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COVER SHEET

Becoming Monika: An Exploration of a World between the Self, Other, I and We

Anna Chrtková

Abstract:

In a hyper-individualised, market-driven neoliberal world where everyone is considered responsible for their own success and happiness, the notion of a common or collectively lived future seems either naive or — given the Eastern and Central European experiences of failed state socialism — totalitarian. To this, the natural and social sciences offer a counter-hypothesis: We already are interconnected in terms of biological matter, ecosystemic relations, climate systems, shared societal infrastructure, and even global financial markets. Socialised as individuals, though, we lack the tools to refer, relate, and act towards this reality.

Monika, besides being an organically formed name for the artistic collective of me and my two artist colleagues (Matyáš Grimmich and Karolína Schön), is a lens and shared body through which I offer entry to this framework.

This exposition follows an ongoing performative research project on models of relating — becoming ‘we’ on the planetary, social, and political scale. The research centres on concepts of the expanded self and politics of unity, focusing on testing existing models or developing new methods of becoming more-than-just-self. Its participatory installations, video works, workshops, and research performances were tested and presented in residency and gallery spaces. These outcomes are organised around three strategies — object and its use; situation and its record; story and its act of telling. Methodically, the exposition (and henceforth the whole research) uses poetic and prosaic language to address people as individual selves and poetically suggest what if we perform the multivocal, rather than uphold the individual. This approach hopes to build affective relation towards the reality of a shared planet (Latour 2018), where all entities are connected and interdependent, with agency emerging from in-between, not from a particular ‘one’.

Keywords:

performance art, visual art, scenography, collective identity, relationships architecture, collective practice, autofiction

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Becoming Monika: An Exploration of a World between the Self, Other, I and We

Anna Chrtková

This is an instructive introduction.

This exposition has a bilateral structure. The first layer consists of three descriptions of Monika; the auto-fictional narrative of her birth in the middle; the description of the research process and methods on the left; and the timeline of the public outcomes on the right. The second layer comprehends selected writings, images, and videos, composed around three primary research strategies — forming the body of Monika from within the research.

The two layers are interlinked. Through either of the narratives — auto-fictional, descriptive or the timeline, you can enter the body of research, unstable and fluid, yet still holding the upper layer together.

[Click here to meet Monika.](#)

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Page description:

Three columns of text are distributed across the page, linked by a meandering, pale purple crayon line. The central column, under the title I AM MONIKA describes a character named Anna. This text acts as a kind of table of contents, linking to the rest of the exposition through highlighted, hyper-linked passages. The text column on the right of the page is a timeline for the research project, presenting dates and titles of various residencies, exhibitions, performances and workshops. The text column on the left, connected to the title WHO IS MONIKA?, is underlayered with a blurred patch of even paler purple. This text briefly describes the history and objectives of the collective that created the research the exposition refers to.

To navigate from this page to an accessible version of the main page of this exposition click on the invitation 'to meet Monika' in the text below.

I AM MONIKA

Anna works in the design industry. She has a powerful, determined, yet distracted attitude to life. She is able to notice the most important parallels between fields, discourses, and paradigms — this is her driving force. Sliding between institutions, academies, industries, and workshops advances her broad effort to connect with the world around her. Strengthening her bonds with all participating actors feels more than satisfying. One just needs to know the appropriate language, aesthetics, and forms. And Anna is very good at learning.

This causes a distinctive fatigue in her limbs. And her skin — covered more and more with a perpetual eczema — is transforming her into a porous, fragile, and tired organism.

Nonetheless, Anna is on a mission today. She is walking in the streets of her city. She is probably heading to work. Maybe for a meeting. There is no rush in her walk but, still, an energetic rhythm can be seen in her step. She wants to make others see that her walk has a purpose. Like everyone around her, she waits for the lights when she wants to cross the road. Once the green light hits, she steps into the road and crosses, fast. Step by step, she walks on messy pavements and drivers pass her by in their vehicles. From time to time, sweating cyclists roll in between her and the ongoing flow of cars. She imagines their exhausted athletic bodies coming home after this ride, covered in an invisible layer of urban dust, resting, swallowed by their homes. The realness of the physical being. She does not remember if she has ever felt like that.

Anna is walking and her head is full of thoughts.

As if I deliberately desire an additional freelance activity. Everyone seeks balance, yet I need to have plenty of everything, celebrate abundance, and bless my ability to drift in between all that.

Anna walks the streets. Her gaze scans every corner, every bush, every face she's walking around. She is probably searching for someone. She is not sure who, though. On her solar plexus, after a while, she notices a light pulsing tension.

Sometimes, it feels like she is not the one responsible for all her choices. It's everything else, everything around, deciding for her, instead of her. One moment she's still and slow, squeezed into certain postures, and the next she's energetic — as if someone chased her. Her dynamic self adapts to everyone she speaks with and everything she engages with. Considering this, she sometimes just wants to give up and accept her nonconsistency as a fact. To finally be integral, no longer individual. A dependent being.

