

# Petra Vlčková

## Sphere Dance

### Abstract

In my work Sphere Dance, I am exploring multiple sclerosis, the autoimmune illness that I suffer from. This project is part of my artistic research conducted within my doctoral thesis, Disease in Photography and Its Visuality. As a bearer of the disease and an artist, I examine my illness through personal experience, time, space, emotion, my body, family, scientific facts, and interviews with experts – and my visual/photographic reflection is a key component of this approach. I use indirect means of expression through staged photographs and collages rather than documentary photography, as I deem my experience with the illness hardly transferrable. Even though the disease is always present with me, it remains, in many ways, abstract. I decided to work through this deeply personal life theme to gain distance and perspective on both the disease and myself. I decompose my experience into the smallest details to consciously explore and process aspects that I am unable to perceive clearly in the everyday rhythm of life.

### Key words

Art Therapy. Artistic Research. Autoethnography. Illness. Interpretation. Multiple Sclerosis. Photography.



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The artistic depiction of one's own illness and its public presentation requires great courage from the artist. It is not only medical or privacy questions that need to be considered when the artist discloses sensitive information about themselves to the audience. Courage is required mainly because the disease is always present, and manifests itself internally and externally, physiologically, psychologically, emotionally and socially, and in both visible and invisible forms. It affects not only the individual, but also his or her environment, family, work and relationships. Unwittingly, it becomes part of the changing identity of its bearer, and the illness – especially a progressive one – begins to take over and occupy an increasing part of the person's personality over time.

Petra Vlčková has suffered from multiple sclerosis since she was fifteen. It is an autoimmune disease affecting the nervous system. The body's defence mechanism attacks and damages the myelin sheath of neurons, making it impossible to transmit nerve impulses. The disease has a number of seemingly unrelated symptoms – seizures, increased fatigue, musculoskeletal disorders, psychological disorders or problems with memory and concentration. It affects women more than men. This degenerative disease cannot be cured by today's medical means, they only can slow down its progression. Nevertheless, patients' life expectancy does not statistically differ from that of the average population.

Multiple Sclerosis has one unpleasant, even perverse feature. The negative symptoms fluctuate, after a period of severe attacks they may completely disappear and patients survive in remission without complications, sometimes even for years. The disease thus gives the bearer false hope that they have miraculously recovered or that it has been wrongly diagnosed.

Petra Vlčková experienced this painful and frustrating process. After reaching adulthood, her health was stable and almost without limitations. The symptoms of the disease began to appear more frequently before she reached thirty years of age. Fatigue and problems with mobility when walking, swimming or dancing gradually brought her to fully understand the situation – the disease is here with me and it is not going anywhere. In an effort to understand it better and try to live with it, the artist began to reflect her illness in her own photographic work, laying the foundation for a long-term project called Sphere Dance, which you can now see in this exhibition.

Public awareness of multiple sclerosis is very limited, and therefore the exhibition could be considered a form of education. Spreading information about the disease, its manifestations and ways in which people with the disease can be relieved or helped is undoubtedly important, but in this case, it is not the primary aim of the exhibition. It probably goes without saying that the impact of the disease

on the everyday life of a person and their immediate surroundings is enormous.

The language of the entire exhibition focuses on the artist's own experience, and on the physical and mental processes that take place when confronted with her illness. One of the key aspects is the integrity of the body. Multiple sclerosis, like any autoimmune disease, creates a contradiction in one's perception, a kind of dichotomy of identity, one might say. The bearer perceives the disease as an alien element that destroys their body and mind, causing pain, mental discomfort, and social exclusion. At the same time, however, the disease is caused by their own defence mechanisms – their own cells, which were created on the basis of their own genetic code. This contradiction must be dealt with – on the one hand, the bearer can try to fight the disease and force it out of their mind; on the other hand, knowing that it is an incurable part of themselves, they can try to grasp it mentally and emotionally as part of themselves, inherited from their ancestors and developed into its present form.

The physiological manifestations that undermine bodily integrity are numerous in multiple sclerosis. In the case of Petra Vlčková, the most obvious are difficulties with walking and keeping balance. She reflects this fact in many of her photographs. In one of them we see the artist walking through the desert, and only a closer look suggests that

the desert is actually her own body. Examining the photograph, we notice that the tiny walking figures depicted in their phased movement are painted gold. This visual symbol is repeated throughout the work. The artist deliberately chose the colour gold as an abstract representation of the illness, and uses it in many of her photographs and collages as a symbol of the predator that literally consumes her physically, mentally and emotionally. Gold, generally considered beautiful and precious, takes on the opposite meaning here. As if the artist were subconsciously referring to gold's negative connotations, well known from the ancient myth of King Midas and winding across cultures for millennia, her work exploits the malign ability of gold to destroy human destinies.

