

Eva Švankmajerová: From the Interior

Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Rachel Fijalkowska

Please note that no permissions have been sought or obtained for images.

“*Ringmistress*. A young girl who had a tale to tell. If other girls had one too, and I have a solid hunch they did, you have every reason to worry, but nothing to fear.”

Eva Švankmajerová ¹

Though she is a significant artist and writer, the work of Eva Švankmajerová (1940-2005) is not widely known outside of her native Czechia, despite being exhibited and published internationally. This is all the more surprising given that it has a clear and explicit context within which it may first be approached: surrealism. Along with her husband the artist and filmmaker Jan Švankmajer, Švankmajerová joined the Group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists in 1970, and would go on to become one of its leading members until her death in 2005. Regardless of the recent interest among scholars and curators to present the work of undervalued international surrealist practitioners, and particularly women surrealists, in recent years very few substantial historical projects have included her, a silence that belies the wide range of themes and concerns her work tackles.²

Predominantly active as a painter, Švankmajerová also had extensive practices in drawing and printmaking, but she was also notable for pursuing work as a poet and author, as well

¹ Eva Švankmajerová, quoted in František Dryje, *Eva Švankmajerová* (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2006) p.24.

² A prominent instance is the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, curator and editor Patricia Allmer (Manchester and Munich: Manchester Art Gallery / Prestel, 2009), in particular Donna Roberts’s chapter “‘Neither Wings nor Stones’: The Psychological Realism of Czech Woman Surrealists”. Of the range of studies of her work published in Czech, Dryje’s

as ceramicist (either on her own or with Švankmajer).³ In addition to these domains, she also made significant contributions to several short and feature-length films by Švankmajer, as well as by other directors, in the roles of designer and art director. Švankmajer has an international profile as a filmmaker, and has received considerable scholarly recognition, but Švankmajerová's contributions to them, and indeed the significance of this couple working together in collaborative partnership over the course of many decades, calls for emphasis and further exploration. The major context for her practice, however, is the situation of the Švankmajers in the Group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists, which for several reasons was one of the most cohesive and collaboratively-oriented of the international surrealist groups during the 35-year period of her participation, and laid considerable emphasis on collective activity and exchange, including interpretative games and joint research projects.⁴ Over the years, Švankmajerová would assume a crucial role for the group in practical and intellectual terms: according to Švankmajer's only half-joking anecdote, she would come to be acknowledged as its "foreman", taking responsibility for the group's leadership since its most senior member Vratislav Effenberger didn't want to assume the role: "and for the first time surrealism was ruled by the female principle, as if cut out from André Breton's *Arcanum 17*," Švankmajer writes.⁵ While it's tempting to extol Švankmajerová as a unique case of a woman at the head of a surrealist group, no doubt this would be to mis-read the complex, interactive and equitable dynamic of collective practice in Czech surrealism; nevertheless, her distinctive standing and the respect it earned her among her colleagues was of a clearly ethical as well as practical nature, and she came to be seen by many of them as something of the group's moral compass.⁶

Eva Švankmajerová is also available in English, but like the others seems not to have been widely distributed abroad.

³ The bibliography of Dryje's *Eva Švankmajerová*, for example, lists no fewer than 107 published texts.

⁴ For an account of some of these aspects of the group, see Krzysztof Fijalkowski, "Invention, Imagination, Interpretation: Collective Activity in the Contemporary Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group," *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 3 (Spring 2005), https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/63517387/surrealism_issue_3.pdf.

⁵ Jan Švankmajer, "Dear Eva," in Dryje, *Eva Švankmajerová*, 25-6.

⁶ Several group members confided this view to us in conversations after her death.

This breadth of activity, and a career that spans the mid-1960s to the mid-2000s, means that there are many ways in which one might approach and begin to understand Švankmajerová's work. Here, our focus is on a single constellation of themes, predominantly from her paintings of the 1970s, but with luck a distinctive and revealing one: gender roles, interior spaces, domestic environments and corporeal identities, all ideas which can be related to parallel concerns elsewhere in surrealist practice, but that in Švankmajerová's case build into a specific core of thought around the morphology of being that links the personal to the social, the internalised to the explicit, the realm of critical imagination to the material experience of the everyday.

Critical and personal contexts

Writing in 1978 Effenberger, at the time the leading theorist of the Group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists, summed up the attitude of Švankmajerová's practice:

Not wishing, like those currently fashionable tendencies, to attract attention with reminiscences of the good old days of the avant-garde, decorated with the spirit and with craft, Eva Švankmajerová paints the current *débaclé from the interior*. From within traditional painting [...] From within humankind that has precisely set itself at a crossroads of history.⁷

Effenberger is referring to the artist's very particular approach to painting in the period of the 1960s and 1970s, in which rather than reflecting current or historical trends, be these surrealist traditions or not, her most immediate frame of reference appeared to be (appeared, since this strategy was in several ways not what it seemed at first sight) folk idioms, the seemingly rudimentary styles of rural or popular representation: joyous, robust and accessible. The image of an 'interior', however, has other resonances too. Effenberger's observation chimes with the specificity of 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovak surrealism, secreted like a shell and confined *in camera* in defence against three decades

⁷ Vratislav Effenberger in Eva Švankmajerová, *Césarienne: Peintures* (Paris: Le Triskèle, undated (1978), unpaginated (Effenberger's emphasis).

