

# DISTILLED: Queering Identity, Shame and Community

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What I have written here was forced by the exigency of our ‘dark times’, the necessity of thinking our political horizons starting from anew. This passion is imposed by the emergency of thinking/enacting community otherwise, in a different manner from what our long history has left as a salient imprint on our present. This stance of the Western metaphysical tradition of thinking community is in a most paradigmatic manner currently reflected in the direction and destiny of the European Community/EU and the intensified revival of nationalisms, not only in Europe and the Balkans, where most of the countries face the ‘irretrievable’ consequences of the communitarian/communist imaginary, but all around the globe in a time when supranational tendencies of the Empire are allegedly declaring them as part of our not so distant past. A hazy reflection, yet not less dangerous, of this tendency is present also in the gender and sexual non-normative communities on various places on the globe, the Balkans in particular, for my interest, in their identitarian claims and in their involvement in the normative legislative models imposed by the international community, and their hegemonic statist and sovereignty models.

Risking to be de-realised as utopian and as surmounting the major political and social emergences of our times, this text comes out from a stance that revolts against this hegemony over time, over the right to determine the tempo, the rhythm, the speed, the direction and the model of time, and the appropriateness of critique in regard to allegedly timely needs. Nothing seems more important, in times like ours, than to strive towards *untimely critique* (Brown 2005); cultural and political critique that strikes right in the heart of our times, preventing violent closure and permitting thinking differently and, consequently, opening future towards alternative possibilities not anticipated by the linear and teleological flow of history.



## Queer Affectivity: Beyond Identitarian Depoliticisation and Communal Immanentism

Wendy Brown (2006) deploys the notion of depoliticisation in criticising the implications that discourses of tolerance, identity politics, and neo-liberal and neo-conservative rationalities have on the critical and political engagement and participation of modern and contemporary subjects. To be more precise, as Brown points out, depoliticisation ‘eschews power and history in the representation of the subject. When these two constitutive sources of social relations and political conflict are elided, an ontological naturalness or essentialism almost inevitably takes up residence in our understanding and explanations’ (Brown 2006, 15). While constructing difference as a negative term and its constitutive outside, thus excluding it, the hegemonic whole incorporates this difference while still maintaining the clear cut, or the delimitation between itself and this other. The difference is first constituted, then excluded, and further, incorporated yet sustained as difference on a hierarchised scale. Therefore, Brown argues that in reifying politically produced differences, identity claims ‘reinscribe the marginalization of the already marginal’, exactly by the means of “opposing their differences to be natural’ (ibid, 45).

While liberal discourse converts political identity into essentialised private interests, its companion partners, capitalism and disciplinary power, ‘convert interest into normativized social identity manageable by regulatory practices’ (ibid, 59). By installing classificatory schemes, disciplinary technologies regulate subjects by producing social positions out of empirically defined, observable, normalised and nominated social behaviours and attitudes. The subject reiterates its division among the social and economic inequalities and individualism in the civic order on the one side, and as member of the universal ‘we’ of abstract equality entitled by the State and legal discourse, on the other side. Brown finds the most flagrant point of intersection of these liberal tendencies in the tickling of resentment, which is to say the Nietzschean spirit of hatred and revenge, the spirit of despair. The failure of juxtaposing individual liberty and social egalitarianism, as well as the claims for recrimination on behalf of the subordinated in the context of inflicted social and political injury, according to Brown, leads solely towards the multiplication of resentment, and consequently, imagining and practicing free-

doms captured in the narrow frames of legalism as a negative reaction on the limitations already imposed within the hegemonic order of inequality.

The historically inflicted injury becomes fundamental for identity as ineffable and repressed trauma infusing the permanent repetition of the traumatic event. Therein the injured identity in the continuation of the revenge trajectory and the claiming of autonomy and natural difference folds new layers of bandage over the open wound and incurable injury. It is not by coincidence that Brown uses the syntagm of 'wounded attachments' (Brown 1995) with the aim of comprehending the political logic of identitarian discourses applied in the legalistic processes of recrimination and equality claims, a logic perpetuating our blindness for the transformative potentials of collective political inventiveness and striving for freedom. It is, actually, a rationale turning the capacity for freedom inwards against itself, equalising it with revenge and reaction to the obstacle in a concrete political regime, holding on to and replicating the position of a victim and, finally, granting the State the role of the absolute, dematerialised and invulnerable protector.

This political strategy, I claim, supports the hegemonic mode in which community communicates, which is to say sublates finitude and suffering. Erecting as protected and safe the boundedness and perfection of the community, the state desire overcomes suffering and death, and keeps at safe distance the phantasmatic continuity and self-fulfilment. When there is no death, when there is no social and bodily suffering, there is still the taking place of social death – making, wherein atrocity is privatised, distanced, erased, forgotten and made foreign, while community necessitates itself towards its promised unity and survival. The manipulation of affects and emotional empathy is the core gesture for creation of what Lauren Berlant (1999) has called 'national sentimentality' as the sentiment of overcoming differences, antagonism, unequal distribution and inequality across various social strata, and maintaining the hegemony of the national identity form. As Berlant argues, in this model the 'nation is peopled by suffering citizens and noncitizens whose structural exclusion from the utopian (...) dreamscape exposes the state's claim of legitimacy and virtue to an acid wash of truth telling that makes hegemonic disavowal virtually impossible, at certain points of political intensity' (Berlant 1999, 53). The eradication of pain becomes thus the core political technology of those in power deployed in order to bring the nation back

to its phantasmatic unity, bringing back belief in the redemptive notions of the law and universal citizenry and, consequently, the national utopia. Restoring thus the safe and healthy unified body politic, the nation promises freedom, measured by the extent to which one feels happiness and pleasure, as the achievement of legal cures against the allegedly localisable sources of pain, and henceforth veils its constitutive and continuous acts of exclusion perpetuating suffering, structural violence and insidious everyday forms of trauma.

As a way of critiquing of these hegemonic political tendencies, in this paper I try to rethink the figural status of queerness in hegemonic political spaces by the means of its constitutive experiences and relations with bodily, emotional and affective discourses and practices. The corporeal experiences and histories of queerness will be explored as the symptomatic disclosure and actualisation of the very impossibility of what Lee Edelman (2004) has called the politics of *re-productive futurism*. Thus, I argue that the repoliticisation of the intersections of queerness, corporeality, affects and politics is necessary for demystifying the void that makes impossible the timeless grounding of society, and for disclosing the perpetual failure of politics to fully realise its promises of securing a universal principle, a substance and a ground of the political order and society immune to revision and contestation.