What if her body decides to strike
inner unions will take back the right to rest
her legs would just slide across the room

She wishes there were no mechanisms in place to prevent this.

Just stay here

do nothing

A soft smile is playing with Anna's dry face. Her solar plexus is in pain. She doesn't mind. She has learned to let go of her unstable body.

She wants to become an obstacle in the middle of the street

finally being pushed down by the weight of the universe depending just on her

her belly, being released

Anna is walking down the street. It's full of noise and young, sparse trees on the edge of the pavement. Behind the trees, a line of boring office blocks. Wind interferes with the dust. The pain in her solar plexus makes her walk faster. All of a sudden, a huge sign says 'Public Baths' in fluorescent red. It should not be that bright, she thinks. A little arrow above a shabby door instructs her to go inside. She is not sure about the world, herself, the one she's looking for. [Is she looking for someone?!] An orienting arrow is relieving to follow. Perhaps having a swim is, after all, a good idea?

Entering the reception, she pulls her long sleeves down in a rush. Eczema. She needs to hide it. Sick skin is trying to renew itself; old, dead flakes of herself are falling. It never ends. It will

never end. This much is certain. She is leaving her traces everywhere she goes. And she does not often fulfil hygiene requirements.

The private changing room seems safe. She takes her clothes off and wraps herself into a big, white sheet. Breathe in, breathe out. Let's hope people don't stare at her red body — full of rush, snowing skin. When she enters the main bathing area, she is partially blinded by the steam. There are many humans around. Their gleaming bodies go in and out of the little sauna rooms. Little pearls of sweat transform them into shiny creatures. Everyone is alone here. They move slowly, naked, looming out of the clouds. As if the space was attempting to soak their skin, flesh, and bones.

Usually, her skin condition attracts unwanted attention. Here and now, no one cares.

Anna is no longer walking.

Her body left the first sauna with an exact shiny, sweaty texture. Her pulsating belly is firm, covered with a glistening layer. Humidity sticks to her, making her think she no longer knows where exactly her body begins. A quick stop in the restroom, and then another sauna. Dry heat entombs her body.

She thought she hated those common organised wellness activities, and here she is, soaking into the space, being the same as the others. Her skin is snowing. Her surface is covered by the snow of others.

Sauna for the third time, and then a swim.

Small salty pool

everyone around

her – self

others

joint snows

her – in-between – them

her

all of them inside of her

palpating on the solar plexus

making her belly grow

Monika was born here. Inside of this bigger and bigger, pulsating, eczematic, wet, and glistening belly.

And so, Anna decided to accept the others living and growing inside her. Now, she knows her place of return. Monika is always there, under the surface of her skin, to be whoever — because she is an entity of many.

TIMELINE

2021

research residency 04/10–14/12 WHAT IF WE ARE ALL...?

Bratislava, Nová Cvernovka

with Matyáš Grimmich [curator & host Ivana Rumanová]

2022

exhibition 17/04–05/06 THE SUMMER SCHOOL OF 'WE'

Olomouc, Basement.project

with Matyáš Grimmich & Karolína Schön [curator David Bartoš]

group exhibition 17–18/06 PSYCHOSOCIAL CARTOGRAPHIES

Prague, Galerie Reunion

with Matyáš Grimmich [curators Agáta Hošnová & Mia Kordová]

residency, workshops 12–18/09 + 30/11–02/12 THE SUICIDE CLASS

Prague, Studio Alta + Berlin, Altes Finanzamt

with Matyáš Grimmich [curators Petr Dlouhý & Magdalena Jadwiga Härtelová]

workshop, performance 21/11 COLLAPSE AS A CHANCE

Prague, Divadlo X10, Academy of Fine Arts

Matyáš Grimmich & Karolína Schön [curators Anna Chrtková & Petr Dlouhý]

2023

installation 17/03–28/08 MONIKA'S TRAINING ROOM

Benešov, Museum of Art and Design

with Matyáš Grimmich & Karolína Schön [curator Petra Widžová]

research performance 22 & 23/06 WE, THE THREE OF US

Prague, Academy of Fine Arts

with Matyáš Grimmich & Karolína Schön

residency 18/09–18/11 SUICIDE CLASS II
Banská Štiavnica, Banská St a nica
with Matyáš Grimmich

2024 .. ?

WHO IS MONIKA?

'Becoming Monika' refers to our three-year-long process of becoming a collective: Anna Chrtková (curator, set designer, and author of this exposition), Matyáš Grimmich (artist and group facilitator), and Karolína Schön (artist and photographer) decided to cover their individual selves with an entity called Monika. As a collective character, Monika was born through processes of joint studying, collective writing, delegated storytelling, and situation training, framed by the topic of 'we'.