of hostile and repressive environments (Nazi annexation and rule 1939-1945, communist control from 1948 to 1989, with a brief and partial relaxation during the mid-1960s brought to an end in 1968), under all of which pursuing public surrealist activity proved near impossible for the group. Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, vigorous and characterful in the 1930s – forging close contacts with French surrealists but owing its specificity to the home-grown concerns of the Devětsil circle of the 1920s that in some respects made it the twin, not the younger sibling, of Paris surrealism – had undergone a forced change as it struggled to survive in the climate of the 1950s.⁸ Under Stalinist rule, in a climate of show trials, social manipulation and curtailments of everyday liberty, many of the priorities of international surrealism such as the Romantic, utopian blend of love, poetry and the marvellous that characterized much surrealist practice of the 1930s seemed no longer germane to the situation in hand. The material, tangible everyday – with all of its grit, its patent absurdity – emerged as the critical framework for the post-war Czechoslovak surrealists. In many ways, this represented less a switch in priorities than a judicious selection from existing characteristics: ‘Nothing is more fantastic than the material and social reality in which we live’, the pre-war group’s leading theorist Karel Teige had written.⁹ Petr Kral, a member of the group throughout the 1960s, emphasizes Czechoslovak surrealism’s focus on the concrete and the critical (a ‘concrete irrationality’, as the group defined it) as both defensive gesture and political weapon:

Far from developing surrealism in its canonical form, [post-war Czechoslovak surrealism] sought to renew and radically rethink it, all the more inventively since the war and its consequences had cast doubts for them on many of its aspects. [...] Deflected from the utopia of a world attuned to desire, [Czechoslovak surrealists’] imagination turned to the present and its daily realities, so as to become the instrument of their critique.¹⁰

⁸ For an overview of the history of surrealism in the Czech lands, see Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Michael Richardson and Ian Walker, *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia: On the Needles of Days* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), chapter 1.

⁹ Karel Teige, in Aleš Kuneš, *Surrealist Incidence: Czech Photography in the Sixties* (Prague: Pražský Dům Fotografie, 1996), unpaginated.

¹⁰ Petr Král, “D'un imaginaire à l'autre,” in *Švankmajer E & J: Bouche à bouche*, edited by Pascal Vimenet (Montreuil: Éditions de l'œil, 2002), 28.

By the time Eva and Jan Švankmajer joined the group in 1970, soon after it had been driven underground yet again by a fresh reflux of social and political restraint, Effenberger had steered the group towards a set of priorities that were anti-aesthetic, critical rather than utopian, and rooted in observable, tangible and even outwardly banal experiences.

For Švankmajerová, one defining context of this deceptive banality was the home, rooted in her own childhood experiences and shifting notions of what 'home' might be. Born into a reasonably affluent but emotionally distant family in the small Central Bohemian town of Kostelec nad Černými lesy, at an early age she was sent for some time to live with her grandmother, resulting in a sense of disconnection that developed into a rebellious and fiercely independent character (indeed the subject of childhood trauma continued to be a highly significant theme for both of the Švankmajers in later years).¹¹ This emotional response could be directed as much towards places as relationships. "Houses," she would write: "the embodiment of a dream and the illusion of the beings that live in them. The houses, the history, the drama with its nooks, railings, turrets, doorknobs, pavements, stairs, bathtubs, covers, kettles. [...] Houses full of brushes and dog hair. Houses where children talk. Houses with frosted glass. Houses with cobwebs and cracked tiles. They will all go one day."¹²

In a number of ways, surrealists have always been wary of the domestic environment, with its stultifying assumptions about family, bourgeois ethics and traditional values; the specific

¹¹ Eva Švankmajerová, "Biography," in Eva Švankmajerová and Jan Švankmajer, *Anima Animus Animace* (Prague: Slovart / Arbor Vitae, 1998), 169; Dryje, *Eva Švankmajerová*, 7-8. The anchoring of Švankmajerová's practice in her own biographical and psychological experience is repeatedly flagged up by commentators, for example by Roberts, "Neither Wings nor Stones", 81. As Švankmajer recalled, "Eva did her own thing. [...] She pursued her own themes, her traumas, her issues. Her biggest trauma was her mother, and her brothers, with whom she settled scores through her art all her life" (in Daňhel, Jan and Adam Ořha, dirs. *Alchemical Furnace*, documentary, Athanor, 2020).

¹² Eva Švankmajerová, "Domy," in Eva Švankmajerová and Jan Švankmajer, *Jidlo* (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2004), 98.

context of Central and Eastern Europe under first Nazi occupation, then Soviet-style communism, adds extra nuances to an already complex paradigm.¹³ More specifically, Czechoslovak surrealism both before and after the war features the repeated and insistent theme of the home as an ambivalent, potentially shattered and shattering space, in which collapsed structures, remnants of objects and memories, anxious openings and closures all figure the parallels between wounded buildings and the dissolution of the autonomous self: paintings and drawings by the most significant artists of the pre-war group, Toyen and Jindřich Štyrský, and photographs by post-war practitioners such as Emila Medková or Miroslav Hák, all deploy the house and home as an anxious, turbulent space.

