

19. 1. — 20. 3. 2022 (MeetFactory Gallery)



Wells of Wisdom

The exhibition *Wells of Wisdom* attempts to answer the question of how our corporeality influences our understanding and experience of the world, and how the body itself can be a source of knowledge.^[1] We begin from the experience that in a patriarchal society^[2] (in which we still live – we're not talking about the Middle Ages here!), the body that is perceived as socially neutral, original, „Adam-like“ and therefore naturally superior, is the body of the cisgender man. What we are interested in, however, is the experience and knowledge of bodies that are seen as “other” from this perspective. However, we do not wish to perpetuate a binary logic by describing these bodies merely as female. The notional well of wisdom of the exhibition title includes richness and knowledge that exceeds the gender identities of the cis and trans women who are mostly represented in this exhibition.

Each of us has an experience acquired through corporeal experience, but even so, it cannot be described as universal – not even within a single gender. Despite this fact, we search for what connects the exhibiting artists in the context of corporeality, without calling their individuality into question. More than biological processes and experiences that are tied to changes in the body, experiences of cyclicity, or pain and pleasure, we witness the arising of social connections. We realise that the inequalities we experience are not caused by our bodies, are not natural (or, on the contrary, unnatural or “deviant” if they defy binary gender norms). The difference of our bodies from the “neutral” patriarchal body, however, allows society to legitimise and normalise these inequalities.

The exhibition therefore wants to be a space in which to reflect upon the vulnerability of our bodies, which is not determined by a supposed fragility or weakness but by the hostility of an androcentric world. It is also, however, a celebration of their vitality and beauty. A majority of the exhibited works focuses on the most intimate parts of the body, which we see as imprints of the artists' individuality as well as striking symbols – gates to the wisdom of our bodies, nodal points of pleasure and pain, spaces of joyously giving ourselves to others and also spaces of plundering and violence. These are parts of our bodies that we must expose or cover up against our will.

The exhibiting artists share a particular openness with which they approach the experience and knowledge of the body, accepting it (or attempting to do so through the work), examining it, and reporting on it. It was important for us to compose into a single living organism the works of artists of several generations, turning to the body as a source of knowledge about the self and the world around us from various perspectives and positions, but always with certainty and self-confidence. The curatorial intention in including (iconic) historical works, however, was not to create a gradual „genealogy“ of creative approaches and positions within which the new continues and extends the old – rather, we wanted to actualise the works of the past, and, by linking and confronting them with the works of today, to create a reinterpretation that operates in both directions.

The whole of the exhibition is connected by a striking curatorial vision of exhibition architecture, realised in collaboration with the architectural duo Stibitz & Stibitz, and completed by new works made by **Marie Lukáčová** specifically for the exhibition. Lukáčová's approach, which represents a long-standing endeavour to attain an emancipation and re-appropriation of the representation of the female body, achieved with disarming honesty and humour, is, in many ways, emblematic of the exhibition. The semi-transparent

curtain through which we enter the exhibition immediately connects the motif of the vulva (and, by extension, the body as a whole) with the motif of the eye, i.e. the gaze. It uses legible symbols to remind us of the dialectic within which our bodies (and vulvas) are both seeing and exposed to the gaze.

The first work we encounter upon entering the gallery is a hand-coloured illustration by Toyen. It depicts a woman putting a mirror up to her genitals. Last year, Toyen's gender identity was the subject of heated discussions in relation to the large retrospective dedicated to the artist at the National Gallery in Prague. We cannot know for sure how **Toyen** would identify if they had the opportunity to adopt today's designation as trans or non-binary. The fact that their sexual orientation and gender identity defied both heteronormativity and cis-sexism, however, is clear both from biographical information and from their oeuvre. Furthermore, their work is also strongly permeated by an interest in corporeality. This is why including Toyen in the exhibition – though only in the form of bibliophilia^[3] – was essential, as the legacy of both her work and her figure as an artist is, today, highly topical. Is the woman on the illustration examining her body or baring it to the world? Is this a gesture of self-awareness or seduction, or an accusation of those around her, who see only this one part of her physique?

