



*Conversation:*

**ANDREA KNEZOVIĆ AND ANJA ZVER**

**3.9.-7.10.2019**

**AZ:** You completed the first series of pieces *Memento Pudorem* during your residency in Israel (Tel Aviv) in 2016. Did the topic relating to the concept of shame interest you beforehand, or did something in Tel Aviv lead to your interest in exploring shame through anthropological-ethnographic artistic approaches?

**AK:** Initially, the contemplation and the actual investigation of the notion of shame started through a personal journey in which I decided to tackle the deconstruction of particular mental mechanisms that presented a high risk to my learning abilities. It turns out that the autodestructive and opaque trigger was none other than anxiety, which often escalated into paralyzing sensations of panic attacks. It took a while before I actually connected it to the notion of shame. After that, I began a six-month process of just tracking and quantifying my own shame/anxiety by marking in a "pocket diary" each time I experience shame, trying to depict impact, meaning and the source of my own shameful patterns.

Regardless of the intensified experiences I was facing, after a while, I realized I was boring myself to oblivion with my own narcissist exploration of "bourgeoisie meditations". The reason for such a statement is that whoever has that much time to spend on their self-observation and regulation is either excessively comfortable in terms of socio-monetary perspectives, in other words, does not need to work, or is extremely desperate to seize the precarious circumstances they are in. I believe I fall under the second heading. The residency at the time was just an excuse to negotiate my own restless emotional conditions. Nevertheless, Israel played a key role in disclosing my self-oriented attitude and pushing me to evolve with my research regarding the notion of shame by engaging anthropological and political parameters. Such an approach helped me to observe the reproduction of shame through the diversified social fabric and work with construct more playfully. I started looking at shame more as a social ritual or negotiation rather than a malignant sentiment, although all romanticism aside, it is definitely a hell of social incarceration tool. In any case, personal struggles were eventually overshadowed by curiosity towards the socio-cultural responses and representations of shame and its material manifestations through historic and legislative aspects, archives, language, sounds and different socio-strategic stages of development.

**AZ:** You say that over time, your focus went from analyzing your own anxiety/shame feelings and triggers to researching socio-cultural responses and representations of shame. In Tel Aviv, during the residency, you did a participating project with residents of Israel, if I am not mistaken (?). It was a part of *Memento Pudorem*, your early project on the topics of shame, anxiety, and guilt, where you made that turn from analyzing yourself to doing artistic-anthropological research with other subjects. Were they doing the same thing? Analyzing themselves by tracking and taking notes on their experiences of shame? One of the results displayed in the exhibition during your residency in Tel Aviv were the jars with "shame-triggering objects" in something like formaldehyde. They reminded me of the practice of conserving and preserving body parts hundreds of years ago. What is the idea behind them? Where does your decision to present them in the jars come from?

**AK:** The artistic residency and the research itself was focusing on the personal impressions of local participants regarding the notion of shame, its material manifestations, and the psycho-cultural dynamic that participants displayed during their engagement with the research project. If I remember correctly, there were eight volunteers who decided to venture with me inside the hourglass of shame. Six of them came out alive, I guess. Furthermore, I assigned them several simple exercises or tasks they needed to work on and contemplate for approximately three to four weeks. One of them was concentrating on noticing and observing their personal trajectories of shame triggers and build-ups by using similar methodologies of a "pocket diary". The other tasks ranged from identifying shame associations in different objects and localities, to tracing sounds they associated with shame and trying to vocalize and reproduce them. All in all, it was lots of data, not so much logic. Eventually, in the middle of the process, one of the participants, who also happens to be an artist and a dear friend of mine, approached me and said: "Listen, motek (meaning dear or darling in Hebrew), this is all very interesting, but here in Israel we operate more with guilt. Shame is more a Catholic thing." This statement made me reconsider everything. I was faced with a form of cultural dichotomy, assuming that one discourse or conceptual construct can be applied and function suitably everywhere. I guess that hyper-globalization, an inherent highly canonized Western perspective, and the residue of colonial heritage truly clouded my cerebral cortex. They clouded my perspective to the point that I was actually controlling the process and insisting on the participants' trajectories more than required. You see, when you enter a new

setting and start examining certain behavioral and cultural traditions, you cannot insist on one specific ultimate approach or methodology; you need to constantly adjust to the subtleties of the environment. Otherwise, all you produce is bullshit.

