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Words:
Tjaša
Pogačar

Photography:
Jiří Thýn

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“Be careful
where you
enter,
brainiacs!”



Jakub Jansa is an artist working in various media ranging from film, sculptural elements, installations to live performance. His practice is crossing genre boundaries from drama to absurd comedy, and employing fiction, humor and elements of the grotesque to develop complex exhibition environments that tell stories about social struggles of today.

His exhibitions tend to merge with the architecture of the spaces they inhabit. They are reminiscent of film or TV sets, they gradually unfold their narrative through carefully designed dramaturgy of various elements (video, objects, live action), while we – the visitors – move through that space. Jansa has presented his works in Tel Aviv, New York, Basel, Strasbourg, Prague, Zagreb and Ljubljana, among others, and has been awarded the 2021 Jindřich Chalupecký Award. In 2017, after several works dealing with the topics of manipulation and self-development (Spiritual Fitness), Jansa launched The Club of Opportunities, an episodic project starring hybrid human-vegetable creatures, which questions cultural and class relationships and authority. The latest, 8th episode of The Club, was commissioned for the Flower Union exhibition organised by the National Gallery in Prague as part of Czech Presidency of the European Union in 2021.

TP In 2017, you launched The Club of Opportunities, an exhibition series that explores a world ruled by vegetable hierarchies. The Club presents a fictional story, but it functions as a metaphor for our world. What kind of a world does it describe? Can you briefly tell me what it is about, who the characters are and what the main plot twists are?

JJ The main hero is the vegetable most often overlooked – the celeriac. It transforms into a rebellious hybrid creature between a human and a celeriac named Red Herring. The main storyteller is Kamil Nábělek, a fairly eccentric philosopher, who makes live appearances at The Club's openings. The main problem of the whole story is that the character of SEER (Fortune Teller) has no vision of the future anymore and feels anxious. The main problem, however, is that in the context of "vegeciety", celeriacs find themselves in a low position and avocados are always highlighted in the centre.

TP Right. So there are two social and economic classes represented in your Club of Opportunities – the celeriacs and the avocados. I remember you explaining these two vegetable groups represent not just aesthetic but also economic dichotomies – you picked celery root as one of the characters of The Club not just because it is "ugly", but also one of the cheapest veggies in the supermarket. How is this reciprocity between aesthetic and economic value addressed and questioned in your work?

JJ Aesthetically and methodically, the work is a perpetual struggle between high and low form. Between banality and sublimity. In practice, these positions are permanently switched back and forth. As an example, I can mention the micro event that was part of the first episode in a bowling bar. The piano virtuoso Michal Supak performed a summer hit by Rihanna in an uplifting baroque arrangement on the harmonium.

TP Your works tell stories about our social relationships through non-human protagonists – in *It's So Physical*, a video installation/puppet theatre is narrated by tapeworms, in *The Club* we follow veggies, and in your latest piece, created for Flower Union exhibition as part of Czech Presidency of European Union, the main protagonists are celeriacs and flowers.

JJ That's true. When you sum it up like that, it almost feels like part of a broader bioactive plan. But the truth is, it probably happened by accident. The Club started as a free improvisation and association game. It was born out of a certain economic and time constraint. The budget for the first zero show (in a Prague gallery Berlinsky Model) was around 20 euros and I was interested to see what I could come up with by the end of the night, so the story of celery was born. You could buy it in the shop next door and it was non-expensive, but there was a shelf full of it. The tapeworms came up during Covid lockdowns. Most of us had put on weight, so it was clear that there was some manipulation of our bodies going on that must have originated in our intestines. Eventually, it turned out to be a conspiratorial confession of witty tapeworms, who wanted to create one broad collective body for their own purposes of controlling humanity. And in the latest piece for the EU presidency, I was curious what happens inside a floral bouquet during an important political meeting. Maybe flowers are not only decorative, beautiful and even more beautifully smelling. What if they could be more proactive and get involved in issues of global proportions?

TP Is there any relation to children stories and folk tales, and is there a moral to your stories?

JJ I guess the link to Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* is more accurate than to children's fairy tales. Unless you mean the film *Labyrinth* with David Bowie. But even in children's stories you can find strong belief that there is a hidden order to the world that lies below the level of normal perception or behind the scenes of everyday life. In case of a moral, I am not sure if *The Club* gives clear answers to the questions of what is right and what is wrong like in fairy tales. By teetering on the edge, I leave this decision purely up to the viewer. But at the same time, I believe that the degree of stylisation of certain characters and situations clearly indicates what I think and what I deal with as an author.

TP The works also consist of surreal, grotesque and often dream-like scenes. Why do you find such aesthetics suitable for addressing contemporary struggles?

