Leading up to an exhibition the artist engages in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

The conversation aims to get an insight on how the initial ideas for the project develop, to paint a picture of the otherwise untraceable choices in the artist's process, practice and the making of this exhibition.

Roee Rosen in conversation with **Babak Afrassiabi** As part of the exhibition **KAFKA FOR KIDS AND THE DUST CHANNEL**

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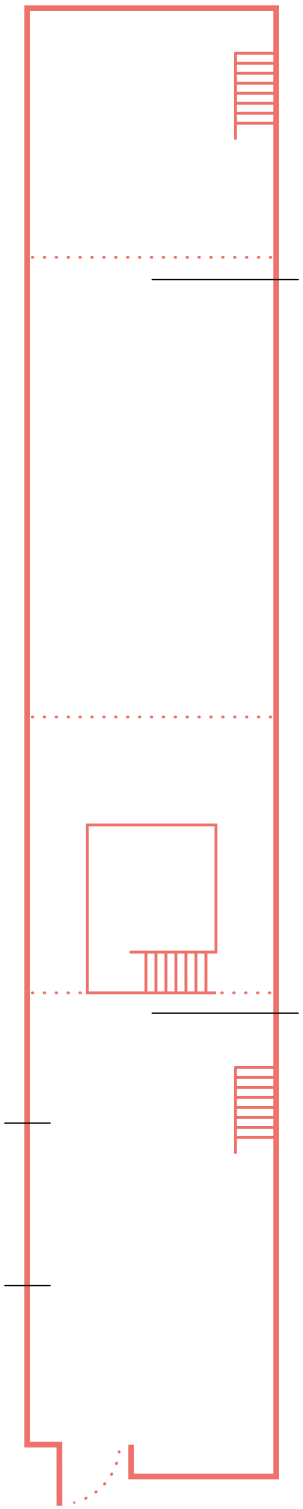

Kafka for Kids
A Musical Comedy
2022, 111 minutes

The Dust Channel
2016, 23 minutes

A still from Kafka for Kids
2022, 55 x 30 cm
Digital print, Dibond (3 mm)

A still from The Dust Channel
2016, 55 x 30 cm
Digital print, Dibond (3 mm)

Screensaver
2016
loop

Dzerzhinsky's Sermon on the Mount (Big Felt)
2017, 370 x 180 cm
wool/felt

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For more information about this and other projects,
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Roee Rosen

Rosen (b. 1963) is an Israeli-American artist, filmmaker and writer, whose work deals primarily with the representation of desire and structural violence. He is known for his multilayered and provocative work which often challenges the divides between history and the present, documentary and fiction, politics and erotics. Using a vast array of fictional characters and iconographic motifs and codes, the artist refers to, and transforms, not only the canon of the historical avant-garde, but also popular media, political propaganda, and classic children's fairy tales.

Kafka for Kids and The Dust Channel were made in collaboration with cinematographer Avner Shahaf and editor Max Lomberg, with music composed by Igor Krutogolov. Kafka for Kids features Hani Furstenberg, Jeff Francis, Eli Gornstein, Yam Umi, Yifeat Ziv, Yiftach Mizrachi, Orna Katz, Ayelet Robinson, Nadya Kucher, Hillel Benjamin Rosen and the Igor Krutogolov Toy Orchestra. The Dust Channel features Inbar Livne Bar-On and Yoav Weiss.

The film Kafka for Kids was made possible by Artis, Artport, FID Lab, The Gwaertier Foundation, Steirischer-Herbst Festival, Rosenfeld Gallery, Medienboard, Israeli Lottery Fund Gemeente Den Haag and 1646. Dzerzhinsky's Sermon on the Mount (Big Felt) is courtesy of Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan. The exhibition was made possible by Gemeente Den Haag, Mondriaan Fonds and Stroom, and is sponsored by VGM Tribunes.

Babak Afrassiabi

(1969, Iran) is a visual artist working with various formats such as video, objects and text. Since 2004 he collaborates with Nasrin Tabatabai with whom he also co-edits of the bilingual magazine Pages. Babak Afrassiabi lives and works between Rotterdam and Brussels.

