

What Is To Be Considered Human

Exhibition by Jolanta Dolewska from Glasgow

Šiame tuščiame slėnyje (‘In this hollow valley’) at Prospekto Gallery, Vilnius

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Bare life becomes both a political subject and object at the point where a voice begins to speak, writes Giorgio Agamben revising Aristotle. All living beings use their voice to shout out the pleasant and the painful, but only humans speak and define the good and the evil, the just and the unjust. And this way, they incorporate life into the State body as a type of wisdom that is promised a “good life” by law—a law that allows to kill it, but not to sacrifice it (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1998, Stanford University Press Stanford California).

Those were the thoughts that came to me while looking at the photographs of Jolanta Dolewska—an artist who is originally from Warsaw, now with British citizenship, and been living in the UK for 15 years and in Scotland for 10. In these pictures exhibited at Prospekto Gallery in Vilnius, we see skin - human and animal, dead and alive. The hairy spine of a round and seemingly not very young man looks as if he is headless – he’s leaning forward, and this posture turns him into an anonymous body, into a bare life with no clear identity or consciousness. Thus, it feels like you can do whatever you want with him. This spine is submissively served and ready for our punches, but only virtual ones for now. For now, it is only our glare that whips it, only the light caught with an analogue camera. The artist captures its image and retouches it with silver powder to make the roughness of the skin, its acne, scars; the convexities that sag underneath the tight underwear fabric; with the little hairs and wrinkles becoming more visible, as if naturally. The view is not tempting, even if the artist speaks of perceptions of beauty and desire. This may sound paradoxical, but the contradiction will be resolved.

Even though what we see is skin, Dolewska’s also concerned by what’s underneath it—a configuration of invisible organs that give the skin a tangible shape. She asks the people in the pictures to inhale, letting the air inflate their bodies and then break out with force. She herself inflates (as a Creator’s supposed to) the ceramic crockery made by somebody else’s hands, blowing the air until the sides start to crack. She forms a rag out of a dead animal’s skin making it look like a head; a head of one condemned to death, covered up high on the scaffold to hide the face getting distorted by the strangling noose. Elastic pleated cloths thrown on top of the other alleged heads simulate life—they vibrate, tremble and squirm under the cover. The bare life of these homunculi is claiming its rights while still speechless. So it’s easy to ignore them, seeing nothing but still lifes.

However, a seemingly unrelated object is captured in several photographs: fat. The small white skin-covered cubes of lard are put together into a sort of football, as if it had been taken out of these obediently leaned bodies, or that woman hanging upside down like some carcass. Obviously, the fat’s not theirs, but still. “We be of one blood, ye and I”—I remember that recurring phrase from the *Jungle Book* in childhood. The jungle civilization never categorized living creatures into ones that are worthy of protection and ones that are not, although nobody was forbidden to devour them. In this exhibition, Dolewska declares a different human and animal communion: we are all nothing but a bare life’s exuviae; at least looking from a certain point—one of a both physically and financially distant power. The juxtaposed photographs allow us to imagine the commercial utilisation of not only animal bodies, but also human ones.

And it is not some made up story or a matter of old-fashioned structures. Artist and critic Daniel Jewesbury's essay that accompanies this exhibition testifies to the fact that it's not a strange idea at all. Soap containing human fat manufactured in Danzig Anatomical Institute is supposedly being held in the archive of the International Court of Justice. The director of that institute, Rudolf Spanner, made 100 kilograms of such soap, using the bodies of mental patients imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp. These are some terrifying facts. But shouldn't we be as shaken by the thought that the bodies of other living creatures are being utilized? The question remains open.

