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INTERSPECIESISM IN CZECH VISUAL PERFORMANCE

In this article I decided to follow Claire Bishop in opting for the term “visual performance” that, despite some reservations, seems most precise. In her definition, visual performance is created by artists who have not been trained as actors, musicians, dancers, etc. In research, the term “performance art” has been used for performances since roughly the 1990s, thus marking a period before their considerable expansion. Whenever “performance” is used without further attributes, what is meant is the art of performance in a fine arts context, i.e. visual performance.¹

Before addressing the area of the fine arts, I would like to consider interspeciesism itself. In a broad sense of the word, it concerns relations among individual species, but for understandable reasons (given by my self-determination, and thus my limitation) I shall focus on interspeciesism from the human perspective. The basic binary differentiation is human vs. non-human, i.e. the elements, stones, plants, animals, the world of technologies or extra-terrestrials. The non-human can also include the world of religion and spirituality, but whether it constitutes a “genre” (e.g. the genre of a spiritual or divine being) is up for debate. The differentiation adumbrated above

inherently presupposes that individual species (whether with or without quotation marks) blend together better, with two humans (of whatever race, nationality, or gender) achieving a better understanding than a human and an animal. However, Konrad Lorenz’s (1903–1989) research has shown this schematic reasoning to be ill-founded. In reality, a seagull achieves a better understanding with a raven living in the same area than with a seagull living elsewhere.² Applied to humans, this could mean that one gets along better with one’s cat than with the stranger one is hosting on Airbnb. On the other hand, one doesn’t talk to one’s cat about contemporary art or the latest political developments. Interspeciesism, it seems, requires a certain sensitivity and communication on a different level. But what does this mean in practice? This is what I will try to answer in the following text, which will depart from the viewpoint of the human-artist-performer, who in his work works with the animal or natural element not as an instrumental means, but as a partner in dialogue.

Human and Animal

Interspecies relations between man and animal are the most consciously reflected in our society. These are relationships with domestic animals (emotional), with animals as food (utilitarian), or with wild animals, possibly also protected animals (idealisation, fear, etc.). An extreme position within the relationship with animals is zoosexuality or zoophilia, where the sexualisation of the animal can be linked to romantic feelings for it, with the animal having the position of a life partner or one-night stand. Animalism is part of the human being evolved from the animal, however it is not value-neutral: it is seen as something “impure” and potentially dangerous,³ something to be repressed rather than developed by the “well-mannered” person.

The fact that humans are strongly connected to nature in the form of animality is ambiguously and – for the purposes of this text – ideally reflected in popular culture. Two main lines of relating to animality can be discerned, which is also very appealing due to its liminality. On the one hand, there is an ironic and mocking position,⁴ e.g. in the hit song *I Wanna Be Your Dog* by The Stooges (1969),⁵ which at first sight describes a heedless love and devotion. However, the song’s very eloquent lyrics can also be read as a description of a BDSM⁶ relationship in which the man is absolutely submissive, a humiliated “mistress’s dog.” Dogplay is indeed a very popular roleplaying⁷ pastime in this setting. What these two views have in common is utter surrender, extracting the human rational component in favour of passion and instincts. Something like this can be very refreshing for an over-thinking westerner. This is also the reason why the overall positive, almost exuberant (in a canine fashion) mood of the song is quite appropriate.

The other position is what I would call “dark animalism.” This time I have chosen as an example a less popular and more contemporary song by Chelsea Wolfe called *Feral Love* (2013).⁸ Feral means wild in the sense of uncivilised, undomesticated. The song evokes a dark, deep position of animality within humans, associated with blood, pain, crossing boundaries, and

with death (of the ego). Potentially, therefore, a transgressive,⁹ sacred and dangerous¹⁰ plane. What the latter position has in common with the first, exaggerated and playful position is the shutting down of reason, the release from social ideas and rules, but more accentuated here is the danger of too much release, namely the loss of control (or identity) and the inability to return; psychological disorders, madness.

Both deeply interconnected positions will serve me as guidelines for interpreting the work of two contemporary Czech performers, Kateřina Olivová and Darina Alster.

