

GINTARĖ SOKELYTĖ - SONJA YAKOVLEVA
**WER HAT MACHT?
KÖRPER IM STREIK**

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FRANKFURTER
KUNSTVEREIN

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Who has Power? Striking Bodies
Gintarė Sokelytė and Sonja Yakovleva

4 May – 4 August 2024

Press preview: Friday, 3 May 2024, at 11.30 am

Opening: Friday, 3 May 2024, at 6 pm

Curated by Franziska Nori

The Frankfurter Kunstverein has invited two emerging Frankfurt-based artists, Gintarė Sokelytė and Sonja Yakovleva, to present their largest institutional solo shows so far. With powerful new works, they have created self-sufficient pictorial spaces in which the question of power is posed—what power are bodies exposed to, and what power is exercised by bodies in public space?

We live in a time of social acceleration, flexibilisation and optimisation. This dictate for constantly increasing performance and efficiency is not only reflected in the world of work, but also in each and every individual.

Sonja Yakovleva has been creating monumental papercuts with exuberant pictorial compositions for years. She became known for her ironic pop-feminist motifs, which developed into a manifesto of self-empowered female physicality. In this current exhibition, she looks at class issues and power relations in an achievement-oriented society. Yakovleva caricatures the cult of the body, the obsession with beauty and the competitiveness of today's fitness culture on social media as symptoms of internalised norms. In her visual worlds, she stages and reveals the work performed on one's own body as a means of dictating a compulsion to perform. As a counterpoint to this, Yakovleva examines labour as a

necessity both for people and for the functioning of cities and society as a whole. She contemplates the possibility of a strike, where primarily migrant workers would refuse the exploitation of their bodies in public and come together in solidarity to effect change.

Gintarė Sokelytė is a sculptor and filmmaker, but also draws and paints. The body, and its inner landscapes, has always formed the core of her research. It is seen as an instrument through which the self experiences the world and its own existence. For the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Sokelytė has created a completely self-contained course of spatial interventions, sculptures and video works, into she allows us to enter. She questions the power of unspoken fears and how it can be tamed, exploring a timeless urge with which one resists the uncertain through order and form. Her human figures are the field on which the power of an eternal struggle is played out. She interrogates what constitutes human existence and what humanity is when not governed by its self-created structures of order.

Who has Power? Striking Bodies is an invitation to take a sensual approach to contemporary phenomena through the works of Sonja Yakovleva and Gintarė Sokelytė. The exhibition is embedded in the Frankfurter Kunstverein's programmatic focus, which is committed to promoting emerging artists from Frankfurt and the Rhine-Main region and presenting innovative perspectives on social issues.

SONJA YAKOVLEVA

***Gym bro*, 2024**

Paper Cut, Photo cardboard

110 x 318 cm

***Pink sexy gym boot camp*, 2024**

Paper Cut, Photo cardboard

265 x 295 cm

***Untitled*, 2024**

Paper Cut, Photo cardboard

680 cm / ø 47 cm

INSTAREXIE, 2024

Ceiling installation of 240 paper cuts, photo cardboard, color foil
each 68 x 68 cm

Courtesy the artist

Sonja Yakovleva has been perfecting the art of paper cutting for more than ten years, transferring this historical medium into the very present. She lives with intensity and, at the same time, is a chronicler of the present. Her view of the world, of people and of everyday culture is precise and lustful, noticing and collecting patterns of human behaviour that she captures in her drawings and condenses in her silhouettes. Her art is full-bodied and life-affirming — the contribution of an "embedded artist" — and she gives an independent account of contemporary pop culture, for which she immerses herself into current events.

For this exhibition at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Sonja Yakovleva has focussed her attention and her extensive research on new areas. All the works in the exhibition have been newly created and developed as a monographic presentation across three rooms. It is the power of the body that the artist examines: on the one hand, the body as a mouldable material for the self-presentation on social media and, on the other, the body of those who go on strike in urban spaces.

Yakovleva opens the exhibition with oversized figures from the cult of the body that is so prevalent in the world of fitness: **Gym bro** und **Pink sexy gym boot camp**. These two silhouettes, one male and one female, strike a muscle flexing pose — bodies from the CrossFit world — *bigger than life*, muscular, strong and sculpted.