Perhaps it was something of this concern that might have encouraged Švankmajerová, whose interests lay in fine art, to choose instead to study interior design, as well as puppetry, at the Prague School of Applied Arts between 1954 and 1958, the year in which she first met Švankmajer.¹⁴ The couple married in 1960, forming one of the most fertile, interactive and long-lasting creative partnerships among the many instances of such collaborations in surrealism. The result was a complex, two-way exchange of ideas, a “dangerous dialogue” in the words of their friends Bertrand Schmitt and Marie-Dominique Massoni,¹⁵ but also one in which the theme of the domestic is highly visible, whether, as we shall see, in the appearance of furniture, domestic objects and interiors in their work, or in the troubled presence of the adult or childhood home in Švankmajer’s films.

¹³ For some discussion of the status of post-war Czechoslovak home and family life, see for example Daniel Just, “Art and everydayness: Popular culture and daily life in communist Czechoslovakia,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 6 (2012).

¹⁴ Jan and Eva Švankmajer, *The Communication of Dreams* (Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1992), 56.

¹⁵ Marie-Dominique Massoni and Bertrand Schmitt, “The Condensed Švankmajer,” in Vimenet, ed. *Švankmajer E & J*, English language supplement 49.



Fig. 1. Eva Švankmajerová, *Familial Bliss*, 1979

Domestic Dramas

Švankmajer's feature-length film *Little Otik* (2000) tells the story of a childless couple who imagine the tree stump found by the husband is a baby: christened Otesánek, it comes to life, grows and devours all and everyone in his path. Based on a Czech folk tale, the project was prompted by Švankmajerová's prior investigation of this theme (she would also be the film's art director) confronting the malevolent animism of natural objects with the familiar conventions of the modern home and family. As Derek Sayer points out, deep shared convictions about 'home' underlie the imagination of Czech national and cultural identity, from the national anthem 'Kde domov můj' ('Where my home is') to the expression of Czechness as 'u nás' ('at home / here').¹⁶ The vision of Otesánek as a devouring monster growing up in the bosom of a family environment saturated with unspoken local myths – one that indeed brings this adored tyrant to life – clearly resonates with Švankmajerová's experience of disjointed family life, and can be seen returning again and again in her work. From its founding generations of the 1920s onwards, surrealists have

often been implacably opposed to the institution of the family as the first stifling nexus of social conventions and (patriarchal) controls. This critique is pushed considerably further, and in deeply personal ways, in Švankmajerová's work; here, the constrained space of the domestic environment and the seemingly inescapable roles of those trapped in it, above all the women, keep folding together and merging in her paintings and narratives. Writing about the Švankmajers' recurring obsessions, her surrealist colleagues Massoni and Schmitt define the verb 'to inhabit': "A house like a belly that needs constant feeding and whose appetite increases with its size. A project never to be finished."¹⁷

Švankmajerová's 1979 painting *Familial Bliss* problematises this dilemma vividly (Fig. 1). At first glance it depicts a naked woman leaping from her chair, her breasts standing upright, arms stretched out in front of her body. Her face wears a serene expression, one perhaps of ecstasy, with her mouth slightly open and her eyes glazed, staring into the distance. The woman's lower form resembles a mermaid, and although her pubis is not visible, the fluid lines and petal-like forms of her limbs remind us of the female sex. Her lower half is made up almost purely of vulvic form. The figure levitates above the chair and away from the table in an ecstatic gesture, with the table resembling a springboard, a jump for freedom. She is an escapee fleeing the constraints of family life.

It is only by looking more closely at the lines, tones and shapes around the female figure that a large male head emerges. The woman is inside this head: they are merged and she cannot break free. She is pulling away, but her hair becomes his hair, his fringe, and they are inextricably connected: her knees are his jawline, her foot belongs to his nose. Her body is not her own. She is his subconscious, and she structures his existence. She is trapped and cannot get away: now her expression could be a picture of fear, not ecstasy; a realisation that there is no way to sever the ties with the man at the head of their table. They are one, for better or worse, and although her gaze is directed towards the outside world, she can do nothing but inhabit his space. She is torn between two worlds and is not

¹⁶ Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 26 and 193-95.

¹⁷ Massoni and Schmitt, "Condensed Švankmajer," 50.

whole in either – reflecting the inner conflict, the complacency and compliance that exists in all familial bliss. Revealing such stifling but invisible domestic ties is consistent with Švankmajerová's wider concerns: as František Dryje writes, she “turns mostly to the external object, making her theme the tense and often extremely banal relationships between humans. [...] She unmasks everything false, everything which camouflages, everything with which people deceive themselves.”¹⁸



Fig. 2. Eva Švankmajerová, *Wind*, 1974

In other works, an identification between the female body and the spaces and rituals of the home is just as spectral but opens onto the possibility of a way out, though their enactment of what Švankmajer saw as her “basic character trait: the experiencing of everything in a kind of calamitous foreboding. [...] And thus the work [...] is neither a pure game, nor the desire for decorativeness and beauty, but the means (and, it seems, the only one) by which to compensate for incomprehensible, unjust, inadequate life.”¹⁹ The wind in the 1974 painting of the same name (Fig. 2) has all but blown the cloth or cloak of woman off the

¹⁸ František Dryje, ‘Formative Meetings’, in Švankmajerová and Švankmajer, *Anima Animus Animace*, 13.