However, the golden colour also indirectly refers to other, less visible physiological manifestations such as pain, fatigue or sadness, or more precisely, to hindsight when the artist still felt healthy. She often paints the backgrounds of her photographs with gold paint in the style of gothic illumination, emphasizing the preciousness of the depicted situation. In one of her photographs, the artist falls down without support (or does she fly?), or elsewhere, during her treatment at the spa, she is practicing on a walking support machine, but feels in unity with her own body.

Any artistic representation of an illness, and especially an incurable one, carries with it a problematic aspect – it can induce

pity or compassion. We naturally perceive illness as a hardship that fills the life of the bearer with suffering. Yet no artist finds their artistic programme on self-pity. Therefore, they face the question of how to visually represent illness, including its drawbacks, without reinforcing sentiment in the spectator. Such an approach would ultimately lead to kitsch, which is humanly unacceptable when depicting illness. Petra Vlčková deliberately works with a subtle touch of wit and irony to lighten the theme of her work, but also – because it is a form of autotherapy – to relieve herself. Take, for example, the photographic collage of a mandala made of legs and medicine capsules placed in a circle. It is not that this image provokes laughter, but it certainly doesn't evoke too much melancholy either. By breaking away from sentimentality, the work is better able to focus on the details of her experience of living with her illness and the meticulous work of coping with it. On a purely medical level, it shows the contrast between the leg, whose physiological condition continues to deteriorate, and the medication preventing that deterioration. On a spiritual level, however, the mandala is a multivocal spiritual symbol that includes a belief in merging with the universe or, if you will, with the divine, and improving one's health. And in this particular case, also making fun on the part of the artist.

It is different if we look at the question of sentimentality through the existential dimension

of the work. Petra Vlčková's photographs directly encourage us to become aware of the passage of time and thus the finality of our own existence. The phenomenon of the passage of time in paintings was aptly described by James Elkins (2007) in his book, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. According to Elkins (2007), paintings interfere with the regular passage of time as indicated by the clock. They cause time to pass tumultuously or, on the contrary, to drag heavily and finally to stop. In everyday life, however, we take the fact that time is slowly and inexorably moving us towards its end with ease and hardly notice its passage. It is imperceptible and causes no pain. We are, of course, aware that with each day we live we are approaching our end, but most of us probably perceive this as a normal reality. The pain comes when time suddenly seems to jump dramatically. An artwork depicting the passage of time is like a hand reaching for a clock and stopping it at an unexpected moment, moving the hands forward or backward by an hour (Elkins, 2007).

Some of Vlčková's photographs – especially those that transcend into dream reality – seem to stop time, while others are chasing it. In contrast to showing strong pity towards the artist, the viewer's sentiment towards their own transience is better justified in the context of perceiving the work.

Even though multiple sclerosis is a relatively widespread disease,

people usually do not know how to react when meeting a sufferer, how to behave appropriately or conduct a conversation on the topic of the disease in a way that does not harm them. Just the opposite – a large number of people even avoid confrontation with the sick person. The artist critically examines several negative phenomena related to this. One of them is unsolicited gaze. In the case of an illness manifested by physical limitations, one can stare at a non-functioning limb or 'unnatural', non-normative walking. Petra Vlčková reflects on this sad experience in a photograph in which she is shown from the waist down in black tights, with dummy eyes glued to her left leg, representing the real eyes of passers-by. Leaving aside the fact that a well-mannered person should know that unsolicited gazing is inappropriate and can make a person uncomfortable, one can understand a certain curiosity – a passer-by needs to establish if the disabled person needs help, or the passer-by wants to subject the diseased to "examination". However, for most of the general public, it is difficult to find the right balance.

Something similar happens when the sufferer loses balance and staggers or falls to the ground. It is usually an unpleasant experience for both parties, both the disabled person and the healthy bystander, where the bystander is somehow automatically placed in the superior role of the one in control, and the disabled person in the role of an object to be manipulated – to be helped to

stand up, to have medical help requested, etc. This hierarchy of power then leads to discomfort on both sides. While living with the physical symptoms of the illness, the artist often experienced these feelings and portrayed her situation in a large-scale collage of layered bodies. The bodies piled on top of each other seem more like inanimate corpses, literally things stripped of dignity. Here, the artist depicts herself in moments of losing her balance and falling in public, and tries to express the feelings of dependence, shame and disgrace she experiences in doing so. After falling to the ground, she immediately becomes an object for passers-by. Often, we do not notice such a person, or we pretend indifference. And if we do intervene, it is only out of duty and to a minimal extent. We often associate falls in the street with people under the influence of alcohol or drugs. However, most of us have also experienced a situation where we have looked on with condescending detachment at an otherwise healthy person who has been injured on the street, fallen and become the subject of medical intervention. The objectification of a physical (or other) disability, where we view the person as an object, can be hurtful. We need to learn to see people as beings in their own right at all times. Just imagine how the artist must feel as a woman when she loses her balance on the street and realizes how she evokes all of the above associations.

