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For American photographer Francesca Woodman, the world was a square – a little round one. The emotional geometry of her life was disrupted by depression, in 22 she successfully attempted suicide for the second time. But she did manage to publish a book of photographs and handwritten notes. She usually labeled her photographs as *Untitled*. This is also the title of a fragile performance, dedicated to the visual artist by Sláva Daubnerová. She is not alone on stage – she surrounds herself with sounds, carefully picked props, but most importantly with emotions. For facts, there are encyclopedias. The minimalist music seems as if composed to the performer's every motion. With choreographer Stanislava Vlčeková, they have created a work of art, delicately touching upon loneliness and nakedness. Daubnerová explores women's eternal lot through the ritual hanging of stockings, subtle changes in costume map out the transitions between a Madonna and a prostitute, she even attempts to decipher our grandmothers' legacy. One could hear a pin drop at the sold-out performance in A4. Life's paradoxes became almost tangible. “If I could change my thoughts as easily as I change dress”. But I don't change my dress easily, either.

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The actress and director Sláva Daubnerová is inspired by work of exceptional female artists. After the French-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois (*Cely*) and the Slovak theatre director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (*M.H.L.*), she adapted the “destiny” of the American photographer Francesca Woodman, who had committed suicide in 22. In *Untitled*, she reconstructs the creative process behind her best-known photographs, dominated by the artist herself. Daubnerová's theatrical images explore the photographer's feelings. The performance is without words, resting upon the performer's physical bravura, attractive scenic design and well-picked music. *Untitled* is a suggestive piece of theatre, drawing the audience to a different time and space and intoxicates it with visual and aural sensations.

Its title reflects upon the fact of Woodman's photographs being untitled. With no exaggeration, this performance is to be titled as outstanding.

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theatre critic

Sad, naked photographer

To create a play about a photographer who had ended her life in the age of 23, and who apart from her photographs left only a minimum of material about herself, requires great courage. That, however, is something Sláva Daubnerová does not lack. Fortunately. It was also thanks to this courage that a performance, as beautiful and disturbing as the photographs that inspired it, could come to life.

No title and no words

Francesca Woodman built a unique body of work during her short life. Expressive, black and white images, dominated by her naked body in unusual poses, started to gain public attention only after her suicide in 1981. Most of these photographs did not have a title, and were labeled as Untitled. The title of the theatre performance, inspired by the oeuvre of this unusual photographer, is the same.

The actress and director Daubnerová systematically aims for a visually attractive, documentary and fragmentary theatre under her P.A.T. label. In this case, she goes even further. While she was showing fragments of life in her previous performances, in *Untitled* she goes on to show fragments of a creative process.

Thus, the audience watches Woodman “live” take her most famous photographs with a self-timer. The concentrated scenes are only complemented by music and a projection of notes on photographs and diary entries. Words are useless. Even with the absence of speech on stage, the audience sees the story in photographs, originating before its eyes. The photographer's growing unease and the increasing darkness are unmistakable signs of a growing depression.

Nudity as costume

Daubnerová's performances enchant. Beautiful costumes, outstanding work with lights and projection, sensible and purposeful use of music. With *Untitled*, this applies on multiple levels.

The performance builds its message through images, visual aesthetics therefore prevail. Daubnerová uses striking costumes, stage and props. She changes clothes on stage, hangs an empty frame in the air, behind which nylon stockings gently sway, she makes a polka-dot dress from a single-colored one through projection. Yet this is no cheap effort to please the audience with overwhelming visuals, but rather a careful reconstruction of the space and circumstances, under which Woodman had worked.

The frequent use of nudity is another proof of an effort for authenticity. Even this isn't to be perceived as exhibition or striving for attention. After all, most of Woodman's photographs were acts taken with self-timer, and so Daubnerová could hardly avoid exposing herself. The actress-cum-director, however, is sensitive in her use of nudity, too; still more, she elevates it to a costume.

Untitled is an aesthetic experience only scarcely offered by Slovak theatre. You don't need to be adept in Woodman's photographs to enjoy it. It's enough to like watching and be able to see beauty.

Pravda's rating: 5 stars out of 5

kød – konkrétne o divadle

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The unique way of Sláva Daubnerová, or the magic of theatre