¹⁹ Quoted in Dryje, ‘Formative Meetings’, 14.

table. Having sat at Eva's table and enjoyed her hospitality, we know that the heart of home was something she offered generously, providing a space at the table for food and discussion. A recurring theme in her imagery, so many events take place around a table, but the climate is often tempestuous in domestic life. The wind changes direction in an instant, leaving those holding it together falling, seeking somewhere to shelter and to hide. Here there is a sense that the womanly tablecloth apparition is resigned to falling, ready to give in to the wind and be taken with it. She is held down by the hearty teapot, with the teacup child in her womb. The sugar bowl holds on to her shoulder, preventing her ensuing departure. She is poised, ready to drop. If only the wind were stronger, the air would lift and throw her somewhere new.



Fig. 3. Eva Švankmajerová, *Tenth House*, 1980

One nuance of this mistrust of the domestic environment from the perspective of communist-era Czechoslovakia is the possibility of political readings: anxieties around control and surveillance in private and public space, and of a literal or metaphoric 'house arrest' and the anxiety that dwellers might vanish or become absorbed into the fabric of

their surroundings.²⁰ As Massoni and Schmitt write, Czech surrealism as a whole is marked by “constant disappearances and reappearances, moments of visibility and moments of eclipse.”²¹ For Švankmajerová, the idea of the house or home as both lair and snare for its female inhabitants, of a ghostly merging of form, space, body and identity, is never far away. The painting *Tenth House* (1980, Fig. 3) is explicit in this possibility: body and building are one, and that building is on fire; but how far is this to be taken literally? Its title points towards reading that complicates the idea of the home as a physical space, and towards disciplines of alternate knowledge, specifically astrology – a theme that interested surrealists in both France and Czechoslovakia.²² Astrologists generally divide the horoscope into twelve ‘houses’, each ruled by particular planets and star signs and with its own defining characteristics and domains that in turn exert influence over the individual. The associations of the Tenth House are especially significant here: aligned with social status, aspirations, reputation and obligations, above all it references power – particularly parental (and often specifically paternal) control.

Tenth House of course suggests obvious associations with obligations and the power of the father, interpretations that could frame this painting in terms of a wish to set fire to the patriarchal regimes that construct and govern the roles and bodies of women, stunting growth and creativity or burning career paths; but there is more to add. The flames emerge from the chest in a screaming frenzy. This fire has really taken hold and is raging deep in the heart of femininity. The roof is a head bent low, an arm flows down the side of the building and continues, bent under the front of the house, clutching the chest and stomach:

²⁰ This political perspective, and the fatal collusions between public and private space in totalitarian society, is one of the predominant readings of Švankmajer’s animated film *The Flat* (1968), in which a nameless protagonist is trapped in a dilapidated apartment, besieged and humiliated by the hostile everyday objects and materials around him.

²¹ Marie-Dominique Massoni and Bertrand Schmitt, “Invisible Constellation?,” in Vimenet, *Švankmajer E & J*, English language supplement 9.

²² The fascination of astrology for surrealists in France, particularly André Breton, is well documented, but Czechoslovak surrealists titled one of their early journals *Zvěrokruh* (*Zodiac*) in 1930, while *Znamení zvěrokruhu* (*Signs of the Zodiac*) was the name of a series of ten confidential dossiers circulated among the group in 1951.

the woman within is in pain, she is hot, adding fuel to the fire, breathless, without identity or a face. The river of blood meanders under her legs, a woman's fortune winding its path through the landscape, through nature. The flames like tongues spread her words as arms of smoke whispering to the night sky, telling the tales of her smouldering dreams.

Images of the convergence of the female body and the powers represented by the domestic environment are a recurring trope in feminist-inflected creative works, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) to Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* paintings, drawings and prints from the 1940s onwards; in *Tenth House*, this imagery attains one of its starkest incarnations.²³ Švankmajerová's vision of this physical and conceptual house, of a building that has merged with its tormented prisoner, is vivid in its evocations. But for the artist easy binaries are problematised and interactive, so at the same time the framework for this calamity is also ambivalent, moved by magical forces and tensions at a site that still remains a dwelling. As art historian and fellow surrealist Alena Nádvorníková writes:

I can see Eva's tenth house clearly. Shreds of mist and hunks of matter trailing behind it and underneath it and around it raging winds blowing from pole to pole; it grows from her innards and merges with the higher, erect part of her body. [...] Eva is enchanted in that house: the lower monsters could of course rise, abandon the sedentary position in front of the canvasses and run away, although the flight would lead across that ominous, anguished plane showing no traces of life, into a place of unrestrained blossom. [...] The tenth house is vulnerable, there are children in it, things constantly tend to collapse [...]. The fire inside needs to be fed incessantly.²⁴

²³ To this list we might also add Laurie Simmons's *Walking House* of 1989, again – like Bourgeois' images and *Tenth House* – a house mounted on a woman's body or legs (and replacing her head). Given the celebrity of Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* paintings, their frequent critical association with surrealism and their striking similarity to Švankmajerová's painting, it is worth noting that it is highly unlikely that the latter would have encountered Bourgeois' work by 1980 given the limited visibility of Western art in socialist Czechoslovakia, and indeed the belated public recognition for Bourgeois, whose first major museum show was only staged in 1982.

²⁴ Alena Nádvorníková, "Eva Švankmajerová's Tenth House," *Dunganon*, no. 4 (undated [1985]), unpaginated.



