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A List of Fears

Eva Kot'átková's *Asylum*

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ABSTRACT: Usually, fears and phobias range under anxiety disorders, and are listed in psychiatric manuals. Their variety seems infinite, and their severity varies from a slight uneasiness or tension to a condition in which a state of great panic is induced by the specific stimulus, which can be an object, an animal, a number, people, spaces, ideas, or a particular situation. The list of fears by Czech artist Eva Kot'átková is part of the installation *Asylum* that was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2013. Kot'átková's works often reflect on the processes that restrict and manipulate people within institutions such as psychiatric hospitals or schools.

KEYWORDS: Fear; Phobias; Collage; Lists; Visual list, List-making; Art series, Cycles (Art); Biennale di Venezia (55th : 2013 : Venice, Italy); Greenbook; Kořátková, Evá; Brecht, George; Floyer, Ceal; Kiwanga, Kapwani

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No whole is unified but all is held together simply by temporary and contradictory forces.¹

A two-dimensional black stocking-mask head with an oversized eye hangs from the ceiling by an invisible thread. On a large rectangular table covered in black cloth, a huge number of disparate objects resembling tiny Dadaist stage props, facing in all directions, are arranged in enigmatic order. Cut-outs, collages, and vintage images of human faces and body parts are mounted on slender, mostly bipedal metal stands. They look like miniature billboards. Some objects bear white lines, which often look like seams, a technique of marking and erasing in order 'to counter situations of exclusion and isolation.'² Filigree wire sculptures in different shapes and sizes with lattice- and cage-like structures punctuate the scenery. Old photographs, drawings, hand-written notes, and printed pages are laid out in orderly fashion. One piece of paper lists 30 fears, one after the other. FEARS is written above it as the title.

1 Eva Kot'átková, *Pictorial Atlas of a Girl Who Cut a Library into Pieces*, 2 vols (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2015), 1, without page numbers.

2 Catherine de Zegher, 'Theater of Speaking Objects: Conversation with Eva Kot'átková', in *Women's Work is Never Done: An Anthology*, ed. by de Zegher (Gent: AsaMer, 2014), pp. 520–33 (p. 520).

FEARS

fear of the dark
 fear of physicalf contact
 fear of own body
 fear of small, narrow spaces
 fear of being watched
 fear of fragile objects
 fear of children
 fear of colors
 fear of clowns
 fear of silence
 fear of sudden movement
 fear of making decisions
 fear of falling a sleep
 fear of sharp teeth
 fear of objects with some closed content
 fear of animal skin
 fear of closed doors
 fear of being followed
 fear of bird wings
 fear of opened windows
 fear of old furniture
 fear of own family members
 fear of too friendly people
 fear of the outside
 fear of having to speak with someone
 fear of own ideas
 fear of being taken care of
 fear of being forgotten in a room
 fear of curtains
 fear of too many memories³

The list contains two typos, 'physicalf' instead of 'physical' and 'a sleep' instead of 'asleep'. The font, the uneven thickness of contour of individual letters, and the errors suggest that the list was written before the age of computers, at a time when typewriters did not have a correction key, or that the list does not claim to be correct but embraces mistakes and uncertainty. Are these fears belonging to one person or are they a compilation of fears of different people? It looks like an ad hoc compilation that does not aim for completeness. At the same time,

3 Part of Eva Kot'átková's installation *Asylum*, mixed media, dimensions variable, presented at 55th Venice Biennale, June–November 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger, Berlin and Karlsruhe.

the list feels exhausting, almost mantra-like; it features many different and very specific fears, some appear more disturbing than others, some seem to contradict each other like the ‘fear of being forgotten’ and the ‘fear of being taken care of’. The recurring phrase *Fear of ...* feels obsessive, but there is also something poetic about it: It’s definitely not a to-do list, but rather an artistic-psychological enumeration of anxious states of mind and personal experiences. One feels inclined to look for significance in the order in which the fears are listed, but the list itself seems to frustrate this.⁴ Usually, fears and phobias are described in terms of anxiety disorders, and are listed in psychiatric manuals.⁵ Their variety seems infinite, and their severity varies from a slight uneasiness or tension to a condition in which a state of great panic is induced by the specific stimulus, which can be an object, an animal, a number, people, spaces, ideas, or a particular situation. For every inexplicable fear the Greeks have something beautiful in store: there is kairophobia, the fear of making decisions, phasmophobia, the fear of ghosts, eisoptrophobia, the fear of mirrors or seeing oneself in a mirror, and paralipophobia, the fear of neglecting duty or responsibility.