Babak

I hope you are well. First of all thank you for sending me the link to your film *Kafka for Kids*. I watched it a few days ago and immediately became fascinated by the radiant childhood world in which you depicted Kafka's tale ***The Metamorphosis***. The film carries so many layers and I hope we can at least talk about some of them here. Perhaps we could begin with the formal nature of the film which is already depicted in its title and I feel in many ways speaks to its core concern. Let me open our conversation with a somewhat rhetorical question: why should little children engage with Kafka's story when this is clearly written for grown-ups? Or in other words, why should we, the adults, engage with Kafka's tale as if we were a little child? The film is set as a TV series, and is similar to children's TV programs in which grown-ups play the role of children, Kafka's tale is being told to a little girl played by an adult actress, who in a later scene unexpectedly reappears as an adult (in the role of a legal expert) before returning to 'childhood' again (this time akin to melancholic regression). This impossible conflation of 'child' and 'adult' finds its echo in the question "What is a Child?" which we repeatedly hear in the film, and is kept open until the very end. The one time the legal expert utters this question she follows it with another: "... and how is she molded by the law?" Of course she speaks of a very specific child, named D., who is the youngest Palestinian to have ever been detained in an Israeli prison. In one sentence she lucidly draws the line that links this question to the legal status of the occupied territories: "Childhood is a transitory state, and the law by which D. was tried is temporary, being that the occupation is an interim state." In this sense the 'child' is an abstraction, a fiction, an empty container into which the law seeks its own embodiment and territorialization. To me the formal nature of *Kafka for Kids* seems to be deeply integral to the politics of the film and its relationship to the issues it is addressing. I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on this.

Roee

Thank you, Babak!

To begin with, what you posit as a rhetorical question: should Kafka be adapted for toddlers? – When I first had the idea, back in 2009, it seemed obvious to me that the question was indeed rhetorical, and the answer is so clearly NO, he should not. The funny and painful potentials arise precisely from the preposterous, perverse and violent nature of such a premise, an idea clearly doomed to failure.

At the time I saw my works as stemming from prospects of self negation and self betrayal, willfully pursuing things one should not do: propositions that are ethically uncomfortable and aesthetically destabilizing. To mention one such narrative and structural premise could be: becoming Hitler's lover. Such propositions also conflate the personal with the political, and their initial attack against one's self yields, as you rightly observed, a multilayered realization. What is initially announced as a clear-cut, laconic premise assumes multiple voices and means, expands, multiplies and contradicts itself. I felt that by positioning myself (and hopefully the viewers) on such uncertain ground, questions, as well as emotions, can be experienced in a performative, emphatic and fluctuating way, rather than through an agreeable sense of identification or a reaffirmation of one's notions. Kafka, I felt at that point, was my last remaining sacred cow, and was thus ripe for abusive loving.

You commented on the modal and emotive shifts throughout the film. I would like to complement this experience of the film as a cohesive whole by shortly describing some stages of its convulsive coming-to be, as it pertains to these multiple layers.

Back in 2009 I felt I had a fairly precise structural and poetic framework. I was to work on *The Metamorphosis* through the most inappropriate genre: the musical. Thus, a horrific scene such as father throwing apples at Gregor, would be sugar coated with a cheerful song about apples. Even worse, of course, is the visual depiction of the vermin against Kafka's explicit directions (and, indeed, against the logic of the story, by which Gregor seems to be shapeshifting, of an unset entomology). I also began with bifurcating the film between the Samsa apartment, and the magical story house, where the TV series' protagonists and mascots reside, thus having two worlds coexisting, and I also knew that the film itself would undergo a metamorphosis. I imagined that the ad breaks would become longer and more labyrinthine, opening up to other tales, until the story itself might suddenly be deserted. Other ideas from that early stage were discarded but perhaps left a trace. For example, in my early sketches, the storyteller and the child were covered in fur, suggesting not only a hybrid of human and (other) animal, but also the hairiness of Kafka's Odradek[1] (so they also had qualities of objects). But after a few months of work I was highly exasperated and dissatisfied with my efforts, and deserted the project altogether.

Then, in 2016, encouraged by my friend and curator Hila Peleg, I returned to the project, thinking that the way to go would be through a less overtly ironical stance, by actually attempting to make the ploy alluring and seductive, and by thinking more directly on the notion of childhood. I felt I could offset some poetic affinities of the Metamorphosis to children's literature. From the ubiquity of metamorphoses in the Grimm fairy tales, for example, to a presence such as the three lodgers who behave as if they are one, who could have well be cast in a children's story, and are reminiscent in a way of the two assistants of K in the Castle. More importantly, I now wanted to highlight the cathartic and pleasurable aspects of Gregor's becoming an animal, as well as tropes of childhood that are central to the tale: Gregor perceiving his beloved younger sister Grete, while Gregor himself is the son who stayed at home and thus, within the family structure, remains suspended as the child.