JJ Humour or visual stylisation, functioning within the genre of allegory, allows me to gain distance from lived experience and its associated intractable problems. I love, for example, the way Charlie Kaufman tries to find distance in *Synecdoche, New York*. But there's always a pure impossibility and absurdity hidden in the very act of finding distance, because we know we'll never get very far from our own subjectivity anyway.

TP Where do you draw inspiration for costumes, stage sets and exhibition designs? Any movies or literary works that you consider to be an important reference or influence for you?

JJ I'm working with Karolína Juříková on the costumes. Specifically for the last episode "Opening Ceremony", Karolína designed them together with her colleague Kristýna Nováková (they call themselves Overall Office studio). Also, since episode 6, I have been working on silicone masks with Eliška Pitráková.

I don't usually have any direct inspiration for making scenes and costumes (like a Pinterest board or something like that). It just sort of happens during work – the old-fashioned way. Which is not to say that there aren't visually similar works in art, like Matthew Barney, Will Benedict, and dozens more. If I attempted to name different works or artists that I like or that inspire me, the list won't make complete sense. Or maybe it does. Let's give it a try. I always liked to imagine what the works of the Situationist International were like. Even though nowadays they don't have perfectly preserved documentation, and obviously it was necessary to live through it. Actually, I am idealistically modifying them in my brain and dreaming again what Guy Debord probably wanted to say with his theory of sublimation. But that's almost 60 or 70 years ago. Back then, Debord's idea of the society of the spectacle was somehow graspable. But I was born into spectacle. I live in an age when a notable percentage of the world's energy consumption is eaten by YouTube storage servers. My current philosophical lighthouse is a YouTube channel ContraPoints. Working with deflection and sublimation is for me today the transfer of the intangible experience

from the servers back to the physical space.

In the field of arts nowadays I do love anything from Shana Moulton. She is my role model. I love mystery and beauty in the sculptures by Isaac Lythgoe, Johannes Paul Raether is great at metamorphosing, I admire Hamja Ahsam for his humor, my colleague Julie Béna for her witty writing style. I love also Melanie Bonajo's *When the body says Yes*. Nathan Fielder's *The Rehearsal* is a pure masterpiece of absurd TV production. You must watch it. Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* is a fantastic autobiography and sociological analysis revealing class and social structures. As you can see, the list is an incongruous mix where serious themes are combined with absurd ones.

TP

The Club's storytelling follows the logic of a TV series, each exhibition presenting a new episode. The migration of art practices in other "content" production territory is not uncommon – *DIS* magazine's transformation into a video streaming service comes to mind here – however, your works are not primarily meant to be screened on a TV channel or streamed (and binged) online. They are accessed and experienced in the gallery as a succession of exhibitions all separated in time and space. Why is it important for you that stories have spatial presence and why is the gallery your venue of choice? Are your works catering to audiences whose attention has been profoundly reshaped by online content and streaming services perhaps?

JJ

The Club has a format where instead of turning on Netflix, the viewer has to visit a gallery. At the same time, the story is not told in a linear way only through video, but is mediated into live performance, object and site-specific work. So, yes, I'm using terms from the world of TV production, but it's more of a camouflage for the exact opposite, because *The Club* requires the viewer to come somewhere and strain to understand something. Let's say it's not such straightforward entertainment. But I have to say that what really interests me about the world of TV series is the space in which we can follow the development and motivations of a character. Here again, the only difference is that we don't know the plot of the whole series in advance, but we analyse the development of a character from episode to episode.

The only exception so far is the Opening Ceremony, the last episode of *The Club*, which

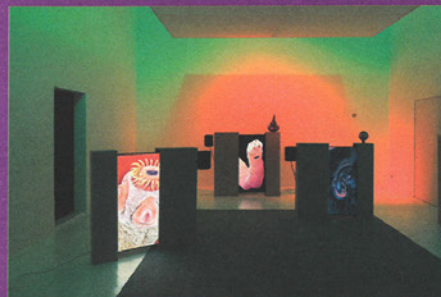


was made as a short film mainly to be presented on the internet. Yet I'm still motivated to build situations and happenings in physical life. It's a form of adventure and mystery. I look for direct interaction with the viewer and I like to let an experience emerge that is different for everyone. It's less controllable than trapping a viewer in a cinema and presenting content with a clear linearity. It's just more fun and fraught with the risk of being awkward or boring. On the other hand, awkwardness itself is a special category for me, I like to develop it and see how far it can go.

TP Your installations that combine different media (video, sculpture, painting, performance) and genres (comedy, drama) feel like stage sets. What role do you wish to create for the audience and what is important for you when planning the design and the dramaturgy of an exhibition installation?

