

Oskar Dawicki: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Oskar Dawicki answers questions about a good life, well-being and the conflicts this topic causes.

The artist participates in the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life (22/9/2022–1/1/2023) at PLATO.

“There is probably no one who has no free time. The office is not a permanent retreat and Sundays have become an institution. In these glorious hours of leisure, therefore, everyone should in principle have the opportunity to wake up to real boredom. But even if people do not want to do anything, something happens to them: the world makes sure that they do not find themselves.” (Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, 2014). How do you navigate yourselves in the so-called free time?

I have not had a time off for 51 years, meaning I am always at work or out of work (it makes no difference), and I have never had a job, even though I was born in a time when employment was mandatory. But boredom is very interesting and not necessarily connected to the so-called free time. You can be bored at work, while you are bungee jumping or having sex. They say children these days cannot handle boredom. If that is really the case, it makes me feel sorry for them even more.

The tool of the exhibition, which we offer as a kind of supportive element, is the genre of the fable. It is a narrative that somewhat mechanically instructs and provides guidance for a good life, usually in an attempt to impose the truisms and virtues of a given social order on the reader. The identification of humans with animals and their apparent domination over

them naturally offers a number of critical and unanswered questions. Who subjugates whom or what, who cares for whom, and above all who is defined here as an independent subject, are all subject to scrutiny. Could you empathize with some form of fable? Who or what would be its main protagonists?

Maybe something like The Fable of the Black Square Betrayed by the Campbell's Soup Can on the Large Glass.

Is your everyday routine and healthy living constantly chased by unhealthy rituals? If so, could you name some?

I have become addicted to nearly everything I could except for power, as in the need to control others.

American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* is about living within crisis, and about the destruction of our collective genres of what a 'life' is. Lauren Berlant's signature phrase 'cruel optimism' explains further: "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing". Berlant argues: where the tools we depend on to achieve 'a good life' — a safety net, job security, meritocracy, even 'durable intimacy' in our romantic lives — have degenerated into 'fantasies' that bear "less and less relation to how people can live". How the desire for a certain idea of "a good life of the 20th century, the postwar period" (or the belief that if one works hard enough or meets certain conditions, one can achieve it) often prevents people from taking the steps necessary to protect their own interests; to imagine a different possible future. Are you willing to reveal your personal unachievable fantasies of a good life?

"The good life" is essentially an oxymoron and as such it can be seen as a sadomasochistic experience. However, I see no room in it for optimism. You can have a great sense of humor, ataraxia or even be cheerful, but to be optimistic? One has to be very uninformed.

Do we choose our lifestyle, or are we chosen by it?

That I do not know, either.

Nowadays privacy means staying offline. Is Screen Time something you can fully control?

If you like to be in control, you can control screen time as well as anything.

German art theorist Isabelle Graw (In Another World: Notes, 2014–2017) claims: “One of the conditions of neoliberalism is that the market encroaches on areas that were previously considered ‘private’ and protected from its evaluative logic — such as the body, health, social relations — making these areas also subject to economic optimization. Thus, even our most intimate lives — our hobbies, relationships, bodies — become essentially cost centers. If we fail to optimize them, we feel disadvantaged. Thus, well-being replaces morality, but far from energizing us, it creates its own tyranny. Indeed, when self-improvement becomes the goal, narcissism becomes a disease. Are you working effectively, making enough money, eating right, exercising enough? Are you optimizing yourself?”

No.

Free activity stands quite consciously outside of ‘ordinary’ life as something ‘unserious’ but at the same time immersive, without temporal and spatial boundaries — and above all without the vision of profit. Since artistic work is often mistakenly perceived as a free activity, do you actually spend your free time doing something other than work?

I might have answered that already in point one, but... let me try again. There is no such thing as “free time”. When you die, then maybe there is? Though some people say not even then.

Do you ever have a compulsive need to run away from your own work ethics, schemas, visuality, form, way of communicating, i.e. in general,

what you have set as your own rules?

All the time.

In a moment when we have all indicators that the Planet is going to collapse, do you feel any conflict linked to your decisions that are intertwined with the production of artworks and environmental issues?

No. I operate on a scale that has little to do with the end of the world, unfortunately. Besides, I lead a very sustainable life. I never had more than one room to myself. I have no children and I do not own a car. I eat simply. I wear the same clothes for years, et cetera, et cetera.

Wellbeing seems so self-evidently good that it escapes scrutiny, enabling it to slide from useful tool to expectation; of ourselves and of others. In fact, wellbeing has taken the place of morality. Instead of working to improve the world, we work to improve ourselves. What kind of wellbeing activities of the future can you predict?

People will kill themselves for wellbeing. Very well.



Oskar Dawicki (b. **1971**) is a Polish artist and performer whose work is accompanied by a slightly ironic, grotesquely absurd aura, strongly permeated by his own existential dilemmas. The self-reflection of the position of the contemporary artist is firmly intertwined with the reflection of personal identity, or rather its conventionality, unattachment, weakness and transience. The established norms of the moral, spiritual and social order are questioned and put to test. In **2010**, he became the protagonist of a partly fictional book, *W połowie puste* (From Half Empty), which a few years later was made into a feature film, *Performer*, in which the artist portrayed himself. Oskar Dawicki studied at the Department of Art Education at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