In 2020, we opened a residency application with the mantra of being we:

Each of us is a spring merging with other flows. We deepen the existing drains, we replicate, we adapt. We flow within the banks; yet once they are worn down, they become us. We permeate the ground, we soak into the matter. We take over each other's habits without feeling guilty for our lack of personal inventions, or imagination. We do not believe in individuality. We believe in permeable bodies. We believe in the exchange of thoughts, ideas, and images. We are sick, we have eczema, we are the transmitters of infections. We imprint into the others' bodies, as other bodies invade us. We are the particles of the world, we are waves, we are molecules.

Our plans were inspired and directly affected by our experiences of previous collective projects, examples of which include: working with the therapeutic method of Systemic Constellations; the viral community practice of Hologram; and Matyáš's practice within The Group of Fulfilled Wishes and Transfer Collective. We wanted to reimagine forms of community, radically reject individualism, and perform a collective consciousness. We were asking ourselves, how is the 'self' established? Where does it begin, and where does it end? How can we create and practise sustainable prototypes or models of a shared, joint, common 'we'? Can we reconstitute the world by performing such collective selves?

In six weeks of the residency, we created a collection of texts from which the next phases of our research could emerge. Our vision of radically interconnected 'we' has, since then, been grounded in environmental philosophy (Latour 2007; 2010; 2003) and [posthuman] phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2002; Neimanis 2017), and our current understanding of self has been mostly informed by works of experimental psychology (Fuchs 2017; Tanaka 2015). We have aimed to meet these theories here and now and perform them in shared time and space as if they were methodologies — and, then, to observe what happens. We imagined this experience as a substitute for disembodied knowledge — we wanted to feel, instead of speak. Feeling the lack of Oceanic Feelings (Wang 2020) in our practice — we understood the necessity of creating a scale of affects that lure the possible participants into the world of 'we'

(even though we cannot offer the stable image of how it should look like) and enable them to imagine the radically different understanding of their own relation towards the world. All these wishes helped the project become a full-scale artistic research project, as it has been reflected as practice together with the process and performed rather than executed when the performance is done (Hug 2017: 61).

After the initial research residency, we found our space in cultural institutions. We presented the research in exhibition, installation, and workshop formats. Initially, I worked only with Matyáš Grimmich; Karolína Schön joined us one year later. Each of the outcomes was prototyped as a space of encounter, where we could test and develop further the use of objects, situations and stories in performing 'we'. The declaration of Monika (the collective) symbolically closed this first chapter framed by the context of art institutions and art production.

Writings, videos, images, and reports from our public outcomes are assembled under three categories: object and its use; situation and its record; story and its act of telling. These are strategies or triggers by which we, during the process of Becoming Monika, operated, and they can also be considered vital organs holding her together now when we are no longer operating under our personal names. This is the underlying logic of arranging all research material into the lower layer, which is accessible through the auto-fictional narrative of Monika's birth (titled 'I am Monika') and also, through the timeline of the research.

Now

I invite you again

[to meet Monika](#)

and — eventually — to get lost in the research that holds her together.

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Page description:

The text and materials listed below are arranged on a large page, which can be scrolled across to discover the various elements. These parts are connected by pastel-coloured crayon lines, that meander and circle across the page, connecting elements into a form of network, in which multiconnectedness is favoured over linearity.

Who Am I Actually Pregnant With? A Case Study of One Constellation

The need to narrow down the wide-ranging research towards existing practices led me, Anna, and my residential colleague Matyáš to a practical experiment. Together with Transfer Collective member Jane Scalabroni, we mutually subjected each other to a two-day constellation practice in which we used Bert Hellinger's psychotherapeutic method of family constellations as a self-subjective tool to change the distribution of our own bodies, emotions and relationships. During the hour-long sessions we gradually put ourselves in the 'roles' of people who could not be with us in Bratislava for various reasons. The individual situations surprisingly quickly took us deep into a wide range of feelings, from joy to despair. Here I attach my subjective description of one of the activated constellation situations:

I put Monika in Jane's body. I asked her if she needed help, while in my mind I wished she would give me a hand so we could exist normally next to each other, just to be together. She averted her eyes, then squeezed herself into a corner, still stubbornly saying, I don't know. I felt helpless, and at the same time I knew very well what the solution was. I pushed it away as far as I could, but eventually I asked: Should I leave? Would it help you if I left? Silence at first, but then a hesitant yes. So that's how it all started: inability and impossibility to be together. The total absence of the other. Even though the real Monika couldn't be with me in Bratislava, her imprint remained in me and placed in our constellation a situation that was the answer to everything that happened a month ago in Prague. When I turned away from Jane-Monika and sat down at the table facing the wall, I felt only great pain. I ended up crying a lot, with tears on the outside, completely bleak on the inside.