This stance is found as radically necessary in the context of contemporary identity politics, past communist communal experiences in South Eastern Europe, supranational unification of the European community and the revival of 'old' nationalisms as they all structurally overlap in sustaining the 'totalitarian' and 'immanentist' concept of community (Nancy 2000). This constellation imposes the exigency of rethinking the constitutive relation between a body's finitude as its singular and contingent spacings, relations and exposure, and the political abyss and, thus, consequently opening community towards the necessary futurity of democracy-to-come. I propose setting queerness' figural and historical engagement in practices of bodily movements, intervals, passings and transitions, affective and emotional politics and experiences of exposure, shame and vulnerability as the ground for the actualisation and creation of new vocabularies and concepts that open possibilities for re-imagining different political worlds, re-thinking the being-in-common and community and re-making political claims and struggles beyond identitarian and normativising models.

## A Note on the Methodology of Affect

The background methodological framework through which I approach the problems elaborated above is set in the vast field of discourses of the last two decades theorising the body and, what Patricia Clough has described as ‘the affective turn’ (Clough 2008), particularly interested in the involvement of the body, affects and emotions in everyday practices of resistance and recoding, but also the processes and movements of undoing and shattering the significations’ grids organising and structuring cultures and political worlds. Special importance for my argument have the investigations in bodily movements, intervals, passings and transitions, or, what Brian Massumi (2002, 5) has called the ‘ontological difference into the heart of the body’ and its non-coincidence with itself, as well as affects’ and emotions’ constitutive relationality, and bodies’ radical potential for modification and vulnerability.

From this perspective, bodily affects are conceived as intensities opening access to the virtual field of differentiation and the multiplicities through which a body passes and gets transformed in a plurality of situations. Affect here marks the very change whose degree can vary in accordance with the concrete situation and the traces in a bodily memory passing the threshold in the situation, the change that is always taking place in the instant of relation and encounter of bodies. I embrace this analytical framework to the extent to which it does justice and provides an account of affect as being the

persistent proof of a body’s never-less-than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations ... At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect) (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 1–2).

However, I find this suggestion to be heavily problematic, at the same time, in its persistent insistence on the indeterminacy of affect, thus depriving the analytical

endeavor of investigating the complex webs and vectors of power apparatuses and their regulatory, organising and disciplinary interventions and inscriptions over, on, in and around the materialities of bodies through a variety of emotional and affective scripts (anger, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, disgust, hate, shame, anxiety etc.), as well as the mechanisms by which power apparatuses orchestrate a differential distribution of different affects among different populations (middle-classes, queers, women, racial and ethnic minorities, youth). On the other side, consequently, it eludes the possibility of scrutinising the different emotional complexes and the different nuances these specific, yet dynamic affective scripts bring to the ways bodies orient towards, connect with, situate within and materialise social worlds, as well as the multiple and dynamic forms through which the intersections of power relations and different emotional scripts increase or decrease bodies' capacities to act, be acted upon, and enter into new transformative and creative assemblages and relations. The reluctance and fear of engaging with the specific categorisable emotional scripts, seems to be thinly grounded.<sup>1</sup>

Silvan Tomkins (1995), for example, argues that affect scripts compose co-assemblages with different mechanisms and among themselves that are highly flexible and indeterminate, and hinge on an indeterminate fit or mismatch and inexactness and play (Sedgwick 2003; Tomkins 1995). This account of affect acknowledges the prevalent automatic triggering of affective intensities and movements, although it does not exclude the semantic, cognitive, discursive or cultural components implicitly inscribed in a variety of representations and mental images that stick certain affects below the level of consciousness, on the one hand, while emphasising the relational and chiasmic character of the affective in-betweenness reflecting the different ways in which the world affects, moves, disrupts and comes to matter to our bodies, in the double sense of the word (have significance and takes, congeals into materiality, meaning how it takes shape and materialises), on the other.

What we need, thus, is a more productive framework for analyses that take into consideration the bio-social dynamic as the field where the emergence of a body form takes place. This dynamic can be elaborated in more details when we put in play the notion of emergence as the 'diachronic construction of functional structures in complex systems that achieve a synchronic focus of systematic behavior as they constrain the behavior of individual components' (Protevi 2010, 8).

The concept of emergence helps us to think subjectivity, while not completely dispensing with it, above, alongside and below its embodied affectivity (ibid.). This situating of subjectivity across the multiple in-formations of its bodily affectivity leads us into considering the concrete assemblages and surrounding social milieu into which a body enters, the automatic and sub-personal events and processes (neurological, physiological, psychological etc.), and its wider social and institutional fields.

## A Turn Towards Arts

For the purpose of making my argument clear, I focus on three works by the Macedonian artist Velimir Zernovski<sup>2</sup>, representing a trans-medial triptych and a queer text that makes a remarkable effort to think community, recognition, belonging, identification and affect, and yet, not to get enclosed in the pitfalls of exclusory identitarian logics, stripped of its political histories and fetishised as being abstracted from the complex affective and relational interweaving constitutive of any identity. The three works reflect Zernovski's continuous endeavour to question, explore and contest identity, while at the same time doing justice to the irreplaceable injuries that queer identity has suffered and that make it possible in the first place. In his works, Zernovski explores the (im)possibility of a narrative, of telling a story of oneself, and yet, thoughtfully evading confessing a truth that the biopolitical regulatory apparatus so eagerly demands. Even more precisely, his works makes us dwell on the question of how one can confess the truth of one's self and one's feelings, and make of that confession an enactment of critique. Critique of such a kind exposes and demystifies the very ground of a political rationality that makes one's subjectivity possible only by subjugation, and thus shatters even the foundations from which one can speak, in one's own voice, in one's own name, as a self-identified subject.

Complementing the problem of the account one could give of oneself, as a founding account of one's identity, Velimir Zernovski complicates, or rather situates the plot of identity against a wider horizon. He embeds the story of the individual in his writing of the history of unequal power relations that have negatively effectuated the appearance of a 'spoiled' identity and a community (if one could say the queer community). This writing, to be more precise, could be better

qualified as a pastiche, a flat rhizomatic plane connecting multiple images, representations, voices, figures, enunciations and narratives, rather than an organised, structured and linear historiography. It is a history, a genealogy of injury that is not able to, even more correctly, that refuses to identify that very same injured community, nor even to imagine all the possible locations from which it could (have) emerge(ed). Zernovski tries to investigate the virtualities that could make possible the relation of oneself with a history that simultaneously constitutes oneself, while at the same instant making that very same dialectic of self-constitution with/through the other impossible. The political history Zernovski touches upon is ephemeral, marked by a multiplicity of contradictions, fragmentations, disidentifications, irreparable violence, disguises, refusals of belonging and aporias of such a kind, which make the historical referent hardly graspable and hazily affordable for reciprocating and returning the look of recognition one strives for.