In processing her feelings and experiences of living with mul-

tiple sclerosis, Petra Vlčková seems to have deliberately avoided the topic of intimacy, or maybe she did not emphasize this aspect of her personality very much (perhaps thinking that her condition would improve). The experience of her MRI scan is an exception. This is an uncomfortable and psychologically demanding examination that involves lying in a claustrophobically enclosed magnetic cylinder for long periods of time. The powerful magnets inside create a magnetic field used for diagnosis. When activated, they make unpleasant, loud noises, creaking and banging, as if the whole diagnostic device is about to fall apart. To alleviate the discomfort, patients are fitted with sound-damping headphones, or have pictures of pets glued to the inside of the cylinder to make the situation a little calmer. Petra Vlčková relieved the stress of the examination by imagining herself dancing to the sound of the machine and portraying her experience in a large-scale collage and video. In it, the artist's figure, wearing a short dance dress and a wig not unlike Charlotte's hairstyle in *Lost in Translation*, floats in a colourful, hard-to-define, dimensionless space and performs a 'disco-like', provocative dance. This subtle form of sexualization of the female body, which in other circumstances (and especially in the case of the woman-artist) would be more of a critical reflection on social norms, here takes on a completely different meaning: liberation from the objectification being experienced in reality. By transcending herself into an imaginative world,

the artist feels herself and at the same time expresses (not in vain!) the prospect of improving her health. The artist turns the established conventions of perception of pity, the unsolicited gaze and objectification inside out, thus encouraging us as viewers to be more sensitive.

Petra Vlčková always wanted to be a dancer. Her fate evolved differently, and she became a photographer. It should be noted that this it is good as it is – the illness that was bound to come one day would not allow her to pursue a dancing profession. As an artist, however, she remains a dancer in body and soul, and perhaps we are not far from the truth when we say that she has also metaphorically danced her way through to a deeply personal photographic statement. Photographs have helped her and continue to help her process her experiences, coming to terms with illness as an essential part of who she is, and thereby reinforcing her authentic self-image. Petra Vlčková's story is a story with an uncertain ending. In the course of it there are life struggles, ups and downs, but at the end – one can wish for it – a big hope.

### Branislav Štěpánek

I have been exploring my own illness, multiple sclerosis, through visual research conducted since 2017. I have chosen photography as the medium for my research, which serves as a means of artistic exploration. Through photography, I try to delve into scientific and medical issues, which I visualize using

my artistic language in order to better understand the principles of my own health problems. This approach offers me the opportunity not only to document the disease and express the experiences associated with it, but also to make the complex process of understanding it accessible and simpler, both for myself and for others who may be unfamiliar with this disease. Through artistic research, I approach the issue of multiple sclerosis and depict it in a new way using photography. The aim is to explore and express my personal experience with the disease through photography and text, which I have recorded continuously in diary form. I capture the physical, emotional, and social aspects of the disease and its impact on an individual's life.

Given that I draw on my personal experience with multiple sclerosis in my creative work, I deal with the aspect of authenticity in my artistic research. Authenticity in this context means revealing my true experience with the disease. The presence of authenticity offers valuable perspectives for others, whether they face similar challenges themselves or are part of the lives of others who are experiencing the disease.

One of my main goals is to visualize the invisible. Multiple sclerosis is often referred to as an invisible disease due to the diversity and often internal nature of its symptoms. Photography allows me to visualize both the visible and invisible aspects of my condition, which can lead to a better understanding of the

nature and impact of the disease.

My work serves as a bridge connecting me to people who may not have direct experience with this disease. Through my work, I strive to enable viewers/readers to empathize with my experiences and create understanding and connection with the world of multiple sclerosis. Through photography, I connect my inner world with the outside world, to promote mutual understanding and raise awareness about this autoimmune disease.

By presenting my artistic work, I would like to provide a unique perspective on living with multiple sclerosis and raise awareness about the realities of the disease, which are essential for breaking down stigma and building empathy.

Multiple sclerosis is a chronic autoimmune disease in which the human immune system attacks its own central nervous system, specifically the brain and spinal cord. Nerve cells, or neurons, communicate with other neurons via nerve impulses through nerve projections called axons, which are wrapped in an insulating layer called myelin, which accelerates and refines the transmission of impulses and prevents them from being transmitted to surrounding fibers. In multiple sclerosis, the body attacks the myelin sheaths and destroys them. We call this process an attack. At this point, an inflammatory reaction occurs in the brain or spinal cord.

When the myelin sheaths are damaged, the axons are unable to

properly transmit impulses to other neurons in the nervous system. In my case, there is a severe impairment of motor skills in the lower limbs, and although it may seem that demyelination occurs in the limbs, this phenomenon occurs mainly in the brain and spinal cord. The disease is unpredictable. It manifests itself differently in

each patient. Common symptoms include visual disturbances, changes in sensitivity, pain and muscle spasms, decreased activity, balance problems, urinary disorders and sexual dysfunction, motor disorders, mental problems, and cognition – which includes attention, perception, memory, association, concept

formation, language, problem solving, and imagination.