Through its techniques, the Hellinger constellation offers the opportunity to plunge into the depths of a relationship problem directly — physically and emotionally. A person who was not with us at the time, Monika, came between us through Jane's body. My perhaps too-intense gaze on her provoked a reaction of rejection in Monika-Jane. My emotions and Monika-Jane's were real; I was mirroring myself in another person, and in the end it didn't matter who it really was. Because I have a piece of Monika inside me, one particular situation that I still haven't come to terms with, and she's lying there inside me. I am pregnant with Monika, as I am with many others (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 273). Endless loops of what I am, what I want to be, what I

was a moment ago, what I realise I am not, what I am together with... [PLEURISMA 12] My self is not a simple bounded space safely separated from other selves, from other bodies, spaces, situations, emotions. In common with the words of psychologist Margaret Warner, my 'self' is always in process, any experience always shapes my identity in its absolute complexity more than I could have imagined (Cooper and others 2004). The self is a process, identity is a process; and this process is not only about me, but about many others who enter into me.

The body and pregnancy in the title can therefore be read as a metaphor, but Maurice Merleau-Ponty is, however, very literal in his descriptions (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 176). The body and what it carries with it are fundamental to my understanding of the world outside it. This process is pervasive and unceasing. An endless re-organisation, becoming, transformation. The body as a site of contact that is modelled from within and outside. A body through which I perceive the world; a body that is full of Monika (Turzíkova 2019: 18). This body influences everything I do, even if it doesn't (seemingly) concern Monika right now.

If we look at my entire constellation situation with the thesis that individuality is impossible, (referring to the above-mentioned texts, the interdependence may appear as a kind of unwanted totality). There is nowhere to escape, we cannot cut ourselves off from our umbilical cord that connects us to others. The basic distribution of forces will always be clear — even though I perceive myself as a unique and somewhat separate entity, I am *connected* to a multitude of processes and entities that are unseen (because they are smaller, or transcend me, or outside of me entirely). We swim in the water-air of the placenta, we are simply all of us, and there is no other way.

Hellinger Constellation: A Record of One Situation, November 2020

And What if We Already Are?

- 1) Let's deconstruct me. Let's watch suspiciously the definitions of the individual.
- 2) Let us sink into ourselves, surrender, inhabit and be inhabited by the incoherent. Let us allow ourselves to be pulverised by the parts we have viewed as the whole of ourselves. Let us become the garden and the grave, the rotting that allows the oddities to grow.
- 3) Let us not hold by force of will the illusion of the unity of our body and psyche. Let us soak ourselves with eczema. When our nose bleeds, let it wash us out to others.
- 4) Let us not throw away self-consciousness or our own specificity, rather let us be led to divide the self into disparate parts, let us allow the self to be completely unconscious and let us relax our vigilance, let us blur our focus, let us not fear our own stupidity.
- 5) Let us seek unity in disintegration. We are made of each other, we are so embodied in each other that we cannot even be erased. We can belong to each other, surrender to each other, experience the special security of that bond.
- 6) But this also means that we cannot escape from this oneness, but neither can we have insight. So let us develop perspectives of looking from within.
- 7) Let us participate in the experience of others. Let us train our capacity to be us through our capacity for dispersion.
- 8) Let us be affected by uncertainty. Let it enter us through the deconstruction of the self. Let us be challenged, let us lose our illusions and expectations.

Text cluster description: A group of four text sections, each framed in a box, provide instructions for performances, under the common title: *Group Situations*.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/642/1414> to see the text cluster.

Videos and slideshow descriptions: On the right of the text cluster for *Group Situations* are three videos and one slideshow. These document enactments and environments, corresponding to the *Group Situation* performance instructions.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/1826/1731> to see the videos and slideshow.

Group Situation: The Crowd

Fifteen people are squeezed into a little room and are running out. They are filmed by two cameras.

Instructions:

1. You must get out the door as quickly as possible
2. You must not hurt the others.

Group Situation: The Cloud

Fifteen people perform a chaotic crowd, walking in a grey indoor space. They are filmed from above, by drone camera.

Instructions:

1. You are in constant movement
2. Your movement must be always directed where the majority is
3. You must not collide with another
and, the variation,
4. You must follow the back of the other.

Group Situation: The Collapse

Five people are lying on the floor. They are listening to the stories while being weighted by heavy pillows. They are recorded from above by drone camera.

Instructions:

1. Listen to the narrative
2. Feel the weight of the blanket. When it is too heavy, say it's enough.

Group Situation: The Disintegration

Eighteen people sit in a circle. They are so close their knees are touching each other. There is no recording device, to not spoil the situation.

Instructions:

1. Take a seat
2. Take a paper and concrete pad and put it on your lap
3. One by one, read the story from the paper out loud
4. You can take the concrete pad to feel something hard
5. You can take the pillow to feel something soft.

