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Eva Koťátková: Interviews with a Monster

Text: Tereza Jindrová

In a quarrel or debate, have you ever used an argument such as “but normal people (unlike you) do it thus and thus”? Despite the fact that it is virtually a logical fallacy, most of us occasionally succumb to this rhetorical manoeuvre. But what does this statement really express? Primarily, it expresses what the speaker considers “normal” – or rather desirable. Even if such a statement were based on knowledge of specific statistics or facts (which is probably not the case in most spontaneous interpersonal disputes), the use of the word *normal* is still notable. We could use another word instead – “most people do it this way”. The word “normal”, however, has a strange power – it is, by nature of its very essence, always judging, normative. When we tell our partner, child, or colleague something along the lines of “please, a normal person would behave in such and such a way”, we are expressing not only what we believe the purported majority would do but also what we imagine the person in question *should* do. By contrast, when we comfort the other by saying “don’t worry, that’s normal”, we are generally attempting to provide legitimacy to an action or reaction we paradoxically suspect an observer with no knowledge of the situation might consider inappropriate or exaggerated. The very term “normality” is thus essentially relative and contextual whilst also making a claim to universal validity in its use. And that’s what makes it dangerous.

Normality vs. Otherness

In household discussions on whether beds should be made one way or the other, how a suitcase should be packed, and so on, the use of the normality argument is usually more or less harmless. But if we transfer it to the pan-societal level, its apparent “logic” can often have extensive and profound impacts on the lives of specific people. As Filip Herza describes in his book *Imaginace jinakosti* (*The Imagination of Otherness*), the idea of “normality”, which arises from the discourses of medicine and statistics, became a cultural authority and ideal (or, in the darker cases, an outright ideology) one should aim to achieve or at least approach. The establishment of “universally shared” criteria of normality thus inevitably becomes a social and political tool that contributes to discipline, control, the sustaining of the status quo, and productivity. In his book, Herza focuses on how our ideas of normality can be established and strengthened by an exoticisation of otherness. This exoticisation is founded on a human fascination with curiosities and “monstrosities”, which – to this day – become the subject of entertainment and “education”, their ultimate aim being to cement the category of normality. The second strategy through which the normative and oppressive effect of normality is applied to society is the tabooisation and stigmatisation of the “abnormal”. Fear, rejection, and displacement are all responses to otherness which Eva Koťátková considers through her exhibition *Interviews with a Monster*.

Koťátková’s oeuvre betrays a long-standing interest in notions of normality and the institutional frameworks that serve to co-constitute and legitimise it. She is interested in the related mechanism of (re)education and schooling, as well as the forms and causes of social exclusion. In *Interviews with a Monster*, a project created directly for the MeetFactory gallery in a close curatorial and production cooperation and preceded by a period of almost two years which the artist spent researching the topic and gathering materials, Koťátková focuses specifically on the otherness of bodily, sensorial, neurological, or mental “disability”.

The idea of a “disability” or “impairment” is based directly on the concept of normality. In the words of the curators of the 2013 exhibition *Disabled by Normality* (one of whom was Kateřina Kolářová, an academic in the field of disability studies working at the Department of Gender Studies at Faculty

¹ Filip Herza: *The Imagination of Otherness: Prague’s Freak Show Culture in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Scriptorium, 2020.

² Among the projects known to Czech audiences, we can mention the exhibition/theatre project *The Two-Headed Biographer and the Museum of Ideas / The Judicial Murder of Jakub Mohr*, which Koťátková presented in 2015 at the Prádelna (Laundry Room) cultural space at the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, or last year’s exhibition *The Opening of the Fish (Aquaculture Lessons)* at the OFF/Format Gallery in Brno.

of Humanities, the Charles University, who also took part in producing the accompanying materials for *Interviews with a Monster*):