The co-determination of the queer singular body and the ephemeral queer community these bodies constitute is mediated in Zernovski's work through the experience of injury and shame. The figuration of these injurious experiences provides Zernovski with the opportunity to address critically not only the identitarian logic such injuries could effectuate (identity constituted by the very same stroke of an injurious interpellation or the multiple fields of heteronormative discourses and violence), but also the hesitating liminality such injury introduces. Namely, the injury in his work becomes the occasion for critically engaging both with assimilation (coerced compliance with the norm as the means for receiving recognition in a heteronormative society), on one side, and the possibility for identity transformation and radical political action potentiated by creatively re-performing the shaming experiences and setting them in different and creative assemblages that could modify and revolutionise affect's histories. Most striking in these projects is their genuine strategies for bypassing the de-politicising, privatising and conferring logic of sentimentality, a logic so many artists and activists embrace. Zernovski makes it possible for us to imagine ways of looking back to one's past, as being always already a community's past, without being able to identify neither a shared set of identity-defining essence, nor what could come next as a foreseen future, yet making space for a utopian hope beyond any recognisable horizon of the future to come.

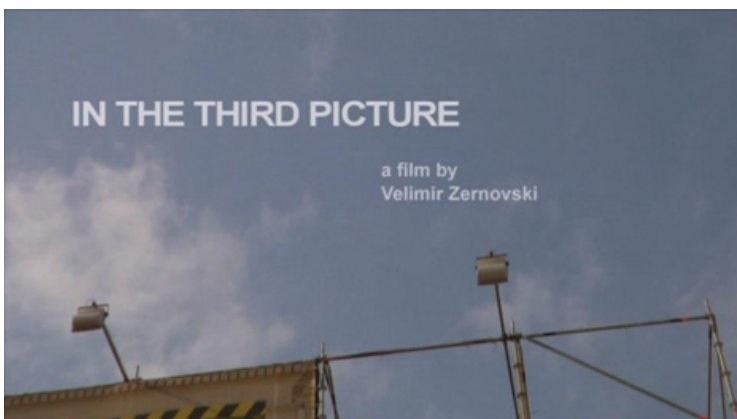


The video 'In the Third Picture'<sup>3</sup> tackles the problem of identity most 'authentically', namely the impossibility to authenticate identity and the deconstruction of the self-reflecting subject imposed by the question addressed to oneself always by the other as what makes possible the doing and undoing of one's identity, and as the necessary condition for rethinking ethics and the relation with the other. The video 'The Walk'<sup>4</sup> engages critically with the violence heteronormativity executes upon non-normative genders and sexual bodies as the means for the performative preservation of the limits of its exclusionary and coercive universe, and the allegedly universal, unmarked and disembodied subject of heteronormativity. The installation 'The Distilled'<sup>5</sup> extends the problems opened in 'The Walk' and situates them in the field of lived queer experiences. Shame becomes the central axis around which the queer embodiment oscillates most strongly, and becomes the occasion for Zernovski to explore a whole range of problems, including: identity, assimilation and passing, silence, injury, the embodied inscriptions of heteronormative violence, the undifferentiated enfolding of political structures and 'personal' feelings, relationality, political resistance and community.

## Deconstructing the Truth of the Confessional Subject

In 'In the Third Picture,' Zernovski radicalises the question of identity most saliently. This radicalisation arrives from *the question* itself, offering a critique of the present rationality by shattering the grounds of what seems to be the most intimate and inner core – identity. The ontological question the narrator poses,

the question of what is supposedly one's uttermost being, of 'Who I am,' remains to linger on its irresolvable limits. The seductive promising the video makes of finding and telling the truth recurs infinitely where it starts in the very beginning: at the question itself. The act of confes-



Cover frame of the video 'In the Third Picture'

sion in Zernovski's video tends to memorise the truth that is revealed by the medium of speech (already under the graphic law) and deprives itself in the very instance from its self-presence, exposing itself simultaneously to the dangerous supplement of writing and the risky future marked by the laws of dissemination (Derrida 2004). The self-presence of the confessional subject is thus deconstituted at the very moment of its constitution in language and moving images. Once the confessional subject announces itself by the fact of saying 'I' and attempting to synthesise the never present moments of the past and the non-present moments of the future's alterity, which is out of the possibility of anticipation, it scatters itself in the dangerous chains of signification and networks of signs/signifiers, relations, differentiations, deferrals, repetition, supplements of supplements, and surrogates of surrogates. What the confessing subject is trying to present, in the fullness of its presence and the strength of its intention, is already inscribed in the graphic structures of différance (Derrida 1982) and is estranged from itself.

The narrator, supposedly the author's voice, is scattered in cross-references. One image evokes another. The next summons reminiscences of references from art history, then it opens itself onto the movement introduced by the remake and inscription of Gus Van Sant's 'Elephant'



Frame from the video 'In the Third Picture'

dispersed in the seemingly never ending flow of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' piano, and returns back to the very beginning of asking, questioning, contesting.

The meaning of Zernovski's confessional act is not given in the moment of its performance. It is always already divided in itself by the moments that precede it and the moments that follow it, which are nothing more but traces of a present that will have never been fully present. As a moment it is related to each of these terms, and consequently each of these terms is divided by the other. What this strategy prevents is the annunciation of truth as the ultimate and eternal truth, the Law, the Norm, and the absolute secret that is underlying every action of the

subject. It is the truth that in the core of its possibility finds its own impossibility and instability, the permanent provocation of quaking.

Truth requires these structures of replacement and supplements in order to present itself (Derrida 2004) but at the instance of giving itself in the field of visibility, in the space of audibility it gives itself away in the chain of supplementary. The cut of supplementary significations leads to vertigo, not only the vertigo we are immersed in that distorts the logic of static perspective of the shooting camera, which in the final scene of the video transforms itself into a liquid, non-human framing, shifting perspectives and embracing multiplicity of points that connect the single human figure in the flux of its environment, movements and sensations. The vertigo is even more strongly felt by the static spectator whose scopophilia is never to be satisfied in the video. There is a dizzily substitution of signifiers all of which are supposed to grasp the answer of the question posed by the confessor. Each signifier, each image, each voice, each cadre melts into another to the point of unrecognizability. Velimir Zernovski, the author, set in a quest for the truth of himself is substituted by a narrator with a female voice, and a female body appearing in the first scene standing on a bridge, lingering on a threshold carried away by the water flow beneath and the blow of the wind that heralds memories and reminiscences. The autobiographical 'I' then gets to be supplemented by another female figure, doubled, or even multiplied in the inter-space of who knows whatever text. Zernovski's strategy accomplishes its apex at the moment when the speaking subject deprives him/her/itself of the very condition that make his/her/its speaking possible, erasing his/her/its name, a name whose meaning he/she/it has always found strange, hard to penetrate. Up until one day, when the name was completely erased, letter after letter, by a friend, by someone else, by the other.