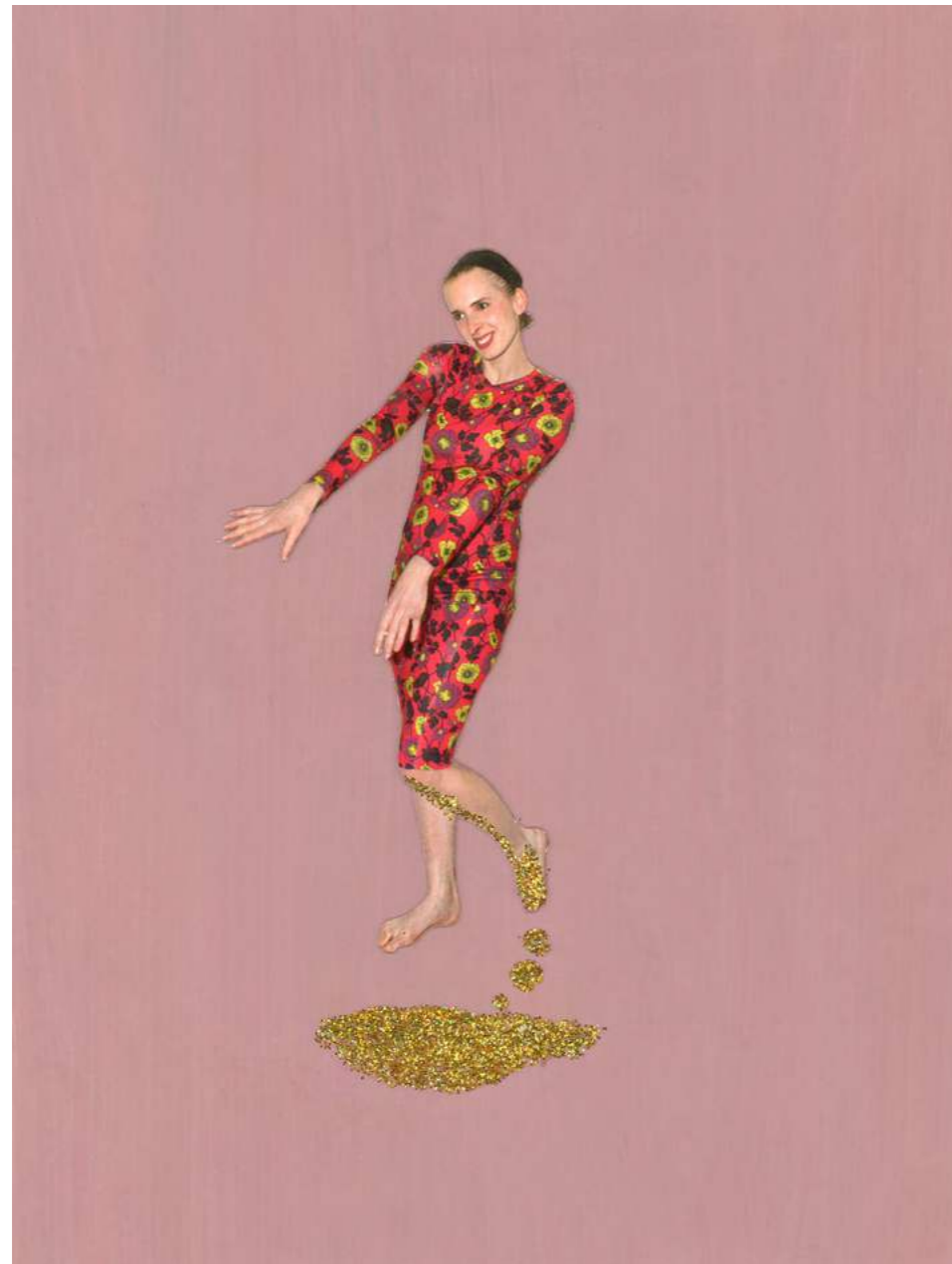


**Golden Colour**

In my photographs, I symbolize my illness with the colour gold to connect the abstract world with reality and emphasize its presence.

The choice of the colour gold was completely intuitive. According to Carl Gustav Jung, things that go beyond human comprehension are inexhaustible, and that is why we use symbolic terms to represent ideas

that we cannot define or fully understand. The usage of the colour gold in my work is somewhat subversive: gold, while having the common notion of something precious and valuable, also symbolizes the disease.

