in a cultural and spiritual way.

I'm not able to analyse my own dreams like this. If I said I sometimes feel like animals, I would just ridicule their experience; our situation isn't comparable.

*The relation between eating and the inner transformation is also interesting. We can find the images of bodies in other bodies in fairy tales (Little Red Riding Hood, Greedy Guts) and in biblical stories (Jonah and the whale). Leaving the body is an act of rebirth or self-verification of humanity. I haven't seen your last film *Žaludek světa / The Stomach of the World* but I imagine there is a snake swallowing children. What kind of transformation is that? In the film, the snake scene is ambiguous – we can see a predator, or a predator for the moment, following its prey, a mouse. When the mouse is*

caught, it becomes part of the snake's body, giving it four feet. At the same time, we can see the huge snake body, waving in the gym like in an aquarium and hitting the walls because the pen is obviously too small and the snake is imprisoned. Then the snake is surfeited and it changes into a bag, a container, and children-mice have to quite brutally open its abdominal wall to get out. But then there are also mice that prefer the snake body to freedom. One of my exhibitions, *a mouse's home is the snake's body* (2015), dealt with this voluntary form of scraping along.

I know that you want the animals abused in factory farms and animal shelters to have a better, beautiful life. But art is not utilitarian; it doesn't serve any, even good causes. What can you do as an artist?

I've been thinking about this from the very beginning, like a lot of other artists who think about how useful they are. We've talked about it recently and I said that I often thought about changing profession (suspiciously often, lately). But at the same time, I realize that I've found my own language in art, the language I sometimes speak and sometimes stutter, but the language that makes sense to me although I'm aware of its limits. In art, there is no immediate feedback; you don't know how your work can affect people. But then I met a radical activist who saves animals from factory farms, and he told me he doesn't believe in petitions, demonstrations and efforts to push new laws anymore but in the power of art that can walk through the walls of factory farms, break them down, and show the alternatives. He's writing fiction about his activities now. I found it incredible that we both saw greater opportunities for a change in the work of the other. And it has paradoxically restored my belief in what I do.

Do you find it normal that the Czech language distinguishes the position of women, children, animals, plants and things as distinguished from that of men (in the plural past forms of verbs)? Don't you feel like breaking the grammar rules everywhere? Which verb form would you choose?

Our language is a powerful, but still quite underestimated power tool that contributes to oppression, discrimination and repression. It shows its power even in situations that don't have a name – and it's more difficult to talk about an issue when it's not defined. As for me, I'd use the male forms for all verbs just to show that there is no difference and that women, children, animals and flowers no longer need a special grammar category. But back at school, I'd get a bad grade, of course.

At present, you want to be an activist-artist. Together with Barbora Kleinhamplová and Zuzana Blochová, you've founded the Institute of Anxiety – you want to change education about our relationship to animals and animals as food, and about the relationship to the other as our exterior, whether it's a thing, animal, plant, or a person of a different race, age or gender. What theories and practice are your intentions based on? What are your plans?

To me, the Institute of Anxiety is a kind of octopus that can feel with all parts of its body – it's in a state of permanent neurosis because it cannot escape the impulses from the outside. And it doesn't want to, actually. Its tentacles are independent units with specific functions, yet they are parts of one functional body. I think it's a model of a well-functioning platform or institution where both independence and cooperation are possible. As for the Institute, each of us adds something different to its programme, but we also deal with everything together. The aim of the educational part of the programme you've mentioned is to look for education about issues that haven't been included in school curricula – although we think that they are crucial for children and their world-view. In the longer term, we'd like to create a curriculum of a new school subject somewhere between ethics, education to empathy, activism and lessons in unlearning... So here it is again: learning to unlearn as a way to take an active, critical, unbiased and empathic approach to the world and a way to find our own functional place in it.

¹ KOŤÁTKOVÁ, Eva and Ketty LA ROCCA. *Manual for Unlearning the Body*. Dortmund: Verlag Kettler, 2017. ISBN 9783862066254.

p. 44, I-animal (Interviews with animals), installation, collages, fabric objects, string, 297×25×210 cm, 2018

s. 47, The Two-Headed Biographer and the Museum of Ideas, installation view, photo © Michal Czanderle, performance, metal, Prádelna Gallery, Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, Prague, 2016