

Pavla Malinová: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Pavla Malinová 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 spend my free time mainly outside the gallery; I often say “I don't go to exhibition openings because it's work”. I think I'm pretty good at being bored. Lying around, watching brain-eating series, being bored in my head, reading. Movement and sports probably fill my free time the most. Resting is important to me, especially the time spent alone, without people. The understanding that I'm hypersensitive has helped me a lot. Not feeling bad about lying down even a few times a day, leaving the studio early, not staying there “overtime”. But I do that lately only, so hopefully, it'll last a while and I won't slip back into overworking myself.

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?

I often paint the bird motif, so I'd probably be a bird. I would be a terribly intelligent she-bird that would fly to see all the powerful men of the world and get to know how to talk to them, so they won't engage in wars but in dialogues instead.

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

There's an English term for it but I can't remember it. I'm always wondering what happened, what could have been done differently. Who thought, wrote and said what? What I said. Constantly returning to moments both good and sad. That kind of inner talking to myself. It's exhausting... Overthinking! I've remembered. Food, for example, I think I try to eat healthy, but I keep forgetting to eat slowly :). You should chew your food like 60 times, including the soup. I don't do that, food is often just a necessity for me, not an experience.

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?

I live a good life, I don't think I could handle any other. But in front of my eyes a green meadow flashes and twinkles, two dogs, a child and a loving man, a nest of home. There, somewhere, I am planting flowers, tending to them, helping them grow, caring for them and thus for the entire world. My brain wires in my head are in complete everyday euphoria. That's all I need in my life. As I say, I have a beautiful life, but I have to remind myself, every day.

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

I chose my lifestyle, but I often wonder whether I made the right choice. My parents said I should have gone to nursing school. Recently, I spent two weeks in hospital on drips. Not only it cured my fear of hospitals, but I also thought “Wow, I'd really love to do this”. Helping people and not just poking at myself and the world with a paintbrush. But at the same time, the fact that I've become an artist is just a coincidence. Art school was a random decision, the only thing I was into at 15 was sports, and I'm only catching up with that now, like a Hobbit. In high school and college, my lifestyle swallowed me and then spat me out as a painter, and age continues to shape that style.

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

I have absolutely no control over this. Although I know that staying offline gives more than it takes. As long as I don't leave my phone at home and go out without it, my hand twitches.

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 guess I'm not improving my intellectual skills. I optimize myself elsewhere; sports and movement, that's where I find my energy. But also physical pain. I hope that will disappear or at least lessen over time. So that when I paint, I won't suffer physically that much.

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 now. I've just been on holiday at the seaside with my family... so I was lying down, looking at the endless sea, looking into emptiness. And a family friend asked me whether I was getting inspiration for my pictures... It was on the fifth day of my holiday, and I didn't remember my work at all... or the pictures, but I actually call them canvases.

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?

Yes, but I'm not sure whether it's signs of a burnout and I'm cleverly avoiding them. But if I were to really escape somewhere, it would be away from art, for a long time. And then return to it, of course, but that return would take time, so I've been putting the separation off and off.

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?

Ecology was the theme of the Jindřich Chalupecký Award exhibition. I approached the assignment in my own way. The theme of water had appeared in my canvases before. Now, when I paint 4 Moons leaning on each other and the way they lean creates the shape of an hourglass—another frequent theme of mine—I can say that it is about ecology and the end of the world, about the clock ticking. But it's actually more like my time is ticking. Otherwise, my paintings have not flown on a plane yet, I myself fly a maximum of two times a year, I almost never get in a car. I live modestly, I'm not afraid to say. But I'm not saving the planet by doing that. By painting, I'm mainly polluting my body and my health.

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?

We should concentrate on our body; it does tell each individual what to do, what to eat, how and if to exercise, when and how to rest. We are all different. And I'm not saying that I listen to my body, but I'm learning. I'm at an age where I don't care what anyone else thinks, which is a great feeling. I'm not a corporate employee. I have imaginary bosses above me: gallery owners and curators who create pressure and often put us in a corner. I've experienced quite a bit of pressure, maybe once I actually turned down a show because I knew what I had time for and what I didn't... all I got was utmost dis-empathy from the curator. And here we are all different too: some people like to work under pressure, others don't.

We show in our “stories” how we work and rest but as we film ourselves while at it, we don't really work or rest anymore. It's something someone else should be doing for us, and I don't know who or how. To remain offline is our healthiest future. We're not going to watch how other people live. We will be here more for ourselves and maybe more for the others, too. No pressure please!



The work of painter Pavla Malinová (b. **1985**) is characterized by ubiquitous symbolism. The artist explores diverse themes based on the dualism of body and mind: from the abuse of power to the involvement of nature, the feminine versus the masculine principle, and everyday heroism. In her paintings, she creates a very sensitive ecosystem—a specifically functioning system of living and non-living components of our environment that are interconnected by the exchange of substances and the flow of energy. Her characters thus evolve in space and time, slowly playing out games that are often subversive, yet work together in their specific way. The Czech artist is a graduate of the Studio of painting at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ostrava.

