

Pantoffeltier
Slipper Animal

Breathing is habit. Life is habit.
Samuel Beckett

The pantoffeltier – slipper animal – is a unicellular organism that lives in water. It is the shape of a footprint with a thousand eyelashes covering its fringes, enabling it to move and to respond to stimuli – to light and its enemies. But it has no brain, just a digestive system and lives carelessly without a conscience or worries, without ambition or direction. It does not think, or remember. It is snug in itself and for itself. Asexual, cosy and complete. This microscopic animal appears as an imaginary humanised form in Vera Klute's animation trilogy *Home is where the heart is*. Vera's version is of a tartan slipper with hundreds of creeping toes. Its oddness beguiling as it moves in circles like a ground insect across tiled floors, immune to the sausage worms and spilt milk and the floating hat that all play their part as elements in this strange short scene. It appears, this slipper animal, as if out of a waking dream like a benevolent hallucination seeping in through the backdoor of sleep. An amazing, funny little thing is a slipper of toes. Nothing is fixed or secure in this short-lived domestic white world that quickly gets swallowed up by rolls of floral wallpaper.

In the first of the works Vera Klute has created an underground world. A city carved out of worm holes. Tracing into these dark crevices she quickly forms patterns that become roadways, then motorside houses spring up as offshoot suburbia. So can begin the coming and going, the cycle of living, the same patterns of movement over and over as day becomes night. This toytown world is pretty though – with its dinky cars, and uniform wooden houses and beaming lights. At night the crickets come out and the sound of wind stirs just at its fringes. Omnipresent is the constant breathing of a lung machine, its heavy inhalations and exhalations controlling energies like the surveillant eyes of a watchman, breathing his mechanical pumping breath, on whose every beat cars move round and round. Stark and definite.

In the final animation we move inside the body, into the brain. Scanning penetrates to reveal beautiful patterns – a cauliflower complexity of organic shapes emerging from a dark background like a silent, slow bomb. A mush of tiny thoughts filters through, yet nothing is perhaps overly mysterious. An arrow points from the brain to ordinary, familiar things – icecream cones and coffee-toned bodies, clicking sounds of an old typewriter, a couple of drinks, plans for a new home, the scribbling sound of writing notes. Things that take up a lifetime, with time ticking constantly by.

Vera Klute's work operates like a short story – claustrophobic with no room for excess, no space and no time for lingering. No fillings. Lines of narrative drawn out quickly between singular bodies and isolated objects that become strange, or unsettling. Disconnected fragments where surreal images are tinged with darker shadows but are kept light through playfully inventive humour. Klute walks this thin line well – like a highwire balancing act of supreme agility, keeping plates up and spinning on the thinnest of sticks. Her videos are, as Richard Ford makes claims for the short story, ‘daring little instruments’.ⁱ For through the flexibility of the animated image, where things can change their nature or form on a whim, where the far-fetched is easily believable and where the slightest of exposure holds significance, Klute's trilogy opens us up to the unreal, only to bring us back to what Aristotle called the essential.ⁱⁱ For Klute does funny things with her imagery, laying bare its insides, wilfully making strange the observational qualities of lived life, dispensing of any plot so that within a pared-back aesthetic of precious little time and space she can give us something *big*.

Portlaoise was the primer for this work and entry points for exploration come not only from this place but from other small towns where the artist has lived. Is one place, after all, not more or less the same as any other? Exploring systems of human behavioural patterns and building up pictures from the close scrutiny of experience gained is offered by someone who stands back and looks in from the outside. For Klute's vantage point is to look down onto her worlds, like a scientist looking through a microscope amplifying the tiny and making visible the invisible, seeing through the surface of things, watching how things behave and figuring out how they really work. Cutting out extraneous details, she skilfully alters what remains to reveal the disquieting rhythms of the quotidian – patterns of (un)remarkable predictability. *Home is where the heart is* is Klute's form of existentialism – the making sense of an absurd and meaningless world through observing systematic habits and daily routines that anchor us against its disorientation and confusion, against the disclosure of *non-being*.

Freedom of choice is the essence of the existentialist thinker. We are ‘condemned to be free’ – to always having to make a choice. But such freedom places the individual in a state of anxiety as he is surrounded by almost infinite possibilities. The *being free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself*ⁱⁱⁱ is burdened with anguish – a dread of facing up to our own inner nothingness. *In der angst ist einem unheimlich*, writes Martin Heidegger, where a radical sense of deep disorientation, of not-being at home in ourselves is experienced. This is perhaps what we *work* against – the *unheimlich* – and therein lies the paradox where we deny to ourselves this inescapable

freedom by choosing not to choose – this is what Jean Paul Sartre has called ‘bad faith’. To alleviate the pain of living, to pass the time, we form habits and routines, participating in rituals to cope with our existence, to overcome the boredom and avoid thinking too deeply which may lead to insanity. *Habit becomes a compromise, between the individual and his environment. and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit,*^{iv} writes Beckett. Home is something not foreign and constitutes a (more or less) moral and protective environment for actual daily living. It is where the heart is and we do not venture far.

