

Martin Kohout: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Martin Kohout 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?

It's hard to say what falls under the umbrella for this answer, since the way of navigating is different for five-minute rests with closed eyes on the sofa, taking an evening off from continuing whatever project I'm preoccupied with, or going off the grid for a few days. But in all the cases, it always takes shape in reference to what else I could be doing.

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 can't think of any from the top of my head. Animals fascinate me and I've recently enjoyed reading *Other Minds* by Peter Godfrey-Smith, but I don't really think about humans through the fable or animal metaphors consciously very much.

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

I eat way more dark chocolate than I wish I had to.

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?

I'd prefer not to.

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

I'm not sure the privacy divide is so binary for most of us who have become natural users of digitized communication technologies. Perhaps it's also about how consistently we engage with the technologies as a singular identity (from

roles of membership to the ways of using or keeping etc. and navigating between the spectrum of works from Shoshana Zuboff and Legacy Russell). Lot of what I consider my privacy is created in spaces with other individuals I was only able to find thanks to the technologies that are enabling both connections as well as tracking.

On the other hand, I can perhaps take control of the so-called screen time, but isn't it a misleading term? The time we look at screens is just a section of how we engage with the networks. I can finely imagine going for a hike without looking at the screen once, but the idea of leaving my phone at home when heading to such trip is another story.

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?”

What is the measure? Maybe that's where the haunting springs from.

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?

Yes.

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?

Not at the moment. They can be frustrating sometimes as I can see how they can complicate certain things. But I see that as a reason to look into them even more, rather than run away.

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?

As much as they are entwined with anything else I do, consume/use, or create. My goal is not perhaps to resolve the issue (because that's impossible?), but rather to keep that issue present as a participant in the discussion of decision-making.

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?

I think that it is a privilege to be preoccupied with a question of well-being and it is in reference to what is being taken and provided en large as a baseline. Therefore, I believe the activities connected to well-being in the future (as they are already now) will be linked to lowering stress, connecting back to here and now, and to one's body. Which, I believe, can eventually also serve as the starting point to connect to others or the surrounding environment in general.

In his multimedia practice, Martin Kohout (b. **1984**) explores self-reflexive themes closely related to the medium of the internet. His work includes videos, installations, sculptures and the publishing house TLTRPreß, which he initiated. Inspired primarily by the limits of individuals and groups, he introduces us to the existential corners of the ephemeral world, on the basis of which he creates another, deconstructed reality. The work shown in the exhibition presents the residues of a modular installation *DungeonTT*, which was already displayed several times and provides the ultimate experience of a place where tea is drunk. The performative installation, created by the artist in collaboration with Norwegian musician and artist Lars TCF Holdhus (b. **1986**), with costumes designed by artist Sandra Mujinga, is always based on the layout of the site. In the past, it has been presented at *Insomnia* in Tromsø, *Les Urbaines* in Laussane, *Synapse* at Meet Factory in Prague and *Schinkelfest* in Berlin. The sessions, which were part of the installation, lasted approximately five hours. Martin Kohout is a graduate of the Film Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, the Universität der Künste in Berlin and the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

