

REVIEW

Mistaking Presence for Meaning

Jakub Kučera's *Because I Have To* (*Podoby milostného vztahu ke světu*, 2026)

VOL. 166 (SUMMER 2026) BY ANNA BATORI

Rather than documenting the life and work of Czech conceptual artist Miloš Šejn, Jakub Kučera's *Because I Have To* attempts to embody Šejn's artistic worldview through a series of performative encounters with nature. Rejecting the conventional biopic in favor of sensory exploration, the documentary pursues a cinema of presence and contemplation. However, by treating Šejn's rituals as self-evident profundity, Kučera ultimately substitutes symbolic performance for cinematic inquiry. This results in a film that only partially fulfills its philosophical ambitions.

From the very first scene, the film conveys its core idea: the line separating the human body from nature is fleeting. As Šejn walks through Prague, he finds a tiny patch of moss on the sidewalk, kneels down, presses his face into it, and then rubs it onto his skin. This moment sets the tone for the rest of the piece. Throughout the documentary, the artist continually pursues a physical connection with the environment. He rolls naked in the mud, lies still in the grass, rubs leaves on himself, immerses himself in lakes, climbs rocks, and pours water over his garden as if mimicking rain. These repeated acts all convey the message: *I am nature, and nature is me*.

This premise is common in performance and land art. The issue is the documentary's unshakable belief that such gestures communicate on their own. Rather than investigating how the performances generate meaning, Kučera records them with unwavering reverence. By allowing the sequences to continue well beyond the point at which they cease to yield new insight, he mistakes duration for depth. The camera seldom questions, challenges, or provides context for Šejn's actions. Instead, it assumes that their symbolic meaning is obvious.

At one point, Šejn's non-diegetic voice remarks that he wants "to test tolerance." The statement unexpectedly becomes an apt description of the

viewing experience. *Because I Have To* repeatedly asks the audience to invest meaning in prolonged bodily rituals without offering new perspectives through editing, framing, or narrative development. Naked performances in forests, extended sequences of rolling through marshland, rubbing leaves across bare skin, or wrapping the body in scarves become less acts of cinematic discovery than repeated demonstrations of a philosophy the film expects the viewer to accept unquestioningly.

The documentary's episodic construction further weakens its conceptual ambitions. The performances are separated by abstract visual interludes and cryptic voice-overs, but lack a sense of meaningful progression. Instead of forming a cohesive essay, the film presents a series of loosely related fragments, which, combined, have a surprisingly muted impact. While individual images are often beautifully composed – showcasing Kučera's keen eye for texture, landscape, and duration – aesthetic beauty alone cannot carry a full-length documentary. To go beyond the portrayal of existing ideas, the film's stunning visuals should have been paired with intellectual growth.

Ironically, Kučera himself offers insight into the film's flaws. At a post-screening discussion during the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, he stated: "We had some concept, but after five minutes we abandoned it and just wanted to be in the present." This statement reveals a lot. *Because I Have To* consistently prioritizes immediacy over structure, and presence over interpretation. However, cinema cannot depend solely on presence. Observation gains significance not just because it happens in real time, but because the filmmaker uncovers relationships, tensions, or changes within it. *Because I Have To* rarely does this. Instead, it focuses on witnessing performances without analyzing them.

This lack of critical explanation is especially problematic for viewers unfamiliar with Šejn's work. The film provides minimal context to understand why these performances are significant within his overall artistic practice. Instead of building an appreciation of the artist through the film, it assumes this appreciation already exists. Consequently, the documentary acts more as a reinforcement of preexisting beliefs than as an introduction to Šejn.

Experimental documentaries often defy traditional expectations of storytelling, explanation, and accessibility. *Because I Have To* is notable for rejecting typical biographical conventions in favor of a more immersive experience. However, experimentation should serve a purpose beyond novelty. A documentary exploring artistic practice should itself offer a new perspective, uncovering the unseen. Kučera's debut, however, simply replicates its subject's rituals with sincerity, thus blurring the line between symbolic performance and cinematic insight. The outcome feels more like a tribute than an exploration of artistic consciousness – a film that mistakes presence for deeper meaning.