Therefore, in the middle of my experiment/artistic research, I quit everything and started all over again. I used similar exercises, of course, but this time a bit modified and more prone to the cultural setting I was in. The whole residency was more of a learning curve for me regarding culture, shame, attitudes and assumptions in artistic research, rather than an art residency where I would have produced a specifically intended artwork. The shame backfired on me again, although this time as a cultural lesson with plenty more questions to answer. It is funny how we cannot escape our own conditions, is it not?

I did, in the end, collect objects and sounds of shame that people donated, and displayed them in the form of a collection at the opening exhibition at the Israeli Center for Digital Art. The decision to conserve the objects of shame in alcohol-based preservatives, similar to formaldehyde but less invasive and toxic, was done purely from a conceptual standpoint. I recognized these objects as small personal outlets and rites of shame that somehow carried a monumental aura around them – representations of someone's shame and the courage to release it. These objects deserved to be displayed and encapsulated, although at the same time, representing them publicly, there is an element of the exposure of shame and even a kind of confrontation for the viewers to re-think and analyze their own personal status. Or maybe not? You can never really predict what the public will perceive. That is the beauty of it and the thrill.

Anyhow, the response to the exhibition was very good, although if you ask me, the most interesting things were still left in that process-space between consciousness, shame, and decision-making. At least, this is how I saw it at the time.





**AZ:** I would say that that is the beauty of artistic research. You can change and adjust methodology whenever, if you are not obsessed with an outcome.

So in the end, the objects inside the glass jars were not just from the volunteers you worked with in the beginning?

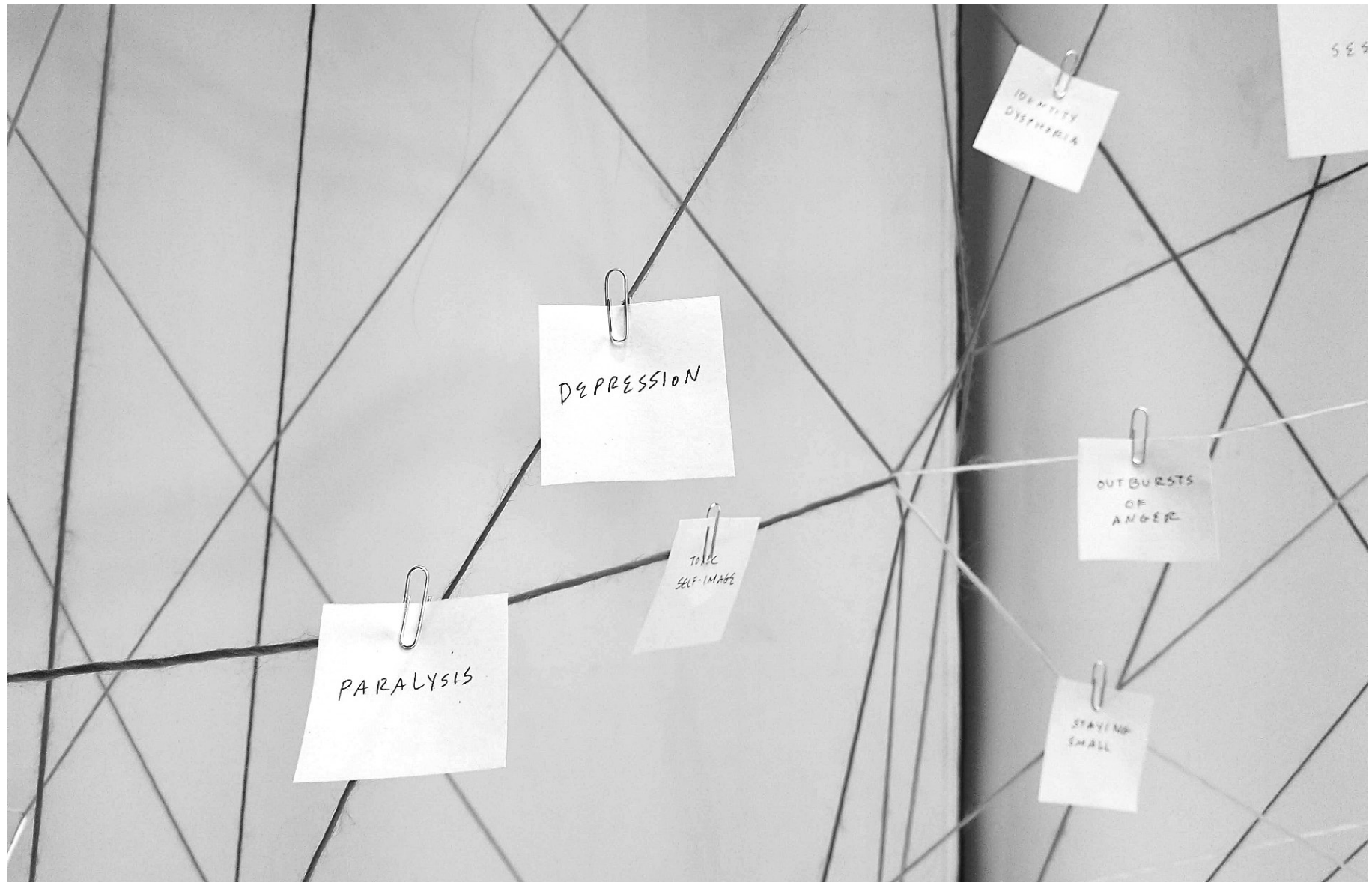
I see how the conceptual approach of preserving the subjects' shame triggers can be noted as releasing the shame. On the other hand, within the framework of the ceremonial encapsulation of objects and with the idea of conserving them, I see them as relics that constantly remind you of something unpleasant, not as a process of liberating yourself of a personal shame trigger, especially when I view the work within the frame of the title *Memento Pudorem*. It probably comes out of the well-known Latin phrase *Memento Mori* that was depicted commonly throughout history ... The sense of shame is exposed in your work, talked about and represented from many angles. Anyhow, in the socio-cultural concept, it is something to be hidden (something that most people hide or even ignore). You wrote in one text that shame also works as a tool for control and punishment that is used on the level of state politics, geopolitics, in cultural and social concepts. In your more recent artwork *Lighter Than Matter, Heavier Than Mind*, you are talking about this aspect of the notion of shame?