Figs 4 and 5. Eva Švankmajerová, *Iron*, lithograph, 1996; *Table* (*Furniture catalogue*), lithograph, 1995

Bodies and objects, objects as bodies

If the ambiguous situation of women's bodies in home environments shades into their absorption into the forms and structures of domestic space, in Švankmajerová's paintings, drawings, prints and ceramics this is also true for the body's relationship to everyday household objects and furniture. Several cycles of lithographs from the mid-1990s explore in graphic form a morphology of bodies and things, in which the one is figured by the other in the double-image register of Arcimboldo's mannerist portraits (also a repeated reference in Švankmajer's work), hinting that to use something repeatedly means to risk becoming it (Figs. 4 and 5). The perspective of *Table* (1995) shape-shifts, so that sometimes its two breasts are like cakes, with their reflection on a highly polished table, and at other times the breasts and shadows are flat like eyes, with wisps of hair framing the face and the shoulder line. The edge of the table has a rectangular mouth, the tabletop is a torso and body with legs tucked underneath, emerging from the pleats of a skirt. But observing the image more closely, another narrative develops. The woman is incarcerated within the table. Her legs are below and her breasts have pierced the surface, forming a landscape of body parts. The edge of the table becomes a vaginal opening. The surface is multi-

layered; superimposed onto the woman is a flat, imposing penis, the shoulders become testicles. Could she have been pinned down and penetrated through the slot, perhaps? Whichever way she turns she is taken at this table, where she is always the meal, consumed.



Fig. 6. Eva Švankmajerová, *Bed*, 1976

The downy, snowy landscape of *Bed* (1976, Fig. 6), meanwhile, is an expansive winter scene, stretching beyond the edges of the bed frame, soft yet icy and with one corner of the cover lifted to reveal the red velvety folds of the under-sheet, suggesting a wound-like vulva. The plush, quilted diamond can so easily be read as the female sex, the pillows as breasts and the whole bed a symbol for womanhood – a place where the feminine resides, where the expectations of what goes on between the sheets is always present the moment she slips under the covers. But the viewer also sees grief in the image: blood-soaked bedding, a slash, a need to heal; the temptress staining the virgin snow. No place for calm, warm contemplation; no room for sleep or dreams hidden from public view. The marital bed, the hotel bed, the young girl's bed is always this bed.



Figs. 7 and 8. Eva Švankmajerova, *Erotic Bowl*, 1978; *Birth*, 1996

The identification of bodies with objects, resulting in hybrid domestic forms, is also pursued more literally and tangibly in a series of ceramic works, made sometimes by Švankmajerová alone but often in collaboration with Švankmajer under the moniker 'EJ Kostelec' (a name that references Eva's home town). Playful and frequently funny, these items have so far received little critical attention, perhaps reflecting a stubborn prejudice against craft practices in the creative arts. Made in the couple's home pottery studio using the technique of majolica, a tin-glazed ceramic generally used for tableware which produces a plain white surface, the results are highly varied and reflect the abiding concerns of both artists in relation to their subject matter. What they share is firstly repeated reference to the human body and to nature – where a promiscuous spawning of limbs, body parts or heads as well as forms such as shells emerges from the clay, hinting at a latent animation – and secondly that each of them is also a potentially functioning item, not just a decorative object. Plates, bowls, jugs, vessels and storage jars of all kinds, even at their most ornate they all retain at least a vestigial possibility of functional purpose, now deflected towards imaginative possibilities (and indeed such items are available for daily use in the Švankmajers' two households, notably the kitchen).²⁵ This proliferation of anthropomorphised forms promises a ludic rephrasing of the everyday domestic sphere, its persistent chores and obligations, redolent with newly charged and divergent meanings:

²⁵ The Švankmajers' two homes, fascinating domestic environments in their own right, are highly distinctive historic buildings, one in the Hradčany district of Prague, the other in the village of Horní Staňkov. The latter in particular is decorated with murals, ceramic tiles and decorative paintwork by Švankmajerová.

as Švankmajer writes in his text ‘The Magic of Objects’: “The New Applied Art that we have in mind constitutes an attempt to restore the magical dimension of an overtly utilitarian activity, ie to restore the legitimacy of irrationality.”²⁶ In particular, several of the ceramic works made just by Švankmajerová explore the collision between practical kitchenware or tableware and the disruptive possibilities of sexuality and reproduction as they hover between bodies and artifacts, as in the witty but disruptive *Birth* (1996) in which a sequence of increasingly distended jugs gives birth to a smaller, perfectly formed cup (Figs. 7 and 8).

Altogether bolder and more disturbing is *Wardrobe* (2001), a large, traditional wooden wardrobe with double doors and a drawer painted inside and out in vivid pinks, greens and blues in a way that inevitably – but superficially – recalls the lively folk art traditions of rustic painted furniture across Central and Eastern Europe, a staple of national ethnographic museums and emblematic of the construction of cultural identity by post-war socialist states around rural and working class traditions. Švankmajerová’s hulking object belongs to an entirely different order, closer to the less reassuring traditions of folk memory and narrative. Its doors depict a troubling encounter on a hillside between a clothed man – his diminutive head obscured by a hat – who makes a grab for a naked woman, her thrown back head morphing into an animal’s. Fling open the doors and the revelation is an explicit coupling as he holds and penetrates her mounted on his standing form; the backs of the two doors show them walking off in separate directions. “But the cupboard is a body or a part of one. A body that can be unbuttoned and opened up, that can be torn or cut and that bleeds; usually, but not always, a woman’s body. A canvas is an object in the same way as a dish bearing a rebus or as pots setting up for an orgy,” write Massoni and Anna Pravdova, pointing out how any object may be available for unexpected corporeal and erotic digressions.²⁷ Tryst or rape? Either way, the idea of storing bedclothes or clothing in *Wardrobe*, or of placing it in your bedroom, invites disruptive associations.