Sonja Yakovleva creates her motifs somewhere between documentary and fiction, between her own practice, extensive research in the studio, Instagram fitness feeds and prompted fantasies, which she then condenses into her papercuts. She sifts through digital imagery in the various echo bubbles of online culture and filters out images that she uses as material. Her instinct for iconographic elements and cultural symbols that characterise our times is unmistakable.

Self-optimisation and self-presentation of the body have always been human endeavours. In online culture, beauty filters have shifted beauty ideals by

exaggerating individual features in such a way that people adapt their real bodies to their digital image, giving rise to a zeitgeist phenomenon: Snapchat dysmorphia.

In the world of fitness, everyone becomes a sculptor and image producer of their own body and its depiction. In Germany alone, gym memberships are growing by 10% per year. And currently, revenues of more than 5.44 billion euros have been generated for the industry by more than 11 million people.

Sonja Yakovleva's work celebrates physicality from the very beginning. The contrast between highly contemporary motifs and historical techniques, which she has been perfecting for years, is her recognisable trademark. And she manages to translate images from fast-moving online culture into meticulous, handmade papercuts that are extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive.

In *INSTAREXIE* Yakovleva is creating her silhouette work as a ceiling installation for the first time. Six pictorial surfaces with a total of 240 tiles make up the monumental motif, with each one individually drawn, rescaled, transferred and cut out. A complex composition of contours and internal cuts. In this new, expansive installation, the central element is the body: the material of the optimised self. The ceiling areas display self-contained worlds of fitness with differentiated community aesthetics — Barry's Bootcamp, Urban Heroes, Pilates Fused and countless more — *boutique gyms* that become themed stages. Here, people take to the stage and perform work on their own bodies, always under the watchful eye of others. The large mirrors, transparent glass facades and omnipresent mobile phone cameras not only serve as perfect settings for presenting the body, but they also serve as a means of self-control, comparison, motivation and competition. Everyone wants to showcase their own physical power and gain recognition for it, in a world where appearance is moulded by performance. Tell me which world of fitness you belong to and I'll tell you who you are.

Yakovleva explicitly emphasises the institution-like character of fitness studios. In this multi-optional society, the human body is quantified, measured and monitored, and the wearable fitness watch is always measuring. The physique is not to be taken for granted, but is the result of willpower, discipline and labour.

The result is a neoliberal field of tension between voluntarism and submission, where performance requirements and conformity to an ideal image are internalised and exert power. The gym becomes a body factory: bodies are optimised, efficiency is increased, flexibility is a guiding principle, and strictness and toughness towards one's own stamina are virtues. Working against your own limits is the overarching motto.

Sonja Yakovleva's work reveals that every body bears traces of its social background and that the power relations of society are reflected in it. The frequency of visits to the gym is a status symbol, as is the choice of club. People go there every day, before and after work, especially in well-paid jobs where physical labour is no longer performed — so working out is a must. And statistics from 2017 show that Frankfurt is the city with the highest proportion of active gym-goers, especially in the premium segment.

Yakovleva practises boxing herself at Ibra Boxing in Frankfurt, and for this exhibition, she has tried out new forms of fitness to excess, capturing the essence of her observations in the silhouette paintings. *Ass Ass Ass* is a dominant element — the female *ass* as an icon. *Brazilian butt lifting* has become the most practised procedure worldwide. It epitomises the male gaze and its objectification of the female body and, at the same time, symbolises neoliberal postfeminism — autonomous, free to make decisions and entrepreneurial. Yakovleva's works are provocative in that her images quote sexist representations, but were created in an attitude of liberated empowerment. The self-optimisation of the body in fitness culture is hard work; working in your free time, following some inner imperative, promises social recognition and participation through the perfect body.