**AK:** Yes, the objects came from various sources, including the volunteers. Although I shifted my approach to the research, the effects of the methodologies I used and the concept did not vary too much, just my attitude toward it. Indeed, the objects became, in the end, small monuments to shame, almost as an ode to the peculiar notion.

If we turn to the more generalized context of the notion of shame, we can depict its presence everywhere in relation to the human condition. Especially if we look back through history, we can find numerous cultural and philosophical representations of shame. From the social science perspective, the relationship between the dynamic of honor and shame has shaped cultures all over the world. Just take for example the traditional Chinese understanding of shame, where there are 113 hierarchical clusters of the terminology related to the notion of shame<sup>1</sup>, and where each of these terms carries different individual or social responsibilities and customs. Or, on the other hand, Mediterranean societies, where honor and shame interplay between public life and the kinship system/social structuring<sup>2</sup>, acting as a central axis in developing and negotiating relationships, as well as dividing private and public spaces, and even coordinating religious procedures relating to social ritualization.

<sup>1</sup> Li, Jin, Lianqin Wang, and Kurt Fischer. »The Organisation of Chinese Shame Concepts?« *Cognition & Emotion* . 18.6 (2004): 767-797. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Moxnes, Halvor. "Honor and Shame." *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture*. 23.4 (1993): 167-176. Print.



On the other hand, shame has also been present through cultures as an ethnic and gender trigger, where it served to lobby for particular discriminatory attitudes or policies. In relation to gender, shame has been always more inherent to the female sex, not because men have less shame, but rather for reasons of religious incarceration and often the biblical portrayals of the female sex that widely influenced later social organization. In her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler describes gender performativity as innate imitation of cultural fusions without the original, where the roles are constantly "performed" or "reiterated".

Possibly one of the most known examples of gender shame in literature is *The Scarlet Letter – A*, originally published in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorne<sup>3</sup>, in which he narrated the life of a "shameful", sacrilegious, "adulterous woman" (the "A" standing for adulteress). Of course, let us not forget that men were allowed everything at the time, including such acts, were still considered gracious in the eyes of God.