The piece by **Yishay Garbasz** comments on this reduction of personality to genitalia directly and from the most private of perspectives. She allows us to examine up close the imprints of her naked body before and after a surgical alteration of her genitals. The process of change, or rather of becoming what she always, in fact, was, is also documented in detail in a voluminous series of photographs collected in a flip book, whereby flicking through the pages quickly creates a simple animation. On the one hand, Garbasz thus unveils something of the life of trans people that the public, with their tabloid thinking, have always wanted to see, but she also alerts us to the absurdity and incorrectness, or rather violence, that is connected to this approach. As we flick through the flip book, we can focus on what is on the artist's chest and groin, or we can choose to focus on her hair instead; their continuity across time. Though in some respects, her body changed radically over the course of two years, she is still the same person.

Anna Daučíková's video *We Care About Your Eyes* turns our attention right between the legs, directly and without compromise, but what we are confronted with is a mirror's reflection. In a gradual rhythm evocative of masturbation, it uncovers fragments of its surroundings, including hints of (another) body and, finally, the lens of the camera itself, which has become an embodiment of the objectifying gaze since the 1970 s, thanks to theorist Laura Mulvey. In the context of Anna Daučíková's non-binary gender identity, another element that is highly important for reading the video is the ambivalence of bodily suggestions that the reflection makes present in their own crotch. Here too, then, a crucial role is ascribed to the process of seeing and making visible – including, in particular, that which has somehow been banished from the field of vision.^[4]

It is no coincidence that we located **Julie Béna's** chandelier made of glass vulvas near Daučíková's video. Daučíková described the connections between glass and video (which is also the medium that Béna uses in the next part of the exhibition) as follows: „After I finished my studies, I abandoned glass making, but the experience of this non-material remained inside me, as well as a particular form of spirituality that arises

from this optical experience of a subject that looks, and it is no longer looking but the gaze. That is one internal connection between video and my beginnings working with glass. And mirroring, too. Only once I was already making videos did I realise that I know this and feel close to it, the narcissistic perspective of the subject who can only know themselves in the mirror. I can only say I when I see You, or rather the Other, that which both is and isn't Me and is looking at me.^[5] Julie Béna created a truly symbolic object that brings together spiritual connotations (we are literally "enlightened" by the glass vulvas) with the ambivalence of the transparent and yet reflective medium.

The works of **Veronika Šrek Bromová** are closely tied to corporeality in an explicit, material, almost raw form. Her provocative and at the same time iconic image of a cross-section of her own torso from the *Pohledy (Views)* series is, on this occasion, complemented by an original, non-manipulated photograph. Bromová, whose openness in working with her own body was perceived as shocking by many back in the 1990 s, took approximately twenty years before finding the resolve to show an entirely uncovered view of herself. By placing them in the narrow corridor, we want to further exacerbate the urgency and intransigence of these photographs. Our aim is not to shock (though shock might form part of the spectator's experience) but to emphasise that this gesture by the artist should be seen – that it is a gesture of liberating self-acceptance that both inspires and challenges us.

At the end of the corridor, we are faced with a work that could not be more different in its delicacy, abstractness, and fragility. *List (Leaf)* is a late work by **Eva Kmentová**, a sculptor who left an inefaceable mark on the history of Czech modern art. And yet, the 1975 piece *List* is, in a sense, a similar demonstration of directness in expressing one's own corporeality. The technique responds to the artist's medical condition, which forced her to gradually replace heavy sculptural materials with supple paper. And, at the same time, it is a poetic yet entirely apparent depiction of the female crotch.

