



# Let Me Hear Your Footprints

*The Let Me Hear Your Footprints* exhibition is focused on the richness of human perception and world exploration, especially with regard to human experience with various types of physical, sensory, or mental disadvantages. The exhibited works thematise such experience and come from the praxis of artists who are either disadvantaged themselves or cooperate closely with the disadvantaged. There is a representation of neurodivergent, blind, purblind, and physically impaired authors. The exhibition aims to not only give the others an insight into their living conditions but also emancipate them face to face with the ableist ideology which prevails in our society.

On that account, we avoid using the contrasting societal categorisations which stem from the terms “normal” (meaning “healthy” or “able”) and “different”. This is why we replace the established term “disabled” with “disadvantaged” in reference to the societal root of ableism.

As the poetic exhibition name implies, the exhibition expresses a wish to partially enter the specific experience of other people. It accomplishes it using distinctive artworks which can activate various senses and thus mediate a unique experience through their mutual effects.

## **David Escalona**

The body, disease, and the fragility of our existence are some of the topics present in the work of the Spanish artist David Escalona. In addition to his art education, Escalona also studied Medicine at the University of Málaga. He envisions art as a strange tool that can convey complex – but not necessarily intelligible – realities. He believes that anything that goes beyond reason can be treated from an aesthetic or artistic angle.

His installation in the *Let Me Hear Your Footprints* exhibition is partly based on the extensive *Cold Fever* project which Escalona presented in a building of a former hospital in Berlin where the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Art Centre is now located. In the accompanying text of *Cold Fever*, part of which is quoted here, Escalona mentions a different reality which he discovered through his frequent hospital stays due to his hand injuries (hands later become a frequent subject of Escalona's drawings and sculptural installations). Pain, awareness of the vulnerability of one's own body, and isolation from society awakened in him a new way of seeing the world around him:

*"You know that, as a child, I spent a long time in hospital. Although I knew that it was forbidden, I used to keep a collection of rocks, bugs, insects and all sorts of little insignificant objects under my bed. By playing I managed to develop differently in an environment as crude and as painful as a hospital. The ludic dimension was, and still is, my medicine. However, when I speak about the ludic dimension I mean the ability of fluttering with the objects, of seeing snow in a piece of lace, of lying down on an operating table and being able to feel the cold of some faraway glacier, when your skin comes in contact*

*with the steel; of being able to hum a tune to the beat of the drip in one's arm... Illness can amplify the awareness of one's own body and environment. In this way, details and subtleties that used to be overlooked are now perceived, such as the wrinkle in a bedsheet, an insect or the thorns of a rose, for which you even feel compassion. The ill can perceive things that normally go unheard, unseen, unfelt; they are capable of thoughts that lead to strange places ... to states of mind, sometimes chemically-induced by drugs, those legalized poisons that cure, affect and even kill us. Wound by wound, such is the cure, the struggle. Maybe this idle form of reflection is the most valuable. Maybe it is a form of rebellion or resistance against the frenzied pace of our society, in which you must either become a frantic producer and consumer, or else be cast away and forgotten, as usually happens to the infirm and the old."*

## **Joanna Pawlik**

The Polish artist Joanna Pawlik expresses herself in a wide range of media - from paintings, collages, and objects to performance and participatory projects which involve other authors with various types of disadvantages in order to emancipate their own work and facilitate their "artistic coming-out". The *Let Me Hear Your Footprints* exhibition presents two quite different positions of her expression.

The four videos from the *Stairs* series are a very straightforward representation of the author's own physical disadvantage. They document performances that Joanna Pawlik has performed in various places since 2013. On one hand, it is a greatly symbolic act which, without adornment, presents the complexity of some of the daily tasks which physically disadvantaged people are confronted with. At the same time however, the unadorned nature of the videos is far from an effort to (self)-heroize. Broadly speaking, it is a factual statement: Here is my body which has one leg and two arms and here are the stairs that I climb with my three limbs in this manner. Such a strong gesture implemented without pathos, thus, can be seen as a strategy of normalizing the movement which may be different from a movement of a human with two legs but is natural for Joanna Pawlik.

Unlike the exhibited videos, Joanna Pawlik's paintings are formally very poetic, seemingly deviating from the simple representation of the world as we know it if we have healthy sight. In the context of the exhibition, we can see these artworks as an aesthetic representation of that different vision or perception. At the same time however, there are no dream scenes: the themes of the paintings are realistic, they are self-portraits, portraits, and natural motifs. And the very special colour and light contrasts evoking that feeling of different vision are based on a relatively simple principle of colour inversion, similar to a photographic negative or overexposure of the shot.

## Aaron McPeake

The Irish artist Aaron McPeake lost most of his sight during his lifetime. He left his long career as a stage lighting designer in 2002 to return to a career of a free artistic expression. His means of expression include mainly sculptural objects but also film. McPeake also addresses the problem of vision loss among visual artists on a professional level as he devoted his dissertation to this issue.

