

Marek Pokorný: Julie in the Worlds of Fantasy. Marginalia.

Translation: Kateřina Danielová

Curatorial text for the exhibition Julie Béng:
Fantasy (23/5–1/9/2024, PLATO).

*“That’s the lot. Now for the play.” (transl. Lewis Galantieri)
Jean Anouilh: Antigone*

In psychology, fantasy means the ability to detach oneself in imagination from the actual or ‘objective’ reality, to imagine something that does not exist in the ‘real’ world, or the results of such a process of detachment. Familiar, visible, existing things and images are combined in various ways, reshaped or put into new contexts. Something new, unreal, alien, but in a way familiar is created. Fantasy is a means of communicating and sharing important things that we hide from (not only) ourselves; things we do not like to talk about straightforwardly.

As a peculiar kind of emancipation of subjects and a liberating reaction to their being tangled in social and intersubjective relations, or as a defensive reaction to the mental and psychological setting of a particular person (or group of people), the reputation of fantasy is sometimes great, and sometimes somewhat tarnished. A matter for discussion is, among others, the degree of retroactive influence that such detachment has on the reality from which subjects and particular groups of people become emancipated through fantasy. There is also the absolutely fundamental question of whether fantasy is not a mere escape stemming from an inability or unwillingness to face reality. Although on a very basic level it may be a purely self-preserving reaction, its productive nature (and therefore the most important asset of fantasy for the subject) always leads to a kind of positive projection, such as the creation of a parallel world or story and the construction of an alternative. Through fantasy,

subjects that are seemingly powerless or subordinated to reality can, at least mentally, overcome or transcend the given facts. By radically reworking and reconnecting or reimagining fragments of reality in the dissimilar, fantasy opens up the possibility of free action in relation to a reality so heavy that it excludes anything like that. Reality is apodictic, fantasy is critical.

In psychoanalysis, where the concept of fantasy used to be hotly debated, especially between the rigid supporters of Sigmund Freud and the defenders of Melanie Klein's concept, unconscious and conscious fantasies are distinguished by any possible means. In the different approaches, it oscillates between the notion of fantasy as a distinct mental process, and fantasies as contents of the mind. The questions of suppressing originally conscious fantasies and the efforts at their interpretation, or the existence of originally unconscious fantasies and their nature, are not important in the present context. Rather, let us bear in mind that in the course of psychoanalysis, the access to unconscious fantasies is a joint construct of the patient and the psychoanalyst, creating a common space of the psychoanalytic field within which fantasies can be analysed and interpreted.

The common idea of fantasy being unanchored and boundless, or entirely and purely individual and non-transferable, is therefore not entirely correct. In fact, fantasy processes are difficult to mobilize without the support of understanding, experiences and volatile memory. Fantasy cannot do without clues, sensually or pictorially quite concrete, without a runway, or even better without limitations and resistance. At the same time, it is intersubjective and specifically discursive, one might even say constructive, and amenable to understanding.

As the daughter of an actress, Julie Béna travelled and performed with nomadic theatre, and is therefore quite familiar with this milieu. Her work has long drawn on this experience, as well as on the traditions and imagery of cabaret and fairy tales, which in their heyday addressed politically charged issues and the repressive nature of social or political reality through allegory and exaggeration. At the same time, Béna's artistic strategy is based on the subversion of associations related to the world of theatre, cabaret and fairy tale, which we conventionally consider the prerogative of the imagination. In fact, our ability to strip away the whole apparatus and a number of tacitly accepted procedures constitutes the basic precondition for the possibility to experience theatrical and cabaret performances or to be carried away by them. Only in this way do they become a space and environment for 'unbridled' imagination. Despite all the experiments aimed at abolishing the thin line

separating actors and spectators, the stage and backstage, we always either accept its existence or are at least able to perceive it in parentheses. We approach the formalised or prefabricated elements that underpin any performance and our experience of it with a special confidence. Fairy tales have a similar position, while cabaret, by definition, switches, deconstructs and reflects on these formal aspects to maximise its effect. In all cases, fantasy is therefore in a way trapped and enclosed in a specific aleatory of the expressive and 'operational' characteristics of the art form or genre in question – as their negation or transcendence. Its freedom can only manifest itself through the dependence on a particular discourse or set of rules.

Julie Béna is also fascinated by the vast reservoir of canonical ideas, characters and plots that have become generalised in Western civilisation and without which any classic drama or great novel cannot be imagined. Another important source for her is film or pop culture with its ability to mirror, exaggerate and exacerbate basic social conflicts and desires through surprising shortcuts. This means a turn to contents represented by specific or typical characters, gestures, plots, images or 'gags.' The personal here is always co-determined with a cultural pattern or model. A series of metal sculptures creating, in various constellations, the idea of the exhausted, arid landscape of our Wild West fantasies. From a single design principle of welded objects, the artist develops a complex imagery and meaning layer of the fantasy transformations. Classic black & white cowboy movies are permeated with images from Lucky Luke animations or hallucinatory images from the post-apocalyptic quasi-western series *Westworld*, contaminated by the memory of the emaciated mare Rosinante from *Don Quixote*.