The list of fears is part of the installation *Asylum* by Czech artist Eva Kot’átková that was presented at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 (Figure 1). The installation is a compilation, collection, and archive, made from found and fabricated objects, blending private and collective history. Kot’átková’s works often reflect on the processes that restrict and manipulate people within institutions such as psychiatric hospitals or schools. As Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz notes, *Asylum* — the title referring to yet ‘another example of total institutions that control and administer subjectivities’ — is based on Kot’átková’s research visits to the Bohnice psychiatric hospital in Prague.⁶ It presents ‘a collection of fears, anxieties, phobias and phantasmagoric visions of patients and children suffering from communication difficulties or

4 Many thanks to Ben Nichols for this thought and his careful and generous reading of the text.

5 *The Encyclopedia of Phobias, Fears, and Anxieties*, ed. by Ronald M. Doctor, Ada P. Kahn, and Christine Adamec, 3rd edn (New York: Facts On File, 2008).

6 Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, ‘Eva Kot’átková: Mental Armours’, *Afterall*, 25 February 2014 <https://www.afterall.org/article/eva-kot_tkov_mental-armours> [accessed 3 June 2022].



Figure 1. Eva Kotátková, *Asylum*, 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, 'The Encyclopedic Palace', 55th Venice Biennale, June–November 2013. Courtesy of the artist, Meyer Riegger, Berlin/Karlsruhe, and hunt kastner, Prague.

struggling to fit within social structures, a chaotic archive of inner visions.⁷ Is the list of fears a cathartic writing exercise or a mere enumeration? Does it sharpen perception or merely irritate? Can a list of fears evoke or instil fears? Where does one go from here? To list all existing fears seems impossible. Fears are often enduring; they cannot simply be crossed off a list. Instead they pose questions to the body and the mind, to the past and the future. Nevertheless, the form of the list and the enumeration of fears coincide, embedded in a compilation of

7 Ibid.

objects. A list combines invocation, presence, intensity. Something abstract emanates from lists, open and yet framed, ephemeral, assembled, wanting to end and endless at the same time. There is also something controlling, restrictive, fearsome, and violent about them. The anxiety that lists can generate is found in the juxtaposition of banality and manipulation. Many things come to mind that can create pressure or trigger anxiety: the task-orientedness, the relentless demand to check items off a to-do list, having to make a list or to continue a list that has been started; having to work things through or to complete actions on the list; forgetting something, excluding something, listing something dangerous or risky, ... Lists can be reassuring too: they grant postponement; what has been noted down does not have to be processed or completed immediately.

Lists have a special appearance and shape. In artworks that operate with or come as lists, the arrangements of entries, the typographical layout, and the formal setting and presentation are of particular importance. This is where aesthetic and conceptual considerations coincide as the following few examples will show: In George Brecht's famous *Water Yam* (1959–63, republished several times since), a tiny box contains a large number of small printed index cards known as event-scores, on which individual instructions for action are listed with bullet points. In Ceal Floyer's *Monochrome Till Receipt* (1998), the receipt from a supermarket, placed in the middle of a white wall, lists the exclusively white products that the artist bought shortly before presenting the work.⁸ Kapwani Kiwanga's work *Greenbook* (2019) lists street names of various American states on thirteen archival pigment prints. The prints are extracts of the 1961 edition of the *Green Book*, an annual guidebook for African American road travellers, which was published between 1936–66 by Victor Hugo Green. The book reviewed hotels and restaurants and was a response to the great difficulties that African American people faced — due to the racism of white society — when seeking lodging and food while travelling, from being refused service in shops or restaurants to being denied accommodation in hotels or gas in gas stations, not to mention the constant threat

8 *Ceal Floyer: A Handbook*, ed. by Susanne Küper (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2015), pp. 34–35.

of physical violence. Kiwanga's prints are framed in groups according to state and, depending on the number of places listed, consist of one, two, or three loose sheets, beautifully presented within a plain frame on a moss green background resembling the colour of the original book cover. As noted above, Eva Kot'átková's installation *Asylum* presents a written list on a single sheet amidst a large arrangement of various objects, and it is precisely in this juxtaposition that the big question emerges: Why should a compilation of written items be called a list, while an arrangement or a series of presented, drawn, or photographed objects should not? Would the definitions and forms of series and sequences as well as the cross-connections to series and lists need to be reconsidered in this context? Moreover, her installation shows in a remarkable way the overlaps and correspondences of list-making with basic elements of collage, a technique of arranging and combining given material as well as of detaching items or objects from an original context and rearranging them in another, new context. It does so especially by including a list — the list of fears — that makes the linear order seem unimportant. 'Cutting the images into pieces and rearranging them is for me a way to step actively into history, into a given situation, into already stabilized imagery. It is a form of critical thinking with scissors', says Kot'átková.⁹

9 'Eva Kot'átková', in *The Age of Collage: Contemporary Collage in Modern Art*, ed. by Robert Klanten, Lincoln Dexter, Dennis Busch, and Francesca Gavin, 3 vols (Berlin: gestalten, 2013–20), III (2020), pp. 104–09 (p. 105).

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