The question of writing oneself is doomed by the question of the other by the means of the necessary condition that governs every writing (including the autobiographical or the confessional). Conditioned by the differential law of writing, giv-



Frame from the video 'In the Third Picture'

ing an account of oneself is set in an unpredictable and non-anticipated chain of repetitions and iterations, whereby the 'autos' of writing is distancing itself from itself once it has been inscribed and sent to the other. Self-accounting is thus written for or pronounced to a destination that can never be predicted and ensured in advance, the destination of auto-writing, the scripting of oneself by another, the gift of finitude and the gift of death (Derrida 2007; Derrida 1985). Writing always invites the other, it is the necessity. Derrida described this logic of the autobiographical writing as otobiography, the necessity autobiography is marked with, since without the other's ear hearing me and re-inscribing me and giving me meaning, my existence is just a void abstraction in the isolated and solipsistic circle of the impossible self-interpretation. Haunting the words, the confessional subject becomes haunted and deprived of its property by the play opened by writing. The constituting signature twists into the gift of death, as the death of the authentic, originary subject of the author and introduces the beginning of life (of the text) beyond the author's control and intention. But the other always has a metonymic structure inscribed in itself. It is, to be more precise, the logic of homonymy preventing the one to whom one is addressing oneself to stay the one, the same. The other is always one and the other at the same time. The other as the one always *remains*. We cannot invite the one without the risk of the other turning up.



Frame from the video 'In the Third Picture'

## The Micro-Bodily Politics of Heteronormativity

'The Walk' exposes the political vectors and embodied conditions of subjectivation and violence. The video presents the struggle and agony of a dancing body in movement caught in the visibly not represented web of shaming and violence. The traces and indications of violence can be read on two levels. The first level, which serves as the anchoring point, and thus communicates the referent with the recipient, is the voice of the feminist and queer scholar Judith Butler narrating

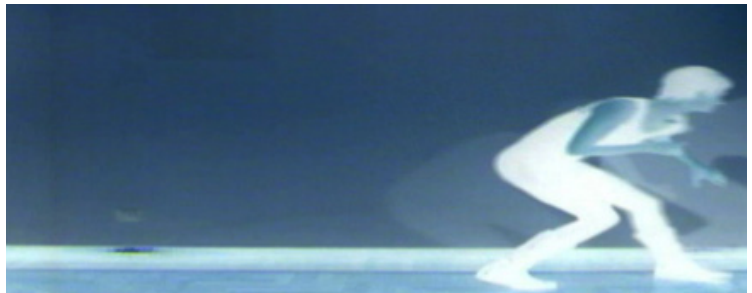
the story of an 'eradicated possibility of a gender non-normative body ever walking again'. The second layer of indication of violence is inscribed in the very body of the performer in the video, a body hard to be easily recognised through the grids of the bi-party system of sexual and gender division. What the video stages is a sexually ambiguous body drawing movements in lines imperceptible through the optics of the hegemonic systems of (gender) significations, a body flooded by intensities and sensations, yearning for relational and transformative extensions. The joyous and self-transfiguring movements of this 'monstrous' dancing body are insidiously interrupted by molecular and microscopic convulsions and withdrawals, accompanied by distorted musical rhythm, hence indicating the panoptical and normative interventions of the shaming and coercive gaze. The body itself becomes the site of struggle of forces, of vectors of power and resistance, all of which are inscribed in the miniscule, but unbearably intense and hesitating micro-motions. Zernovski manages, ingeniously, to capture the micropolitics of bio-power whose operations target the body as its ultimate site of regulation, discipline and violence.



'The Walk' - Video image

Zernovski's capacity to evade the sentimental logic of a privatising and identitarian discourse of liberal politics seems to be even more important in this context. As much as he succeeds to elude the presumption of an already existing identity prior to the act of violence and power relations, he also redirects our attention from the search of easily identifiable culprit, and inscribes the violent operation of heteronormative bio-power throughout diffuse bodily sites and flows. Engraving the coercive acts of power on the skin of a singular body does not serve the purpose of providing us with the comfort of sentimentality whereby we could lament and sympathise with an individual victim, nor does it, either, distract our attention, and thus to exempt the responsibility of the agent of violence. The phenomenology of

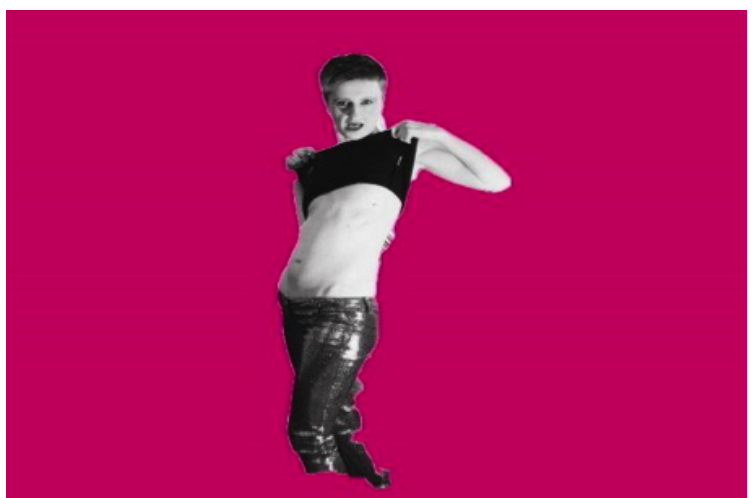
oppression in the video is dense to such an extent, traumatically engraved and deposited in the comportment of the non-heteronormative body with such a force, which makes the heroic act of the revolutionary consciousness raising and overthrowing of a supposedly repressive power, but a metaphysical nostalgia. The compulsions and contractions of the struggling body summons the exigency of our radical rethinking of a different, embodied topology of power whose vectors rely on a systematic history of exclusion, as much as on a synchronous multiplication of locations of power throughout diverse discursive and institutional settings – from the authoritarian voice of science and political institutions to the normative gaze and the corrective violence of the street and the bedroom.



'The Walk' - Video image

While listening to the voice of Judith Butler as a narrative with a linear syntax whereby the victim and perpetrator are clearly identified (a young 'feminised' boy and a group of boys from the town where he lives), we are confronted with the vulnerability of the human body, intensified through the staging of the sexually non-normative body, being the undeniable witness of the perverse apparatus of the insidious and all-encompassing inscriptions and coercions of the norm.