Yakovleva's monumental visual worlds condense and compress, quote and caricature her observations, as she looks at the new generation of believers celebrating the collective rituals of a fitness cult with humour and irony. She portrays the places where bodywork is practised fanatically and where performance is quantified by coaches, headset commands and precise intervals. Or she focuses on the stretchability of the ideal body in minimalistic Pilates worlds with smoothies and food bowls. Yakovleva's gaze is unsparing and sensual at the same time; however, she never places herself above her figures, but gets fully involved with them.

***State of Strike*, 2024**

Paper cut and drawing, card stock, pencil and coloured pencil

10,65 x 2,71 m

Courtesy the artist

In Sonja Yakovleva's new works, specially created for this exhibition, the overarching motif is the representation of an abstract power that governs bodies and is embedded in them.

In ***State of Strike***, the city itself is a body whose vital functions are maintained by various organs, and the blood in its veins are the workers who supply the living organism. Sonja Yakovleva depicts these people crowded together in the streets as they go on strike, utilising their bodies in public space. But pigs from industrial fattening farms are also freed and become part of the resistance against the exploitation of their bodies.

Yakovleva has created a mural over 10.5 metres long. It depicts a city in which e-commerce, the meat industry, delivery services, day-care centres, hospitals, construction sites, industrial cleaners and restaurants have been condensed into a very small space. She also deliberately incorporates recognisable Frankfurt buildings into her composition — the *Alte Oper*, the central railway station, the facades of brothels and the *Sudfass-Beine*. Some of the motifs were photographed by the artist in Frankfurt, and others come from online stock photography providers or Instagram. In the images' composition, various locations in the post-industrial city, which are otherwise marginalised or made invisible, are placed at the centre.

The city is depicted here as a symbol of the modern age and society at large, with all the buildings representing different production sites. We see a dense flow of bodies going on strike. Yakovleva is driven by the contradictions of an increasingly flexible and yet insecure work environment. People, especially those with migrant backgrounds, are often forced to take on difficult jobs — characterised by poor working conditions. In her depiction, she shows us a city of delivery drivers, temporary workers, cleaners and meat industry employees. What would happen if not only the unionised workers, but they too were to go on strike? Would everything come to a halt? Who are all these people who keep the pulsating system of a city and a state functioning? In her mural, Yakovleva takes a

close look at migrant workers and has them populate the city streets with their bodies. The artist also includes animals in the strike, because they too have lost self-determination over their bodies.

Through her thematic focus on the migrant strike of precariously employed workers, Yakovleva succeeds in raising the question of the relationship between body and politics in two different ways. On the one hand, how are workers' bodies controlled and exploited in today's precarious labour conditions? And on the other hand, how can these bodies become a new force by going on strike and opposing precisely this control and exploitation? And by going on strike, demands for solidarity and new forms of social organisation are brought to the streets by these protesting bodies.

Yakovleva's working process is characterised by montage and collage, collecting and assembling. For Germany, 2023 and 2024 have been the years of nationwide waves of strikes. Not only for higher wages, but also for the implementation of climate protection measures. So for ***State of Strike***, a variety of elements have been incorporated into the monumental mural: research into historical sources and literature on migrant strikes in the 1970s and the working conditions of precarious workers since the post-war period, interviews with e-commerce workers, the publication of the investigative collective "correctiv" in early 2024 and the remigration plans of right-wing networks. Through the social mobilisation against racism that soon followed, Yakovleva thought about a migrant strike as a means of protest against racist tendencies in society. During her research, she sifted out scenes and stories, contradictions and patterns from her own world of experience, which she incorporated into the themes of labour and strikes. She visualises the strike of migrants and workers, who represent a large part of the working class, and sets her monumental work of art against the fast-moving flow of information in the media.

For this new mural, Yakovleva quotes the visual language of various forms of propaganda art: the agit prop of the 1920s in Soviet Russia, the *murales* (wall paintings) of Mexico's Diego Rivera and even street art. She uses isometric perspective, in which the image has no single vanishing point and in which the edges of components are drawn in abbreviated form. And through the use of collage and condensing visual elements, she depicts different scenes simultaneously, using geometric forms and the symbolism of colours —black, white and red.