Nevertheless, there is no space for my personal frustration in this story, let us go back to the facts. The last but not least examples of ethnic shaming that we have witnessed – and this is the last example that I will make now, I promise – are with the fatalities of the Second World War, the Star of David marking Jewish people as a symbol of exclusion and shame.

As you can see, there is a lot of material to work with when it comes to the notion of shame, and I still haven't even touched upon the legislative prospect of shame and Martha Nussbaum's work, or the behavioral development theory by Erik Erikson, or the modern psycho-emotional spheres of the shame resilience theory by Brené Brown.

The more recent work that I have made, *Lighter Than Matter, Heavier Than Mind* resonates more with the artistic exploration of shame through relations of social value/measurement, temporal paradigms of contemporary reality. It works with the personal turmoil of balancing time, identity and aspirations within the 24/7 reality and the extreme pressures of modern Western life.

For a while now, I have been exploring social theories related to the labour-politic, the production of value/worth, and the temporal dimensions of 24/7 existence. I have even written my Master thesis on a related topic. The current fast-shifting paradigms of digitalisation, hyper-connectivity, "transnationalism", globalisation, and ambition-hungry reality have co-opted time in the most peculiar way. As theorist and art historian Jonathan Crary would argue: "The beast never sleeps – or at least the 24/7 temporal cage is erasing boundaries between day and night, work-time and leisure-time."<sup>4</sup>

The temporal dimension of 24/7 existence assists the neoliberal construct through "plugging-in" to private realms of communities and single individuals,

creating a vacuum of the never-ending circle of demands and desires.

In this case, I have seen the connection between such paradigms and shame, through relations of intimate scaling systems and the fast shifting of market demands that we all have to keep up with. I noticed there is shame hiding in the ambition and the "lack of time" for manifesting all the imagined or wished-for goals.

There is also shame in failing to do and be everything, especially in a world that offers so many possibilities and options.

I would also like to note that this type of particular syndrome is highly contagious and infects predominantly young, bourgeoisie, often Western, hip individuals, dueling between what to do, where to live and which course to take next.

Although shame as a notion is relational and associational, which means that it is always used in comparison with the other and is not always connected to action, it is a constructor that is highly durable and resistant when given specific context, time and environment.

I find the flirtation between shame and temporality very interesting. The work *Lighter Than Matter, Heavier Than Mind* is all about that. It is about balance-disbalance, burnout, time-loss, shame and doubt. The work investigates the prospect of scaling and the intersections between the notion of shame and social and subjective identification procedures.

The installation is made of a triangular life-sized copper scaling system that holds different scaling pairs, each representing different planes (plates) of shame. The triangular scaling skeleton of the installation represents a societal structural framework, as well as an intimate constellation. The whole structure is held together by a two-kilogram weight, representing the central axis of selfhood. The scaling installation is only held by the weight of selfhood, carefully calculated and balanced in equilibrium with different scaling planes representing shame effects. On the other end, there is a single plate with a burning candle. When the candle burns, the weight is destabilized, or the plates unbalanced by disproportional relations, the installation loses its structural integrity and consequently collapses.

The prospect of temporality and scaling or measurement of worth-value serves as a departing point for the installation, which engages in questioning subversive dynamics between autonomy and shame/doubt.

<sup>3</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 2019. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Crary, Jonathan. *24/7 Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*. 2013 Verso, London. P 29

**AZ:** Is there anything written on the plates (panels of shame) besides your scale measurements of shame? I thought there were certain sayings or words that connect the viewer's thinking with the role of shame in public and official or non-official constructs for the control of (social) behavior.

To take the conversation further: You have been researching topics of shame for a few years now. Where does the process of research end, if it does at all? I am curious at what "point" you start to think about presentations in the visual language. Within such long and quantifying research, that could be omnipresent for you, I imagine. The logical thing for me is to develop some of the artwork through more visual stages. Here I am thinking about the concept of your chess board. While on the subject, what is the final title of this work?