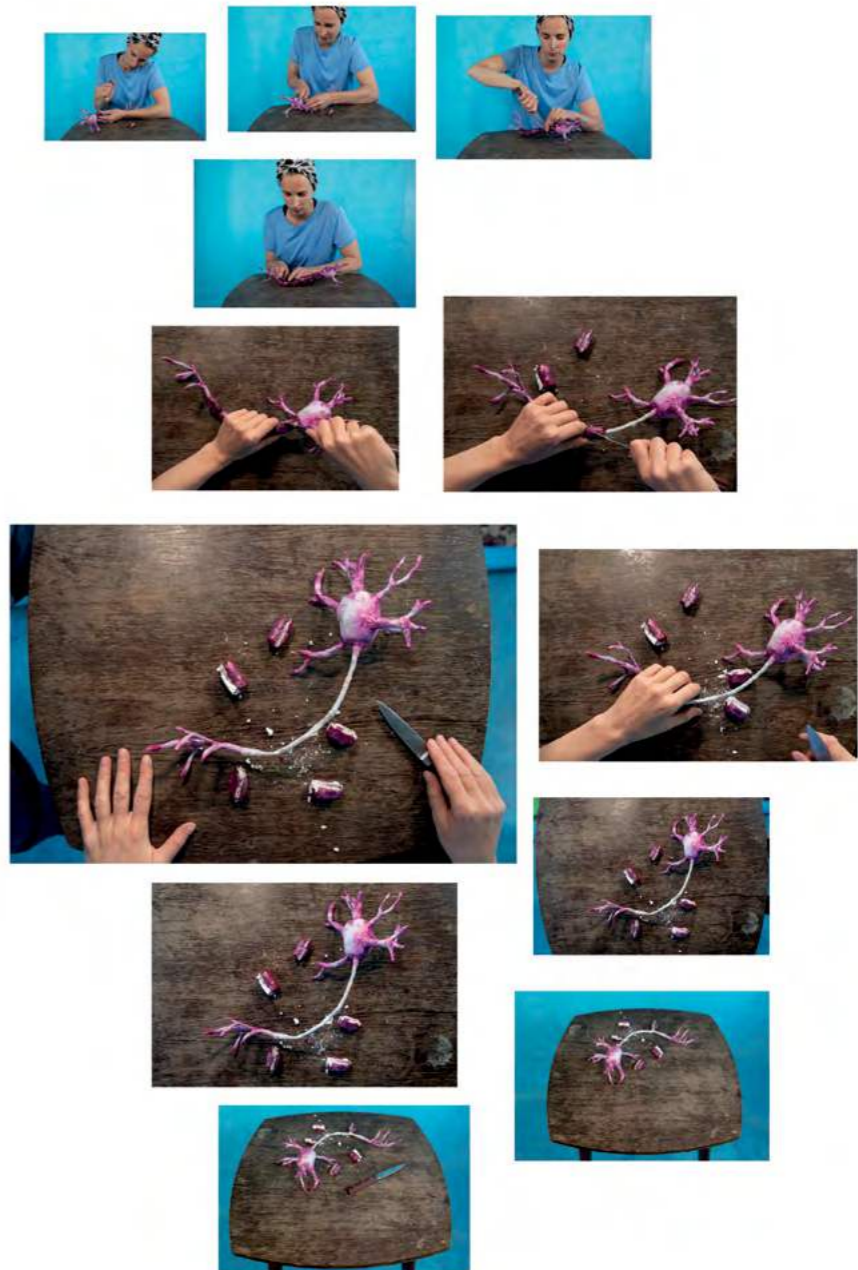


**Destroying the Neuron**

I created a model of a neuron in polystyrene and wire, which I then

covered with foam made from paper and glue. I decided to disrupt the object by destroying the myelin sheath - just as it is destroyed when

my cells are attacked by the multiple sclerosis - to visually represent the basic mechanism of the disease.







**Falls**

A common symptom of MS is the weakening of limbs and difficulties with maintaining balance. I often fell while walking, which not only causes

pain but also feelings of shame. To cope with this, I reconstruct my own falls caused by the illness. I return to the places where I fell and, using collage, depict the fall and the body position that followed. I wear formal

dresses to highlight the absurdity of the situation – where elegance is abruptly interrupted and replaced by my physical degradation.