The colour of Kmentová's *List* brings us to another author, close to Kmentová in more than just coming from a similar generation: Polish sculptor **Alina Szapocznikow**. Her masterpieces from the 1960 s and '70 s are characterised by a significant sensuality in depicting (multiplied) fragments of female bodies, including direct imprints (particularly of lips and breasts). At *Wells of Wisdom*, however, we present one of Szapocznikow's oldest surviving works, made while she was a student at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague in the studio of Josef Wagner. Szapocznikow was only twenty at the time, making this the exhibited work made by the youngest artist. In addition to the directness of this small statuette, we were also captivated by the background narrative, whose mention is, in a sense, an example of Irit Rogoff's provocative theory on the importance of gossip for the reconstruction of the oeuvres of female artists.^[6] Szapocznikow allegedly dedicated this statue of a lying nude (with easily identifiable elements of a self-portrait) to her classmate Olbram Zoubek (later Eva Kmentová's husband), whom she was supposedly trying to seduce. If we mention this personal aspect of the work, it is not because we are interested in the "risqué anecdote" as such, rather, it is the possibilities for interpretation offered by it that we are after. In fact, the open, lascivious pose of the lying figure can be read as a confident depiction of one's own body that is not appropriated by others, but is instead given of one's own volition and considered as a source of one's own pleasure. As Adriana Primusová quotes, for Szapocznikow, the "human body is the most sensitive and the only source of great joy, all pain, and all truth".^[7]

The other works in the rooms running alongside the central corridor are also connected by the motif of looking and relationality; the co-being of bodies. The organic “portals” of **Marianne Vlaschits**’s oval paintings open up to us, while the female figure in another painting of hers showers us with an abundance of flower blossoms that evoke female corporeality. This is a representation of a fictional religious leader from the science fiction novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) by the African-American writer Octavia E. Butler. In this narrative, Lauren Olamina’s super-power – and burden – is her hyper-empathy with others.

Also telling are the two statues by Eva Kmentová. The archetypally reduced figure has a deep wound in their back. What is it that this *Žena, která mlčí* (*The Woman Who Is Silent*) does not wish to say out loud? On the stele, whose scale suggests a human figure, the imprint of the artist’s lips, multiplied, assumes the position of other body parts: in its totality, corporeality is present in a mere fragment whose ambiguity is reflected and reinforced in Marie Lukáčová’s drawings on the floor of the room.

In her new installation, **Romana Drdová** presents three female figures with mysterious names (Vicky, Sanandra, and Utsava) who have recently influenced her, representing different approaches to the body – the struggle with male energy and one’s own gender ambivalence, the generative power and harmony of one’s own sexuality in relation to magic.

In a short film by the Los Angeles–based artist **Zackary Drucker**, we follow an intergenerational dialogue between two women focused on the body and relationships. The conversation between mother and daughter, threaded with humour and allusions, is inspiring in its „banality“; its atmosphere of everydayness and commonality, as this normality is often denied trans people in cis-normative society, replaced by the exoticising narrative of „otherness“.

The following two rooms are, to a large extent, opposites in their emotional effects. The pink room, with works by Kris Lemsalu, Veronika Šrek Bromová, and Jana Želibská represents a monumental fireworks display, showing the body in relation to spirituality and nature. Upon closer inspection, however, ambivalent elements appear. Are the hands gripping **Kris Lemsalu**’s giant ceramic vagina those of protectors or creeping usurpers? **Bromová**’s drawings include not only the pleasure of the body but also the pain of unfulfilled desire for what a (specific) body cannot provide or what it must bear. And **Jana Želibská**’s Triptych, with its reference to the sacred classical forms, upon a few minutes of observation, surprisingly returns us to Yishay Garbasz’s photographic series, *Becoming*. The three figures on the paintings turn out to be of ambiguous gender (which, similarly to Yishay’s photographs, is not influenced by their hairdo). With regard to the religious context, we could – from today’s perspective – relate this work, now over fifty years old, to various non-European traditions (India, Siberia, the indigenous people of North America, etc.) in which non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals played – and often still play – important roles as spiritual leaders or mediums.