**AK:** The plates, as you mentioned, were initially intended to have certain sentences engraved on them, although at the last minute I decided to leave them as they are. The scale does play with the idea of public and private autonomy and the dynamics of the measurement of value, as well as shame as a scaling tool or official moral mechanism for behavioral control. Nevertheless, the entire background of the plates was more interesting, and at that moment it seemed too aggressive to me to appropriate additional context onto them. You see, each plate, unique as it is, comes from different regions of East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank (Palestine). Most of them are serious antiquities, some dating from the late 18th century and others from more recent times. They are all serving plates, mostly used to serve tea and coffee, and represent a form of communication of a certain intimacy or interaction. They also symbolize "portals" for social transactions and relations, as well as a metaphor for fair and equal relationships. As you might have noticed by now, these plates carry enough context by themselves, with no need for me to disturb them additionally. Things should sometimes be left as they are. Shame will reflect one way or the other. I obtained the plates from an unforgettable man by the name of Omar. Omar has a shop in Old Jerusalem in an old bazaar, not far from the Jaffa Gate and the Church of St. John the Baptist. He is a man of many lives and his shop has stood there for generations, dusty, lost in time and full of worldly antiques. That day, I was looking for plates for the project; instead, I found Omar and the stories of forgotten objects. That day, Omar changed my life. And the plates had their own will. So I let them be. There is no shame in that.

To go back to the research and your questions, yes, it has been a long journey, sleeping with shame. Although I might admit that after researching such a





notion for a long time, you think you might become immune to it, but it just gets worse. You become more self-conscious.

The works that you develop in research, you develop them gradually. You go back to them many times, even if they make complete sense. Also, I have realized during this process that academic research and artistic practice can co-exist, but academic research should never dominate over creative, artistic, and intuitive expressions, otherwise you get expositive documentation of scientific results.

With regards to the work Chess of Rites that you have mentioned, it has definitely evolved from different stages of conceptualization and development. Chess of Rites is a mixture and sublimation of several research trajectories: one being Erik Erikson's work on the eight different stages of psychological development (the second stage involving autonomy vs. shame), the other Erik Berne's transactional analysis, which looks at social behaviour through the interchangeable relationship of individual role-playing as adult (rational), parental (critical and nurturing), and childlike (intuitive and dependent) aspects of personality. I am also using various borrowed aspects from Brené Brown's SRT theories<sup>5</sup>.

The Chess of Rites is not what you would call a usual chess game. It is a chessboard made of the finest silk on one side and from the rawest cotton on the other. All the squares on the chessboard are white, and each has different emotional and psychological stages of the progression of identity embroidered on it.

The figures are made out of metal, all equally shaped. Each figure represents a different identity characteristic/value. For example, King = Ego, Queen = Self-hood, Knight = Will, Bishop = Values, Rook = Intent and Pawns = Choices. Each of the figures has its status marked, each has its different role.

The game is a psychological one, and when you start playing it, you realize after four or five moves that you are completely lost. The fields are all the same color, so you cannot track moves easily. The figures are all the same but different, so you have a hard time orientating, just like within our own psyche. The game is not there to just be played out. It is there to be examined as a phenomenon. So each time you make a move and for example your Will (Knight) jumps from the square representing Recognition to the square representing Consequences, the game plays out in the player's mind, rather than on the board itself. It is all about things that get lost in the subconscious. Things that we imagine or things that we cannot bother to notice or we bother too much. This game has nothing to prove, and nobody to answer to. Except for the player that plays. It is a silent game. Game of Rites.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Brené. "Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame." *Families in Society*, vol. 87, no. 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 43–52, doi:10.1606/1044-3894.3483.

**AZ:** Right, our personality is made and constructed by all those little "rituals", most of which we do not even notice. With the chess game as a psychotherapeutic apparatus, you made a heavy and playful way for personal introspection, and transformed this act of getting to know oneself into a game. Chess, by the way, I think is the perfect choice, by being complicated, intellectual, rational and analytical.

Referring back to your second reply, where you mention the perspective your friend pointed out in Tel Aviv – s/he described a relation between shame and guilt, both being behavioral control tools in different socio-cultural environments. Maybe this statement does or does not have any scientific background, but to me it is interesting. During your research programme at the University of Amsterdam, did you work with more volunteers on projects you will present in Slovenia this time? What is your opinion, do people (either those you worked with or in general) predominantly Catholic Western world consider shame differently in some way?