²⁶ Jan Švankmajer, “The Magic of Objects,” in Jan and Eva Švankmajer, *Communication of Dreams*, 47.

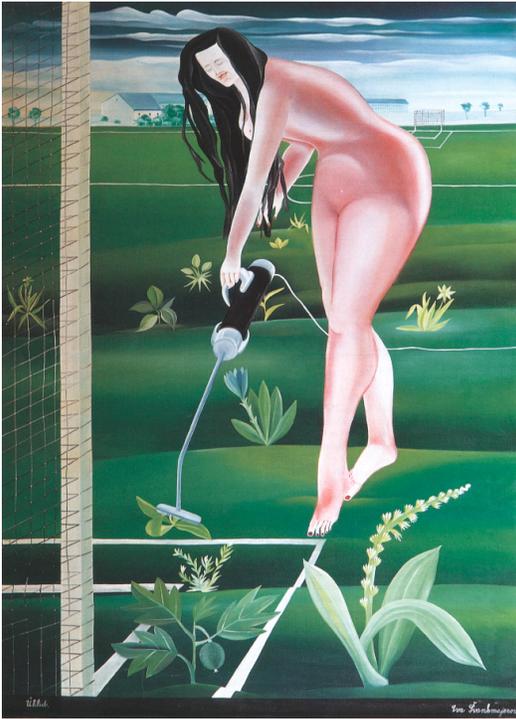


Fig. 9. Eva Švankmajerová, *Cleaning up*, 1972

Gender, work and prohibition: ‘women’s lot’

The emancipation of women is not possible in this civilisation [...]. It was no joke, finding out that I was to spend my life in a lot of ordinary, manual physical activity which is called women’s work, and that all human and intellectual strivings were to be suspect in my gender [...]. They kept nothing from me. During the whole of my childhood plump women tractor drivers with headscarves looked down at me frighteningly from posters. For twenty years I met no one who would believe that when I grew up I would paint pictures.²⁸

A sequence of Švankmajerová’s paintings from 1972 show naked women performing chores within scenarios in which interior and exterior, sexuality and labour are confused – handmaidens to those obligations she herself would later refer to as “the curse of women’s

²⁷ Marie-Dominique Massoni and Anna Pravdová, “Eva Švankmajerová: Impudent Indifference of the Cataclysm,” in Vimenet, ed., *Švankmajer E & J*, 59.

²⁸ Eva Švankmajerová, “Emanicipation Cycle” (1976), in Eva Švankmajerová and Jan Švankmajer, *Anima Animus Animace* (Prague: Slovart / Arbor Vitae, 1998), 42.

work”.²⁹ In later years, she would recall the awful drudgery of chores such as washing up (“the most hateful work ever”) in her family home, a strange house entered via the kitchen.³⁰ A seam of dark humour pervades these images. *Hard Working Girl in an Interior* pictures a woman on her hands and knees, planting or picking seedlings on the earthen floor of an otherwise empty domestic room, her bare backside to the open door. *Cleaning up* (Fig. 9) has another ‘housewife’ apparently vacuum-cleaning a football pitch. This voluptuous figure is large and looming; her smooth, curvaceous hips and thighs extend to an elegant leg and pointed toe. The field is her stage: like a dancer, she weeds with grace, engrossed in her task. Her long, flowing locks suggest she is in her prime, nubile, fruit of the land and prime for picking. Her nails are painted, she is well groomed.

She is both exquisitely beautiful and gifted at her chores, maybe finding intimate, tactile pleasure and time for herself when her right hand caresses her own hair. Her eyes are closed: she has to find her own moments of bliss. Is she transported to her own inner sanctuary, fuelled by her unquestionable sensuality? Sexually desirable as well as domestic goddess, the two combined create an explosion of stereotypical male fantasy. She holds on to the penis-shaped vacuum cleaner; it appears to ejaculate and suck up the shrubs and plants at the same time. The long white lead draws out the football pitch, the space created by her efforts for male leisure time, beyond the home. From her labour is born an arena for his freedom as she tirelessly clears the weeds. They will continue to grow, so her job here is never done. Has she worked all day? Will she be there again at first light? If she keeps her eyes closed she can continue to dream of another life.

While Švankmajerová’s experience of growing up in wartime and post-war Czechoslovakia was traumatic from the perspective of family environments, it also meant a growing awareness of the strict limitations to her ambitions imposed on her as a girl and a woman, even as the official narrative of communist society proclaimed universal liberty and equality. This would have been true for her lifetime possibilities as a whole, but they were

²⁹ Švankmajerová, *Césarienne*, unpaginated.

