

## Retrospective

Ari Nielsson

On the 3rd of December the various levels of the Trade-Fair Palace of the National Gallery in Prague, as part of the wider exhibition *Against Nature: Young Czech Art Scene* and in collaboration with Are Events, acted as the setting for the 23-year-old Saliva, aka Lukas Hofmann's 'Retrospective'.

It started in the upper reaches of the fifth floor as a troupe of meticulously dishevelled youth filed in, assuming the various positions of their first tableau. In keeping with Hofmann's tendency to collaborate his way across the stricter delineations that typically separate art and fashion, they were clad largely in the garments of Anne Sophie Madsen. Soft leathers and the crisp bulk of cotton enveloped silk-slipped limbs and topstitched denim constructions; reined in and belted against the gravity that tugs to reveal a bare shoulder, assemblies pulled together with the easy confidence of revellers finding themselves thrust suddenly back into the bright world.

In ones and twos they began to shift out of their carefully poised stoicisms. Amid the space's arrangement of sculptures, whose forms wavered between the instability of the organic and some semi-industrial quality, their bodies jolted and broke from reciprocal and sympathetic objecthood. Torsos twisted rhythmically, shoulders rising and falling, each rotation forcing breath to travel out from within the chest. They passed through the crowd as if in the grip of a reverie, the audience only half-present to them. Past onlookers who remained looking straight on even as a select few were singled out, locked in intimate confrontation with the wandering agents, and with the escaping air. These were, for all their gyrating bluster, private moments.

Mouths out of breath began, instead, to lick their way along the knotted installations of red thread that had been spun around the room. Bodies crouched, crawled and limboed awkwardly around one another, whetting their mutual ties to the building, before scooting down to a lower level by means of the main staircase's handrails, the childlike irreverence of their movement dressed with impassive expressions.

Structured both as a descent and a perambulation, the performance drew on a progression of past elements of Hofmann's oeuvre, magnifying and multiplying them to the institutional scale of the Functionalist palace. Its interiors were framed one minute as the superficial stage décor for the performers' catwalk-like march through its collections, in the next they functioned as an echo-chamber not only for their occasional shouts which broke through the dust of gallery etiquette, but for the erotics of their movement and the moments in which those movements stopped, abruptly.

Now and then sinking to the polished floor, performers lay like a funereal obligation on their upright fellows, bodies now more like objects with the exact weight of bodies. Tests of brute power, fabrics draping around them like shrouds, demanding that they to be raised up, since they could not raise themselves. Theirs was a physical struggle that did less to detract from the artworks surrounding it than it lent an immediate, literal weight to their scenes. Depictions of strife and exodus instead found an arresting corollary outside their pictorial and material bounds. These permanent works, in turn, offered the debatable grandeur of historical continuity, of past traditions and academies arranged like a backdrop to the emerging, momentarily melding with them in a hall of small bronzes as the group embraced and encircled the figures with themselves and froze, containing the sculptures without touching.

As they reformed, now into a makeshift choir around the periphery of the atrium, their voices joined together in renditions of Disney songs' curious, populist magic, a plaster bust unexpectedly fell to the floor in the background and shattered; its percussive note punctuated a digression from assumed stability, pronouncing instead the absolute quality of the lived moment.

Upon reaching ground level, a circle formed. One, separated from the rest as the designated master of ceremonies, marked out with intermittent, primal cries progressively longer periods of time, while he tended to an array of bowls containing dry ice, maintaining their spreading apours by watering them from one vessel to another and once, notably, with a stream of piss. To each resounding outburst the seated forms pinched shut the nose and mouth of their neighbour, alternating with and against the direction of the clock. A simple, even playful game of tolerance, each changeover was marked also by increasingly relieved intakes of air from those relieved, as the durations grew ever longer.

Perhaps appropriate to this procedural simplicity, two small children from the front of the audience's semi-circle crawled playfully towards the carpet of smoke as it extended across the floor, retreating at each cry only to return, intrepidly, in the lull. Their game was not so far removed from the spectacle that extended, with increasing discomfort, in front of us. This was the final action and the lowest point, and the descalation from the heights of the building was being met with a like increase in the stakes. It was a tension in witness of which the audience did not hold their breath, but rather devoured the air with gratitude as the moments stretched to implausible lengths, before one final gasp against expiration marked the end.

These repetitions and reformulations of the past which the retrospective act make possible underpin the indelible insistence of the present, as well as the certain anticipation of what is to come. Hofmann's 'Retrospective', then, formulated itself both as the playful self-mythologising of a young emerging artist and also as an acknowledgment of the inescapability of the past contexts through which these actions and their divergences must to be understood. At whatever point it occurs, a retrospective, like the life across which it looks, can only be exactly as long as itself, and no longer.

**Ari Nielsson** is an artist and writer based in London. His text-work, 'Retrospective: A Cultural History of Saliva' was commissioned to accompany the performance and appears in full on the website of the Czech National Gallery. He was shortlisted for the Frieze Writers' Prize 2015 and published in Undercurrents Journal

The performers were: Coco Kate, Eva Che, Thiago Dias, Katrice Dustin, Elizabeth Hinojos, Lukas Hofmann / Saliva, Scott Hopper, Kateřina Konvalinová, Roman Ole, Markéta Strnadelová, Bianca Tanchay

And wore garments from Anne Sophie Madsens, collections of 2015 and 2016

**Lukas Hofmann's** works of note from the past year include IKEA Made Fashion, hosted at Galerie AVU (Prague, CZ), classic arrangement of four white roses in collaboration with Dan Bodan at the Schinkel Pavillion (Berlin, DE), big bag with Barbara Klawitter and Nico Arauner at Moderna Museet (Stockholm, SE), and l'eau des algues with Nils Lange at Cabaret Voltaire, for the closing of Manifesta 11 (Zurich, CH).