Recalling the Stories: How They Appeared in our Practice

A: There's a lot of freedom for interpretation in written fiction. That's the worldbuilding, in its capacity for immersion or complexity. I guess they used to build worlds in churches through wall painting, maybe. But writing or storytelling has always somehow worked with that. And, always, when you say 'the world', I don't imagine a moment of listening or watching something. I imagine myself standing directly in the world, looking around. It's not even that I'm choosing a path, it's that I'm looking around and something catches my eye and something doesn't. And when I enter it the day after, something else catches my eye and something else doesn't. And when I enter with someone, it's a different story again. That's what's good about it.

M: Maybe the focus of our things has changed. The constellations, the bellies, or even the story in Benešov, are made for that show-place. The viewer looks around for things in a gallery and brings the content themselves. In the constellation, you bring your psyche, your problem; in the belly, you bring your own reading of the metaphor, which is brutally abstract... We wrote the text about Monika the prepper so that there were as few clues as possible to give her some kind of identity — so that it wouldn't prevent the viewer from identifying with her. And there's not that much of that in these stories anymore.

A: It's a different format now. We have often chosen the story or writing for a pragmatic reason. As a way in which the viewer, who enters the installation, is not guided descriptively, they're not instructed, not manipulated. They're just being told a story about someone else. It's next to them, and somehow it shapes their perception of the installation. You as a viewer and the character of a story or object are side by side and you already have a relationship together, and you are already interacting. I remember that even when we did the very first exhibition at Basement.project, we were already trying to make stories there. We were doing the chorus with these girls, the recordings, you remember... But it was very addressable to the viewer. We told the visitors who to be pregnant with and how to feel about it.

M: There was a good thing about it. It went beyond the gallery space, beyond the exhibition. You had to use a QR code to load it and then listen to it on the way back. It was a good format.

A: For me, that was unfinished, but it was a good idea though. It seems that what we're still

dealing with is our awareness of the context we're entering with our project. The context of the event of the presentation of art, the context of the art world based on selling and authorship. We're very critical of that and we don't want to submit to those rules. Maybe that's our hidden motivation for doing all this. To resist accepting the logic of exhibiting unique objects, originals that can be sold and monetised.

M: Yeah. And for me, it's actually very boring to show drawings and objects in a gallery. Unless it's some kind of drawing or painting, proven by time... I like to look at Monet, that's great, but I'm not really into the regular gallery mode with its aesthetics subordinated to the market or the attention economy on social media. That's not fun for me. Also, this world may present and highlight the individual more than something common, or collective.

A: And we want to avoid that. That is one of the goals.

A conversation with Matyáš Grimmich, November 2023

On Common Worldbuilding

Bruno Latour's 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"' (2010) opens up the unsettling vision with a positive twist: The world we live in is in ruins and we can't just clean it to return to the previous, 'natural' state of existence. The agency Latour offers is to change our understanding of ruins — not as a sign of terminal stadium, but as an actual time for making changes in a political sense. Acknowledging the current global political status quo — rising inequalities, rapidly advancing climate crisis, live-broadcasted conflicts around the globe, and the ongoing lack of understanding of common truth, our world is no longer the same for everyone (Latour 2018).

With our exhibitions designed more as playgrounds or spaces for resting or meeting others, we enabled ourselves to cross the horizons of aesthetics, artistic excellence, or standards of beauty (stereotypes still prevailing in our success standards in visual arts). This feels as a great relief — as well as it's full of joy.

The future should not be projected somewhere in the clouds, it's us, people (no matter if artists or 'just' civilians) who has the agency to change it — together. We should live, create, and transform it now, together with the transformation of ourselves as actants of reality. To be Latour's compositionist, one needs to constantly negotiate, observe patiently the environment around them, put things together, re-compose, evaluate the quality of these compositions, and make decisions using this knowledge. The world is composed of ruins that call for constant manipulation. Composing these temporary structures must have no end. The importance is in constant transformation — and this determines where we can begin to see progress.

Following these ideas, let's not think universalism as a homogenous unity. Let's think (and moreover) make it together. Let's not only compose, but also negotiate, try out, test, tease, have fun, have conflicts together. From the safe grounds of art institutions towards the new political regimes. As Latour wrote that the world needs to be (re)composed (2010), I think of this research process as an attempt to engage ourselves directly in heterogeneous practices of acting more together in this world.

Image descriptions: The hand written question, 'Where do we tell stories?' stands close to two colour photographs. These depict installation shots of two exhibitions: *Summer School of "We"* at Basement.project, Olomouc, in 2022 and *Monica's Training Room* at the Museum of Art and Design, Benešov in 2023.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/642/4415> to see the images.

On the Initial Place of All Stories: Pleurisma, Water and Joy

In Western Slovakia, there is a hot spring lake. It became my and Matyáš Grimmich's refuge on our residency in the cultural centre Nová Cvernovka (Bratislava, autumn 2021). This hidden communal spot is located between the satellite villages Čierna Voda [Black Water] and Chorvátsky Grob [Croatian Grave], surrounded by fields, with the constant drone of the nearby highway. Water runs off a drill hole from the 1970s. A few concrete blocks form a 1.5m deep pit filled with hot, 50°C water. Water from the pit then flows into a pond, where it mixes with the colder water. To enjoy a bath in the warm mineral water, no entrance fee is required. The whole place is without surveillance. It is a little trashy, with dozens of cars parked everywhere around and the pallet-made DIY lanes through the reeds, but it is nonetheless a free spot of pleasure and joy where bodies are equal and dialogues flow, no matter the capital each of these individuals holds.