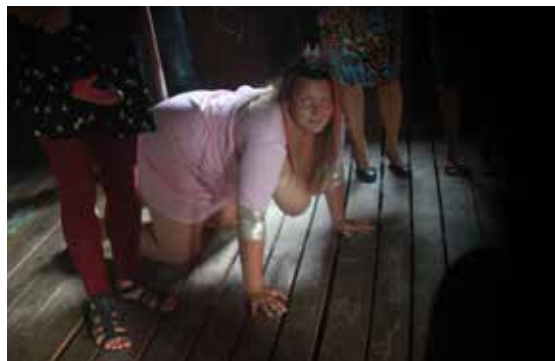
Kateřina Olivová

Kateřina Olivová (b. 1984) drew attention to herself as a finalist for the Jindřich Chalupecký Award in 2018. She is a personality whose look, lifestyle and opinions form an integral part of her artistic work. The boundaries between the non-artistic (personal) and the artistic are deliberately blurred in her case. She herself and her performances evoke strong emotions, which is an important strategy in her performance work. From a feminist position, she reflects on women’s collective traumas, dissatisfactions and inferiority complexes arising from their lack of a perfect body. Olivová draws on and benefits from her own bodily endowment, which evokes the Venus of Věstonice, a form of the maternal aspect of the female cult that, especially in the last century, has been considered something unhealthy and unaesthetic. Standing outside the contemporary ideal of beauty, her nudity is not primarily considered erotic, nor is the author degrading her into a sexual object. As a result, she has a wide range of agency and can indeed do with her body as she wishes; its very being, combined with Olivová’s casual attitude, becomes a work of art.

Olivová mixes the Venus of Věstonice figurine with pop culture, loving colour, glitter and cat ears, giving her message a touch of lightness and entertainment. Typical of her work is the use of animal masks, butterfly wings, unicorn attributes, etc. Her distinctive performance style was created as a counter-position to the stereotypical “boring, solemn, serious performance.”¹¹ In one of her early performances



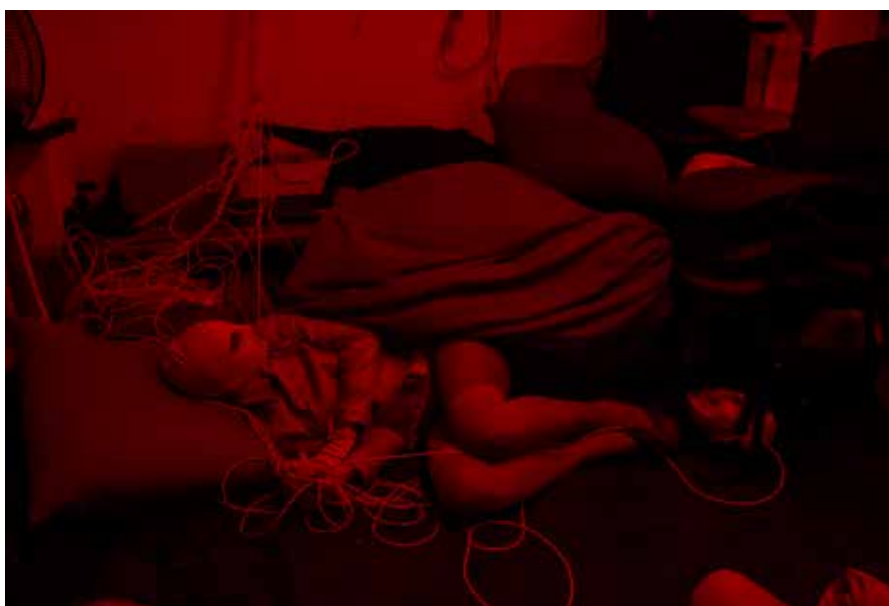
Kateřina Olivová, performance in Sokolowsko, 2012,
photo Zita Belfast



Kateřina Olivová, performance at Darina Alster's exhibition, 2015,
photo Petr Flíček



Darina Alster, *Green Woman*, 2021, screenshot,
Polina Revunenka



Darina Alster, *Red Agent*, 2018, photo Airide Rekstiite



Miloš Šejn, *Yellow Man*, 2015



Hana Magdoňová, *Thirty-Nine Days*, 2021, photo Alena Hlaváčová

at the Festival in Sokolowsko (Poland, 2012), she stripped down, stuck a lit candle up her behind and crawled naked on all fours until she reached a lattice (which can be interpreted as imprisonment) and imitated the sounds of various animals (horse, cat, tiger, cow, etc.). She ended the performance ended by injecting herself in the abdomen with a blood thinner she was using at the time. Programmatically, she was trying to break away from the over-intellectualised form of performance and her actions were to be as “crazy” as possible. Later she tried a different position during a performance at Darina Alster’s exhibition (2015). She dressed up in a princess dress, let Alster lead her around with her breasts exposed and behaved like a dog, i.e., among other things, sniffed the audience and obeyed her mistress’ commands.