JJ Mostly I use recycled materials from film productions. These are of course deconstructed and assembled into new objects and units – the building blocks of one illusory reality are being transformed into another which we can experience physically. I also like to think about the fact that every space has a hidden dramaturgy. It leads you somewhere, it gradually presents information, and you compose your own story as you walk through it. Not to sound too abstract, for example in The Club's third episode called "My name is Red Herring", I worked with objects that looked like empty shelves from a tech store. Moreover, the gallery was located in a former store, so most of the viewers at the opening were confused whether they were entering a gallery furnished like a store, or a renovated store with lots of empty shelves. But even that was meaningful, because the Red Herring, who is a hybrid creature of human and celeriac and the main protagonist of the episode, was selling his empty ideas in the form of a video tutorial in the cellar.

TP Besides the exhibition in the gallery serving as an environment for the visitor to explore, the physical installation is often also used as a stage for live performances of the main narrator of the story. They appear also in videos, explaining or describing the action we observe on screen, perhaps preventing us from getting immersed in the story. What is their role and why did you choose to include a narrator at all?



It's So Physical,
Meetfactory Gallery,
Prague, 2020. Photo:
Studio Flusser. Courtesy
of the artist.

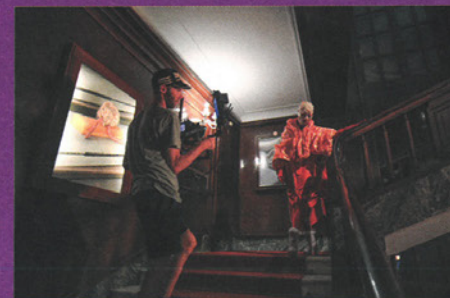
It's So Physical,
Meetfactory Gallery,
Prague, 2020. Photo:
Studio Flusser. Courtesy
of the artist.



CLUB OF OPPORTUNITIES:
Episode #7 – Shame
to Pride, Moravian
Gallery, Brno, 2021.
Photo: Jakub Jansa.
Courtesy of the artist.

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Episode #7 – Shame
to Pride, Moravian
Gallery, Brno, 2021.
Photo: Jakub Jansa.
Courtesy of the artist.

CLUB OF OPPORTUNITIES:
Episode #7 – Shame
to Pride, backstage
photo, 2021. Photo: Iryna
Drahun, Jakub Jansa.
Courtesy of the artist.





CLUB OF OPPORTUNITIES: Episode #8 – Opening Ceremony, 2022.
Photo: Iryna Drahun, Jakub Jansa. Courtesy of the artist.

JJ In *The Club*, videos usually do not carry the complete story. They are encoded in the experience of visiting the exhibition. It's a bit like playing the video game *Stanley Parable* in the physical world (a game which takes place in an old empty Half-Life engine, in which everything you do is accompanied by the commentator). In the same way, in *The Club* you move between props created from discarded movie sets while seeing fragments of *The Club's* story in videos, plus you may (or may not) meet the main narrator Kamil Nabělek, who can bring meaning, connecting the fragments, but also create chaos, because he doesn't say the same thing to everyone who visits.

TP Is the series also about power dynamics in the art world? Or perhaps we can read it as a reflection about the role of "taste" and "culture" as signifiers of a certain social (and economic) class, and as tools of gatekeeping and authority, of maintaining existing social hierarchies?

JJ That is a very well formulated question. This work arises under the conditions that define the local art world, it is directly influenced by them, but I don't think it is a commentary that could be described as a clear institutional critique. For example, in the first episode I directly counted on the fact that the space of the bowling bar would be visited by several insightful curators and critics who, from my point of view, with their interpretation, are able to elevate ordinary things to unique. They are actually also conductors of metamorphosis. Their brains are trained to think sophisticatedly and critically about materiality, shape, context, meaning, etc. ... So I installed various found objects in the space in a way that made it unclear whether they were already in the dirty bowling bar where the episode was on view, or whether they were a conscious artistic intervention. Simply put, every trained brain becomes a performer in my exhibitions. Be careful where you enter, brainiacs! Now, seriously, the edge of ambiguity of what art is or is not and who makes this decision about it interests me a lot.

TP But *The Club* also has its own club – it consists of all the people involved in the production. The cameraman, performers and costume designers are listed on your website as *The Club's* participants. Why have these "rules" been important for you and for *The Club* (as a project)?



JJ There is only one rule: to set the conditions of cooperation so that everyone feels comfortable. The idea is to make the terms of cooperation transparent from the beginning. The collaborators must know what the expected scope of work is, how they will be credited and how much they will be paid (this is all based on the possibilities of the project and our personal agreement). This should probably be from the first meeting. If a mistake is made (from my side) or the nature of the work changes, this should be discussed and changed. It must be the norm that all collaborators are credited. I try to have complete credits on my website, in the exhibitions or in the accompanying materials to the exhibitions.