³⁰ Eva Švankmajerová, ‘Le Rêve’, in Eva and Jan Švankmajer, *La Contamination des sens* (Annecy: Centre d’Action Culturelle, 1991), unpaginated.

especially applicable to her aspirations as an artist: “What a shame you’re a girl,” she recalled being told by her art teacher at the School of Applied Arts: “you could have been a great painter.”³¹

The conditions around gender and society have a specific set of histories and identities in Central and Eastern Europe during the communist era (and consequently the post-communist era too), and accounts of feminist currents in Czechoslovakia and Czechia, for example, highlight their distinction from Western narratives.³² Women’s participation in the struggle for Czech independence, followed by significant rights under the First Republic (1918-1938), lent Czech society a better level of equality, and in consequence the perception of greater harmony, between men and women than elsewhere.³³ As generally in communist Europe, after the war women’s movements were officially sanctioned and organised, affording them prominence but also aligning them in many people’s eyes with the wider nexus of state control. Under communism, the Czechoslovak women’s movement prioritised enhanced working rights, but at the same time consolidated the identity of women as homemakers and child-carers, in this way effectively invoking a double burden of labour responsibilities.³⁴ The 1990s generation of post-Velvet Revolution feminists, in contrast, viewed socialist-era Czechoslovakia as a corrupt, failed regime dominated by male interests and whose commitment to gender equality was in fact a repression of women’s identities.³⁵ But once again they also emphasised the communist-era domestic sphere, this time reading it as a bastion of women’s personal and ethical freedom and a space in which to elude state ideology and control, while also often

³¹ Švankmajerová, “Biography,” 169.

³² Marianne A. Ferber and Phyllis Hutton Raabe, “Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (2003), 407-09; Angela Argent, “Post-Communism and ‘Women’s Experience’?,” in *Partial Truths and the Politics of Community*, ed. Mary Ann Tetreault and Robin L. Teske (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 38-42.

³³ Ferber and Raabe, “Women in the Czech Republic,” 410.

³⁴ Ferber and Raabe, “Women in the Czech Republic,” 409-12.

³⁵ Angela Argent, “Hatching Feminisms: Czech Feminist Aspirations in the 1990s,” *Gender & History* 20, no. 1 (April 2008), 88-89.

promoting a feminist renewal of society in terms of symbolic metaphors around women's fertility and maternal roles.³⁶

These trends give a wider social and cultural context for Švankmajerová's work, but they might also misdirect us about the extent to which, until 1989 at least, the audience for this work was really the immediate circle of her fellow Czechoslovak surrealists, gradually extended to international surrealist networks; and to which the concerns of this intimate, research-driven but largely confidential collective surrealist culture mirrored the Švankmajers' deeply personal primary sources (especially play, dreams and the irrational) for their creative practice. At the same time, though she viewed her female identity in contemporary society as (in her husband's words) an imposed "injustice", she also wished to explore it. As Švankmajer recounts in the documentary *Alchemical Furnace*,

Feminists took her for a hardcore feminist, but she was ambivalent about feminism. Her attitude was, if she had the misfortune to be a woman, she might as well use the feminine weapons in her struggle. And they are powerful weapons, as she found out. So she did not want to renounce the benefits of femininity.³⁷

"Were you a feminist at all?" asked Jan shortly after her death; "I know how the comrade girls driving tractors terrified you in the 1950s and how cunningly you were able to exploit feminine guile."³⁸ Švankmajerová had little interest in presenting her repeated focus on gender and everyday experience in terms of feminist theory, reflecting the extent to which surrealist groups in this period often tended to read feminism as just one more current in a nexus of ideologies in thrall to cultural and intellectual repressions of all political tendencies. Nevertheless, her work articulates an explicit critical and imaginative resistance to received constructions of female identity, and to the spaces and

³⁶ Argent, "Hatching Feminisms," 86-87 and 97-99.

³⁷ Švankmajer in Daňhel and Ol'ha, *Alchemical Furnace*.

³⁸ Švankmajer, "Dear Eva," in Dryie, *Eva Švankmajerová*, 26; see also Dušan Brozman and Martin Souček in the same volume, 88-89. Purš takes up this theme by writing that "the artist's femininity is intrinsically projected onto the psychological plan of her works by both extreme poles which it can reach: by a special simplicity imbued with cunning" ("Eva Švankmajerová," 36).

representations of oppression Švankmajerová and her colleagues occasionally refer to as “women’s lot”.³⁹ As Massoni and Pravdová assert when writing of her works: “to reduce womanhood to magazine clichés – even the feminist ones – is to reduce womanhood to idiocy and silence. How to bear this shoddy brand of femininity, without poison, without fatality, without cruelty, where no jot of humour ever provokes an instant misdemeanour?”⁴⁰



Fig. 10. Eva Švankmajerová, *No Entry*, 1978 (original in colour)

Towards an interior

If Švankmajerová’s work as an artist gives image to the invisible relationships and constraints of family and social life, with all of their ambivalent promises and denials, they are also a realm in which to protect and reclaim the space of the self (of *her* self), to draw,

³⁹ Martin Stejskal, in Group of Czech-Slovak Surrealists, *Other Air: The Group of Czech-Slovak Surrealists 1990-2011* (Prague: Sdružení Analogonu, 2012), 151.

