

# Ester Krumbachová



Edith Jeřábková – Kateřina Svatoňová (eds.)



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Edith Jeřábková — Kateřina Svatoňová

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in Czech scenography. Lukáš Skupa is a film historian specializing in the history of Czech cinematography after 1945. Libuše Heczková is a historian of literature specializing in the 20th century and gender studies. Jesse Jones is an artist whose practice links the media of film, performance, and installation. Ruth Noack is an author, curator, and art and film historian and theoretician, teacher, and mother. Grażyna Świątochowska is a film historian

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Reviewed by Prof. PhDr. Jan Bernard, CSc.

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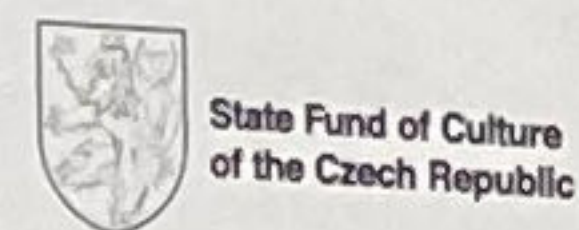
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#### Editorial note

Captions of documents from the Ester Krumbachová Archive use names taken from Krumbachová's writings and titles, which, as an expression of freedom, contain intentionally informal forms, grammatical errors, and vulgarisms.

Daniela and Linda Dostálková's graphic design is interwoven with their own artistic commentary on Ester Krumbachová's work: the photograph series *Misobricks*, which appears throughout the book. The book does not include biographical and bibliographic data, which can be found in comprehensive form in the online Ester Krumbachová Archive.

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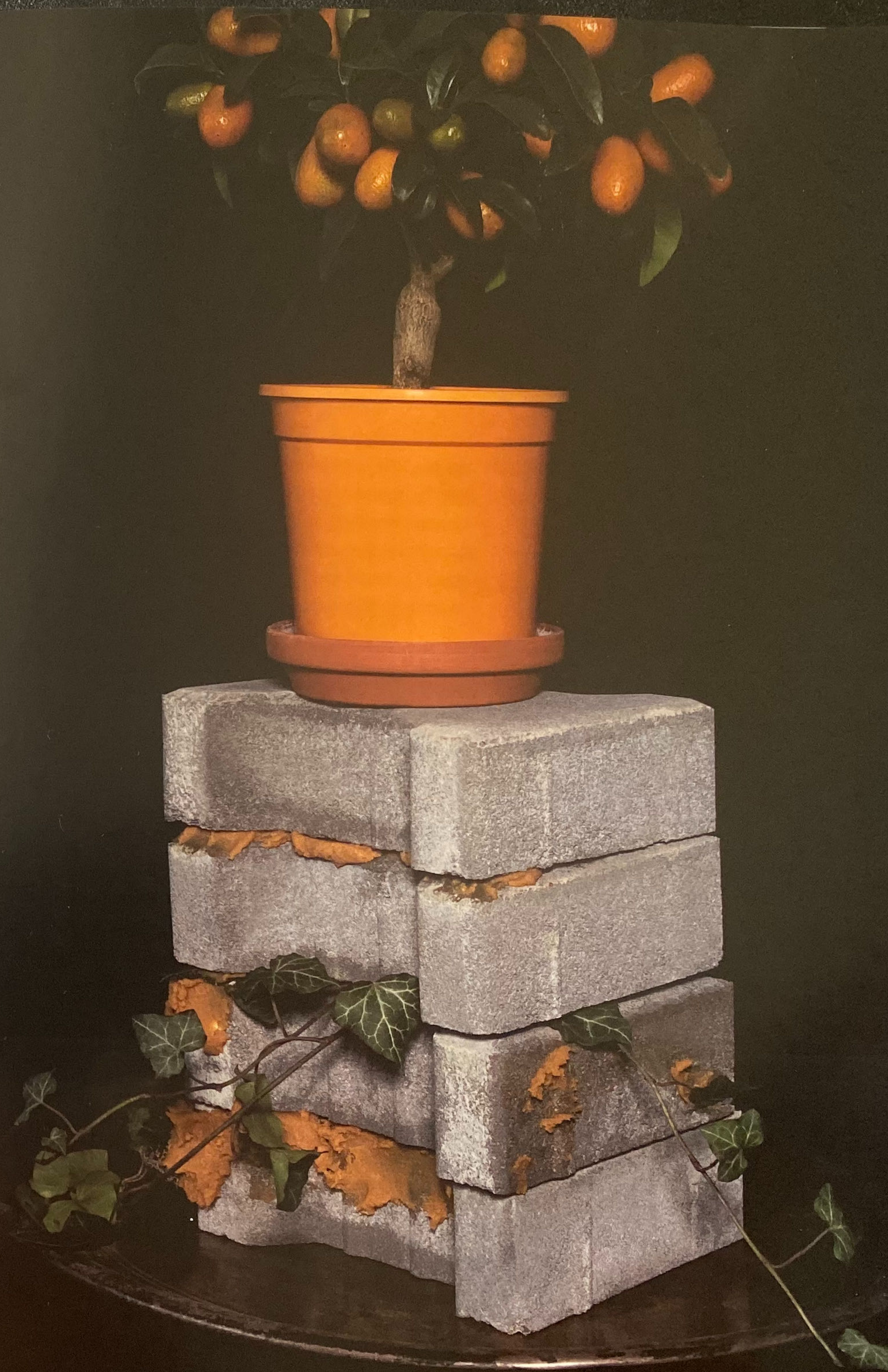