The references to prefigurations are interpretively rich, but it would be foolish to build on them. We cannot do without them anyway. It may be more prudent and effective to accept the prefiguration in its impersonality or facticity and make the most of its characteristic features. What is essential is the will to stretch these characteristic features until they almost begin to crumble. And this is, after all, the basic choice of the artist, approaching her personal history and mythology strategically, in order to make as much room as possible for the imagination. In the world of *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, cabaret and circus, in the world of fairy tales, but also in animated films, blockbusters and computer games, the characters are portrayed in clear strokes – so as to be recognisable at first sight. Their characters do not evolve; they represent distinct attitudes, moods and destinies. They go through the plot in one costume. We know what to expect from them. They act in order to make us

follow the plot, the situational wit, the execution. We do not bother about where they came from. However, their lack of ambiguity is disturbing in itself. Considering that they should be perfectly elegant, what if there is a toe sticking out of their sock?

The poetics of emancipation in Julie Béna's work conceive her characters and their archetypes in the context of their former critical function, when such an artificial fairy tale or cabaret were spaces for radical questioning of the social order. In other cases, as for instance the actress Shirley Temple, who merged with a certain type of character, which in turn merged with her roles in her political career, it reveals and questions the mechanisms that instil socially conforming ideas about the roles assigned to individuals. The creation of her own avatar for some of her animated videos, the performing of herself and her loved ones in costumes referencing commedia dell'arte and circus in Béna's films, is a similar tactic. The paradox of blending and disconnecting person and role makes the message more intense. When I asked about some important texts or works of art that were quite fundamental for the artist, we came to Jean Anouilh's drama *Antigone*. In it, five-year-old Julie Béna played Creon's page. The prologue she drew my attention to in the interview can be seen as a kind of source code for one of the artist's basic creative principles. In it, Anouilh suggestively introduces the various characters, in such a way that the text very subtly conveys the disjunctions between the roles, the physical presence of the actors and the choices facing the actors in the drama. Through the rhetorical figures enveloping the individual characters of the drama, the prologue artfully weaves a trap of transparency allowing also our own fantasies to speak to us. For transparency is as much a hand offered for sharing as it is a principle of power, the strength of which has been well understood by modern architecture. Its ambivalent effects are evident in *Glass Table*, a work that has appeared in different contexts in the artist's previous exhibitions. Seemingly standing out from the narrative, figurative oeuvre of Julie Béna, the work mirrors her former desire to become an architect. The contrast of dysfunctional functionality and the evocation of missing human presence seem to be a critical reference to this 'career fantasy.'

While eminently personal, the world of Julie Béna is also shared through universally understandable prefigurations. It is made up of images that may have come from different sources and traditions, but have stuck in our collective memory. These images form a vocabulary that the artist uses to express in new and imaginative ways the issues or dilemmas of emancipation,

gender repression, and the social roles we occupy in our lives, such as the conflict between the roles of an artist, mother, daughter, wife...

Marek Pokorný

Julie Béna (born **1982**, Paris, France) is a performance and visual artist. She currently lives and works between Prague and Paris. She is a graduate of the internship at Villa Arson in Nice and attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. In **2012** and **2013** she was a member of Le Pavillon, the research lab of Palais de Tokyo, a prestigious French contemporary art gallery in Paris. In **2018**, Julie Béna was nominated for the Prix AWARE women's art prize. She has had solo exhibitions at venues such as CEEAC in Strasbourg (with Anna Hulačová, **2023**), NiCOLETTi (London, **2021**), Villa Arson (Nice, **2021**), Kunstverein Bielefeld (**2020**); Kunstraum (London, **2020**); Jeu de Paume (Paris, **2019**); CAPC Musée d'art contemporain (Bordeaux, **2019**); Amparo Museum, Puebla, Mexico (**2019**); and CAC Passerelle (Brest, **2017**). Her work has recently been exhibited at the Biennale de Coimbra, Italy, Prague City Gallery, MeetFactory (Prague, CZ), Neve (Los Angeles), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Biennale de Rennes, Fondation Louis Vuitton (Paris), Polansky Gallery (Brno), **1646** (The Hague), C art C (Madrid), Bozar (Brussels), Kadist Art Foundation (Paris and San Francisco), Protocinema (Istanbul), and Chapter NY (New York). Béna has done numerous performances, including at Centre Pompidou (Paris, FR), the Institute for Contemporary Art (London), M (Louvain), Palais de Tokyo (Paris) and Performa (New York). She has participated in a number of residencies, including at Fonderie Darling (Montreal), Futura (Prague), ISCP (New York), Moly Sabata (Sablons), CCF (Surabaya) and INI Project (Prague).