“Realists, of whom I am one... do not take the photograph for a 'copy' of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Our lagging behind the world, caused by the normalization, is presently compensated by a number of original artists, among which Sláva Daubnerová – the founder of the P.A.T. collective – cannot pass unnoticed. She usually composes her work as solo performances, although she occasionally chooses

partners, such as in the productions of *Polylogue*, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* or *Illuminarium*. In orthodox practice, performances are created solely from personal material as pure authorial opuses, but Sláva Daubnerová treads her own, original path. In her performances, she doesn't probe into life's truths and her personal desires autobiographically, in her own name, she rather delves into lives and the work of other artists. Be that visual artists, such as the French Louise Bourgeois in *Cely* ("Cells"), the Norwegian painter Lars Hertervig in *Polylogue*, and most recently the American photographer Francesca Woodman; or else, she would find artists in other media: Inge Müller – a poet and wife of the well-known playwright Heiner Müller – whose destiny she had reflected upon in *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, or Magda Husáková-Lokvencová, „first lady of Slovak theatre directing”, to whom she had dedicated her performance *M.H.L.*. The Cultural Studies graduate is, in her own way, an autodidact. Perhaps that's why she's so interested in artists' destinies. She observes them as potential colleagues in line of work, to engage in a dialogue with them, find with them answers to her own, undoubtedly tormenting questions on creativity and existence. She is inspired by their artifacts in order to arrive at her own conclusion, her personal, authentic message. In her stage compositions, she raises and in unique ways develops questions of identity, limits of life, relationships, loneliness, an outsider's position, saving graces of the art, and a slew of other similar themes. It seems that for her, the creative process is a kind of ritual and magic, she steps into the realm of her own universe through the world of another artist. And it is, too, a therapy and a laboratory: to peek inside is a delight for all those who like new discoveries and poetry in space.

Her newest solo performance, inspired by the work of a talented photographer, looms on Sláva Daubnerová's path as a climax of her striving for an unadulterated message and unique form. If we looked just a little at the American photographer's pictures, we would notice a number of similarities between the two. Did Sláva find her alter ego? That sounds disturbing, too, if we consider that Francesca, the prototype, ended her own life in 22. Yet isn't living through others' trials and tribulations on an imaginary level something of an exorcism? A challenge to overcome the hurdles they could not? Transformation and performance of a negative code into positive action? Specifically, into a powerful and aesthetically rich work of art? It's even shocking to see the face of a Slovak performer on the self-portraits of Francesca Woodman. However, that similarity is only superficial. Upon studying several photographs and through experts' interpretation, we can arrive on a deeper and more substantial level of kinship. It is appropriate here to cite what The Guardian's critic Sean O'Hagan wrote on the occasion of her recent exhibition in London's Victoria Miro Gallery, more precisely about an early picture, simply titled *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*: “It is as mysterious and elusive as any of her later nudes or performance photographs, and tells us that, even at 13, Woodman had found a way to hide in front of the camera,

and, in doing so, had also found her abiding theme. Nearly 30 years after her death, she is still hiding from us in full view, as elusive and beguiling as ever.”

The full view of camera's lens and an escape, concealment; these two paradoxical gestures are not only a deeply existential pattern of behavior, but of artistic expression as well. In this Slovak performer's *Untitled*, it happens as follows: first, the photographer adjusts her camera on a tripod, then she presents herself in its view, naked in a position of a crouching embryo, using minuscule movements to move in the space. Through minimal movement, she clearly evokes the chaste guard of her body before the world, only to reach a small panel on the other side of the stage in this uncomfortable curl and hide behind it. However, the panel turns over, and she can be seen again. She continues to struggle with hiding her body before the camera's lens, as well as the audience's sights, but the contrasting setting keeps on exposing, illuminating her. And yet the body she so modestly hides is beautiful, it is a body of a painter's model, as it turns out in an unguarded moment. There are many variations on a hide-and-seek theme to be found here. Perhaps the wittiest and technically most sophisticated is the following: standing behind the back screen, the actress – in an interplay with video – entwines herself in the peeling virtual layers of the panel; thanks to this playful trick, her effort is rewarded with success. Sláva Daubnerová dedicated one whole sequence of her well-balanced performance to a play with dresses she changes through an inconspicuous hocus-pocus (modern technology makes its appearance once again). “I wish I could change my mind as easily as I change dress”, we read on a side panel, on which a simple English commentary (the sole instance of text in the whole performance) is projected, as if it were a speech bubble in a comic book.

As the strong individual performative details, so the composition of the whole, its clearly legible structure – all this is what makes the performance so pleasing and aesthetically fulfilling. Daubnerová is clearly proficient in staging, she has a feel for directing, aside from being able to fill the space with intriguing action as a solo performer. Emotional peaks arrive in regular intervals as she organically develops everyday gestures and actions and escalates them into modern or postmodern dance creations (great choreography work by Stanislava Vlčeková). It is as if they were a punctuation in between the single tableaux/sequences. Scenes and sequences alternate in their contrasts, which also contributes to the dynamics and rhythm of the performance. Some are based on the female nude – before the audience's eyes, the performer unfolds a series of closely studied positions from the original photographs, taken in black and white with long exposure times. At other times, a play with objects dominates, culminating almost in magical black light theatre, such as when ladies' stockings softly dangle on a clothing line before a dark background. Or when she, *nature morte*-style, sets up scenes of nature with taxidermied birds and a fox on the stage, and puts herself to sleep within the enchanting

scene, illuminated with red light.