“The term ‘disabled’ carries with it a certain already established, codified, and institutionalised notion of what is ‘normal’. This notion leads us to differentiation based on otherness, resulting in the creation of minorities and their eventual discrimination or social exclusion.” In the anthology *Jinakost-Postižení-Kritika: Společenské konstrukty nezpůsobilosti a hendikepu (Otherness-Disability-Critique: Social Constructs of Disability and Handicap)*, Kolářová also clarifies a possible socially critical interpretation of the term “disability”, a term with which many people prefer identifying over the Czech term of English origin (now somewhat neutralised in the language), “hendikepovaný” (“handicapped”): “Here, the term ‘disability’ does not refer, as it usually does, to otherness of body or mind but to the social mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatisation, disabling the people whose physique and intellect do not correspond to the supposedly universally valid and apparently natural parameters of normality.” Kolářová adds: “‘(Dis)ability’ and ‘handicap’ are not merely factual descriptions of bodily, sensory, intellectual, and psychological dispositions and characteristics – they represent an abstract and analytical category describing and uncovering forms of social differentiation and hierarchisation.” We too subscribe to this socially critical conception of the meaning of the word “disability” when we use it in the context of the exhibition *Interviews with a Monster*. We must also bear in mind that the term “people with disabilities” is still stigmatising, as it confirms the separation of people on the basis of difference.

Mluvíci a mlčící hlavy

Koťátková also disagrees with the notion of a “natural” duality of the normal and abnormal and attempts to disrupt these schemes in her work through the use of empathy and imagination. At the *Interviews with a Monster* exhibition, the role of a case study for thinking about these issues is filled by materials relating to relatively recent cases in which inhabitants of several Czech townships protested against the development of projects providing supported housing in their vicinity.

In the front part of the gallery, Koťátková – along with exhibition architect Dominik Lang – created an environment reminiscent of a recently unfinished construction site of such a supported housing community. At the construction site, we meet characters who represent real and invented (but possible) participants in the “affairs” mentioned above: the mayor, the governor, the architect, the chairwoman of the petition committee, the director of the NGO providing a home to the disadvantaged, a woman supporting the inclusion of the disadvantaged in their city, and a man who aggressively resists the construction of supported housing on the plot neighbouring his. For the script of this audio drama, Koťátková used a collage of real statements by councillors and citizens taken from the media, complemented by several fictional speeches by the architect and a character called The Child’s Fear.

The audio drama, which is conceived as a spatial sound installation whose mouthpieces are the individual giant textile heads, gradually doubles back on itself – the arguments repeat, so what gradually comes to the surface is the misunderstandings and unresolved nature of the entire affair. The “construction site” itself completes – mostly through a large number of nonsensical details – the feeling of absurdity or hopelessness. In addition to the distended heads of the speakers, we are also sometimes confronted the limp, silent heads. These represent potential clients of the new supported housing, who are essentially puppets in this affair – either as the feared “straw men” or as the “needy” one

³ Kateřina Kolářová: *Disability Studies: A Different Perspective on Disability*, in: *Otherness – Disability – Critique: The Social Constructs of Disability and Handicap*, Kateřina Kolářová (ed.), Sociologické nakladatelství, Prague, 2012.

⁴ In the context of the Czech language, the term “disadvantage” is perhaps somewhat more adequate, as it indicates more clearly the structural nature of the disadvantages these people have to face. As Kolářová points out, a thorough formulation should go something like “disadvantaged by notions of normality and compulsory ability”. compulsory ability”.

must stand up for. However, during the long negotiations and in various media appearances, no one gave them any space to express their opinions and needs. And so they remain silent, even here...

Where Does the Monster Sleep?

The next part of the exhibition is in low lighting, reminiscent of a cave or basement. Across the room, in the darkness, rests a tentacled monster. By itself, it is far from terrifying – quite the opposite, it offers visitors the opportunity to bury themselves into its soft tentacles and listen. Anxiety, however, sets in as we listen to its story. We learn about the stories of real people and fictional characters who speak of discrimination, bullying, and removal of competence.

Their experiences concern the behaviour of bureaus and institutions, the power and despotism of medical diagnoses, the problems of the job market, exclusion from the collective, derision, or the (im)possibility of living alone and becoming independent. One of the causes of their tribulations is the fear of others – that illusory majority – of otherness. This is why Kofátková delineates the meaning of the word “monster” in the exhibition title from pejorative connotations of the traditional understanding of “monstrosity” as otherness, introducing instead a Social Monster that feeds on society’s irrational fear of the other and the unknown; on attempts to arm itself against this other with various defence mechanisms and force it out to the margins.