By her own account, Olivová is very fond of nature and animals (for a long time she wanted to be a veterinarian, but at the last minute she ended up attending the Faculty of Fine Arts in Brno). In her performances, she engages in a game with wildness, bearing the imprint of the desire “to be able to move like an animal at least sometimes, to have animal qualities, it’s also a bit of a child’s game... It’s also intertwined in my everyday life, I wear cat ears because I would like to have them.”¹² She is fascinated by the combination of a latex, kitsch animal head with nudity, she likes the tension that shifts the body into a fantastical, almost alien appearance. She also explores how the animal in question feels without becoming it, “I like the nothingness of it.”¹³ The wildness in her performance is eminently playful, not dark and dangerous as in Darina Alster’s work.

Darina Alster

In her work, Darina Alster (b. 1979) combines religion, magic, mysticism and political activism. She chooses the medium of performance because her own body is the fundamental means of expression for her. She is interested in ritualism across religious and spiritual movements, and her conception is characterized by a postmodern eclectic approach to spiritual traditions.

I think my mission is to bring spirituality into contemporary art. To inspire people towards spirituality. Today people can combine different elements from different traditions to create their own mythology. They can be Christian, gay and use tarot without feeling silly, or they can like other religions – Buddhism, Hinduism... I try to open up these themes in my work to bring them back into play within the contemporary world.¹⁴

During her performances, Alster often personifies a female deity and her actions take the form of a ritual.

In performance I work with certain aspects of inhumanity, where I detach myself from myself and my person and embody certain spiritual aspects. The animality in my work is not purely related to the animal kingdom as such, but when I perform I enter a trance. It is a state of mind where I perceive the presence and different aspects of the presence in relation to myself and through me it speaks, I become the primordial essence that is also beyond sexuality. In this trance I step out of not only my normative roles but also my personality, in this trance I connect with my animal side. By performatively being in the present, we become animals or children: the only thing that exists for them (for us) is the present moment.¹⁵

For example, in the performance *Red Agent* (2018) she tapped into female passion. All in red, she moved around a red room specially designed for this purpose, consciously working with the aesthetic qualities of her body and environment, reciting a poetic text about burning desire, how powerful it is, how dangerous it can be without the right direction, without ever being reducible or regulated. It was a very intimate, self-revealing performance with intense personal and psychological input from the artist. It was as if the audience had been invited into a private slice of reality, into another world, a realm of

intense emotions, but one with which they could easily identify as Alster had abstracted and disembodied it. Another work is the performance *Bodies of Water* (2021). This one was about embodying nature, the rainforest, the archetype of the green woman, the roots of life that are in water. In the part of the performance situated in a gallery space, the artist flailed with herself in waves on the ground, throwing up various objects (like the sea), which she gave to the audience, looking intensely into their eyes. Connecting to the personified wildness of nature was important to her, and she sought an authentic experience of an unrepeatable event for both herself and the onlookers.

Both performers work with inner wildness or animality in their own specific ways, sharing a desire to free themselves from social roles and assumptions; for Olivová, the leitmotif is lightness and play, for Alster, a trance-like connection with archetypes and spiritual elements.

Humans, plants, elements

Connections with plants and inanimate nature are more abstract than relationships with animals, and so from hit narratology the narrative moves on to deep ecology and the environmental movement in my search for framing. While humans have cultivated a relationship (however contradictory) with animals, they almost without exception think of plants, water or land in utilitarian terms, as a resource upon which one can draw (almost) endlessly. The growing environmental movement of recent years is a clear signal that an increasing number of people feel this approach to nature to be unsustainable and in need of changing. Environmentalism is also linked to criticism of consumerism, of the desire for ever new things, to criticism of tourism, etc.¹⁶ The turn to nature, together with its connection to the ritual dimension,¹⁷ was typical of the art of the 1970s¹⁸ and is currently enjoying a revival. In the 1970s, however, there was a lack of connection with the environmental movement, whereas today artists place great emphasis on environmental issues, even if they may not work directly with nature in

their work. Moreover, ritualism has moved from nature more into the city, as demonstrated by the work of Alster.

Petr Štembera (b. 1945) is a typical representative of Czech action art of the 1970s, which combines physical (body-art) action with the natural element. In his most famous work, *Grafting* (1975), he grafted a twig onto his arm in the same way that trees are grafted. Pavlína Morganová writes about the action as follows: “In a manner customary in orchard management, he grafted a twig into his arm, in an attempt to achieve the impossible – to merge completely with nature. ... All afternoon, he »let the two organisms interact« until he got blood poisoning.”¹⁹ The photo-documentation of the event is one of the most famous paeans to the first wave of performance art in the then Czechoslovakia, which influenced subsequent generations of artists. In the 1970s, Štembera himself carried out many other self-torturing actions, which his yoga practice helped him to manage physically and mentally. Noteworthy in that context is the performance, *Sleeping in a Tree* (also from 1975): “after three nights of sleeping, he spent the fourth night in a tree.”²⁰ At the end of the 1970s, he withdrew from the scene and refused to return at any cost.