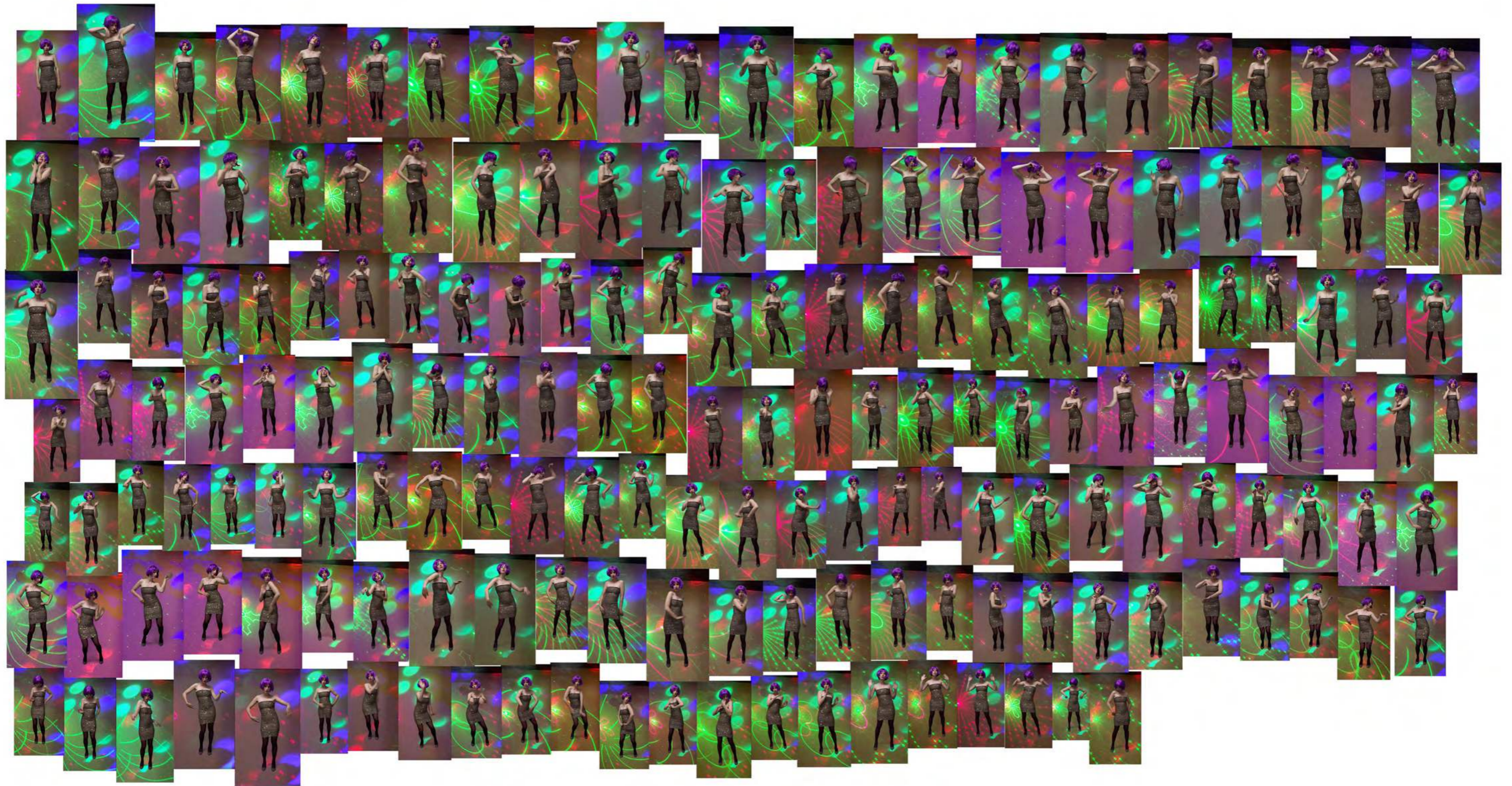
### Miri Dance

I regularly undergo MRI scans to monitor the progression of nervous system damage. The examination takes place in a tunnel where I lie on my back. Once inside, after a brief

silence, rhythmic tapping begins, shifting in intensity and pattern. I must remain completely still. However, in my mind, I imagine how I might dance to those rhythms. The entire procedure takes about twenty minutes.

During one of these MRI visits, I recorded the sound of the machine during my own scan. I later danced to that sound recording and filmed the performance. From the video, I created a series of stills.





**Stockings**

These photographs were created as a form of self-therapy, aimed at accepting my own stigmatization. I was processing feelings related to the attention drawn to my limping gait,

caused by disability in my right leg. I created stockings with eyes to represent the gaze of others directed at my movement. The stockings act as an artifact that, when worn, symbolically liberate me from my stigma. I deliberately pose in provocative and

seductive ways – postures I cannot afford during actual walking, where my body movement appears clumsy, insecure, and unstable.