Esterisque, Czech Her Back In:  
On the Bikini Retrofuturity  
of Daisies (1966) — A Brief  
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Kyoo Lee

"... the free woman  
[...] just being born ..."  
"... la femme libre [...]   
seulement en train de naître ..."

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1949).





Briefly, Ester Krumbachová writes:  
August 21, 1991

I just want to say it briefly. Gorbachev was arrested on August 19<sup>th</sup>—a *normal*/Soviet joke. [...]

Lithuania has today declared its independence as a free state. The number 21 works like gambling, blackjack. The number caught my attention. It seems to me that it does not belong in Central Europe, but it's sucking us in. It is an odd number and our fate are even ones, especially if they end in eight. That's interesting. The question is whether a new numeral value is not penetrating the place where I live and which I have been fatefully bound to. I know nothing about it—just my intuition tells me it can't be accidental—even though the 21<sup>st</sup> of the eighth number—August 1968. *Interesting, really interesting.* [...]

Everything is in the hands of people without any *telepathic connection* but they do not know about it, they are connected by power. Any power. [...]

But who were they all? They all are men. Men boasting about some abstraction. *Hahaha.*

When I recently saw that disgusting American film *Top Gun*, I threw up quietly and almost with pleasure watching all these macho, brave men who tap each other's shoulders while doing tail-spins with their planes and laughing their heads off [...].

My life has always been translucent, I have no reason to lie and I didn't give a damn if I was going to survive. Something deep inside me started rejoicing that the temporary time of death everywhere around, of general death, lack of culture, disgust, was about to end. I lost consciousness for thirty hours. Then I was called back. I have probably already mentioned it in these notes of mine, I can't remember and in fact I don't care. *I only know that I had to return*, something pushed me back here. [...]

*This is a diary and I have the right to keep digressing.* [...]

(T)hose mean idiots. Perhaps they meant to console the departing one. *To hell with them.*

And today, on August 21<sup>st</sup>, I didn't get up to look at the sky, which I haven't been doing for the past year. I should have looked up. *Many souls are dying in that common jungle.*<sup>1</sup>

I would not think to touch the sky with two arms.

Sappho, Fragment 52, *If Not, Winter* (trans. Anne Carson, 2002).

*Many souls are dying in that common jungle today too*, at the tail end of a long long winter in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, 2020, the calendar says, and I, a lady philosopher in her apartment in New York City, this concrete jungle now plagued by COVID-19 like many others all over the world, am watching, again, *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*), with awe, this 1966 masterpiece co-scripted by the legendary duo, Věra Chytilová and Ester Krumbachová, two (otherwise) nice lady artists from the Czechoslovak New Wave, that fascinatingly vibrant era, also, of post-Stalinist darkness in the history of the country. This film directed by Chytilová with such wild imagination and acerbic precision, banned therefore, yes, for its threatening brilliance and oddly cryptic simplicity, remains revolutionary and resonant, also thanks to Krumbachová's matchingly playful and boldly lyrical, totally chic, costume design that instantly speaks volumes; also inseparable, it should be also noted, is her art co-direction with Jaroslav Kučera who was in charge of cinematography. If this feminist classic and cornerstone of the Czechoslovak New Wave by the legendary trio was too scandalous for the oppressive regime Krumbachová and her many other artistic comrades lived through, it would be also scandalous to leave it understudied today.