Dolewska doesn't only care about the past; she's also concerned about the future – a future whose foundations are already erupting in the so-called “other” world that's attacking “Fortress Europe”. Ethnic groups declared “non-citizens” are deprived of their land and turned into “refugees”. Foreigners running away from war and ecological catastrophes are left floating in the sea, where the wind will carry them until their remnant boats eventually sink. Even trying to save them is forbidden, while survivor camps are being destroyed at night without warning. And if it seems like it is only these “others” (immigrants, Muslims, people of colour, etc.) that are at risk, the artist suggests to listen more carefully to the world news, trying to hear the subtle changes in the discourse that are about to become the main political course. Insensitivity develops gradually; in fact, it does it so slowly that one might not even notice. For instance, only a while ago some hurricane would cause not only a tsunami, but also the respective wave of condolence from the world. Now, disasters more and more severe happen every day due to climate change, but the only ones to truly care are their victims. Only a while ago, “We care about your safety” announced on a plane was no empty promise. Yet now, the aircraft manufacturers themselves imitate the safety check-up, as this way's just cheaper. All seven billion six hundred ninety six million four thousand human bodies (we reached this number while I was looking at the [digital humanity clock](#), and it's been only growing bigger), together with the endangered fauna, are sliding towards a “bare life”, where no rights will be guaranteed.

What is more, Dolewska tries not to travel by planes herself, but not because she doesn't trust them: she spent three days on buses and trains to come to Vilnius, and returned to Glasgow via Warsaw in the same way, seeking to contribute to climate change as little as possible. This year already, I have met two British girls like this. Such people are getting more and more numerous, now also getting inspired by figures like Greta Thunberg, who travelled to Davos by train only to scold all the rich people who had flown there by 1,500 private planes. Dolewska contributes to this with her art. The same repeated information about the causes and consequences of climate change anaesthetizes people; their ears get clogged with the rumble of life, their eyes—shielded by the spectacle's dazzle. So the artist chooses to speak using strict, visual, black and white metaphors, punching us straight in the forehead.

She commands people like a doctor who is about to diagnose them. However, her photographs can also express opposite intentions: to experiment with bodies that have lost all their legal protection. So what if this thin vertebrae cannot keep itself in an *erectus* posture? Who needs that “erect” man if the submissive one's more useful anyway? All these submissive humans that Dolewska photographs are about to explode, as they're full of air, and empty; the headless do not speak. They are meaningless, and nothing else but passive material for creators, recreators, developers and directors of this spectacle society. They're dead—like T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Men*: blind, filled with with straw, whispering meaningless words and “wandering aimlessly in this valley of dying stars”; even though Eliot wrote about a completely different historical period—after WWI and after the Treaty of Versailles that the defeated Germany was forced to sign in 1919, taking full responsibility and promising to pay reparations as well as disarm. This only

encouraged Germany to start a new war in the long run, but it seems like the poet had already long known about all these death deserts that would cover up Europe in the future.

What makes Eliot relevant now? According to Patrick Cockburn, "Britain's withdrawal from the EU is the equivalent of a major defeat in war" (*The Independent*, 23.11.2018). The destinies of a defeated country's people are hung in uncertainty. Who is this Jolanta Dolewska, having emigrated from Poland, living in Scotland and officially a British citizen—a foreigner or a local? It all depends on how the "real" citizens will perceive her, even though her white skin doesn't give away her otherness. Perhaps this is also why the prevailing elements in Dolewska's pictures are skins and surfaces, disclosing and concealing what lays underneath them: an "essence" with an unknown nationality. Dolewska turns the interior-exterior dichotomy inside out and fills it up with emptiness, highlighting not only the vulnerability of the deceitful exterior and the body, but also the beauty of a politically dismissed body. Yes, these ugly silver-powder-covered bodies become beautiful. And the lard cubes are beautiful, too. And the ceramic crockery, torn from overstraining, not suitable for anything anymore—as useless as the overworked bodies of the old white men. The life inflated into these organic and non-organic "dishes" is breaking out, wanting to cry with horror, afraid of what's threatening it; but all the body orifices are clogged, nobody says or hears anything. Only the voice of an image remains—unarticulated, making the thin layer of photo emulsion vibrate. "This is the way the world ends", as Eliot repeats three times—"not with a bang but a whimper". Only in this hollow valley of the present time, the hollow men do not even whimper. It is blissfully quiet.