The *Let Me Hear Your Footprints* exhibition presents two complementary McPeake's films which are an eloquent rendition of the acquisition of the world meaning and its loss. The older film *A Sense of the World - The Blind Traveller* (2007) is a documentary that uses shadows in combination with surrounding sounds to convey McPeake's travelling experience in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The work refers to the expeditions undertaken by the celebrated "Blind Traveller" James Holman in the 19th century. The shadows and sounds are meant to make our visual imagination complete what might have happened around. The second film named *Losing a Sense of the World* documents a total solar eclipse in Bihar, India in July 2009. The film is an attempt to find a metaphor for vision loss. The total eclipse event provides the largest shadow available on Earth. This "unnatural" darkness in the middle of a clear day, however, causes the perception of an almost blinding brightness when the eclipse subsides. Darkness and whiteness are terms often used to describe blindness. The video uses constant exposure to demonstrate differences in lighting levels and uses ambient sounds from a nearby temple.

In the gallery, the films complete the series of acoustic-haptic bell bronze sculptures which you can interact with, touch them, and tap on them to make them ring. This way, McPeake depicts his personal objects, bells, gongs, singing bowls, as well as geological objects and landscapes. The exhibition presents various examples of such resonance objects and invites spectators to touch them and ring them. Although Aaron McPeake is almost blind, the emphasis on touch and sound in his work is not intended to replace or compensate for visual perception. Rather, it is about amplifying the experience of those who encounter the work. At the same time, the artist emphasizes "active listening", which is usually practiced only by musicians and mechanical engineers while most of us filter the sound in our daily lives rather than examining it.

## Guðjón Gísli Kristinsson

McPeake's fascination with the Icelandic landscape is shared by two other exhibiting artists who even live in Iceland. Elfa Björk Jónsdóttir and Guðjón Gísli Kristinsson are residents of the Icelandic community eco-village of Sólheimar. The village is located in the Icelandic hinterland and currently accommodates roughly 100 inhabitants. The Sólheimar community is known for its sustainable approach to life. The close connection with nature and the possibility of working in large and generously equipped art workshops ensure a healthy and pleasant living space for residents with various types of mental or physical disadvantages. Guðjón Gísli Kristinsson has been living and working in Sólheimar

since 2017. The Icelandic artist grew up on the west coast in Ólafsvík and later moved with his family to Reykjavík where he attended both primary and secondary school. In the Sólheimar workshops, Guðjón Gísli began to focus on arts and crafts which awakened his passion for embroidery - a technique he admires for its neatness and elegance. He creates his works by partially abstracting photographic models, most often landscapes (both natural and urban) or modern residential interiors which satisfy his highly aesthetic perception. His works with their characteristic, distinct style are still small in size but his desire is to create large-format works sewn from both reverse and front side in the near future.

### **Elfa Björk Jónsdóttir**

Elfa Björk Jónsdóttir also works in art workshops in Sólheimar. She used to live in many places on the southwest coast of Iceland before she became the eco-village resident. Elfa Björk has completed a number of art courses and exhibited at exhibitions in Iceland and abroad. She was selected as the artist of the year 2022 by the jury of the Icelandic art festival Art Without Borders, a partner organization of the MeetFactory Gallery for the project *Other Knowledge*. Elfa Björk works with various media and finds her inspiration in books about fine art and photography or simply in her everyday thoughts. She describes her creative process as follows: *"I like to think through and plan what to create in advance and then I follow the order when creating. I like when I can work hard and have a lot to do. Then I can think clearly and have peace and quiet around me."* Elfa Björk Jónsdóttir would like to expand her work with embroidery techniques. When asked what her plans and dreams for the future are, she answers: *"I dream of dreaming beautiful dreams."*

### **Alžběta Bačiková Michaela Blažková Ráchel Skleničková**

Many people believe that blind people usually have a very sensitive touch compared to those with healthy sight. Their ability to distinguish very subtle surfaces by touch (such as Braille) is probably unimaginable for people who rely primarily on sight. But how does a blind person orient themselves in the world, in the space that surrounds them? This is, of course, a very complex question but it is certain that in addition to touch (which does not have to be realized only with the fingertips but also with the help of a white stick), the main sense for the blind is hearing which also usually exceeds the hearing capacity of those with healthy sight. Not every hearing is a musical hearing, and therefore not every blind person has the potential to become a musician. Nevertheless, music is one of the artistic fields which the blind - as both creators and performers - often find their way to. The Czech artist Alžběta Bačiková decided to expand on this topic. In 2019, at the occasion of an exhibition in the Regional Gallery Liberec, Bačiková started to work with two blind musicians,

Michaela Blažková and Ráchel Skleničková, and also with the Synth Library Prague platform which is focused on experimenting with and educating about electronic music. Blažková and Skleničková created a sound installation *Our Space* as a part of a series of several half-day workshops, the aim of which was to focus on so-called deep listening and rendering of various artistic ideas using sound. There are three compositions using surround sound: *Humans and Droids* (Ráchel Skleničková), *Moon City* (Michaela Blažková), and *On the Moon* (Michaela Blažková and Ráchel Skleničková). The last song is supposed to depict the feeling of an astronaut walking on the Moon where the gravity is lower than on Earth.