⁴⁰ Massoni and Pravdová, “Eva Švankmajerová,” 59.

to withdraw and to re-draw. The deceptively simple painting *No Entry* (1978) captures these gestures (Fig. 10). A hand, deep in the dark shadows, holds back the long, flowing drapery around a window. A second, more prominent hand, held high, waves to a friendly face or to us as onlookers, but this interpretation is too simplistic and conveys a basic illusion. The canvas presents reoccurring, familiar imagery reminiscent of an open vulva, as we have seen, a theme often found elsewhere in Švankmajerová's work. The opening appears overly stretched, medical or anatomical in appearance, ready to give birth rather than sexualised. The central bar of the window prevents entry or expulsion. The hand is not waving or inviting anyone in, it forbids entry; the hand shouts: keep back, stay out. Švankmajerová's own statement about the painting makes this defensive prohibition, and the impassioned acrimony that calls for it, very plain:

This signal means you must not enter this place, into which there are paths nonetheless, but you don't have permission to use them. Do what you will. It would be best if it causes you pain and even better if you know that I know that you are in pain. Here, I am master. You can be certain that it's not often in life that you'll suffer so cruelly, with such shame, that you'll put up with such impotent rage. Rest assured that here, I'm master.⁴¹

If home and body alike are ambiguous sites, their openings and closures nevertheless offer a promise at least of both entry and evacuation, of snares and escapes. With great honesty, Švankmajerová's answer can just as likely suggest a third possibility: of a dwelling that knows of, that holds in check the forces in opposition, without denying or in some utopian manner hoping simply to resolve them. In many of her works, Švankmajerová seeks to renegotiate identity through painting from the interior, redrawing the self at the risk of losing it at the same time, reassigning relationships between body, identity and place as at the same time a defence, an imaginative regrouping, and a place from which to begin the process all over again. In this gamble we perhaps find a central wager of her work:

⁴¹ Švankmajerová, *Césarienne*, unpaginated (note that the title of this exhibition explicitly references birth and its potential violations).

So I will pick up some essentially innocent tool and I will spread paint with it in my hermitage. It seems safe and undemanding. And this time will remain essentially mine, if I am depicting a person, the woman into which I am spellbound. So I've been taken in by myself again.⁴²

⁴² Eva Švankmajerová, in Švankmajerová and Švankmajer, *Anima Animus Animace*, p.29.

Bibliography

- Patricia Allmer, ed. *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*. Manchester and Munich: Manchester Art Gallery / Prestel, 2009.
- Argent, Angela. "Hatching Feminisms: Czech Feminist Aspirations in the 1990s." *Gender & History* 20, no. 1 (April 2008): 86–104.
- Argent, Angela. "Post-Communism and 'Women's Experience'?" In *Partial Truths and the Politics of Community*, edited by Mary Ann Tetreault and Robin L. Teske, 35-66. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Daňhel, Jan and Adam Ol'ha, dirs. *Alchemical Furnace*. Athanor, 2020.
- Dryje, František. *Eva Švankmajerová*. Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2006.
- Ferber, Marianne A. and Phyllis Hutton Raabe. "Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 407-30.
- Fijalkowski, Krzysztof. "Invention, Imagination, Interpretation: Collective Activity in the Contemporary Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group." *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 3, (Spring 2005). https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/63517387/surrealism_issue_3.pdf.
- Fijalkowski, Krzysztof, Michael Richardson and Ian Walker. *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia: On the Needles of Days*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.
- Group of Czech-Slovak Surrealists. *Other Air: The Group of Czech-Slovak Surrealists 1990-2011*. Prague: Sdružení Analogonu, 2012.
- Just, Daniel. "Art and everydayness: Popular culture and daily life in communist Czechoslovakia." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 6 (2012): 703-20.
- Kuneš, Aleš. *Surrealist Incidence: Czech Photography in the Sixties*. Prague: Pražský Dům Fotografie, 1996.
- Nádvorníková, Alena. "Eva Švankmajerová's Tenth House." *Dunganon*, no. 4 (undated [1985]), unpaginated.
- Purš, Ivo. "Eva Švankmajerová: The Painted Art of." In Jan and Eva Švankmajer, *The Communication of Dreams*. Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1992, 27-38.
- Sayer, Derek. *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Švankmajer, Eva and Jan. *La Contamination des sens*. Annecy: Centre d'Action Culturelle, 1991.
- Švankmajer, Jan and Eva. *The Communication of Dreams*. Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1992.
- Švankmajerová, Eva. *Césarienne: Peintures*. exhibition catalogue. Paris: Le Triskèle, undated (1978).
- Švankmajerová, Eva and Jan Švankmajer. *Anima Animus Animace*. Prague: Slovart / Arbor Vitae, 1998.
- Švankmajerová, Eva and Jan Švankmajer, et al. *Jidlo*. Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2004.
- Vimenet, Pascal ed. *Švankmajer E & J: Bouche à bouche*. Montreuil: Éditions de l'œil, 2002.

ABSTRACT

Eva Švankmajerová (1940-2005) was a leading artist of the post-war Czech and Slovak surrealist group. Though primarily known as a painter, her practice also extended into graphics, ceramics and a fertile collaborative partnership with Jan Švankmajer. The focus of this paper is Švankmajerová's imaginative and deeply personal exploration of identity, gender and the body in the context of domestic environments and objects through artworks that seek, in František Dryje's words, to unmask "everything false, everything which camouflages, everything with which people deceive themselves". The snares of domestic environments, objects and roles become spaces in which to renegotiate identity through 'painting from the interior', an identity bound up in Švankmajerová's complex and sometimes anguished response to the construction of gender within post-war Czechoslovak society.