TP Your work is also about gaining visibility and voice. The overlooked celeriac ends up in the spotlight – in Flower Union: Opening Ceremony, a celeriac ascends the main stage, addressing the flowers. They start as an underdog, but watching this last episode of *The Club*, I wasn't so sure they actually end up the winner. Could you say a bit more about their journey, the shift from "vegeciety" to floristics, climbing the social ladder and the possibility for transformation of hierarchies in *The Club*?

JJ For each episode and the development of the main characters, the context of the exhibition itself is always important. In the previous episode (episode 7, "Shame to Pride"), which was produced in the framework of the Jindřich Chalupický Art Prize, the character of the celeriac (Red Herring) was invited into the higher circles, among the avocados. On this basis, the celeriac addressed his class and social coming out. He had to clarify where he actually belonged and came to the conclusion that he had to start a movement of class and social defectors. This brought him some unexpected cultural and social capital. He became a seasonal vegetable, replacing Oprah Winfrey's pumpkin spice latte with a new celeriac flavour. And at that moment, he was invited by the National Gallery to open the Czech presidency of the European Union. Which, in a group art project called "Flower Union", was allegorically hidden under a parallel world of the Union of Flowers. In the world of plants, flowers have an irreplaceable representative and diplomatic role. Now they even have their own union, an infinite union in the circle of medicinal flowers. Their garden ceremony for the opening of the presidency is given in the form of what is known as an "appreciation dinner". This is a type of gala dinner that in our world is held for the elites and the media. As in our human world, a comedian is invited, here in the form of a "Celery-man". The already mentioned character named SEER, a supernatural figure of a Fortune teller, who is no longer able to predict the future, takes over the direction of the film in the second part of the "Opening Ceremony". She activates decorative flowers in the form of an eco-sexual festive ritual and shows the plants that by putting pistils and calyxes together they can reach out to the public and change the course of things. So hopefully her ability to see into the future will return. You can watch this episode in full online at flowerunion.eu.

TP As your works are often described as merging or hovering between reality and fiction, I was wondering how you see the role of storytelling and fiction in the context of fragmentation or multiplication of "realities" through the internet and social media?

JJ Haha, this is probably the most massive interview I've ever answered in my life and the difficulty of the questions only increases towards the end. Now we're almost getting into the philosophi-

cal level and social network theory. Perhaps the readers who have made it this far are just reaching some kind of storytelling nirvana ...

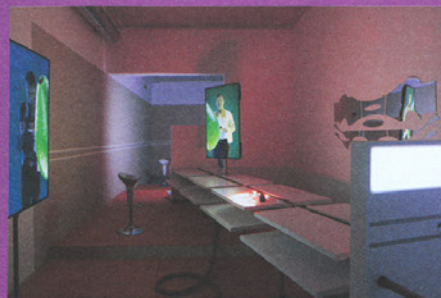
TP ... or a fever dream, haha ...

JJ ... an altered state of consciousness from too much word content. Maybe they're feeling like they've been scrolling on TikTok for the last two hours. No, seriously. The fragmentation of information is deepening the modern confusion of language more and more. We are experiencing the fragmentation of social groups and it is becoming increasingly difficult to connect them. Everyone today can design his or her own ideological identitarian bunker and hide in it. The return to narrativity, oral stories and the combination of live action with a layer of real-time self-criticism seemed to me to be the solution to the problem.

TP Great, so let us complicate the story just a little bit more before we end this exchange. Reading through your website it seems like *The Club* has a meta-layer to it, it is also about the ways in which stories are told, and what power and effects they have. What is this, to quote you, "anatomy of mythology and storytelling" that *The Club* uncovers?

JJ In the process of producing *The Club*, I have met with Kamil Nábělek several times, between each of the episodes, and we tried to analyse the motivations of individual characters – how they dealt with the problem the episode has introduced, how they reacted to this new situation. Moreover, some analysis of the situation and the current events happened also in the form of live action, the presence of Kamil Nábělek in the gallery as part of the exhibitions. This is what I call the anatomy of storytelling. The story is trying to name itself, we are inside the project, but we are trying to get distance from it. We are trying to understand how the story and the mythology associated with it are slowly unfolding under our hands.

Have we found some kind of hidden storytelling rules? They appear to us from time to time and we have a feeling that all our efforts are making clear sense and gaining a precise structure, that we are getting closer and closer to understanding how mythology is created. But just as often the whole structure breaks down and unravels, so that from chaos it can adapt again to some new conditions of exposure.



CLUB OF OPPORTUNITIES:
Episode #5 – Keeping
in Line, NoD Gallery,
Prague, 2018. Photo:
Tomáš Souček. Courtesy
of the artist.

CLUB OF OPPORTUNITIES:
Episode #2 – April
showers bring May
flowers, AMU Gallery,
Prague, 2018. Photo:
Tomáš Souček. Courtesy
of the artist.

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Episode #2 – April
showers bring May
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