Kofátková explains: “The Social Monster is an embodiment of our learned fears and worries. As inequality and oppression grow, it grows too – it is the collective body of our emotions. It tells its story at the exhibition because it cannot stop. It has its bed in the gallery, and perhaps it walks the city at night and comes back a little larger. It speaks of what it is like when you are labelled other and what forms fear of the unknown can take. Our society is based on inequality and exclusion. Since childhood, a fear of the other, the unknown, is purposely created within us. There is no time for otherness – it represents a threat to the system. What is different is often described as dysfunctional, incomplete, or sick; as something that needs to be repaired or removed. A different movement, gesture, or sound are immediately diagnosed, corrected, treated. Imagination is tolerated only as a means of dreaming, not as a tool of change. We are taught one set of stories while other sets are silenced and erased.”

Not only does Kofátková point out the open negation of otherness, which can manifest both in being actively insulted and in being passively ignored. She also notices the problematic nature of attempts at correcting or reducing differences. Kateřina Kolářová also frequently points out the power-based nature of medicine and the potential stigmatisation of diagnoses: “Exclusion and surveillance have been replaced by ‘regimes of treatment and help’ (...) ‘The birth of the clinic’ ushered in the participation of medicine in the dream of normality and established medical discourse as one of the central discourses to have power over the content of the term ‘normality’ and therefore over individual bodies and minds. (...) Regimes of treatment and charitable aid could have been attempts guided by enlightened motivation to include otherness, but paradoxically, they laid the foundation for the power structures that lead to the repeated exclusion of the ‘handicapped’, the abnormal and different – this time, however, the exclusion takes place through a cluster of rehabilitative, pedagogical, and therapeutic practices.”

⁵ An infamous example of such an understanding was the fairground freak show.

⁶ A different manifestation of the objectification of otherness – less clear and therefore acceptable to many people – is making the disadvantaged into heroes: “Disposing of negative epithets is not enough – even seemingly positive assessments reinforce and reproduce the stigma of alterity. Admiringly looking up to the ‘disabled’ as heroes who tirelessly overcome their fate is the second side of the coin of abjection and certainty that we are not the ones who are ‘disabled’. Both forms of stereotype, both the negative and the positive, stigmatise and aid oppression.” – K. Kolářová: *Disability Studies: Jiný pohled na postižení*, p. 14.

The tangle of societal constructs and prejudices that lead to or aid the fact that one group is considered as citizens enjoying full rights while others have their legal competence taken away is a complex field explored by the discipline of disability studies, as well as many civic initiatives, activists, and artists. Kořátková herself is interested in the issue of education and the potential to support a positive perspective on mutual differences in childhood. It is no coincidence that such a specific part in Kořátková's conception of the narrative of supported housing construction is *The Child's Fear* – i.e. not the child itself, but the element of fear which the child acquires on the basis of the reactions and arguments of grown-ups. Once again, Kořátková thus draws attention to the mechanisms that lead to an adoption or passive acceptance of our positions. In real discussions on the subject of supported housing that took place in various Czech townships, many of the opponents proposed an especially strong argument based on the notion that it is children in particular who should not be exposed to contact with people who are different in some way.

Newsroom of the Imagination

Kořátková, on the other hand, has a strong sense of the child's "unprejudiced" nature (which we must, at the same time, avoid idealising, as its "contamination" with social patterns takes place from a very early age) as a potentiality that is open to the radicality of imagination and empathy. This is why the third component of the exhibition is conceived as a communal space dedicated to encounters, discussions, and creation. A light room with huge textile newspapers on the walls and a large table at its centre – the height of the table is designed to accommodate the children who visit the exhibition – represents the Newsroom of the Imagination. It is crucial for Kořátková's work that in addition to critique, an irreplaceable part is played by the positive approach. An attentive listener will notice that even the monster's narration included some dream narratives – dreams of something better. Kořátková believes imagination has an emancipatory potential, which is why the third installation is prepared for children (and other groups) to communally imagine change and various visions of a better world, as well as how to practically achieve it together. The fact that this room represents a newsroom also symbolically suggests the ambition of rewriting the narrative of incomprehension and denial set out by the audio drama in the first exhibition room. In place of the evasive, self-justifying, and outright hostile statements taken from media reports on the affair, the giant pages of Kořátková's textile newspapers provide a space for new narratives. Narratives of understanding and acceptance. We should therefore not consider *Interviews with a Monster* an exhibition that provides a space for the silent contemplation of an already finished and enclosed "aesthetic object" composed of the individual installations, seeing it instead as a space for activating the visitors – a space inviting us to use both our critical reasoning and our imagination, as well as to meet other people and enter into dialogue with them. The interviews with our Social Monster represent only a beginning.