However, although presenting a body that cannot be grasped within the gender binary system of heteronormativity, Zernovski's work opens a wider field of thinking and resistance that displaces the focus from the here-and-now towards the open horizon of political violence: a history shared across diverse locations, exclusions lived by different bodies, and a future where the utopian democratic hope can be made possible only through a collective endeavour.



'The Walk' – video image

## Shame: Exposure, Vulnerability and Affective Performativity

The installation 'The Distilled' represents the central piece in this queer triptych. Its centrality is the result of its being the point of intersection of the multiple problems tackled by Zernovski in his works, and whose density culminates in the complexity of this installation. There is the horror of an abject word carrying the weight of this installation – SHAME. The most shaming of all affects, the emotion that haunts the contemporary mainstream gay and feminist movements as the spectre of the past supposedly to have been overcome, a spectre shattering the grounds of their present shouts of normalising pride.

As I will try to demonstrate, shame is probably the most ambivalent of all affects. The most depoliticising, isolating and disgraceful affect, whereby one withdraws ones interest, joyous interaction and desiring production in the social field when the disciplining gaze of the other imposes the norm, and one shelters oneself in the self-derogating walls of solitude, on the one hand, and the affect whose visceral implosion turns one into a self-conscious body, brings one into social being baring the marks of shame-induced identity, on the other hand. Viscerally overflowing the individual undergoing it, shame is what deprives one from all social and political entitlements, since it always comes from a significant other occupying the place of the norm performing its institution in the act of shaming, of enacting the threat/the break to/of the social bond. Shame therefore breaks the circle of

reciprocating gazes of recognition, smile and communication, interrupts the interest that drives one body towards relations of unanticipated transformative potential, and enforces the law of silence and conformism.

Furthermore, shame carries the mark and the force of dis-titling. It is what must never be avowed, must re-



'The Distilled' – Image from the installation in the Academy of Arts – Skopje

main unsaid, with no name, no title, since it breaks the ultimate imperative of modern man (and the contemporary proud self-identified gay) – individualism, self-sufficiency and in-dependency, since it clearly exposes one’s vulnerability to the other, and our social co-dependency, our desire for recognition. ‘Shame on you’ stands as a reminder of my failure to embody the idealised norm and to align to the collective emotional attunement, and commands me to withdraw my bodily interest for certain doings, touches, relations, pleasures, desires, looks, words, comportments, behaviours and joys. ‘Shame on you’ commands me to forget its violent command and to dis-title my interest in order to preserve my entitlements of human recognition and intelligibility. ‘Shame on you’ makes assimilation to hegemonic and normative sociality the condition of my entitlement to sociality. In order for sociality to secure its privilege of unknowing, silence is what I must agree upon, what I must forget. What the politics of shaming dis-titles is, simultaneously, the history, the event of its violence and its exploitation of my radical exposure to and dependency on the world of others. Disguising the genealogy of its normative forces, shame dis-titles both its performative and negative fabrication, and its silencing of movements, extensions, relations as the interrupted and fixed truth of my absorbed self.

And yet, there seems to be some exceeding danger that clings to normative sociality, that shame carries in itself, hence its ambivalence as an affect. What potentialities does shame open? What democratic, ethical and subversive virtualities might this being deprived of a title, of recognition, of obliging and conforming entitlement bring? It is this question that Velimir Zernovski tries to investigate, in a manner that conjures interconnected plateaus: (dis)identification, affect, ethics and politics.

Following the most recent debates in queer theory and queer activism, Zernovski in ‘Distilled’ stages queerness as socially tied to those whose identity sense-making has been centred and tuned around the experience of shame and, consequently, to the practices of performativity as strategies ‘for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma’ (Sedgwick 2003). Following Silvan Tomkins and Michael Franz Basch, Sedgwick traces the affect of shame as originary involved in the constitution of one’s sense of distinction and identity. Shame, unlike guilt, is focused on what one is rather than on what one does. It concerns the being of the one



blushing and averting his/her eyes and the meaning ascribed, which in a dialectical turn becomes the basis for one's self-consciousness and identification. Shame in Sedgwick's account is ambiguously tied to a primary narcissism that, as much as it differentiates one, simultaneously throws one into the gravitational field of the other and thus undoes the self-sufficient narcissistic formations of the ego. Sedgwick in several occasions in the line of her argumentation throughout 'Touching Feeling' emphasizes that this self-positioning in the relation of shame is not to be conceived as an attachment to securely provided essences, but rather as 'the place where the question of identity arises most originally and most relationally', and further unfolds the transformational capacities that can be derived from the double structure of performativity – self-absorption and theatricality- and consequently made available for the 'work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transformation, affective and symbolic loading and deformation (...) all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure' (ibid, 63).

This inevitable identity-constituting-shattering experience of shame for Zernovski becomes the occasion for further questioning the ethical and political re-configurations it can enact. Zernovski's endeavour is accompanied by his refusal to fetishise the emotion of shame as the burden of the individual, and consequently, a refusal to reinforce the political strategy of social division between individual heroes and weak personalities, disguising the histories of inequality as being the source of unequal distribution of emotions across the social field. This de-privatisation of the emotional burden is achieved, in Zernovski, most illustratively by his re-appropriation of a language that has a history which precedes one's own constitution, an imagery which evokes multiple references and opens semantic multiplicity that is hard to be grasped through the effort of individual intentionality and meaning-giving. Identity is dispersed on a plane of plural simulacrum and images. Hence, the childish masks of Micky Mouse that resonate simultaneously with the commodity culture and hyper-reality of the American Dream, the fantasy of careless childish innocence and a world not yet touched by the brutality of political violence and antagonisms, the mask we used in our childhood in order to celebrate the joy of being someone else, the striving for freedom embedded in the movement the cartoon exports from still images, but also the masks that provides one with legitimate and recognisable identity and status. One's self-positioning is thus disseminated in a vast field of already available texts and sites of identifica-

tion, to such an extent that self-absorption becomes impossible to be sustained and is permanently cross-cut by the discourses of the others.

Therefore, we can remark that this technique of intertextual pastiche provides Zernovski with the opportunity to illustrate a general, yet highly specific problem. This functional 'stealing' of the other's imagery serves him not only to illustrate a genealogy of a feeling and identity, but also to subvert those images that have also participated in a history of violence. Namely, the monumental and sculptural figurations of bravery, manhood, and nationalism become the occasion for exposing the nationalistic violence of masculinism, and at the same time the occasion for resignification, whereby the strong masculine body is made vulnerable and disrupted by a feminine figure holding a doll and surrounded by the queer pink chromatics. The socially generated experience of abjection of queer subjectivity is mediated by the background vocal of Marilyn Monroe, incessantly singing 'Non, no, no, no, no, NO!', a camp figure that embodies abjection, disgrace, misfortune, sentimentality, backward feeling, grace and glamour simultaneously, but also emphasising the interdiction imposed by shame, the hostage of silence, and the life-long project of queers in struggling with the significant 'no' of sociality. The collective history of exclusion and symbolic violence is amplified with references to the author's personal and family genealogies indexed by the old frames of family portraits, evoking the ambiguous movement towards and away from the burning pains of the 'family table', and yet making of it a collective and shared queer experience.