So when the case of D., (the Palestinian twelve year old who was jailed in Israel) happened, I was already midway writing the script and I felt I could continue writing and ignore it. The problematic of "What is a Child?" had such legal and political concreteness, absurdity and urgency, and the fact that the formal frame was that of legality and law, which is so crucial both in Kafka's life and work, that the convergence seemed necessary, even as at that point I thought of it, again, as a form of self-betrayal, this time betraying the narrative and integrity and cinematic coherence.

Here again, there were convulsions and shifts along the way. My initial idea was to organize a panel discussion on children and law in the occupied territories. I had a meeting with several lawyers and activists who provide aid to detained Palestinian children, a theorist dealing with military law and human rights, and others. I thought, in other words, of a veritable documentary discussion, but immediately realized that if I was to maintain any emotional and moral equivocality, I had to fictionalize my expert and structure her monolog as a hybrid between pertinent information on some astonishing aspect of the military law under which D. was sentenced, and between lapses into fears, running

1 Editor's note: Odradek is the name of a creature, or an entity in Franz Kafka's The Cares of a Family Man

thoughts and fantasies, which shift from childhood to old age. By the way, the panel discussion was, in fact, held and recorded, with my amazing actress, Hani Furstenberg, delivering the monolog as a last (and only fictitious) speaker.

Another convulsion in the process of making this work was the fact that its aesthetic language, the music and the bulk of the artworks, came relatively late. Having no budget I used an opportunity to stage the monolog, in a hit-and-run fashion, improvising a makeshift set, believing I would reshoot the scene as the last phase of the production (a plan botched by the first wave of Covid). In other words, what was to be done last was the first thing to be realized, while the musical and visual language of the film, the very fabric that makes it, was being articulated relatively late.

I collaborated with my musician, Igor Krutogolov, several times, most importantly in The Dust Channel. It was his brilliant idea to use his toy orchestra for the music, which presented challenges because of musical limitations many such toys have (for example, toys that have a very limited scale, only full tones, preset sounds and noises etc.) but, it also suggested the physical presence of the musician as an integral part of a toy room of sorts, and the very first songs composed felt almost alchemical to me in relation to the lyrics. It was only after the script was finished that I began working on the gouaches that provided the story with its visual language, and suggested a new layer, or register for the work (which can perhaps be addressed later). In other words, I guess I am trying to say that the multilayered quality you noted is indeed key in all my works, but that substantial aspects of this palimpsest-like experience were unforetold.

Babak

Dear Roee,

It is really interesting to read about the long process you took to arrive at the final film. I think I can understand this impulse of self-betrayal for navigating the intricate layers of the film. I'd like to linger on this notion of self-betrayal as a scheme a bit. Could we take it further by claiming that self-betrayal is in fact the film's subtheme and that even the film's characters (Gregor, child, legal expert...) are driven by it in renegotiating their worlds? After reading your email and your emphasis on this notion of betrayal I couldn't help but think of the animated scenes in which Gregor the vermin exuberantly moves about the house leaving wild lines of greenish slime exuding from its body crisscrossed on the walls, the floor and the furniture. The music here, played on toy instruments, beautifully highlights the violent and unconstrained pleasure of being a vermin (a nonhuman). Gregor has finally (or seems to have) freed himself from the suppressive bureaucratic order of his family home. But the sense of freedom is short-lived. He soon gives in to his inner conflict. Split between his human and insectuous selves, Gregor (incestuously) clings onto to his beloved picture of the 'woman in fur' as his last resort to secure his place in the familial home. This scares off his mother and disappoints his sister. It's all downhill from here for Gregor. He fails his escape from his bureaucratic life and returning is no longer an option either. Gregor is doomed to live in the impasse of being neither fully animal nor a 'dignified' human; exiled inside his own (non-)body. His physical disintegration is literally depicted in the animated scenes of the film and finally, as in the original story, he dies. But what is this ambiguous yet masochistically pleasurable space, this exilic threshold that opens with this (scheme of) self-betrayal, or rather with its inherent 'failure'? We encounter this question several times throughout the film, most pertinently in the powerful sequence with the legal expert. In a way this sequence places the totality of the film in a critical relation to the laws pertaining to the Israeli occupied territories. In her speech, the legal expert tries to explain the twists within the intricate system of these laws but astonishingly she seems herself to go through certain bodily sensations linked to that system. I am really interested in this peculiar scheme that binds the occupier to the law of occupied territories and the symbolic place of an "unnamed" Palestinian child within it. What fantasy of habitation persists through the 'non-place' that occupied territories inherently (and structurally) are made to be? Taking this question through the story of *The Metamorphosis*, especially in the way it is appropriated in the film, opens it to fascinating psychological and political aspects.