At that point, we were studying a range of concepts of theoretical unity. We went through intercorporeality, extended self, kinships, theories of social networks... Matyáš remembered one old Christian term, supposedly explaining the total unity including time and space: *pleurisma*. We were unable to research it further, since there were no Google results, and no books found on the topic. *Pleurisma* was, however, a fully fictional term: A few weeks later we discovered the original concept of *pléroma* — a gnostic and Christian theological concept used to explain the unity of all divine powers.

Pleurisma, a corrupt and fabricated term, became the signifier of the first year of research. Freed from the sediment of historical interpretation, it became an empty jar, affecting all our actions and outputs. The zine we finished the residency with was given the name *Pleurisma/p*. *Pleurisma* was a title to a body of texts — fifty citations ripped out of their previous contexts, which were books or essays we had read while residency. This booklet was followed by a map of our texts arranged in the form of a map. For this purpose, after studying Merleau-Ponty, we used a metaphor of pregnancy for the first time: The water in Chorvátsky Grob felt like an amniotic fluid, carrying and representing the place where communities are born.

This unanticipated mistake made us realise the importance of fiction as a tool. The topic of 'we' —which earlier seemed vague, unarticulated, or too broad — was inherently seen as a world of knowledge where we could swim — as we did in the thermal spring. At that point, the joy of discovering unusual and bizarre places, which had been a simple pastime activity, merged with our browsing through sociological, philosophical, theological, and psychological concepts of unity in research. One messy communal place performed the perfect live instance of our field, assembling all of the possibilities, and embodying one hybrid entity at the intersection of knowledge and practice.

The image of shared baths stayed with us, as well as *pleurisma* and the use of fiction. Monika was born here. Hot, *pleurismic* waters of one public bathing spot made her alive. Water and its interpretations shaped her from behind. Monika — a body of one research, a body of one practice and a body of one collective — an assemblage of knowledges and actions, an unstable matter, a monstrous entity.

This is why I see Monika (female) as gendered (Janečková 2021: 106), and, as Astrida Neimanis reminds us with her huge metaphor of ever-entangled bodies:

We have a specific politics of location as bodies of water, but as watery, we also disrupt our own sense of embodied self. In the face of fear, the welling up of water in our affective and visceral bodies can result in the sudden and unexpected elimination of tears, or pee, or shit. Such eruptions might seem beyond the control of the disciplining processes to which we usually subject our visceral selves. [...] These dissolutions of my self into a watery world may reside below or beyond my direct contemplation, but they extend my body all the same. (2017: 50)

Neimanis took over Merleau-Ponty when we thought of the formation of 'the self'. Her phenomenology offers a vital contextual base to our main interests: the constitution of self in the ever-entangled world, the imagination of shared baths, and frequent use of the metaphor of pregnancy.

Images and video descriptions: On the right of the text entitled *On the Initial Place of All Stories: Pleurisma, Water and Joy* are two images and a video. The images are digitally distorted colour photographs of people bathing and reading in the hot springs. The video, with voiceover, uses stills and handheld camera footage to describe a walk through an area with both urban and rural characteristics.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/3498/5516> to see the images and video.

We Are Monika:

How is Monika established? Where does she begin, and where does she end?

How can we experience Monika on the levels of body, emotion, imagination, and politics?

How can we practise being Monika? How can we perform more together, more as one?

How can we prototype the environments, actions, and situations wherein Monika feels as one?

On Narrative

In the third book of the *Xenogenesis* series, Octavia Butler introduces a new species of alien. The Oankali are three-gendered beings with the ability to feed on genetic information, in order to adapt themselves to various environments in space. *Xenogenesis* follows their landing on

the planet Earth, where they force humans to mate with them after a nuclear war. In the third book, *Imago*, the very first human-born 'ooloi' (the third Oankali gender) is born, able to consciously change their own matter.

Butler offers a suggestive description of the degradation of one ooloi body after they fail to find a mate:

a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other Human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime. It could not speak or breathe air or make any sound at all. [...] It kept slipping away from me — simplifying its body. It had no control of itself, but like a rock rolling downhill, it had inertia. Its body 'wanted' to be less and less complex. If it had stayed unattended in the water for much longer, it would have begun to break down completely — individual cells each with its own seed of life, its own Oankali organelle. These might live for a while as single-cell organisms or invade the bodies of larger creatures at once, but Aaor as an individual would be gone. In a way, then, Aaor's body was trying to commit suicide. (2012: 151)

This excerpt provides a near-perfect analogy for vital materialism (Bennett 2010), or Latour's agency of things (Latour 2007). To imagine human matter as a living assemblage, it is convenient to illustrate this with a fictional ooloi in non-persistent human form. Of course, this example has no connotations of actual reality, or philosophical argumentation — instead, it enables us to dive freely around topics of decay, matter, interdependence of the human and non-human, and to bridge the Cartesian dialectic and rift between humans and nature.