Sedgwick (2003) traces these potentials for identity-play as generated by the double movement of absorption and identity enclosure, and theatricality as the opening towards the outside,



Photo from the 'Distilled' installation

the audience, which introduces a gap in the felicity of the performative act and produces possibilities for disidentification and transformation. Yet I claim that Sedgwick, although she mentions the relational basis undoing the circuit of identification, remains caught in the logic of identity even when mapping the transformational capacities and de-essentialising tendencies. The relation preceding and the interruption of this relation remain eluded in the end. It is not to claim that Sedgwick overlooks this question in her book. She quotes Tomkins and Basch exactly on those points where they emphasise the relational violence and inequality shame introduces. Yet she shifts her focus on identity problems that, although dispersed on the resignificatory axis as potential, still remain caught in the dominant logic of meaning, sense and signification overshadowing the question of relationality.

Following Basch, she argues that shame enters the scene at the very moment when the circulatory exchange of gazes and recognitions is ruptured by the non-favourable reaction of the caregiver towards the child's gaze or action. The response of the child triggered by this break of mutuality 'represents the failure or absence of the smile or contact, a reaction to the loss of feedback from the others, indicating social isolation and signaling the need for relief from this condition' (Basch in Sedgwick 2003, 36). Or further, citing Tomkins, shame 'operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhabits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest and joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest (...) will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration and self-exposure' (Tomkins in Sedgwick 2003, 39).

What seems pretty clear in both of the above descriptions of the causes and activators of shame, is set to a second-order importance in Sedgwick's further argumentation. If shame represents the interruption, the reduction, the deprivation from, the absence of, and social isolation of joy, contact, interest, self-exposure and further exploration, caused by the normalising gaze of shame, it remains unclear why the priority Sedgwick gives to spoiled identity in queer performativity is made at the expense of the originary relationality and movement of circulation with no guaranteed points of stop/rest and temporary identifications. If it is clear that the violence enacted is the violence enacted over the possibility for relationality, it is highly problematic to take a stance based on the spoiled identity ascribed

on me by the other as the means of interrupting the self-exposure and exploration in movement. As Berlant (1999) claims,

if the pain is the juncture of you and the stereotype that represents you, you know that you are hurt not because of your relation to history, but because of someone else's relation to it, a type of someone whose privilege or comfort depends on the pain that diminishes you, locks you into identity, covers you with shame, and sentences you to a hell of constant potential exposure to the banality of derision (Berlant 1999, 72).

It remains unclear why one should enact a performative resistance based on the 'painful identification' rather than on the painful emptying of the relation enacted by the work of a gaze silently telling us what is the proper way of relating and setting our body in movement.

Following this note on Sedgwick's work on shame, we can conclude that shame is the triggering of affect caused by the projection of the forthcoming negative consequences for the body acting, such as humiliation, violence, social exclusion, feelings of inappropriateness and becoming a social outcast, a general transformation/negation of one's relational capacity into the abyss of intransitivity, and consequently the formation of culturally acceptable emotional patterns and schemata of responses that restrict the bodily capacities for touch and change. In this model, what I am claiming is that identity becomes the mystification of a more urgent political question, and this is the question of the social relation. What shame exposes is the exploitation and violation of our ineluctable exposure to the others and the erasure of the possibilities for entering into singular relational encounters. The identity formed is the negative effect of this primary operation of violence, institution and sustaining of the hegemonic political order and communal model. Although following Tomkins, when arguing that shame produces 'bodily knowledges' and 'can turn one inside out-or outside in', Kosofsky Sedgwick remains holding the distinction of the system that gets effectuated by this coercive processes of materialisation of the bodily surfaces.

Unlike Sedgwick, Elspeth Probyn in *Blush* reads Tomkins by bringing the relational dynamic into focus, and emphasises the importance of the social relation in the activating logic of shame. For shame to inflict the blush on our faces,

something has to matter to us. For blush to matter and materialise the contours of one's body, thus raising the painful awareness of the heaviness of one's presence, of one's body, there is the concern, the mattering of something prior to it. The blush on the face is the indicator of our interest, care and concern for something or someone. Before the blush of shame gets a hold on me, I hold something or someone as important to me, as necessary for my social and corporeal existence. The interruption of interest and joy that shame brings to the fore is the interruption of the 'desire for connection', which 'at a basic level, it has to do with our longing for communication, touch, lines of entanglement, and reciprocity' (Probyn 2005, x). The conceptual value Probyn excavates in her reading of Tomkins' scripts on shame is inextricably related to the human fragility revealed in shaming experiences. This fragility is revealed to the extent to which the look of the other forces us to withdraw and remain intelligible and loved in the eyes of the other, and thus discloses the yearning for connections and belonging. But on the other side, it reveals our fragility<sup>6</sup> when shamed we are put out of place, when our bodies are exposed as less than human, deprived of sociality and belonging. Shame indicates a prior double connection, a connection to the world expressed in the interest and joy interrupted, not fully, by the affect of shame, and a connection to the others, indicated in the cause of shame being the external (or internalised) gaze of the other. And these connections come to be intensified and made important by shame differently in different contexts. Namely, either it is the already established flow of connection and interaction with someone that causes feelings of joy and interest for its maintenance when shame comes to break and turn inside this communicative exposure, while revealing our interest for maintaining and continuing this connection, thus indicating our interest in the relation we might not have been aware of. Or, shame comes upon one from another while one is being engaged in an interested relation to the world or with other bodies, and amplifies, simultaneously, the importance of those relations with some bodies and world materialities, an amplification executed in the very same act of breaking this relational material world, as well as the importance of the other from whom the shaming gaze or words come.

Thomas J. Scheff, one of the most prominent sociologists of shame and emotions, claims that the social tie and bond with others, and its maintenance and threat upon it, are the fundamental source of human motivation, interaction, self-

presentation, monitoring on one's actions and the emotions emerging in it. Pride and shame are the most prominent human emotions, according to Scheff, that testify for the importance and the meaning of the social bond, being the 'intense and automatic bodily signs of the state of one's bonds with others' (Scheff 1990).