The ruminating photographer, playing hide-and-seek, does show (her?) various faces after all. That is no different in this performance, either. Aside from the favored, stiff Victorian form, images of women as we know them from the famous paintings of Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec spring up; prostitutes with hair in a chignon, with a garter as their only piece of clothing. “Woman is a mirror for a man”, says a pointed remark on the panel. It is then clear why the performer tiptoes to the scene as a bunny, with a white rabbit's mask on her head, and hops around the stage lit up in pink.

In the beginning, the performer modestly curled up in a fetal position; in the end, after going through numerous situations and guises, she suddenly opened up before her audience, spread her thighs in a black lingerie like wide arms. Only to rise up and leave the proscenium for the back screen panel. She then cautiously slid herself in its fissure, be that mother's womb or Alice's mirror. Who knows?

Much could be gleaned from this performance about Sláva Daubnerová's creative expression. Why she envelopes herself in the stories and destinies of other artists, how she comes to her own authentic “I” through their hideouts, what existential meaning art holds for her. And also the simple fact that the world of art is a bottomless source, never ceasing to bring people joy.

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Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes, they went directly to my hands

When I saw an exhibition of Francesca Woodman's work in Shedhalle in Zürich in the early 90s, I was mesmerized – the strange melancholy and self-reflection reminiscent of sentences from the book *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* and the mysterious world of Toyen's paintings have stayed with me for life. Since my Swiss friends spoke of her with great interest, I was convinced she was Swiss and situated her photographs in an environment that I have just been discovering. Her pictures always summon within me all that I felt those first months of my stay in Zürich.

A few weeks ago, one of my friends took me to Rusovce, to a new performance by Sláva Daubnerová, inspired by Francesca Woodman. I have to point out now that anyone who takes me somewhere is

running a risk of me ruining the evening for them. That didn't happen. Or at least, I hope I haven't ruined it for any of those present with my bare exaltation, being absorbed in my memories during the first part. I'm not going to stretch this anymore, but it was a long file ranging from Living Theatre to a myriad of wonderful performances during the first few years of the French Institute, the eras of Luc Bignol and Dimitri Ovchinikov. All that is running through my head even now, as I'm trying to write something about what I've seen.

Theatre is inapprehensible, it is there, in that moment, but not after nor before. A photograph, too, is but a photosensitive surface, exposed to light for a splinter of a second, but it is a picture, a relatively exact record, vestige, reflection. To combine these two arts is a challenge, to say the least. If we want to experience theatre, we have to come to it, to sit with others in the auditorium, be present, whereas we can look at a photograph at home. It is not at all simple to carry over one of these arts into the other, it requires great sensibility and poise. Daubnerová and her collaborators managed to do it. From beginning until the end, they pursue their chosen linking principles, each of their attributes being picked and used precisely and fittingly. And yet these are not photographs come to life, but a physical theatre in a true sense of the word. Daubnerová leads us through the story, engaged and dramatic, with precisely the same peculiar mixture of urgency and intimacy, just like Woodman's photographs and films.

The scenes follow one after another, cut by use of a simple gesture, sound of a shutter and flash, they lead us through the portfolio, but also through the life of Francesca Woodman. The elegant choreography as enacted by Daubnerová is truly an aesthetic experience. But that, of course, is not all; if the performer doesn't die on the stage, that is, doesn't release his or her soul, it would all be in vain. It has to be a matter of life and death, in this case Woodman's, but Daubnerová's as well. We, the audience, have to walk out transformed, that is why we have come to theatre, that *is* theatre. We don't go there to entertain ourselves, even if going to theatre is „entertaining“. Theatre is no fun, theatre is something serious. Lives are at the stake, ours, as well as the performer's and the one performed. The story is always the same, only the narrator changes. When I look at Woodman's photographs now, I look to the past, I see and feel like I did when I saw them for the first time. Daubnerová actualizes this story, and without changing or improving it, her message is just as strong in the contemporary language.

During the sequence of her hanging stockings on a line to a frame hanging before her, I shut my eyes and in fact, fell asleep – I went through the looking-glass to Zürich, and through a wharf in the evening, I was going from Shedhalle to Silquai 21, where my studio was back then. When she was finished with the hanging, I opened my eyes. Play with mirrors, concealment and exposure, leaving and returning.

Always the same story, but that's the only one we have and it's enough for us. We only have to play for real, in theatre as well as in life.

I walked out of the theatre inspired, and I like that. The feeling has been coming back for several days and I like to come back to it too. So I'm looking forward Sláva Daubnerová performing again, to go there, even further than Rusovce. As the French say, next time about the border and the centre. Art is somewhere else, that is, not where we would expect it. It's good to make an effort and embark on a journey to find it. In closing, my favorite quote from the film *Pina*: „Tanzt, sonst sind wir verloren!“
My translation: „Paint, otherwise you are lost!“