One more thing. The exhibition is titled *Dialectics of Value*. You mentioned value in our conversation while talking about your new artwork in the context of the production of value, the measurement of value/worth, the exploration of shame through social value. Is the concept of value in your artwork bound to current social and political issues?

**AK:** The research did expand in Amsterdam, of course. I engaged various crowds and participants inside different stages of project development. Some were more practical participations, and others more conceptual, including donations of objects of shame. Although I must say that most of them found the topic of shame quite challenging or even repulsive. I would argue that the religious and cultural background shapes and pre-determines one's response and perception of such a notion to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the engagement truly varies according to the individual. Lots of participants came from different nationalities and social backgrounds, and their contemplations on the notion of shame resemble their immediate cultural and socio-political urgencies, as well as personal ones. For example, I have received donations of voting confirmation (slips) from recent presidential elections as an object of shame, or specific passports, or even colours representing particular colonial heritage and shameful cultural memories. There are all sorts of things in there, but what I have realized through the collection process is that shame lives in the past, but feeds on future potential.

Let me explain what I mean by this. The construct or sensation of shame is

often embedded as a dormant emotion in the memory or association of a certain event or circumstances. It is triggered by internal self-reflexivity or doubt and external factors/representations. Most of the time, shameful associations relate to previously experienced, imagined or created traumas – or the past (even if they are experienced in the present). However, though shame nests in the past, and occasionally erupts in the present, its true diet is feeding on the anxiety of future potentials. The notion of shame is deeply intertwined with our "psychological clock", our perception of temporality, and the values of significant events inside that temporality. The value or evaluating factor is what triggers the shame, and time is what accelerates it and therefore makes it more urgent, or slows it down and leaves it on the periphery of our perception.

The one thing that most of the object donations shared is precisely the anxiety towards the future – personal or public, global or local, cultural or political. All of the objects were tormented by the past and restless about the future to come.

I would like to note one more thing about this particular answer. Religion (as you mentioned before) or, in this case, Catholicism is fueled with shame and guilt as a core self-suctioning mechanism for control. It is a slippery slope to play with these things, it only takes one match to burn the whole crop. Christianity and in particular Catholicism reached their peak when it comes to the ritualization of shame and guilt, with all that crap related to redemption and confession of sins. I mean really? Who are we kidding now?

It is one thing to have a good psychotherapist and release psychological and emotional pressures through healthy channels (exercise and socialization), and another thing to render yourself submissive and faulty in the name of the greater control-system. The reason why I react this way is that Catholicism and its canon have exercised control through public and private shaming and guilt throughout the centuries. Shame based on gender, social status, ethnic background, sexuality, and so on. It is possibly the number one religious movement that did this so consistently and extravagantly. And do not be mistaken, I do not criticize the personal belief of individuals; on the contrary, I condemn the opaque institutionalisation of control through religion agencies and the use of shame and guilt as an incarceration tool.

When it comes to the West and the neoliberalization of life, I would say that anything goes, as long as you can sell it. The same with shame. Some would maybe disagree, but the fact is that we have become extremely desensitized to the currents and events of life. That does not mean that shame is not present, it just takes a different form. As I mentioned before, shame is correlated with value, as well as productivity. This is, at least, how things are "in the West".

Hahaha, I find this hilarious. "In the West", like it is the center of the world, the

only geographical place where important things happen. Everywhere else is merely an imitation of the West or not even relevant. God, we are so arrogant. The great age of the Anthropocene, a tragedy waiting to happen.

If I may be frank with you, Anja, I am not sure I do what I do because I have full hope in humanity, or because I have completely lost it.

Anyhow, let us get back to the questions. Dialectics of Value. Yes.

The reason why I chose this exhibition title is because in the contemporary day and age, we have a different understanding of the dialectics of value. Looking briefly at philosophical discourse, we can examine the Hegelian take on dialectics, which comprises three different stages of development: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Or Kant's understanding of dialectics, which is not separate from his logical theory (Loparic, 1987)<sup>6</sup> and is relational to ethical theories on value – Kant's Categorical Imperative. Or Marxist dialectics (historical materialism), which arise from the Hegelian dialectics and concern themselves more with the observation of the personal, economic and social spheres of conduct.