The last part of the exhibition is intentionally cold; the body is, to a large extent, exposed to violence, presented as vulnerable and mortal. The images by Spanish artist **Esther Ferrer** are an honest reminder that a woman's bosom is a particularly sensitive and threatened body part. **Jana Želibská's** *Pudding for Two* goes even further, reminding us of the importance of breasts for our species whilst also showing them without embellishment as a product to be consumed. With this, she also alerts us to the reality that women are often reduced to this dimension, with the care they devote (not only) to their offspring trivialised as a biological necessity instead of society truly valuing it in depth, both symbolically and practically. The title of *Primitive Accumulation*, a ceramic torso by the Belgian artist **Aline Bouvy**, also brings attention to the economisation of bodies; their labour or "use". A series of photographs by **Anna Daučíková**, *Výchova dotykom (Education by Touch)* presents a clear glass pane that acts as an invisible barrier and shield. We can perceive a body pressed against this transparent plane as an erotic object but also as a subject that is actively defining itself against the definiteness of its body, transforming this same body.^[6] And, finally, **Julie Béna's** film is a dense and many-layered statement on the experiences of (one's own) body, which can be painful and traumatising as well as cathartic and emancipatory.

As film theorist Vivian Sobchack summarises in her epilogue to Yishay Garbasz's book *Becoming*: "We don't just "have" a body. We "are" our bodies. They come and become (with) us as we grow and age. They come and become (with) us as we grow and age. Our familiars, they provide us continuity, the place upon which experience gathers and inscribes our adventures in the world and with others. Our bodies enable and accompany us- marked by and marking our on-going journey through our lives. Nonetheless, however familiar, our bodies are always also strange in their ongoing indifference to staying the same."

(1) At this point, it is appropriate to articulate our own position as white, middle-class, heterosexual cis women.

(2) The patriarchy is here taken to understand general male dominion in the world – not just over women but over the structure of social relationships in general.

[3] These are illustrations that might seem secondary in the context of Toyen's fine art pieces. However, as the art historian Ladislav Zikmund Lender points out in his article for *artalk.cz*, illustrations can also contain highly personal testimony. See <https://artalk.cz/2021/06/14/i-am-not-your-lesbo-k-diskurzu-o-soukromi-snici-rebelky/>

[4] "According to the theoretical texts, one first turns the camera onto oneself. But I did not need my own face at all – I began with a close detail of my hands. These were my hands as that which creates the action. Close details were also a means to evoke intimacy, which automatically involved a sense of corporeality, eroticism, and sexuality. I engaged with corporeality as a visualisation of desire. I was interested in a particular form of obscenity that I consider positive in the sense that it is banished off stage and is brought to the centre of the spectator's attention. The obscene is pushed out of sight but returns to the stage due to my decision. [...] I believe that visual pleasure is everywhere and that pleasure need not be genital and erotic. It is the pleasure of seeing." – Anna Daučíková in an interview for *pro Art+Antiques*, March 2015.

[5] Anna Daučíková in an interview for *pro Art+Antiques*, March 2015.

[6] Irit Rogoff: *Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature*, 1996.

[7] Adriana Primusová: *Tri sochařky (Three Women Sculptors)*, catalogue of the exhibition at Queen Anne's Summer Palace, Prague Castle, 2008.

[8] Close at hands are associations with breast/chest binding, a practice enacted by certain gender non-conforming people, partly in an attempt to limit or preclude gender dysphoria, i.e. a stress state arising from a disparity between individual identity and the gender ascribed to the individual by their surroundings.

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Artists:

**Julie Béna (FR)(CZ), Aline Bouvy (BE),
Veronika Šrek Bromová (CZ), Anna Daučíková (SK)(CZ),
Romana Drdová (CZ), Zackary Drucker (US),
Esther Ferrer (ES), Yishay Garbasz (IL), Eva Kmentová (CZ),
Kris Lemsalu (EE), Marie Lukáčová (CZ), Alina Szapocznikow (PL),
Toyen (CZ), Marianne Vlaschits (AT), Jana Želibská (SK)**

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