Our first attempt to embody the topic of self-disintegration was through a meditation-like situation: I have created a video with a text, which is addressing the reader [in the case of text] or the viewer [in the case of video] directly. Through guided experience, readers/viewers navigated through the imagined situation, as if their own bodies were falling apart into millions of pieces to be dispersed by wind and water in innumerable directions.

After entering into dialogue with the fiction — a narrative became the dominant part of our writing practice within Monika. This approach, I believe, has better affective potential than the manipulative reciprocal strategy of giving and receiving orders. Instead of guiding visitors through the installations, situations, and topics, we chose to narrativise them — or, to provide them next to a narrative. This created a dependent, complex, and unstable situation wherein each actor had the right to act, speak, play, experience, think, and perform in their own language. The affective power of the novel, of fiction writing, is an important tool for associative thinking which allows individuals to take their own knowledge and work with their own personal reservoir of memories and experiences.

These situations provoke a shifting of perspective: Instead of asking how to navigate visitors effectively, or how to communicate our intentions clearly, we were asking the environment about an act of narration, an act of story: Where are our stories told? How? By whom?

On Extreme Self: Where is Myself in All of This?

Extreme Self, a visual novel by curators and writers Shumon Basar, Douglas Coupland, and

Hans Ulrich Obrist, seeks to depict our world as a place wherein individuals are extremified, where the contemporary 'self' is a battlefield where turbo-capitalist, neoliberal mediascapes meet identity politics in a fight for data. The novel is polarised. On one end, the Extreme Selves are, to a certain extent, de-individualised — constantly connected to their devices, creating and consuming data, operating as a non-paid workforce in the free market of an online attention economy. On the other end is a constant fight for recognition in the globalised field, where personal is no longer individual and we all stand on the balconies of our homes (Dullaart 2014), hoping to be the voices of many.

What is the opposite of you? ..me? ...crowd? ...a machine? ... a virus? ...some-as-yet-unnamed entity? The opposite of self is no longer a crowd. The opposite of man is no longer a nature. [...] We've changed the meaning of ourselves. Welcome to... ... Age of you. [...] What if: We need a new word to describe this thing what individuality is morphing into? ... you're now becoming your Extreme Self. (Basar, Coupland, and Obrist 2021: 16–40)

The novel follows the logic of an infinite feed. The pages are assembled from visual material, short texts, questions, and citations. The voice is seductive when read: Authors ask questions and rarely give answers. The novel seduced me into re-orienting the overarching and abstract 'we' in opposition to the identity-specific 'I'. If I am, together with two others, examining a common 'we', where does 'I' become scarce? At which point is simply 'I' too much? And the opposite: At which point is simply 'we' too much? When 'we' becomes an extreme? And is Monika not simply a metaphor for an extreme version of me? How can I navigate her when she is made of many, and I am just one of many? Through doing? Will I lose my self at some point? And, then, back towards my life outside of this particular project: Can I perform Monika such as I am performing set designer, such as I am performing arts academic, such as I am performing cis woman, such as I am performing white person, such as I am performing Eastern European?

I escaped back to academia, partially, from being tired of my performance as a set designer — acting as a true set designer should act — to performing creative genius, effective troubleshooter, master in communication between creative, management, and production crews. I feel the urgent need for research to help me build strategies for navigating this over-demanding role. Instead of focusing on building or creating things from scratch, I aim to work with what is already there — objects, people, places, and their relations. Yet, it is still me who is entering these fields. The me of 'I', of a specific politics, an articulated background (which I am trying to escape?), using some infrastructures while disregarding others, while certain relations have a direct influence on me from within. Understanding and knowing these influential resources enables me to act (differently), to re-learn, to perform something else — to try, to fail, to try again. One day, I might finally change the tools for building a set — a tape, a PC with 3D software, plain wood and iron, a hammer, or a saw — for tools of sculpting relationships — 'a workshop', 'an installation', 'training', 'a record', 'a test', or 'a rehearsal'.

For my doctoral studies, I chose performing set designer as my research method rather than as object of study. This performance brought me towards another professional status: that of curator. I curate objects, people, places. I care about their relations. I compose worlds, I do not build them from scratch. Radicalising ourselves (myself) can make us (me) transparent being(s), through whom one's situation is visible.

What if my extreme self is 'we'?

Video description: A video documents a performance by a man and a woman, both wearing belly extensions. The soundtrack is of heavy banging, reminiscent of someone hammering nails into wood.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/5944/2033> to see the images.