In Giorgio Agamben's analyses (1999) of the Nazi camp and the Muselmann as the living dead and the limit figure of humanity, shame indicates the limit, narrowness, abstraction and insufficiency of what is defined to be human, and forces us to rethink the question of universal belonging to humanity beyond identitarian matrices. Shame exposes what goes beyond the limit of the humanly intelligible as what defies dignity and self-respect as definitional parameters for legal recognitions of the human. It moves us towards what is considered as the inhuman in humanity, a domain of ultimate intimacy in which we are left absolutely with ourselves without any possibility of organising a distance. The sentiment of shame consigns us to the impassible abyss of our being subject, the ineluctable lingering on the threshold of being subjected and being a sovereign. This could go in line with what Sedgwick calls the 'painful identification' that includes within one gesture of the ultimate exposure and passivity of one in the face of the other, and the subjectification and identity-sense making arising from this relation of passivity. If in shame we bear witness to the subject it is only to the extent that what is witnessed is its permanent desubjectification and exposition in its passivity. Flush is what betrays every subject without fully destroying it. But what is left is no man with content, but on the contrary the destruction of all content in the inescapable exposure of passivity. A subject is only inasmuch as it is the consciousness of itself as desubjectified. The indistinction of the human and the inhuman is the grey zone undoing any imagined substance of a subjectivity, the zone from where any ethical imperative should be made beyond the concepts of dignity and self-respect. The grey contact of the zones is the firing mobilising shame as the most proper 'emotional tonality of subjectivity' (Agamben 1999, 110).

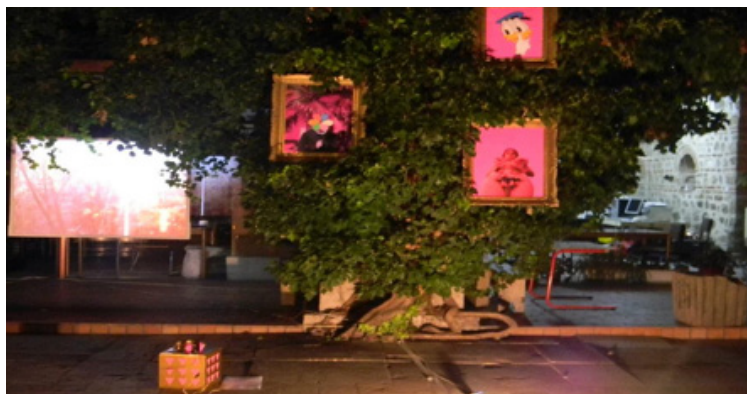


Photo from the 'Distilled' Installation, Academy of Arts, Skopje

It is precisely from this exposure that shame marks, as being the sign of our constitutive relationality with others that Zernovski tries to imagine the possibility of community and resistance. It is this ethical stance that opens the possibility for us to say 'we'. The 'we' of a queer community generates spaces of marginalisation as sites of sociability organized around the sharing of social abjection and shame. Nothing expresses this movement better in Zernovski's work than the over-visible repetition of the pink triangle as the marker of queer stigma in the Nazi camps. It warns us not to forget a history of violence and extinction. It connects any individual queer lived experience and shame with a history that is shared. And still, Zernovski overturns the danger of instantiating a wounded attachment as the inevitable identity-bounding condition imposed by the force of nationalistic and heteronormative exclusion. The pink triangle becomes the occasion for resignification, and thus for opening the injury towards creative reappropriations and for reclaiming one's abjected and despised condition.

These shared spaces and world-making projects centred on the commonality of refusal, Michael Warner writes, 'are the true salons des refuses, where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality' (Warner 2000, 34). What queers recognize in each other is not the trace of a shared identity or essence that is supposed to get unfolded in the processes of socialisation and political organisation, but the common experience of exposure and being-in-relation, the double edged experience of vulnerability and transformativity intersecting through the body, following from our bodily life as what puts us all outside, beside ourselves. Or even more importantly, as Paul Gilroy claims, shame and other feelings and experiences of humiliation, loss of dignity, pain, disease, etc.



Photo from the 'Distilled' Installation, Academy of Arts, Skopje

mark the 'predicament of fundamentally fragile, corporeal existence ... (that) can all contribute to an abstract sense of human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial' (Gilroy 2000, 17).

And yet, there is another meaning oscillating in the queer existence, written in its name, and set on the margins of its history. Queer signifies the reverse of the conditions of suffering and shame, the critical reevaluations of the negative prerogatives ascribed with discourses and practices of homophobia and violence, and the political reappropriation of these hegemonic discursive fields for the purposes of struggle, resistance and radical resignification and reinstitution of normative horizons. The structural position queers occupy in the current organisation of knowledge and power deprives them from the privileged modes of relational systems, and forces queers to find out, to innovate new modes of meetings, forming relationships, intensifying bodily zones, involving surprising ruptures of pleasure, organising encounters in lines that are still not sterilised in the power relations they imply and roles and models that characterise conventional heterosexual and gender relations. Velimir Zernovski forces us to rethink the political possibilities that can be derived from the specificities of queer experiences, not only in terms of the recognition of the relational vulnerability and exposure as the means for instituting community beyond identity, but, even more importantly, to re-perform the shaming elements of experience as the means for enacting a different distribution of the sensible, instituting queer fields of visibility and sayability, for generating new modes of relations, and figuring different and non-normative zones of eroticism, sexuality and desire.

Aligning with Butler, I claim that Zernovski reimagines community starting exactly from this place where we are all undone by each other and where we share loss and vulnerability as that which deprives us of the possibility of complete comprehension, rendering us unable to finalise mourning and to restore neither ourselves nor the relation lost that sustains us in fundamental ways beyond any foundational politics on the horizon. Hence, imagining community 'affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence (...) that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another' (Butler 2004, 27). However, extending Butler's perspective, what Zernovski forces us to think is also an excessive moment of corporeality as the not-yet-realised tendency towards a futurity that can be transformational and monstrous. If what needs to be sustained as the core condition for our urgent rethinking of community is relationality itself as the



ongoing dimension of our existence, vulnerability and loss would not be sufficient grounds for extending our normative horizons. A normative horizon would have to extend its limits of recognisability, and this extension can only be done by reconsidering the ruptures of a political order and public spaces indexed by the inverted, perverse and anomalous bodies, for which queer eroticism figures as the political unconscious. These ruptures of the political ground represent not only the already existing symptomatic spots in community's failure of its immanent self-reproduction, but also the not-yet-present future to come as the capacity of the singular plural unfolding of bodies-in-common. The overemphasis of bodies' vulnerability bears the threat of reintroducing the overprotective and immunitary biopolitical mechanisms that can prevent the virtual in-formations of a community-of-bodies that can sometimes appear to be threatening the security of trembling bodies.

