

Christelle Kahla: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Christelle Kahla 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?

I escape through fiction.

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?

Life is already made of a succession of small daily fables of which we are all the protagonists. I am the main protagonist of my own fables.

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

What you call “unhealthy” rituals contribute to my well-being and happiness. I love sugar, fat, wine and reality TV shows.

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?

My personal unachievable fantasy would be to vivre d’amour et d’eau fraîche, as we say in French. It means to live a carefree existence, with no worries or responsibilities and just for love.

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

If you’re lucky and strong enough, you can choose it.

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

Yes, it's all about willpower. Unfortunately, I have no willpower.

The renowned 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 have been working on it and failing at it since I was born. What about you?

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, I do. I am not a romantic artist who dedicates and sacrifices her life for art making.

Do you ever have a compulsive need to run away from your own work ethics, schemas, viscosity, form, way of communicating, i.e. in general, what you have set as your own rules?

I haven't had a nervous breakdown or an existential crisis yet, if that was the question.

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?

This is a tricky question when one considers the ecological impact of the art world, but I am personally in agreement with what I do, think and how I live as a human being and artist on this planet.

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 don't even want to predict and I cannot even imagine what wellbeing activities will emerge in the future. I already feel like I'm living in a sci-fi movie.



Rough art techniques are characteristic of the work of Swiss artist Christelle Kahla (b. 1994). These include both the material, i.e., untreated cotton and canvases, which the artist stretches on the wall so that their edges are distorted, and the shape eventually evokes animal hide. She also uses a specific natural and gestural technique of spray painting, which makes it impossible for the artist to go back and retouch. The intensity of the movements provides the paintings with a very rich decorative aspect and gives the viewer an impression of framing their own reflections. Yet is not their reflection of them, but a kind of absorption into the surfaces of the asymmetrically stretched canvases. The artist studied at the Art Institute of the College of Art and Design in Basel and the École cantonale d'art in Lausanne.