This is the first time that Yakovleva has combined her characteristic technique of paper cutting with drawing. In her practice, the drawing is the central starting point for design and image composition, but it is lost in the act of cutting. Her pictures are created as drawings, which the artist rescales with the help of a grid and transfers to larger paper. In ***State of Strike***, we see her painting skills, her mastery of lines, shapes and shading, her ability to observe and reproduce the world around her, her love of experimentation and her craftsmanship. Sonja's drawings and papercuts thrive on the flattening of motifs and stage like perspective. Her style can be associated with the phenomenon of superflat, an artistic style that reacts to consumer culture in postmodern painting.

Yakovleva says of her choice of papercutting that she likes the cross-references to historical development. From the 17th century onwards, the papercut became popular in Europe as a time-saving and cost-effective substitute for portrait painting. And whilst painting was reserved for the aristocracy, the lower classes could have silhouettes made from the outline of a profile, which were offered by street artists.

In her work ***State of Strike***, Sonja Yakovleva combines references to an artistic technique with socio-political questions — regarding the possible outcomes of going on strike, through which the invisibility of these precarious and often migrant forms of labour becomes visible. There is a sense of solidarity among the workers who go on strike, which provides strength to build alternative ways of living and working. These bodies, that otherwise work, deliver, pack, transport or wash up, become visible through the movement on the street. They become resistant bodies that withdraw their physical strength from exploitation, and instead, bundle it in the collective in order to protest against their exploitation and bring about change.

GINTARĖ SOKELYTĖ

***A-Type Complex*, 2024**

Installation

Construction grids, coal, reflective foil, screen, series of sculptures made of chicken wire, plaster and engine oil

Height 255 cm / ø 260 cm

25, 2024

Wall sculpture

Styrofoam, iron wire, metal, various plastics and engine oil

5 x 1,8 m

* (*Asterisk*), 2023–24

Room installation

Plaster, branches, wood and jute fabric

40 m², Height 2,5 m

Video installation

Five videos 7:04 min, 3:44 min, 6:15 min, 4:21 min, 11:00 min

Wood, MDF, cardboard, paper and 5 screens

3 x 3 x 3 m

Sculpture

Metal

92 x 68 x 210 cm

Courtesy the artist

The body is a material unit with which the individual inhabits time in the here and now. But what constitutes our existence? What is the irreducible essence of human existence? What is humanity when it's no longer governed by its self-created structures of order?

For her new exhibition, Gintarė Sokelytė has constructed a self-contained universe. She transports the viewer away from their familiar sense of perception and releases them into a constructed parallel world. Like through a rabbit hole, the space can only be entered via the elevator. The door opens, and we find ourselves in a prehistoric cave. Sokelytė has painstakingly recreated part of the Blombos Cave in South Africa, using scientific 3D models. Blombos is the oldest Stone Age site where evidence of human creativity and culture has been discovered. Stone engravings depicting intersecting lines, painted with ochre, and numerous artefacts testify to the fact that 71,000 years ago *Homo sapiens* thought in abstract terms. They had to possess the ability to imagine, synthesise and visualise things. And the result was their rock art — the few traces left of human beings from ancient times, and evidence of their need to create images and symbols that bear witness to rich inner worlds.

These first traces of human made art, the first visual language of early humans, are what Gintarė Sokelytė picks up on. Through her multimedia installation entitled * (*Asterisk*), which faces the cave, the primal symbol of prehistoric rock art inspired her to create her metal sculpture. Sokelytė welded it to the size of a human body — this recurring symbol of humanity, found from the Blombos Cave to the digital world. She then tied five people, five volunteers, to the metal star by their arms and legs. Bound to this cruciform sculpture, she then interrogated them about fear, power and order. How do you describe fear? What are you most afraid of? What if this happens? What is power? Who is allowed to wield power? Describe your understanding of order. How do you feel when reality slips away from you? What forces make you feel powerless?

These five people were interrogated through constant, cyclical repetition, each speaking in their respective native language and allowing their bodies to be subjected to external coercion. Exposed to the lens of the camera, their bodies began to ache from the gravitational force exerted on them. They surrendered to the influence of this external force until, in a transcendent state of essentiality, they gained deeper insight into their own perception of society and the self.