⁷ We can point out here that an exhibition that is closed to the general public for months due to the pandemic is, paradoxically, itself a kind of memento of accessibility. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, what most of society considers a matter of course, such as freely visiting exhibition spaces at any time, became impossible for most of society (with the exception of professionals and reviewers). The current situation is thus, in a way, a reminder of the inaccessibility or low accessibility of our unprepared cultural institutions, to which groups of people with various forms of disability are commonly exposed to. The present state can perhaps help institutions to make these problems visible and consider more intensively how to overcome them.

The moment Eva Kořátková found particularly interesting when studying the discussions about the “problematic” new building projects was the phrase “fear of the unknown”. It was heard repeatedly from numerous parties. Some opponents of the project appealed to the fact that it is natural to fear that which we do not know.

This aspect partially speaks of insufficient communication and discussion between the various interested parties (the regional government, the municipality) and particularly from the representative bodies to the inhabitants who were set to become the neighbours of people with “disabilities”. In this respect, fear of the unknown is, to an extent, understandable, and greater transparency and better communication and education could have at least partially tempered the negative reactions. It is also worth emphasising here that Interviews with a Monster is not about pillorying specific people, even though some of them clearly mismanaged the responsibilities arising from their position, while others did not shy away from expressing themselves in essentially hateful ways. This is part of the reason why the exhibition includes no specific names of places or people. Personal responsibility is one thing (and just like the exhibition does not wish to pillory, it also certainly does not wish to make light of or excuse personal responsibility), but what seems even more significant in the long-term and broader context is to consider the pan-societal mechanisms that create and influence our responses in these situations.

When the protagonists of the affair spoke of “fear of the unknown”, what they meant by this unknown were the “disabled” clients who were to become their neighbours. That unknown, however, was also the vision of coexisting with them; in their immediate vicinity. Such an approach, however, is, unfortunately, circularly entangled into itself by its very essence. If instances of human otherness represent the unknown to us and we feel anxious when confronted by this unknown, by refusing contact, we merely strengthen ourselves in our fears and prejudices. But if we explore these fears with diligent attention, we can realise they are not brought about by otherness itself in some absolute sense of the word but by the fundamental impossibility of truly strictly defining the borders of such difference (as well as the borders of “normality”). It is the lack of clarity of these borders that elicits anxiety, as it is a reminder of the fragility and imperfection of us all – even those who seem to fit better with the current notions, norms, and statistics on “normality”. If we begin to admit the causes of this fear of otherness; begin to reconsider the imperative of capability, it can end up being a liberating process. As Kateřina Kolářová puts it: “The demand for the incessant substantiation of a ‘capable’ identity forces every subject to cast aside bodily otherness and distance themselves from any suggestion of failure. The rejection of ‘disability’ by the ideology of capability is harmful precisely because it forces the establishment of distance over a recognition of similarities and mutual dependencies that necessarily tie seemingly capable bodies with the corporeality and mind that is incapable, dysfunctional, ‘handicapped’. (...) The identity of the capable, able, and fit subject must be constantly performatively established; repeatedly and infinitely fulfilled. Even so, capability remains an impossible to fulfil and perpetually unsustainable goal – in the end, our corporeality or rationality will fail us, the supposedly un-handicapped and able, and not only because of human mortality, but also because the normative demands of the ideology of health and ability are, in their very essence, inaccessible and harmful.” This is why the phrase “fear of the unknown” also contains within it one of the possible responses to the problem of exclusion: if we stop relegating otherness to the periphery, to narrowly defined zones, but instead work to make it more and more present in society, fear of it will diminish in the way Kořátková dreams of. The social monster will stop growing and begin shrinking – until it will finally remain only a tiny little monster such as we find in the Newsroom of the Imagination. Perhaps then, we will begin perceiving otherness more as an essential component human nature, as something that is not a tool with which to mutually delimit each another, but instead serves to enrich us all.