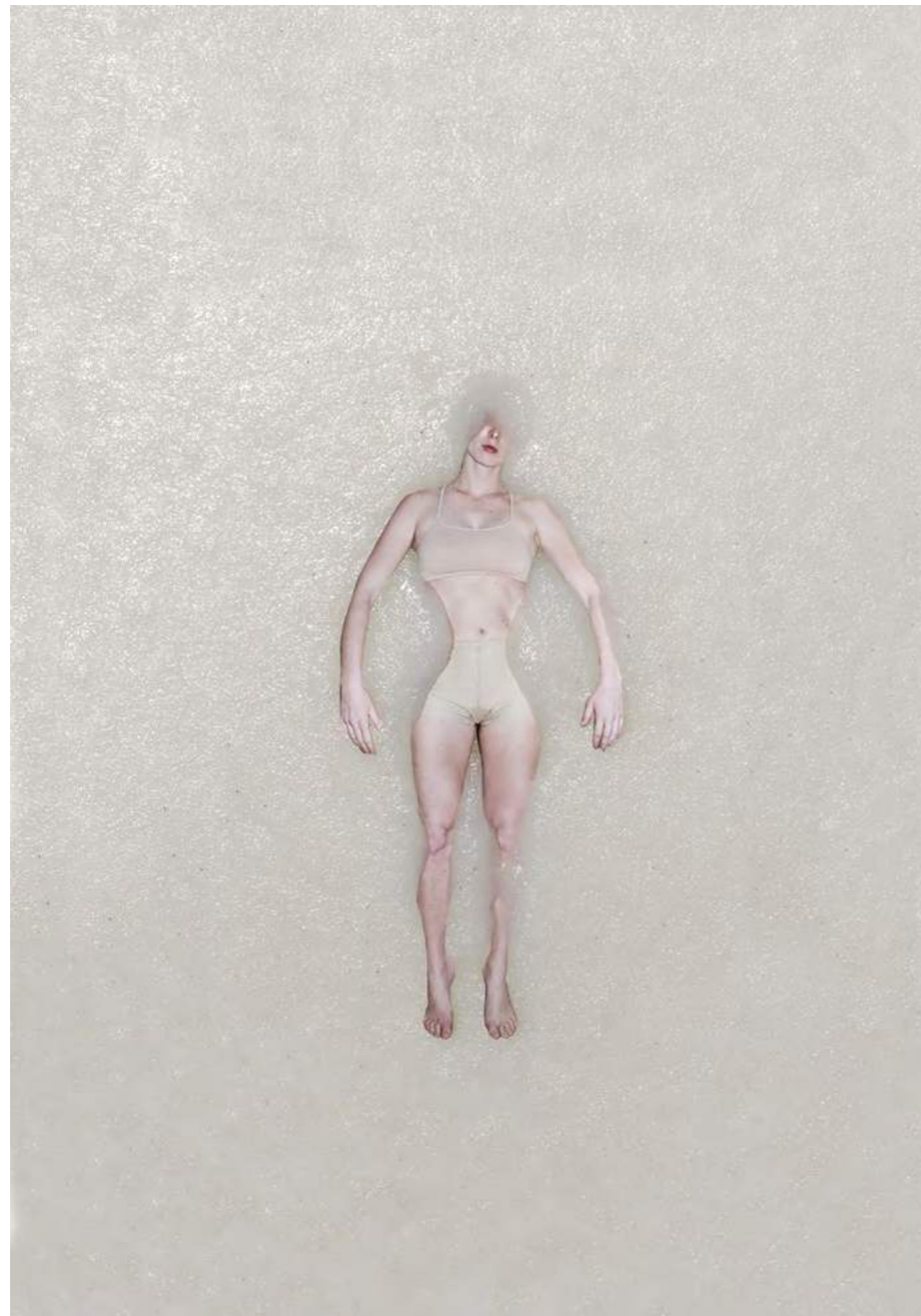
### Mash

A key feature of the relapsing-remitting form of multiple sclerosis are so-called attacks, during which the patient's condition worsens. The

deterioration is manifested through neurological symptoms.

During one of the first attacks, I experienced visions that my body was turning into porridge. The surround-

ing environment also turned into a porridge-like substance in which I was drowning.



### Grandfather Břet'a

I feel that my illness was influenced by the death of my grandfather Břet'a. He was a man I loved deeply, and he loved me. There was a special bond between us, one that only the two of us could understand. He left an imprint on my childhood soul. He taught me to swear and shared with me those

tender little rebellions that children are eager to discover.

When he died, I couldn't come to terms with his absence for a long time. I went to school dressed in black, staging for myself the deep grief I carried inside. I would walk along the forest path to the swing, over and over, imagining him beside me, trying to preserve that feeling

before I forgot it. Bára, my grandparents' dog, often walked with me as well - she reminded me of him until the end of her life, because she had always joined us on our walks in the woods. They say that strong trauma continues to unfold for three or four years in a post-traumatic process that can affect one's health.

All the timelines fall into place.



I created a family tree, pondering whether my illness had already existed in my lineage.

Could I have inherited it genetically?

Could my family have unknowingly fostered this disease?

Is it a coincidence?

Is the disease controlled?

Who is responsible for the illness?

Can familial ties predetermine the

disease? Could my disease have been developing in the past through family members?

Where does the disease fundamentally begin? Is the disease a consequence of the family environment in which a person lives?

Can family patterns create a disease and continue through generations in its development?