Simply, I will leave to the experts this ongoing task of rediscovering *Daisies* and further articulating its wider and deeper significance as a *bona fide* contemporary classic in the world cinema. Here, more simply, I, born after 1966, now an enthusiastic

reader and archival learner of the art of Ester Krumbachová, this quirky genius caged so long so wrongly, would just like to share some points of observation on the film, focusing on what I have come to sense and savor as “*esterisque*” elements there, the explosively edgy aesthetics, ethics, poetics, politics of “*risqué*” risk, the Ester-style (yes, asterisqued, “*blacklisted*,” “*stigmatized*,” now “*starred*” on a new list).

Those guys in power who felt there was something not right about the film seem right. There is something slyly prescient in her and Chytilová's genius and their collaborative energy, the feminist wit and counter-semiotic sensorship of it all. Their “*genie*,” not just bottled up there at your service, really came out and did her or their thing on their own—although I am also aware of Chytilová's rejection of the “*feminist*” identity, for instance, which she sees as a stigma, something of a “*Western*” import too, and this point would obviously require a separate space for a properly contextualized discussion. Again, all I want to show now, anew in my own way, is some cinepoetic import of the “*esterisque*” that feels retro-futuristic, cuttingly contemporary all over again today when second-wave feminism on the street



and millennial feminist activism on the screen do often meet through shared stories often still involving so many sons of b\* and b\* too yes, wherever they are. This bit of *telepathic connection* is *interesting, really interesting.*

Czech them back in, check them out again: Marie I (played by Jitka Cerhová) and Marie II (Ivana Karbanová) in their checkered bikinis sitting side by side, on that checkered mat. A chess game? Are they being checkmated? Is the game about to end already or to start shortly?

These playmates, protagonists or anarchists, whichever you prefer, with whom the film opens, are at first seen napping or sunbathing or meditating or maybe doing all that. Then Marie II, first, opens her eyes. Action. After a pause, a second or less it seems, she lifts her index finger, brings it right next to her right nostril and starts picking it ever slightly yet still saliently; suddenly in some synchronic synthesis, or maybe a split-second prior to that nasal self-fingering, a door or floor creaking sound also starts filling the screen—or someone farting sonorously! While Marie II is still at her nose, Marie I is picking up a trumpet left on her left and blows it as if blowing a nose for the other Marie. The blare of the trumpet replaces that creaking sound for a while. These two (otherwise seemingly) nice (and quiet) girls are making a scene or a noise, even if just a tiny one. Turning, talking, to each other, looking bored or maybe simmeringly frustrated in fact, they seem to have nothing else or better to do. They do in fact make it crystal clear, right then, that there is “*nothing*” they can do. Instead, they are acting out their nothing-much-ness. They are playacting.

Marie II, despite being—or *since* she is—the second born of the two, acts like a born leader. Is it not part of the non-linear logic, and retro-beauty, of social progress in progress? The art of following those who follow you, those turning up next. Raising the same index finger up high, holding it up rather didactically like it is a stolen handgun, or another communist manifesto freshly written, or a bouquet of bank notes: is she going to introduce a one-line *femanifesto*?

Then, as she quickly brings her finger—her thingy—down as if slashing something down, right through the diagonal cut of a No or a Yes as in a “*Yo* (somewhere between You and



Yes)" in a hip-hop dance move, as our eyes follow that downward arrow in motion, we see right away a footage of some skeletal building collapsing or being bombed or perhaps both. It's all quite quick, a blast in a war zone, almost gone already. This surrealist jump cut instantly magicalizes, radicalizes, Marie's randomized take-down, the casual "throw-down." It is a videographic event.

Then back to the Maries: Marie II picks up a floral crown of daisies, which has been in front of her all along, lying flat, idle, almost invisible. She puts it on her head, on herself. "What are you doing?" asks Marie I. "Being a virgin", says the queen Marie II. From then on, wherever she goes or whatever she does or undoes, the self-declared virgin Marie almost always wears her daisy wreath—except on some rare occasions such as when, for fun, she tosses it on the balding head of some man ready for a threesome romance, already victimized by the pair. This prop, this accessorized touch of genius, the signature of the film born right there, becomes as inseparable as the crown of thorns from the head of Jesus, the son of God who also fell into time. When the words we say fail, the things we wear speak instead, sometimes a thousand times better. Such is the cinephil-poetic brilliance of the crown of daisies designed for and placed on *Daisies*, by Ester. See how it sustains and mobilizes the risqué irony of a (bridal) virgin almost always about to be deflowered then missed by lusty old(er) men. Iconic meets ironic in the daisy-busy body. Use of this mobile flower bed is so spot-on, and its visual irony on the go so palpable and cost-efficient.