**Afterword:
Learning Differently,
Exploring Otherness**

The *Interviews with a Monster* exhibition forms part of a long-term programming theme at the MeetFactory gallery, *Other Knowledge*, with which it resonates on several levels. The first of these, of course, is the subject of otherness itself, as it arises from discussions about normality. As Kolářová notes, the fears mental otherness provokes, and which are repeatedly manifested in the disagreement of the individual communities with the assignment of an institution for the “handicapped” in their city, are “manifestations of an anxious refusal of the possibility that a healthy, rational, self-sufficient, and autonomous subject – the Enlightenment idea of the individual that most of us identify with – could bear any resemblance to its opposite. (...) Being healthy, able, capable, and therefore ‘normal’ has become an unchallenged prerequisite for a modern person’s fulfilling life, as well as a condition for acknowledging their civic status and humanity. (...) If modern society identifies this strongly with the idea of scientific and technological progress and the capacity for correcting the imperfections of nature, then the incurable body becomes an insult to the power of modern medicine and technology and ‘disability’ becomes the opposite of progression and development. (...) But in fact, the ability of the subject depends on the capacity to fulfil demands placed on the ‘responsible citizen’, and on operating as effectively as possible within the system of capitalist exchange.”

The *Other Knowledge* project focuses precisely on those areas and ways of learning, knowing, and creating world-views that go beyond the Enlightenment – or generally rationalist – conception of epistemology, which we generally favour in our time and culture (European/modern), or rather, which is favoured by the dominant social systems and hierarchies such as capitalism and the patriarchy. The principal servants of this predominant epistemological model based on rationalism are the natural sciences. Unfortunately, this tradition of Western thinking is also linked to power structures based on oppression (colonialism, patriarchy) and extractivism, which contributes to the social, economic, and ecological problems of the present. In the exhibitions that form the *Other Knowledge* series, we attempt to search for alternatives for the dominant, rationalist model of knowledge. The aim, of course, is not to disqualify rationality and science, but rather to point out the broader frameworks of our being in the world. In everyday life, we observe many other forms of knowing or creating world-views. “Non-rational” knowledge can be based on emotions, immediate experiences, faith, speculation, imagination, etc., and is usually outside the remit of generally agreed upon norms or naming conventions; classifications or falsifiability. It is this creative power of the imagination and the emotionally affective effects of empathy that Eva Koťátková believes provide ways of looking at the world and acting in it differently, in new ways, stepping beyond categories, assessments, and diagnoses that can be enormously reductive and restrictive.

Within the environment of the gallery and the art world as such, the *Interviews with a Monster* exhibition refers to the knowledge and discourse of the field known as disability studies, mentioned several times already, which is “based on the registry of general humanities and social science research, offering an alternative to the dominant form of knowledge, which primarily pathologises, medicalises, disciplines, and individualises physical and mental otherness, thus ridding it of its socio-cultural context. Disability studies identifies and analyses the relationships between disadvantage and dominance, thus contributing to social change. (...) From the individual ‘otherness’, disability studies turns its attention to the social, political, and cultural interpretations of these terms and the ways in which the category of (dis)ability, in modern society, becomes a strategically important means of organising and controlling not only the ‘disabled’, but all of society.”

If we want to learn about disability and also learn in different ways, connections between various spheres – such as art on one side and academic research on the other – can open up unexpected perspectives or productively complement each other. In any case, what is most necessary is to maintain a spiritual openness and cultivate inside us a sensitivity to each other and to the outside world in general. The “other” for us to learn about – or try to, at least – is, after all, all around us – it makes the world we live in and it makes us, because otherness is a creative principle of life, not an exception or deviation.

Eva Kofátková: Interviews with the Monster

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MeetFactory Gallery

Eva Kofátková: Interviews with the Monster

Curated by: Tereza Jindrová

Production: Jan Vitek

Architecture: Dominik Lang

PR: Zuzana Kolouchová, Filip Pleskač

Graphic Design: Richard Wilde, Jan Arndt

Production of Objects: Renata Dračková, Dana Kofátková,

Martina Lhotová, Karolína Liberová, Jiří Merčák

Voices: Roman Horák, Tomáš Jeřábek, Anna Klusáková, Anita

Krausová, Richard Němec, Václav Poláček, Matěj Samec,

Monika Špoulová, Halka Třešňáková, Eliška Vavřínková,

Daniela Voráčková, Jitka Rudolfová

Sound: Vojtěch Zavadil, Wombat Studio

Installation Team: Vladimír Drbohlav, Štěpán Eliáš, Antonín

Klouček, Tomáš Koutník, Antonín Kvasnička, Karel Mazač,

Oliver Mazač, Vojtěch Žák

Other Collaborators: Kateřina Kolářová, Alyson Patsavas,

Magda Stojowska-Jiříčka, Magdalena Šipka, Hana Turečková

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