Roee

The move you suggest from self betrayal as a creative premise to the protagonists in the film (and through them to the film's political stance) is all the more gratifying for me, as I did not think of it this way. You also observed Gregor as caught in an impasse (between human and animal, adult and child, pleasure and torture, and more: language / music and noise-making, speed and paralysis, gluttony and fasting); but while an impasse might imply stasis, being fettered in a midpoint, there is also the experience of being both simultaneously, and thus in a constant, erratic flux. This sense of restlessness can also apply to the possibilities of reading that open up and become viable and visible even as they contradict each other. My approach is still indebted to Deleuze & Guattari's book on Kafka, *Towards a Minor Literature*, from the resistance to interpretation to the way that it, indeed, leads to the pleasure in becoming animal, and its literal, concrete manifestations (climbing, eating, secreting). I read an interesting recent chapter on the *Metamorphoses*, within the context of what has been defined as the Animal Turn[2], in which the author, Naama Harel, suggests taking the literal bent even more directly: the vermin in the apartment not the figure of the Oedipal son, or of the Jew, or of the subject of bureaucracy (as so many interpreters suggested), but as a literal animal, treated as such by humans[3].

Yet in the film, even as interpretations are defied and becoming animal is highlighted, these tendencies are superimposed on other problematics and narrative potentials. For example, throughout the film, the family is portrayed as a regulatory system, a business. The fact that it is also a clearly erotic system paradoxically conflates the bureaucratic with the erotic; this convergence of bureaucratic thought and law-making with the erotic reaches its peak in the film outside of Kafka, with the legal monologue.

The glide in your question from "Insectuous" to "Incestuous" is beautiful and useful in this context. Deleuze and Guattari polemically opt for the desire to the sister over the Oedipal drama, but Kafka's story offers other aspects of the erotic. You rightly pointed at the masochistic stance of the film. I will not be the first to point out that

2 *Editor's note: an increasing scholarly interest in animals, in the relationships between humans and other animals, and in the role and status of animals in (human) society.*

3 *Naama Harel, Kafka's Zoopetics, Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier (2020, University of Michigan Press); downloadable here: https://www.press.umich.edu/11325807/kafkas_zoopoetics*

in *The Metamorphosis* there is a clear influence of Sacher-Masoch[4]; the woman in fur clearly alludes to Wanda[5] in Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*, and the charwoman is a striking figure through which condensed ciphers of inferiority, in terms of class, gender and age, are transformed into a figure of an omnipotent, phallic woman as she amuses herself with the ailing male vermin, whom she calls "dung beetle." So indeed, when the impasse is a fluctuation between contradictory aspects rather than only the static, melancholic suspension it initially suggests, self-betrayal can be inscribed to both the structure as a whole and to different protagonists.

Even though it may be all too obvious, it is worth stating that this also pertains to the constant disavowal of the story itself. That is, Kafka is betrayed both in the way the tale is reenacted, and by desertion to other realms: a simultaneous promise of the Kafkaesque with its disruptions and disavowals. There is another world, the magical story house, where other dramas unravel, and, of course, the ad-breaks, which on the one hand suggest Kafka where he does not belong (the food ad, for example, is based on a bulimic fantasy culled from the diaries), and on the other hand enables the invasion into Kafka's world of figures that clearly do not belong there – so that, for example, in a "coming soon" ad for *The Trial*, the court painter Titorelli is cast as none other than Picasso.

The final part of your question connects these reflections to the film's political stance as it is manifested in the legal monolog towards the end. Without attempting to explain, I'd like to point at three aspects of the monolog. First, as you rightly point out, as multi-voiced as the expert may be, she is bound (as I am), to the realm of the occupier when it comes to facing this one binary divide – Israeli and Palestinian, occupier and occupied – that is not contested (and I write this as someone whose entire artistic work was set against binary divides). The legal expert makes no attempt to speak for the Palestinian child or render her emotions or experience, but rather dwells on the system that implicates the speaker herself as an Israeli. This private and collective self, however, is presented not only as a trap, but also as determined by that which it fails to see (the guard is defined by the prisoner, the boss by the employee, the occupier by the occupied). It is problematic that I found myself staging in other contexts, perhaps most clearly in The *Confessions of Roee Rosen*, where illegal female labor migrants deliver my supposed confessions in Hebrew, without understanding what they say. I would mention that in this regard the panel discussion that preceded the staging of the monolog yielded almost opposite results: lawyer Gaby Lasky, for example, described in details the hardships detained children are meted by the legal-military system (a crucial and viable angle for many documentarists, but, again, the opposite of what I try to articulate).