The theatrically coordinated symmetry and trickery of the positions and postures of Marie I and II, their live puppetry in their own improvisational public theatre, is softly animated and glamorized by the lushly elegant materiality and vibrancy of the fabrics, patterns and colors of their clothes in the film. Usually, their dresses are similar in style, often almost the same, baby doll or shift dresses (that quintessential '60s style), although the colors are distinctly different; usually Marie I, more passive, wears darker/black clothes, and Marie II, more pro-active,

lighter/white, all in synchronized contrast, although that is not always the case, especially when they are back in their room, playing with each other, also with the scissors, taking a bath, chatting, co-miserating, etc., i.e., when not out on the world stage, chatting, co-miserating, etc., i.e., when not out on the world stage, playacting. This sartorial and behavioral reciprocity between Marie I and Marie II, tweaked with their signature hairstyles and colors, and their grunge makeup, forms the aesthetic grammar of the film that communicates their otherwise insignificant, mechanical doll-like social existence while, more obviously, choreographing that "girly" intimacy between the two best friends, the soulmates in the machine.

Consider the floral theme plastering the whole film. Zoom in on the hyper-floralized, almost furiously added frills on, for instance, those Marie bikinis, especially Marie II's pants that have three fairly prominent rows of frills around the derriere



area, which one should not miss as she shows it right there right in front, which—I mean, the frills—are entirely superfluous, and either distracting or enticing, depending on how they are looked at or who is gazing at those, which of course is the idea, the point, of the frill, a master-signifier of feminine frivolity and fringe, etc.

This time, consider all that again along with the mock-ritualistic gestures and moves the Maries make as if programmed to, so scripted not entirely by themselves; these

two young female-bodied persons, hyper-gender-conforming hetero-sexified "ladies", supposedly always already available to all sexy and unsexy men of "the ladies and gentlemen", might still be alive today and enacting the RealDoll-ness of their collective personae as a two-in-one-or-for-one, twins in sync in the age of duplicated and automated living. The artificialized intelligence of these two female plotters on the go, their street cunning and stage-directorial control, comes from years of deep gendered intergenerational learning, and the simplified—not simple—hilarity of their estersque prank is an almost natural output. For, to say it à la Greek chorus, "we are young, and life is long", or in another translation, "We're young and we've got our whole lives ahead of us!"

So they move on, as one must. Besides, it is unclear where on earth these bikini girls are or would be—except that the film was made and set in the Czech Republic, then Czechoslovakia. We cannot just assume, either, that these bikinis in the opening scene must be near the waters or a pool, as the next



scene cuts to a field where the bodies in those suits suddenly fall as if from the sky, not unlike the way they pop in to start the show. No other friends, no parents, no siblings, nada. Just the two of them, tight together, sitting, drifting, singing, living like conjoined twins.

No one knows where they are from and where they are headed, or in fact, who they are or *what the hell* they are doing except raising hell, or more precisely, going to be... together *Hahaha*.

Remember Marie II's sweetly maniacal smile against some psychedelically patterned wallpaper, the mischievous intensity of which reminds me of the rather sinister eyelashes of Alex in a bowler hat, the young English hoodlum in *A Clockwork Orange*, the novel (1962) by Anthony Burgess, and the film adaptation (1972) by Stanley Kubrick. Two bunnies vs. three or many wolves? A pair or a pack? The globally shared *zeitgeist* of the swinging '60s and early '70s aside, the gendered psychopolitics of it all, a kind of symmetric tension aesthetically signaled here, is palpable. Later in 1991, "I threw up quietly and almost with pleasure watching all these macho, brave men [...] laughing their heads off",<sup>2</sup> said Ester, after watching *Top Gun*, a much more jovial and much less real, real feel-good movie from some holy wood. Perhaps, Ester and Věra were, back then, already experimenting with creating a world where two women in solidarity too can at least have some time off to laugh their heads off. How avant-garde. Perhaps, let me go on, Ester's boundary-pushing, scary fairy tales are her torchlight in her darker times.