Politics of shame distribute affects unevenly among populations, decreasing the capacities for relationality of queer bodies and securing the illusion of invulnerability and self-sufficient standing of the privileged heteronormative bodies. The heteronormative distribution of the sensible, to use Rancière's terms, represents the exploitation of our shared materiality and thus vulnerability, and exemplify the biopolitical deployment of power *over* life. However, our affective capacities, as much as they restrict the potential openings of our bodies towards the world and curb the differential configuration of our bodies in not-yet-foreseen assemblages, with the same force they also open the horizons of our 'encounter-prone bodies' (Bennett 2010, 21) towards monstrous becomings. This double bind testifies to the relatedness, in-betweenness and co-dependency of our bodies inscribed in the very capacity to affect and be affected, to act and be acted upon. This second position derived from the double bind of our shared corporeal conditions demands the struggle for and engagement with politics *of* life, politics that create and foster conditions for different assemblages of bodies as the only imaginable horizon for transformation and being, bodily being, only, as becoming-in-relation. Affectivity exposes our relational dependency and vulnerability, the always virtual potential to be affected, to be impinged by the outside in such a way that makes us aware of our desires for connection by depriving us, by decreasing our capacities for creativity, transformation and assembling with heterogeneous bits of world materialities, thoughts, ideas, representations, other bodies, objects, body parts etc. At the same instant, affectivity as the disclosure of our being-in-the-world and our

thrownness in the world (to use Heidegger's words), our receptivity for the rush of impressions and sensations is a reminder of our virtual powers for becoming, for entering and opening ourselves to encounters with the 'outside' that increase our capacities to act and affect and be affected in ways otherwise than our habitual and regulated modes of being. If the broken material worlds we experience with negative and passive affects makes us feel as self – present by the gesture of being cut off from interested connecting and relationality, to feel oneself as diminishing and disappearing in the burning of the skin and blush of our heavily over present awareness of ourselves, affectivity in this double bind makes it further possible for us to becoming imperceptible, nomadic and become – otherwise, to empty the self and open our bodies towards becomings and transformations in the encounters and chance events with the world. Or as Rosi Braidotti so beautifully argues:

In those moments of floating awareness when rational control releases its hold, 'Life' rushes on towards the sensorial/perceptive apparatus with exceptional vigour. This onrush of data, information, affectivity, is the relational bond that simultaneously propels the self out of the black hole of its atomized isolation and disperses it into a myriad of bits and pieces of data imprinting or impressions. It also, however, confirms the singularity of that particular entity which both receives and recomposes itself around the rush of data and affects (Braidotti 2006, 145).

Engaging with the specificity of the lived queer experiences, Zernovski discloses the recognition of the ontological priority of the relation with the other, the other sensed in the impossibility of being touched as s/he is always being somewhere else, but yet struggles to find strategies that make identification with the other possible, although one can/should never identify him/her.

Zernovski opens the horizon for reimagining community that can start exactly from this place where we are all undone by each other and where we share loss and vulnerability as that which deprives us of the possibility of complete comprehension, rendering us unable to finalise mourning and to restore, neither ourselves nor the relation lost that sustains us in fundamental ways beyond any foundational politics on the horizon. Hence, imagining community, as Judith Butler argues, 'affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation,

but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence (...) that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another' (Butler 2004, 27).

But finally, the ethical priority inscribed in the question of the political is supplemented by Zernovski's subtle appeal to pull the trigger, to explode our shame and social failures as the means for disrupting the boring, homogenising and coercive attunement to social life, and shifting our 'monstrous' bodies from the place assigned to them and change the assigned place's destination.



Frame from the video *In the Third Picture*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The different affective scripts identified by neuroscientists, psychologists and cognitive scientists, although incompatible and conflicting in many regards, especially in terms of fixing or finalizing the list of evolutionary inherited affective programmes (Prinz 2004, Griffiths 1997, Panksepp 1998, Damasio 2012, LeDoux 1996, Tomkins 1995, Nathanson 1992, Sapolsky 2004), create a picture whereby affect is shaded by multiple, interactive, recursive and dynamic components set in complex feedback loop relations. Even those accounts in neurosciences that hold to the body-brain structures of affect scripts (interchangeably naming them as affects or emotions, some of which differentiate the bodily-brain organization of emotions from their conscious auto-affection as feelings (see Damasio 2012 for example), consider the indeterminacy of degrees, intensities, com-

plexities, thresholds, patterns and basins of attraction, bifurcation and nonlinearity as defining features and conditions of the emotions as emerging structures (Freeman 2000) As Izard et al. claim (2000), in the frames of developmental emotions theory, there is a salient contingency of different emotions, emotion patterns and the affective-cognitive structures among individuals, but also at individuals in different time spans.

- <sup>2</sup> *Zernovski Velimir* (b.1981, Skopje, Macedonia). Graduated at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje. Currently, he is postgraduate student at the Department of Cultural Studies at “Euro-Balkan” Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities Research in Skopje. He realized solo exhibitions in Macedonia and abroad: New York (2010, 2012), Paris (2011), Vienna (2009, 2011), Freiburg (2009), Skopje (2006, 2007, 2010, 2012); he took part in group exhibitions in Slovenia, Kosovo, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Macedonia, Turkey and USA. He curated and co-curated several projects and exhibitions and participated in many international projects and collaborations. From 2008 Zernovski is co-founder and president of FRIK Cultural Initiatives development Formation, organization which is working on motivation of socially engaged art production and society democratization, beyond prejudices and stereotypes. Through the media of drawings, videos, installations, object installations in public space, writing and publishing artist books he is exploring notions of identity, urbanity and popular culture as well as sexuality and gender identity. <https://www.facebook.com/zernovskivelimir>; <http://www.cee-art.com/macedonia/zernovski-velimir.html>; [velimir\\_zernovski@yahoo.com](mailto:velimir_zernovski@yahoo.com)
- <sup>3</sup> “In The Third picture” film (HD), duration 15 min. Production 2010, Vienna
- <sup>4</sup> “The Walk” video + sound, duration 6 min. Production 2009, Skopje. Awarded on Biennial of young artists, Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, Macedonia
- <sup>5</sup> “The Distilled” space installation / video/sound/objects/photography/drawings. Production 2013, Skopje. Awarded with DENES award for young visual artist, Center for Contemporary Arts, Skopje, Macedonia
- <sup>6</sup> Deploying the Levinasian apparatus of thinking ethics, otherness and vulnerability and passivity, Douglas Crimp, also approaches shame through a similar position in his analyses of Warhol’s movies with Mario Banana. See Crimp, Douglas. *Our Kinds of Movies*.

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