How deeply does the family medical history affect individual family members, and why does someone become

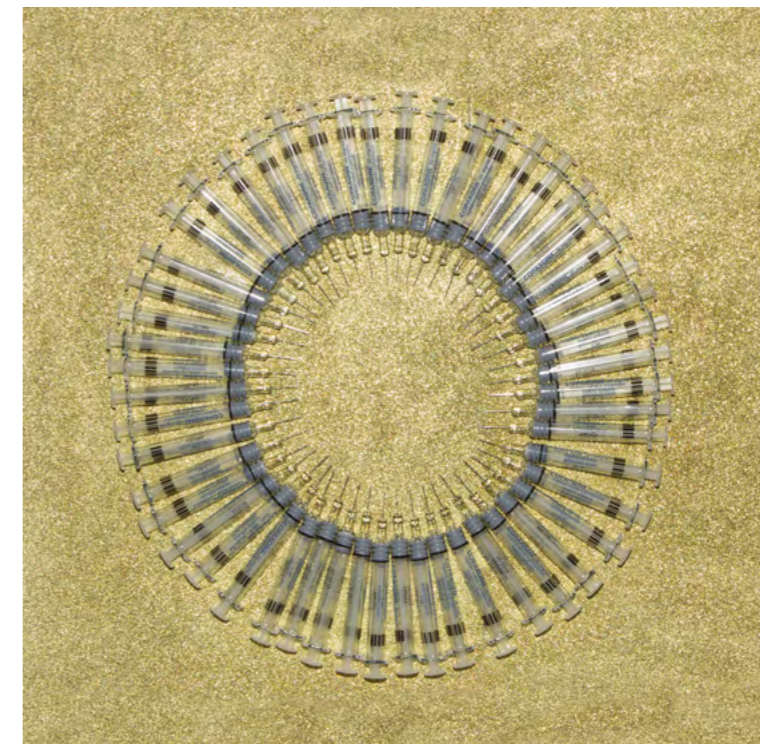
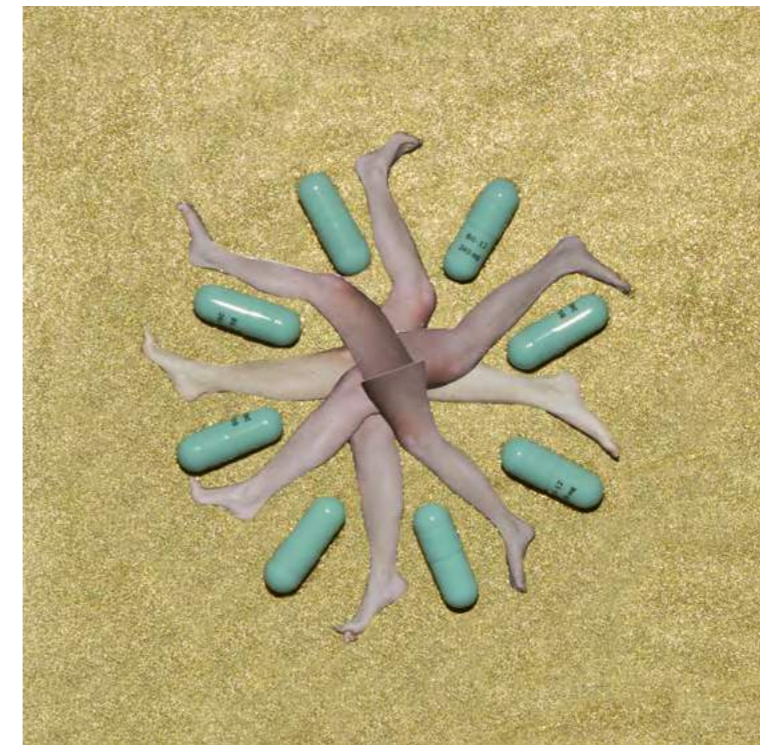
the chosen one to carry on the disease while another does not? Can I influence it?

Can I stop it?

Is the disease pre-written into our lives?

Who decides this? Is there a decisive moment?

Is everything pre-written somewhere?







**Petra VLČKOVÁ**

(Čeladná, Czech Republic, 1985)

She is an actress and photographer who explores deeply personal themes in her work through subtle, sensitive approaches. She uses a variety of techniques to create scenography for intimate visual storytelling. A powerful message lies behind her seemingly fragile form. She completed her doctoral studies at the Institute of Creative Photography at Silesian University in Opava.

**Individual Exhibitions**

- 2024** *Sphere Dance*, Fotografic Gallery, Prague, CZ
- 2021** *Grandmothers*, Cultural Center, Frýdlant nad Ostravicí, CZ
- 2020** *RS*, Fiducia Gallery, Ostrava, CZ  
*RS*, Social Photo Gallery, Olomouc, CZ
- 2019** *Grandmothers*, Komorní scéna Aréna, Ostrava, CZ
- 2018** *Grandmothers*, Labyrinth School, Brno, CZ  
*Grandmothers*, Neustadt Gallery, Prague, CZ
- 2016** *Betlenemesek*, MODEM, Debrecen, HU
- 2017** *Obsession*, Nibiru Gallery, Ostrava, CZ
- 2012** *Circus*, Cafe La Petite Conversation, Ostrava, CZ
- 2011** *Circus*, Camera Ga, Ostrava, CZ

**Awards**

- 2015** "Grandmothers – Art and Entertainment", 1st prize, CZECH PRESS PHOTO, Prague, CZ

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