Štembera’s generational contemporary is the poet, performer and artist Milan Kozelka (b. 1948), who in the 1970s moved from poetry to performance and installations in nature. He too sought to connect and merge with nature, as seen for example in his series of actions *Contacts* (1980) with the Vydra river in Šumava. In the first of the realised performances, for example, he lay downstream in a stream from midnight to dawn; another action was *Standing in Rapids, Suspension, Walking Upstream* (with a stone, a stick, etc.).²¹ On one of the surviving typescript entries of the *Resumé on Physical Actions*, the author writes:

The body as a specific means of expression
/ and as an artefact / the body as
a spontaneous dynamic element / itself
in relation to the material used / modes
of expression / the body as a de-fetishised



Milan Kozelka, *Suspension (Contact IV)*, 1980, Archive of Pavlína Morganová



Petr Štembera, *Grafting*, 1975, Archive of Pavlína Morganová



Petr Štembera, *Sleeping in a Tree*, 1975, Archive of Pavlína Morganová

object / the body as a spatiotemporal / embryonic / signal / of self-analysis / coming out of oneself / self-reduction / self-discovery / perceptual spaces / living / action sculpture /.²²

He was seeking integrating into the landscape, after blending in, after natural contact. His actions were neither violent nor penetrative, but rather minimalistically meditative, linked to his interest in Indian philosophy. In another entry he adds:

It was in no way a deliberate aestheticisation of the body vis-à-vis nature, nor was it a contradictory aestheticization of nature vis-à-vis the body. Landscape, body and modalities of action were not mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, formed a living metaphorical whole.²³

After 2000, Kozelka turned to radical political performance and – due to his disordered life (always living on a minimal income, on the margins of society) – he died in 2014.

The multimedia artist Miloš Šejn (b. 1947), whose work has a similar starting point, is still an active performer, and what is more, from its beginning to the present day his work has formed a continuum. Václav Hájek characterises his work as follows: “The key theme and environment of Šejn’s work is landscape (or nature, perceived in its fragments). The author also thematises subjective space and natural image. Šejn perceives landscape as the primary reality, source, root or base of his work. ... In the landscape, then, is found the subject around which a particular place gathers. ... The subject is not an abstract quantity, but a corporeal entity – it moves, looks around, perceives and reacts.”²⁴ Not only does it react, it also touches, merges, and communicates. What is significant for Šejn is a very close, often direct body-art contact with various natural substances such as mud, water, trees, leaves, etc. In many of his works, the artist merges with nature through his body, his senses; the actions are long-lasting, usually without an audience, and he records the performance with a camera or video camera.

What is important for him is coming out of himself and connecting... to nature, to the concrete, to the tree, to the atmosphere of the moment. Even if his work is not programmatically environmental, his inner starting points are identical. Šejn draws primarily on his rich inner world and spiritual development. His meditative work has influenced many younger artists.

Interspecies Anthropology

Interspecies anthropology or posthumanist philosophy has become an increasingly popular current of thought in recent years, even among artists. Posthumanist thought goes beyond the human-centred viewpoint and expands it to include components of animate and inanimate nature, as well as exploring the possibilities of a future without humans. Combining her experiences from the theatre and art environments in relation to the work of Šejn, Hana Magdoňová (b. 1989) can be included in this stream of thought. The unifying line of her work is the desire to discover new horizons of human consciousness and perception of reality, for knowledge and intuitive understanding, which is closely linked to the interest in personal development and the spiritual side of life. Her main medium of expression is performance, and in parallel she is active in the Agronauts’ Collective (which she co-founded), an interdisciplinary platform for applied posthumanist thought.

It was these two lines that were connected in the happening titled *Thirty-Nine Days*, which took place from 17 May to 24 June 2021 in the environment of the Hády Quarry in Brno. Magdoňová opted for her own version of “going to the desert,” aware of how the original meaning shifts. As an artist, a woman, a non-ascetic (during her stay she had regular baths, ate food, took care of herself and the environment), she chose a landscape mined by humans and subsequently re-cultivated, in a sense a “new wilderness.” She realised this long-lasting performance as her master thesis project, perhaps as an excuse to free herself from all obligations, including those work-related, for a long time. Such a long

separation has the nature of an initiation event, a liminal situation, or a rite of passage. To some extent, her gesture was also a reaction to the pandemic period, to the restriction of movement and possibilities of going out, and to the transfer of most interpersonal communication into the virtual environment.