Dialectics as a discourse and methodology are a reasoning mechanism for discussion and observation of truth, the dichotomies of logical and metaphysical concepts. The essence of dialectics is to reach a consensus among divergent constructs or parties.

The Dialectics of Value in this case relate to the diversified contemporary production of value, especially in the age of hyper-neoliberalisation, and the capitalist transgressions and co-option of intimacy and privacy. Shame plays a part here as well, mostly as a moderator of value, a well as "temporal customs", bridging reality and projections.

It seems indeed that we have various determinations and viewpoints on what value is these days.

On one hand, it is a method by which we measure things, compare and differentiate, a currency of some sort, and on the other, it is a moral and ethical imperative, meta-state, or even identificational tool.

In any case, it is currently the most important conceptual asset humankind has. It is the measurement of all. Even of nothing.

So you see, value does fit as a representation of the social neo-currency of the contemporary era.

If you do not believe me, just look at social media and the digital realms of socialisation. They all use value as a primary currency for interaction and the exchange of content.

That is not all, there is also a taxonomy of value that differentiates and outlines the contrast between non-value and value<sup>7</sup>. Anyhow, value rules us all.

The construct of value has become the main socio-political as well as cultural negotiator when it comes to knowledge production, innovation, and the

<sup>6</sup> Loparic, Zeljko. "Kant's Dialectic." *Noūs*. 21.4 (1987): 573-593. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Rabinowicz, Wlodek and Ronnow-Rasmussen, Toni (2015) *Value Taxonomy*. In: Brosch, Tobias and Sander, David, (eds.) *Handbook of Value: Perspectives from Economics, Neuroscience, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 23-42. ISBN 9780198716600.

preservation of material and immaterial assets.

To focus on your question, whether my concept is relating to value is bound to the current socio-political circumstances of the world: Of course. I could not depoliticize my status even if I wanted to!

Although this exhibition is not necessarily directly politically engaged, it is definitely stimulated by the currents and contingencies we face.

For me, it was interesting to explore the notion of shame in relation to value production, especially because of contemporary social desensitization and hyper-identification.

Hyper-production and value go hand in hand, one cannot exist without the other. We produce and exchange hyper-value in a globalised, "transnational" setting – all sorts of additional, must-have/must-be values.

Here I am, designating the term "hyper-value" in relation to identificational procedure and value production, mostly attached to identity structuring or communal procedures. Shame comes in again as a mediator or evaluator of value, as mentioned before. If the value is not "stable", "confirmed/rectified" or "measured properly", shame acts as an incarceration tool or mediator between internal and external circumstances.

For me, it was exciting to explore how we observe shame through the construct of value or in relation to value. In this case, I did it through material objects and shame donations, rites of passage games, and scaling and strategizing systems. Of course, all of this is part of artistic research and interpretation. We are not here to reach scientific conclusions or any kind of logical and reasonable results. Just pure curiosity... and some, of course, added value.

**AZ:** It has been such a journey following your research and artistic progression. What stands out the most for me is the connection you draw between the experience of shame, its material manifestations, and its psycho-temporal dimension. I am looking forward to seeing how the exhibition will express this while also provoking new questions and observations. Thank you again for sharing your thoughts, it was a pleasure.

**AK:** Thank you for your interest!



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Production and organization: Projekt Atol Institute

Publication co-production: KOS

The zine publication KOS 10 – Conversation with Andrea Knezović accompanies the exhibition:  
Andrea Knezović: Dialectics of Value  
DUM Project Space, Ljubljana  
24. 10.–8. 11. 2019

Acknowledgments for production support and assistance: Hanna Steenbergen-Cockerton, Laura Dubourjal-Bergé, Otakar Zwartjes, Leeron Tur-Kaspa, Adam Beni, Valter Udovičič.

The project is supported by the Ministry of Culture and the Department for Culture of the City of Ljubljana, the Ministry of Public Administration and the project KONS::Platform for Contemporary Investigative Art, which is co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Regional Development Fund of the European Union. The project Memento Pudorem (Remember Shame) was started during the residency in Israel, supported by the Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon and the Museums and Galleries of Ljubljana.

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*ZAVOD PROJEKT ATOL*