Now, again, "does it matter?" and if so, why? Again, maybe "it doesn't", to recycle the seemingly vacuous, or as the critics often say about the film, nihilistic refrain and frame of it; "seemingly", as I might have said, since the almost clichéd doubling—mirroring and echoing—of the world that feels like one big f\*cking joke, which is the surface syntax of the film, is a counter-normal joke. Especially given that the quotidian accessibility of the narrative does seem to have something to do with the experiential authenticity of the comakers of this piece, what does seem to matter, even gesturally, in this sur-realized double-mirroring—the outward mirroring of the world tightly controlled by hard-core chauvinists and hypo-bureau-critical communists, on the one hand, and the more inward mirroring of the two in action, counteraction, on the other hand—is that these two



female characters, two nice and tight buddies, not only eat and travel together but really, quite literally, stick together until the end of their rigorous fooling around and risk-taking, testing, (t)esterisquing, where, at the end of the day, we see something of an apocalyptic self-explosion of the world: "After all, we are really happy", like we mean it.

Not sure? Not clear yet? Let me try and explain this — or blow it up? — further then.

The Maries do function and unfold like a series of cut-ups, themselves cutting up all sort of things along the way, and they drift precariously although excitingly across space and time like free nobodies, like socially alienated butterflies, like some proto-post-modern floating signifiers in the world — except that appearance is deceiving. Their stunningly surreal, paper-scrap body wraps towards the climactic end of the film, which telegraphs the beginning of an end of an era, carry a sci-fi futuristic edge to them. Are they about to die, really, and "really happy"? Are they going to be reborn? Now transported here, which train of time are they going to get on this time?

Also, key to that decalomania-like, kinetic synchronicity among this obviously bonded pair messing around is a kind of secret logic of aesthetical and poethical com-position, aesthetical, ethical, poetical, all at once. These seemingly unruly girls in neatly checkered swimsuits with frilly proclivities, who set the tone, right from the start, with the mock-syllogistic reasoning that they ought to be "bad/spoiled" *because* the world is "bad/spoiled", turn out some badass cynics, cunningly choreographed anarchists — except that appearance is deceiving. And of course, again, you cannot, because you cannot, miss that iconic, ironic ass entirely, exquisitely covered by that gentleman's butterfly collection box Marie I is holding behind her while asking for more food.

Look at this perfectly cornered, self-corneringly naked young lady with her daisies but no panties on. Lepidopterology, gluttony, obscenity, geometry, irony, allegory, philosophy... all

come together in this relentlessly satirical, seriously brainy black comedy where cathartic humor butts in as a poignant cure for almost, if not entirely, all. Writing, directing, dressing for a bare future, Ester in Věra and Věra in Ester ventriloquized in their avatars, Virgin Queen Maries, are offering this bountiful platter of hilarity for all able & ready to laugh not just at but with their future (s)elves.

What now then.

Living through this stormy era of the new world disorder where the post — World War prosperity, promises and perils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are all being really awesomely hyper-augmented by the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution, bigly, on both micro and macro scales, by the same old new big boys in big nations, literally and metaphorically, most of whom, so busy living up there online or wherever, tend just not to have the time really to ponder on ways to save the world from itself, from all these cultural, environmental, social, political, *existential* threats we human beings pose to the whole eco-system of being, let alone our smaller selves... I am also thinking of so many faceless, now heavily masked, very depressed, disempowered and disillusioned boys and girls and ladies and gentlemen and all those nonbinary nonnormative nonspecialist folks in and among us these days, young and old, able-bodied and disabled, in the "Global North" and "South", here and there, many of whom seem to sense something of a disappearance of spacetime itself on a whole new planetary scale. So did, in some not-so-different way, I imagine, these seemingly carefree, desperately young, now memorialized, ladies from the be-sure-to-wear-some-flowers-in-your-hair '60s, who increasingly faced no future in or for them in that part of the world they were inhabiting. Perhaps the Daisies felt they had nothing to lose — except some weight likely to be gained from all that eating, from all that don't-put-off-until-tomorrow-whatever-you-can-eat-today. There we go, a kind of allegory, food for thought today: *that temporary time of death* performed through a series of pointedly escapist exercises in contrarian binging was consuming them, and yet all through

the process in this gorgeously manic comedy, a certain, sudden seeing of a "bigger" hope, namely, that all this non-sense *is about to end*, could even make one *rejoice*.

I do not know if my musings here makes any sense, to you, let alone any nutritious contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the work of Ester Krumbachová, but then *this is* a kind of reading *diary* and I have the right to keep digressing... toward a retrofuture that repeats its own generic novelty, and yet in any case, *I only know I had to return* — to this esterisque, věry esterisque, scenes where one can learn a thing or two on the feminist art of counter-sensorship.



Isn't there anything to eat around here?