

‘Breaking the Joints’ exhibition at Sapieha Palace

4 April – 31 December, 2025

Artists: Gabrielė Adomaitytė, Ed Atkins, Martin Arnold, Catherine Biocca, Aline Bouvy, Barry Doupé, Peter Frederiksen, Özgür Kar, Tomasz Kowalski, Oliver Laric, Ebecho Muslimova, Nadia Naveau, Agnieszka Polska, Jani Ruscica, Mateusz Sadowski, Gary Simmons, Viktor Timofeev, Theo Triantafyllidis

Curators: Post Brothers, Edgaras Gerasimovičius

Assistant curator: Povilas Gumbis

‘Breaking the Joints’ is a group exhibition and event programme that considers the status of the body within the history of animation, elaborating on the essential concepts of cartoons, while also examining what these modes of world-building can tell us about our world today.

Back in the 1930s, animators were faced with a problem: the rubber-hose style of rendering bodies in motion was too fluid, abstracted, and without physical structure, while rotoscoping – the practice of tracing over live-action footage – resulted in rigid mechanical movements without vitality. The Disney animator and labour rights activist Art Babbitt came up with a solution: to give force, flexibility, and believability to animated bodies, one must successively ‘break their joints’. Indeed, they discovered that to give characters flesh and bone, solidity and weight, they had to disfigure their anatomy. This method suggests a certain violence and trauma at the heart of the cartoon world, but also a pliability and plasticity of the body and matter itself, demonstrating a counter-intuitive principle that animated realism requires a bending of physical laws.

Once relegated to the periphery as a popular art form for children’s entertainment, animation has become integral in all media production, a code through which all images and constructions are composed. At the same time, scholars across and between disciplines are increasingly turning to animation to examine not only social and physical transmutations in our society and our media but also to reconsider material objects and relations through a renewed and speculative understanding of animist, agential, and vitalist principles. As such, animation is not simply a specific historically-bound practice of techniques and conventions for moving images but can be regarded as an epistemology, a way of understanding and relating, that offers new possibilities for socio-political, cultural, and ecological critique and embodied transformation.

With a nod to the Sapieha Palace’s former use as a military hospital and ophthalmology clinic, ‘Breaking the Joints’ explores animation’s fusion of optics and anatomy, and considers legacies of bodily disfigurement and manipulation. In their works, the exhibited artists draw from and critically deploy animated tropes and techniques to address bodily anxieties and material relationships, media and trauma. More than simply giving the ‘illusion of life’, animation is, in fact, also an uncanny pact with death, occupying an interval between the emergence and dissolution of form. At the heart of it all is a narrative of the cartoon body, which often serves for the artists as a figure for the outsider, the objectified, the inhuman, the abnormal, the wounded, the dummy, the goof. Squashed and stretched, contorted and fragmented, the elastic and abstracted body of the cartoon functions for many of the artists as a model for limitless malleability, a freedom and transgression of biological constraints, hierarchies, and social norms in the face of the absurdities of reality. The exhibition considers a tension at the heart of animation: between animation as a narrative of liberation,

metamorphosis, and transformation, and animation as a cyclical mechanised disciplining of the body full of violence and bittersweet gags.

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