The name *Our Space* represents both “our area” and “the outer space” which captures both the form of the exhibition (spatial sound) and its levels of meaning. The compositions themselves have a cosmic undertone and they are fundamentally an aesthetic representation of cosmic ideas. At the same time in a broader sense, we can also perceive the installation itself as a step into a space that we do not necessarily know personally but which is as real as the one we inhabit every day. For the vast majority of us, cosmos is such a distant space but, for blind visitors, it can also be a metaphor for the space of the blind.

Ráchel Skleničková describes her experience with the detailed listening as follows: *“Imagine that you suddenly find yourself in a situation where you lack sight for a moment, just for a short moment of your life, maybe ten minutes. For many, this notion can be quite unpleasant, even frightening. But how would you deal with that if you knew that you would gain sight again at that moment? When you know that you will perceive a situation only by hearing, you begin to focus on aspects of the sound that usually do not come to your mind so automatically. You perceive its structure, volume, location in space... You will use a completely different type of fantasy than in everyday life because, at the same time, your sight gets out of the way and 'does not interfere'.”*

## Javier Téllez

The Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez is internationally known for his films which allow marginalized groups to tell their stories. For example, he collaborated with blind actors and actresses or with patients from psychiatric institutions. The content and form of his work are based directly on family history and personal experience: the artist's grandfather was the founder of one of the first Venezuelan film theatres in 1911 and Téllez spent a lot of time watching films with him as a child. Both of his parents were psychiatrists and Téllez's work refers to the so-called carnivals at his father's hospital which used progressive alternative therapies: patients and psychiatrists exchanged uniforms at carnivals to symbolically reverse their stereotypical everyday roles.

For Téllez, the film is a medium which reality can be revealed through, and therefore his works repeatedly appropriate

well-known film works and insert new meanings into them in cooperation with untrained actors and actresses.

The video installation *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital, Sydney)*, created by Téllez in 2004 in collaboration with psychiatric patients, is based on Carl Theodor Dreyer's famous film of the same name from 1928. Téllez seeks to show how gender has historically influenced the construction and diagnosis of mental illness. It creates a connection between the martyrdom of Joan of Arc and the process of institutionalization.

The subtitles from Dreyer's original silent film were transformed by a group of twelve women from Rozelles Hospital to tell a story of a fictional new patient who suffers from grandiose delusions and believes she is Joan of Arc. The second film presents the monologues of individual patients who talk about their diagnosis, childhood, life in a psychiatric institution, and experience of prejudice and discrimination.

Téllez himself comments his work as follows: *"The purpose of my work is not to heal psychiatric patients. Maybe it is more of a cure for those who go to see the exhibition."*

The exhibition *Let Me Hear Your Footprints* represented both a great challenge and educative opportunity for both the curators and the entire team of the gallery. Our intention was to present works that reflect both the specificity and universality of experiencing the world from the point of view of different people. At the same time however, we wanted to take into account the overall accessibility of the exhibition. The result is not perfect. We managed to collaborate with exceptional authors and exhibit impressive and inspiring works, while the exhibition as a whole alternately involves sight, hearing, and touch. The architecture of the exhibition is as minimalist as possible with regard to the movement of visitors. We have made the descriptions of the works bigger for better readability, we situated the paintings lower than usual...

But we are well aware that various groups of visitors will have different experiences and that visitors without sensory and other disadvantages will be privileged to experience the exhibition as a whole. A poor access to the Kostka Gallery is a long-standing problem facing the MeetFactory cultural centre. A barrier-free access to this otherwise spatially exceptional gallery is going to be an important task for the MeetFactory implementation team in the coming years. It is obvious that the current exhibition pinpoints many pitfalls of our own practice and the material realities we work with. This represents a challenge for us in the future to increase the various levels of accessibility at our exhibitions.

Tereza Jindrová & Eva B. Riebová, curators of the exhibition

## Ať zaslechnu tvé stopy / Let Me Hear Your Footprints

June 22 - September 11, 2022  
Galerie MeetFactory

**Exhibiting artists:** Michaela Blažková a Ráchel Skleničková ve spolupráci s Alžbětou Bačíkovou a Synth Library, David Escalona, Elfa Björk Jónsdóttir, Guðjón Gísli Kristinsson, Aaron McPeake, Joanna Pawlik

**Curators:** Tereza Jindrová & Eva B. Riebová

**Architecture:** Stibitz & Stibitz

**Production:** Jan Vitek

**Production assistant:** Viktória Firmentová

**PR:** Zuzana Kolouchová, Filip Pleskač

**Graphic design:** Richard Wilde, Jan Arndt

**Installation team:** Alena Brošková, Vladimír Drbohlav, Jarmila Havlíková, Ján Cholvadt, Antonín Klouček, Jiří Kocman, Karel Mazač, Matěj Pokorný, Samuel Stano

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