The result is five films forming part of a large geometric sculpture — a dodecahedron, a geometric construction with twelve equal faces and thirty equal edges. The viewer may enter the structure, brightly lit from the five monitors, and listen to the five volunteers as they question their innermost selves on notions of fear, power and order. In geometry, the dodecahedron is one of the five Platonic solids. Plato assigned them to his worldview as fundamental geometric figures, and their significance remains fundamental to mathematics and science today. Due to its perfect symmetry, the dodecahedron is considered the most sacred of the five Platonic solids, and the golden ratio is found repeatedly within it. In Plato's time, it was even forbidden for people to speak about the figure. It symbolised the soul of the world (the ether) and the universe, and its twelve faces draw a connection to a number that holds special significance for human systems: the twelve zodiac signs, the number of months or hours within units of time, all the way up to the twelve apostles. For Gintarė Sokelytė, the dodecahedron forms a conceptual counterpoint to the primordial nature of the cave.

Its interior is lined with numerous copies of texts, which Sokelytė has researched and printed, from ancient to modern codices. Nearly two hundred international

state constitutions and around forty collections of laws, from prehistory to the present, have been arranged chronologically and mostly in their original national languages. For the artist, they represent humanity's struggle for structure. Laws are both protection and restriction, defining a transition in human history towards a normative order for communal life. Sokelytė explores a timeless urge with which one resists the uncertain through order and form.

Back to the cave — there is a second, narrower passage that leads to the next section of the large installation. In the centre of the room, we find the igloo-like hemisphere entitled **A-Type Complex**, woven from salvaged, rusty construction grids. Inside is a display of human figures, either upright or sitting down, and neither female nor male; not individuals as such, but rather forms of human existence. Their bodies are open, raw and permeable, reminiscent of survivors of a catastrophe. Gintarė Sokelytė creates them out of plaster, malleable and porous at the same time, then paints them with burnt engine oil. The mineral oil is viscous and toxic, and yet, at the same time, it is the fluid that kept the engine of the industrial age running.

The floor is covered with coal from which the human figures rise up, their bodies hollowed, ravaged and reduced, as if by fire, to their essential form. And beneath them there is a monitor screen. Time holds a special significance in Sokelytė's work. It continues to tick relentlessly, and yet repeatedly returns to a starting point. This special significance is exemplified by her fascination with George Woodcock's book *The Tyranny of the Clock*. Time, rhythm and measurement are seen as distinguishing features between early societies and people in the modern era — time as a structure and order that determines the life and experience of individuals. Above the lattice igloo-like structure hangs a mirror, doubling its hemispherical shape, and the memory of an hourglass is suggested in the reflection. Time and transience, the past and the ever recurring, seen as eternal principles of all life.

The final part of the grand installation consists of a 5-metre-long wall sculpture. The black, three-dimensional work, entitled **25**, is a dense formation of architecture, geometric structures, ruins of grids and stone and a flow of people winding through the construction. The work resembles a medieval altarpiece in its compression and superimposition — abstract yet concrete. Gintarė Sokelytė built it out of found materials, materials that the city itself produces, uses and leaves behind.

The artist attributes strong narrative value to each of her materials. Thus, the wall painting, like the human figures, is not painted with colour paint but blackened by the layered application of burnt engine oil. This toxic substance is a residual waste of industrial production — from engine combustion — a lubricating non-biodegradable oil that sticks to people’s skin. Coal is also an intensely associative material for the artist. The material encompasses time itself — from the primeval age of its geological formation for over 350 million years. It was the catalyst for human energy production from ancient times to industrialisation in the age of machines, and then as a raw material and force behind toxic environmental impacts.

How does the past affect the present? How is the future already embedded in the present? For this exhibition at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Gintarė Sokelytė has created a stunning and monumental world. Her pictorial spaces are experiential universes that trigger associations and know how to strike the viewer at the very core of their emotional depths. She thinks in images and works with her own references. Like Aby Warburg, she compiles her picture atlas — her *Mnemosyne Atlas* — from which she feeds her grand installations.

She is a seeker who strives to gain knowledge, to establish connections, to explore what holds the world, humanity and the eternity of time together at its core.

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