Magdoňová opted for a path of isolation in nature, with the aim of reconnecting with various forms of life and expanding her perception. As in Šejn's case, her work is marked by an interest in meditative practices connected with the body, which help her to induce and deepen perception. Unlike him, however, she chose not to record any time-bound performances, but to perceive her entire stay as an artistic performance. And to maintain this awareness, if possible, even during crisis situations when she doubted herself and the possible continuation of her intention, for example when she got painful blisters on her hands or was robbed.

The *Thirty-Nine Days* project also included three workshops open to those interested in a deeper appreciation of nature through direct experience. These were carried out together with Lea Spahn, a colleague from the Agronauts' Collective who works on bodily movement in a social science context. The aim of these workshops was to convey – in a condensed form and reduced time – how during her stay, metaphorically speaking, Magdoňová performed the landscape and the landscape performed her. How can the human and the inhuman intermingle? Is it possible to communicate with the landscape? To let the landscape enter into oneself? What is it like to act from this position, what is it like to make art from this position? The key is co-existence with all forms of life in nature, conscious co-existence. The question is how to capture such co-existence, if achieved. The *Thirty-Nine Days* project was an attempt to transcend previous human and artistic experiences towards a strong unifying theme, whose communicability, in her conception, should be enhanced by experiential encounters that should make interspecies sensitivity accessible to more people.

Conclusion

This text has presented several positions of Czech visual performance that deals with interspecies themes: from purely artistic performances to artistic-anthropological intervention. The artistic performances share the moment of merging with nature or expressing inner animality, as well as the desire to free oneself from social roles and assumptions.

The performance *Thirty-Nine Days* highlights in an exceptional way a caring approach to nature and cohabitation with it (in the sense of a partnership or relationship). It can be said that it absorbs the approaches mentioned above in an enlightened way and takes from them whatever it needs at any given moment. It operates at the very edge of art, research, spiritual practice, and social interaction.

As the above cases show, an interspecies approach to art-making is not uncommon. Rather, what is unusual is the given point of view, or the set interpretive key, through which new contexts and perspectives on art can be found.

Notes

- ¹ Claire Bishop, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62.2 (2018): 22–42.
- ² See: Konrad Lorenz, *On aggression* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also: accessed September 19, 2021, <https://sciencemag.cz/sojky-cizincum-duveruji-mene/>.
- ³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of concept of pollution and taboo* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁴ See: Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by Abraham Arden Brill (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- ⁵ See the lyrics, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://genius.com/The-stooges-i-wanna-be-your-dog-lyrics>.
- ⁶ BDSM combines the abbreviations of B/D (bondage and discipline/dominance), D/S (dominance and submission) and S/M (sadism and masochism). See, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://wikipedia.org/wiki/BDSM>.
- ⁷ Roleplaying, i.e. role-playing in sexual fantasies or activities.
- ⁸ See the lyrics: <https://genius.com/Chelsea-wolfe-feral-love-lyrics>.
- ⁹ Compare the conception of transgression in: Georges Bataille, *Erotism*, translated by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).
- ¹⁰ More from the viewpoint of orgiastic mysteries than Christian sanctity.
- ¹¹ Interview with Kateřina Olivová, September 18, 2021
- ¹² *Ibidem*.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁴ Darina Alster, „Rozhovor s Darinou Alster“ [Interview with Darina Alster], interview conducted by Magdalena Šípková and Nikolai Ivaschiv, *Ateliér* no. 13-14 (2014): 5.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Darina Alster, September 20, 2021.
- ¹⁶ See e.g. Jan Keller, *Až na dno blahobytu* [To the Bottom of Prosperity] (Brno: Hnutí Duha, 1993).
- ¹⁷ The necessity of connecting/conjoining/identifying with nature in the spiritual or emotional sense has been pointed out by the founder of deep ecology Arne Naess. See John Seed, et al., *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2007).
- ¹⁸ See Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory* (New York: New Press, 1983).
- ¹⁹ Pavlina Morganová, *Akční umění* [Action Art] (Olomouc: Votobia, 1999), 84.
- ²⁰ *Ibidem*.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*, 90.
- ²² Vladimír Meistr's archive. See also: Vladimír Havlík, Pavlina Morganová and Jana Písaříková, *Svázáno do Kozelky* [Bound in Kozelka] (Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2020).
- ²³ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁴ Václav Hájek, "Miloš Šejn," Artlist — Center for Contemporary Arts Prague, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.artlist.cz/milos-sejn-539/>.

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