The second aspect has to do with another reversal: the familiar ("my" assigned collective identity, political and legal formation and history, the things you supposedly face in news editions and Op Ed pieces), is in fact extremely bizarre and unknown. When the scholar offers to explain the law of the occupation to a stranger removed in time and space, and thus imagines Kwame[6], a veterinarian from Ghana who hasn't been born yet, she seems to offer to convey the most trivial data. But I feel that this data is anything but trivial or familiar (I think, by the way, that Israeli culture is highly invested in turning a blind eye to the factualities of the occupation, which invariantly means not only refusing to know the Palestinian other, but also refusing aspects of the way your clash with that other constitutes your own identity).

The third aspect, as you pointed out, has to do with the ways in which the erotic imaginary, pleasure and fantasy are conflated with the political, and the ways in which its harshest and most disturbing aspects of power reverberate in this imaginary rather than disappear, even as the erotic fantasy, eventually, is one of ascension and escape.

4 *Editor's note: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was an Austrian writer and journalist, who became famous for his romantic stories about Galician life. The term masochism was derived from his name and was coined by Kraft-Ebbing in Psychopathalogia Sexualis, along with the term 'sadism.'*

5 *Editor's note: Wanda von Dunajew is the central female character of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's best known novel Venus in Furs. The novel draws themes, like female dominance and sadomasochism, and character inspiration heavily from Sacher-Masoch's own life. Wanda was modeled after Fanny Pistor, who was an emerging literary writer.https://www.press.umich.edu/11325807/kafkas_zoopoetics*

6 *Editor's note: Kwame Nkrumah was a Ghanaian politician, political theorist, and revolutionary. He was the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana, having led the Gold Coast to independence from Britain in 1957.*

Babak

This conflating of erotic imaginary with the system of political power is really illuminating. It sheds light on the mechanism of occupation and its production of self as a trap which you mentioned earlier. But is it at all possible to 'escape' it or avoid falling into its trap? This may not really be your concern in this film, not directly at least, but I want to speculate that the film does hint at the orientation of this 'escape.' The failure of both Gregor and the legal expert to fully release themselves (from their place within the law) is because they do not go far enough in their perversions beyond the enjoyment schemes that bind them to the law. In the film we witness instances of their perversion (before they relapse into a version of their old selves), but it is nevertheless enough to make us wonder, what if they had continued the path, what if the legal expert for example had let herself be taken by the material plasticity of her bodily reflections or bore the consequences of her deviation from conceptual sense in her legal language? While she is restrained by the very signifiers she stages as a legal expert, she is yet driven by the urge to abandon herself as a sensible signifier, both in body and speech. In one telling instance, the unlocatable odors she assumes are excreting from her body, tempt her into releasing her thoughts away from her speech... Above that I think the film's own narrative and filmic approaches also imply the necessity of perversion, beginning already, as we spoke, with the film's title, where the impossible conjunction of the two worlds, that of toddlers and Kafka, incites obscene elements potentially incompatible and incomprehensible to either worlds. It is perhaps this notion of incompatibility and lack of sense that defines perversion, one that necessitates the desertion of self but also the other. But can this offer a way out, or is perversion only possible inside the law and fantasies bound by it? Is transgression inherent to the dialectic of law and desire? I am slightly deviating from the film's topic, but I feel these are questions that the film implicitly poses.

Roee

On many levels it is right to end with these questions that you raise, and let them remain as questions (whether described as an impasse or as a fluctuation, as we did earlier in this dialogue). In *The Confessions of Roee Rosen*, Roee Rosen 1 – a Bulgarian woman named Ekaterina Navuschtanova – exclaims (in Hebrew, without understanding the words she utters): "I did not become familiar with the cities through which I passed.

Like that guy wrote: there is an address, but there is no street, What we call a city is only wavering." 'That guy' is of course Kafka, and the sentence is an abusive homage to his famous aphorism: "There is a goal but no way, the only way is wavering."