What filters through the nimbleness of these irresistible animations is a search for some sort of understanding. On one level – there is a light-heartedness compounded by a uniquely imaginative and surreal humour. On the other there is something bleaker, darker to consider – the notion of the human being as predictable, determined and limited, as if the pantoffeltier, the slipper animal with no brain and sheltered from any sense of disorientation, is a metaphor for what we might really want from life. As if the *home* we seek is some sort of hideaway like the prenatal cavity of a mother’s womb. Klute’s ambition is to get inside it all and take it apart – like Marcel Proust who watches Albertine asleep, scrutinising to find out what is on the inside. Zooming into territories of the brain and panning out to view the town, the three video animations read as chapters from the same story with Klute’s searches reaching beyond the patterns of external society and bringing us inside (the body, the brain) to find clues. It is not that there are any clear answers here, Klute’s position remains ambiguous, but rather there is the suggestion that we are perhaps more machine-like, natural cyborgs – as opposed to the post-human theories that present modern muscle-man, as a newly formed mix of prosthetic devices, drugs and body sculpture. The line between nature and machine was perhaps always blurred or thin and neurobiology may reveal that we are not such mysterious beings afterall – the brain is quite straightforward, understandable in the way that a complex machine might be. It is in this sense that Klute’s existentialist man has a 'science-fiction' feel – possessing a cyborg psyche, a machine-like mentality which can readily embrace a controlling reality and the circumnavigating clock. But this is a reality presenting a dual aspect, not only the dark or dull world of routine and non-adventure, but also, in the possibility of finding ourselves *at home*, there is, perhaps, the possibility of a utopia full of promise- of simple and safe things, in a succession of habits, in constant repetition. *Home is where the Heart Is.*

Thinking about Vera Klute’s work you can imagine that her home might be found not inside a conventional house, but more a home that belongs inside the stories of a surrealist, like Uncle Ubracio’s workroom in Leonara Carrington’s “Little Francis” – described as ‘a spacious apartment

on the ground floor filled with half constructed constructions and wholly demolished bicycles. “The walls’, she writes ‘were lined with bookshelves that held books, spare tyres, bottles of oil, chipped figureheads, spanners, hammers and reels of thread. A series of books – *Man and Bicycle*, *Intricacies of Pedals*, *Tobson’s Essay on Spokes and Bells*, *Free Wheels and Ball Bearings* – was piled beside a heterogeneous collection that included starved cockroaches in a small cage, a string of artificial onions, a spinning wheel, ladies corsets of complicated pattern and a great many cogwheels.”^v

Klute’s existential pragmatism (a desire to work things out through taking things apart and reconstructing) presents itself within a vivid imagination, where the unexpected and obscure allow machines, the semi-organic, kinetic and dream objects, to converge in her enquiry into the human condition. And this enquiry is treated always with a pinch of salt, a light-hearted twist dampening any nightmarish or heavy cautionary tone. For Klute’s position remains fundamentally playful, non-didactic and mischievously inventive.

It is not surprising when Vera Klute was invited to participate in UNIT – a curatorial experiment conceived by Sarah Searson and located within the town of Portlaoise that she wanted to get inside the hospital, to seek out the medical instruments and machinery and the scanning technologies to explore the images of pathology and discover how things might look from the inside. When eventually she got permission and was allowed to see the radiographic images on X-Ray and digital image plates, what she found were beautifully mysterious wateryblue abstract transparencies, where bones or a colon or the site of disease or malfunction is traced out in graphic outline, or amplified by coloured dye to read within the vapour-liquid intelligence of the scan. Another world is opened up for Klute, and for sure the body and mind might be understood as machines or, rather machine-like, but their systems seem full of mystery too.

Vera Klute will present her animation trilogy *Home is Where the Heart is* in shop windows in the main street of Portlaoise for one week from the 19th May next.

Clíodhna Shaffrey

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- i John Ford, ed. *The New Granta Book of the American Short Story*, Granta, London, 2007, pp vii
- ii Paul Ricoeur *Can Fictional Narratives be True?* in *Analecta Husserliana*, ed. A-T. Tymieniecka, Dordrecht, Reidel, vol. 14, 1983, pp 16. This reference is found also in Richard Kearney's chapter *The Immemorial: A Task of Narrative* in his book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Routledge, 2003, pp 183
- iii Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, pp. 232
- iv Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1931, pp. 19
- v Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below*, introduction to the English edition by Marina Warner (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), pp.2. This reference is sourced from Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* in his chapter *Homes for Cyborgs*, MIT Press, 1992, pp.149-50.