Research Questions:

How can we practise being 'we'? How can we perform more together — more as one?

How can we experience 'we' on the levels of body, emotion, imagination, and politics?

How is the 'self' established? Where does it begin, and where does it end?

How can we radically refuse 'I' without fear of establishing a new totality, where a person no longer matters?

How can we prototype the environments, actions, and situations of becoming 'we'?

We, the Three of Us: Repertoire of Objects

In the summer of 2023, I created a testing round of a performance situation for one visitor and two artists. Titled *We, the Three of Us*, the situation aimed to connect most of the objects we created (including a few extra, and excluding one) into a twenty-minute-long experience of being physically lost in the body of research. The objects included belly extensions, heavy pillows, a collective costume, iPads with recordings of situations, a yoga mat, a tea set, a painful tool, an MP3 player with sound, and a scaled-down map. The objects were placed on a map with 4.5m x 5m dimensions, where instructions in the form of stories were printed. Each performance invited one visitor to the situation of two artists explaining their research project, and visitors were allowed to enter the field of this research represented by the map and the objects. Here, they could navigate themselves as they wished — they could decide to follow the stories, they could interact with the objects, they could ask us more questions and further guidelines. We were present on the map with them and after the introduction was done, we tried to interact as little as possible to give all agency to the visitor. After the first three performances and their visitors' feedback, we decided to emphasise the role of the visitor and give them more power. They were asked to place the bodies of artists (of us) on the map as they wish.

In the previous stages of *Becoming Monika*, we used and created objects to emphasise one's body or one's own materiality, with a view to bring the abstract topic of 'we' back to a human scale. We wanted to perform a practice of becoming we, and to do this we had to act as 'we', not as 'I'. For workshops in the framework of *It's All About Education... Again* (2022), we created a concrete object — The Grater — to trigger a personal flow of association while

listening to short utterances. The objects in the installations *The Summer School of We* (2022) and *Monika's Training Room* (2022) were situated in order to stress the physical presence of the visitor inside the museum/art space. Here, the conventions of recognition of the object follow the 'white cube' corpus of knowledge: Isolated from reality by the white walls of the white cube, whatever is placed there loses function and becomes an object of art (O'Doherty 1986: 14), which we tried to disturb through attention to placement and form. In the videos or performances, objects were used rather as props or as costumes in a conventional sense — to be used to illustrate the narrative, to aesthetically and materially support situations and actions, with no agency when not in use.

In *We, the Three of Us*, the bodies of two artists and one visitor entered the map, where texts, things, and other humans were positioned and were invited to delve into conversation with the research topic. With time limited to twenty minutes and space defined by the map, an artist's body became equal to objects made by them. This performative situation still needs to be developed more with a focus on precise instructions and atmosphere, yet its first five iterations explored the potential for objects to be used as keystones of the world of Monika. Again, this changed my initial approach to the object as such: Regardless of latent role or prescribed use, the object created rules in the world of the research. In other words, the objects generated their own agency.

Slideshow description: A slideshow of seven colour images documents the performance *We, the Three of Us*, at the Academy of Fine Arts Prague, on the 22nd & 23rd of June 2023.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/6813/3811> to see the slideshow.

What If We Are All Pregnant With Each Other?

My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression (*Ausdruck*), and there the visual and auditory experiences, for example, are pregnant one with the other, and their expressive value is the ground of the antepredicative unity of the perceived world, and, through it, of verbal expression (*Darstellung*) and intellectual significance (*Bedeutung*). My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 273)

Mixed-media cluster description: Six text boxes containing titles and descriptions of performance objects are illustrated by four videos and five slideshows, showing the objects being performed or exhibited.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2310857/2310858/6907/4995> to see the cluster.

Belly Extensions

AIM: to imagine all of the people we are carrying inside of us, to embody the more-in-one, to provoke embodiment of being pregnant with the other(s)

WHEN: 2021

USED: Summer School of 'We'; Monika's Training Room; We, the Three of Us

BY: Anna Chrtková

Cuddle Objects

AIM: To represent those who are not physically there, to perform closeness

WHEN: 2020

USED: Summer School of 'We' and Karolína Schön's individual practice

BY: Karolína Schön

Heavy Pillows

AIM: to physically feel the weight of the others, to collectively collapse

WHEN: 2021

USED: Y: Harbour of Sorrow, Monika's Training Room and Karolína Schön's individual practice

BY: Karolína Schön

Maps

AIM: to capture 'we', to navigate ourselves in the interdependent world, to lose ourselves in the interdependent world

WHEN: 2020

USED: research residency in Nová Cvernovka

BY: Anna Chrtková, Matyáš Grimmich & Karolína Schön

A Collective Costume

AIM: To demonstrate being one

WHEN: 2023

USED: We, the Three of Us

BY: Anna Chrtková, Karolína Schön, Matyáš Grimmich

This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445> which it is meant to support and not replace.

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