

Agata Ingarden: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Agata Ingarden 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 so-called free time?

My previous project “The House” was about searching for boredom. I think a lot about work time/space and “free time” and domestic space, or maybe on the two above merging in one. I put a lot of effort in trying to find balance between the two for myself, or finding a way to rest, which is not only a necessary requirement for being more productive afterwards. Being slightly hyperactive I force myself into stillness and try to cultivate the feeling of not having to do anything, letting myself just simply be. It sometimes even lasts 20 minutes.

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

identification of man with the animal and his apparent domination over it 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?

I like a metaphor of the ant world. In this fable Ants gather and discuss existence of humans. Some say they exist and are good for ants or that they are not, some say they don't exist. The Ant world gets divided, there are protests, marches, little banners, Ants get elected depending on their beliefs and then internal wars happen, movements, writing, imagining how humans build their families and hills. At the end a human walk through the anthill destroying it, without noticing.

For a while now I have been developing the “Dream House” narrative. “Dream House” is an imaginary software generating a real-life simulation for a group of dormant characters, called Butterfly People. The system seems to be supervised by characters called Emotional Police (EmoPolis) and maintained by another group of insomniac characters – Goblin People looking like Butterfly People. Sometimes separate, sometimes merging as one character, Butterfly People explore the boundaries of their bodies, emotional states and communication through dance and non-organised movement in what seems to be a system built out of one room, multiple corridors and elevators with cables filled with ground, mushrooms and plants coming out of the architecture. All their efforts and energy, even when they try to rebel and break through the system, end up fuelling the entire program, which also somehow maintains their bodily functions and existence. Where and who are EmoPolis is not clear, but characters debate on that afterwards. And what is the idea behind the “Dream House” that puts the characters to sleep? Maybe the idea of unattainable “good life”.

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

It feels like my unhealthy routine is being punctured by healthy rituals, (sport, healthy food, meditation). One of the highlights of my guilty pleasures is going to sleep very late, watching anime and making pasta at 3 am. I also have an on-and-off relationship with cigarettes.

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 argued, where the tools we depend on to achieve 'the good life' — a safety net, job security, the 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 "the 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 the good life?

Living in a self-sustainable community, with friends, somewhere in nature, eating potatoes with butter and cream with chives every day.

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

I like to believe we have a choice, and willpower to create lifestyle that suits us.

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

Screen Time Limit is something I usually ignore. But it's installed on my phone for 10 minutes a day. It fatigues me to always be available. I dream of holidays without a phone.

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?”

I think we all try to optimise ourselves, trying to be the best version of ourselves or something. I struggle with the idea of feeling enough or not enough because it presupposes an ideal. I work towards feeling like I am doing enough.

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 do. And all these seemingly unrelated things feed my work anyway. At the same time, I feel I don’t really work ever because exactly what we do is mistaken for a free activity, and in effect I work all the time.

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?

I sometimes want to run away from being myself. It feels tiring to communicate what’s in my head. I try to reinventing the rules for myself. Inventing a game, a scheme, and then realising it’s all again the same, but maybe a tiny bit different... I don’t want to run from work ethics, this I try to build solid.

In a moment that 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?

I try to make my production being aware of environmental issues. It's not easy, but it's a choice and a process. It definitely makes me question a lot of current models of exhibiting works, art fairs, transports, storage etc.

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?

A friend told me a dream in which they woke up to a world where you have to pay in order to sleep. Everyone is an indebted insomniac, anxious, stressed and working twice as hard to be able to pay for their sleeping hours to be more productive. Sleeping Beauty Corp. provides sensory deprivation – sleeping tanks in 5 minutes regenerating the body and convincing the brain it had hours of sleep.



Agata Ingarden's (b. **1994**) practice is based on the exploration of posthuman mythic narratives. She works with many different media – large-scale multi-component installations combining industrial materials with natural resources and products such as wood, sugar, oyster shells, beeswax, and butterflies preserved in salt are often complemented and enhanced by narrative devices and sound or video. Agata Ingarden's work can be interpreted as a commentary on the ambiguous relations between nature and technology in the Anthropocene epoch, or even as a vision of a post-apocalyptic world devoid of human life. The Polish artist graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris and studied at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York.

