

A Motion Interrupted: Marie Matusz Krzysztof Kościuczuk

A set of polished silvery objects rests in a black archive box on a Plexiglas pedestal in the middle of a room, against a draped royal-blue neoprene fabric. With its two rows of razor-sharp bolts alongside elbow-long screws, it resembles precision machine parts or surgical instruments. Whether an alluringly packaged product sample or a designer gift, this mesmerizing item exudes the air of a fetish, beaconing the observer to approach, lean over, and examine, perhaps stopping short of running their hand against the cold metallic surface.

Crafted by Marie Matusz in an enlarged scale, it is actually a medieval torture implement known as knee-splitter used against purported liars, a truly dreadful device that would likely deliver a confession from any subject. The apparatus comes with a sheet of black fabric embroidered with a quote from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93)—“He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence”—oftentimes quoted as a positive encouragement to action. Yet while in Blake's deviant rendering, Hell is a source of energy rather than suppression, even for the canonical Dante the “apathetic” or “uncommitted,” those unable to take sides in life, deserve neither a longer mention nor a place in Hell proper. Ostensibly, the piece can be read as a ruse, as the Latin phrase that gave its title to the work has it: *The world wants to be deceived therefore deceive it* (2019). But Matusz hardly deals in deception. Rather, her currency is what lies beneath. Take, for instance, the following constellation. Two steel mortuary trolleys—one resting on its side, the other upright, occupy the exhibition space of Kunstmuseum Bonn. On the latter is a postcard from Palazzo Doria Pamphili, Rome, depicting Caravaggio's celebrated *St John the Baptist* (1602). “I don't think he would be happy,”¹ quipped Matusz, noting the minuscule size and function of the reproduction (incidentally, some accounts dispute Caravaggio's authorship of this version of the painting). This was *Body, soul and society mingle* (2020), and scattered across the walls in the same room was a set of ten framed lithographs based on Honoré Daumier's *Épouvantée de L'Héritage* (*Appalled by Her Legacy* [1871]) featuring a mourning figure in a veil against a receding field of corpses—one of many Daumier prints chronicling the political events around the turbulent time of the Paris Commune. Matusz altered the image by removing the date, keeping only the 8, in its original typeface, and rotating it so that it becomes the infinity symbol (*When Man Truly Approaches the Other He Is Uprooted from History* [2020]). In another part of the room was *When you look back, Memory has no consistency* (2020), a distorted, photocopied black-and-white image of a human eye placed on the floor and covered with a sheet of a semi-translucent fabric, its frame identical to those of the lithographs, the fabric likely echoing the figure's veil. There is a sense of tension in the arrangement of the works as they converse with one another, and also a sense of timelessness, of motion interrupted. Matusz's works continually reemerge in new configurations, inhabiting the encompassing space and staging a choreography. For *Singular service* (2021), the same mortuary trolleys were coupled with an empty chair and a pair of ping-pong rackets resting on a hefty rectangular plinth of black

Plexiglas affixed to the wall so that it seemed to hover in midair. The dark monolith, referencing *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520–22) by Hans Holbein the Younger, hid a preparatory cast of yet another work titled *Soon* (2021): a circular glass face with one mouth, two noses, and three eyes that is only visible once the viewer approaches closely. And soon enough this seemingly austere situation—“I like the feeling of there not being enough,” says Matusz—with reflections upon reflections of surfaces, triggers a network of associations, drawing the viewer quite literally into their midst. Again, a movement that plays out as pure potentiality.

Victoria cruziana is a remarkable plant. A tropical water lily named in honor of Queen of England with large green circular leaves, it blossoms for a total of about forty-eight hours each year. First, the female flower emits a scent that lures scarab beetles. Then it closes, trapping them inside, changing into a pink male flower and producing pollen that the beetles carry farther. It then withers. For *The becomings* (2020), displayed at Kunsthalle Basel in the group show *A-PART* (2020), Matusz hung three lily pads by the stem at different heights in the large skylight room, the massive leaves wilting and shrinking as the exhibition went on.

Now, one doesn't simply buy water lilies in the local flower shop. These came from the University of Basel Botanical Garden, one of the oldest of its kind in the world. Originating as *hortus medicus* at sixteenth-century universities in Italy and France, the botanical garden was instrumental in colonial expansion, nurturing imported plants and cultivating crops to be used across colonial plantations. Many species kept today force cost-consuming infrastructure redevelopments, including elaborate greenhouses. This postcolonial irony is not lost on Matusz, who placed a text on vellum—*Thirsty Tyrants* (*See Where They're At*) (2020)—under a dark fabric beneath one of the lily pads. In the installation that treated the skylight room as a massive greenhouse, visitors experienced the drying-up plants as an interplay of visible and invisible: the inaccessible text, and the otherwise invisible underside of the plant studied with sharp thorns. It also laid bare the implicit power dynamics at play in what is oftentimes seen as an institution for preserving natural beauty, and, by extension, the urge to collect and categorize.

Marie Matusz's works disperse and come together in various configurations, but there is a certain alchemy at play, as in the minute almonds cast in pewter from old utensils that dotted the countryside shed between larger works in Atelier Amden, Switzerland; or the *500kg of Graphite Powder* (2018) offloaded in the exhibition space at Salts, Basel, becoming an array of sleek human-size blocks in Plexiglas evocative of minimal sculpture in another (*Sediments of Modernity* [2020]). They feed on time and vision. Around 4 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon in Basel, the clock at Matusz's studio shows 23:59. It probably reset when it was disconnected, but I just might have looked at the wrong moment.

1 All artist quotes are from a conversation with the author, November 2021, Basel.

205 Marie Matusz, *The world wants to be deceived therefore deceive it* (detail), 2019.

Courtesy: the artist and Nir Altman, Munich

206 207 Marie Matusz, *Body, soul and society mingle*, 2020. *Until we turn blue* installation view at Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2020. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: David Ertl

208 Marie Matusz, *The future is already sold*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich. Photo: Annik Wetter

209 Marie Matusz, *Singular service* (detail), 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Swiss Art Awards









