

Bojana
Kunst

The Powerlessness of Radical Consumption in Contemporary Performance: The Case of “Via Negativa”

Introduction

The starting point of this text is the question about the radical consumption in contemporary performance.¹ I understand radical consumption as the consumption of the body, acting, presence, stage actions and abilities, physical strength, spiritual power, affect – **with the purpose** of producing an intersubjective effect, the exchange between performers and spectators. At the same time, I do not wish to avoid allusions to the contemporary status of reaction to consumption as a self-consuming economic exchange and passion. As is well-known, radical production is often at the core of 20th century performance, especially performance art and body art; it drives the live communicative situations in contemporary theatre beyond the conventions of established representation and signification. The performance event therefore becomes a unique “laboratory” for testing the effects of radical consumption, a field of practicing intersubjectivity, exchange and probing live communicative situations. For more than a decade those questions have also been at the centre of the Slovenian performance group “Via Negativa.” Their work under the direction of Bojan Jablanovec is very tightly connected to the research of

the live communicative situation established through performance and addresses especially the public, political, economic and intimate role of performer’s body, which is always represented and performed through the economy of affective exchange with the audience. This text is especially dedicated to the first phase of their research under the name “Via Negativa,” where eight performances have been created as part of the seven-year research project of the director Bojan Jablanovec and participating artists, who together explore the acting strategies of presentation, ways of presence and enabling new communicative relations with the audience. The participating actors come into the project with radically diverse experience ranging from acting to performance (dramatic theatre, performance art, body art and dance). The first seven research years of “Via Negativa” focus upon the thematization of the seven deadly sins, or, according to the creators, seven ‘negative’ human traits. “Our outgoing point is that wrath, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, envy and pride profoundly mark the identity of every individual. With each of these human traits, a conflict arises that is ingrained into the subjectivity of each individual. On the one hand, it builds mechanisms and strategies of defence from its own negative impulses in order to serve

the demands of society for their control and oppression. On the other hand, it develops various forms of loosening because it gives way under the pressure of one’s own subjectivity.”²

From this perspective I would also like to address something which is always at work in the performances of “Via Negativa,” a production of uneasiness in the exchange between performers and spectators. This uneasiness would be easiest to describe as a consumption without effect, most of the time, the exchange between performers and spectators works as a kind of senseless utilization of excess, producing fun and laughing, but not really a relaxing one. Even if the energies of the performers are radically consummated on the stage, at the same time there is a feeling of an impotent, always cynical communicative situation, in which sometimes the feeling of shame is also aroused. Shame which is connected to the processes of subjugation without remain, to a certain kind of dispositif which is at work in the performances of “Via Negativa.” With this exchange the performances of “Via Negativa” cut deeply into the contemporary dynamics of power, and it is re-questioning the contemporary mechanisms of subjugation and liberation. “Via Negativa” is related to the loss of potentiality of human actions and the powerlessness of subjectivisation, which can be also read as a symptom of contemporary western culture. With the development of contemporary forms of power, this powerlessness has grown to immense proportions. Therefore I see the performances of “Via Negativa” as a sort of fleshy and profane discourse on ethics, a radical confrontation with the imperative of pleasure and the time in which is too much sense.

On Confession

At the core of every scene of the performances by “Via Negativa,” there lies confession. In this year-long research project, we have actually been able to follow a series of confessions; their point of utterance is always the individuality of each participating actor or actress. Each statement is constructed as a scene in space and time; even if it does intertwine with other scenes, it always preserves its initial singularity. It is also obvious that the utterance never remains at the level of speech: everything that is uttered also triggers some real action. Along these lines, for example, Grega Zorc in the High Fidelity monologue in the performance *Incasso* (2005), struggles to hold the heavy amplifiers in his hands which are part of the music equipment purchased with the life insurance policy of his dead parents. The truths uttered by the participants about themselves and their work are performatives because the language of the confession not only describes reality but also establishes and changes the reality itself. The truths uttered by the participants are therefore not existentialist truths. Their “reality” only shows itself through action; it is a result of the intertwining of verbal and non-verbal actions. This does not mean that the confession and the action are in harmony, in the relationship of cause and effect. It is more about a radical alienation of speech and action, the establishment of an empty place where the intimate performance can be established. In the case of Grega Zorc in the aforementioned scene, this person needs to physically defeat the gravity of their own merchandise. Frequently, what is confessed is not closely connected to the work which is performed by the person confessing: with acting or performance “labour,” and indirectly also with theatre as the point of utterance. The hunt for the real, as the “Via Negativa” project calls the series of the new performance

art pieces entitled *Via Nova*, is thus paradoxically framed into the (public) work performed by the participants in the scenes.³

At the same time the connection between the research of Christian human weaknesses as represented by the Christian deadly sins which are the focus of this long research of the performance group and the acting research focussed upon ways of presence and communication with the audience, gives rise to an unusual exchange between the stage and the audience. It seems that we are witnessing a public form of “penitence,” a sort of contemporary version of flagellates.⁴ We can only enjoy it, however, if we are also ready to accept the abominable dregs of the real (the medium of spoken confession is namely the body with its fluids and openings), and thus confess our own obscene pleasure. But the confession in the “*Via Negativa*” project is not the only way of pointing out the voyeur economy of the spectator’s exchange and pleasure, where the actor’s body and action are established as those of a victim in order for us to be able to see or in order for the obscene to surface. The “*Via Negativa*” project does not stop at moralism, but sharpens the mechanism of subjectivisation. This mechanism places us before theatrical questions and opens ethical problems: What drives us to do what we do? And what drives us to watch what we do?

Making Crisis of the Subject Visible

Michel Foucault writes that confession enters as the apparatus of subjectivisation (i.e. the manner in which the subject is established and its singularity articulated) into Western culture already in the 19th century, when confession replaces the classic apparatus of remorse by means

of new forms of power and ruling. Foucault writes, that we became a society in which always something has to be confessed, in western society confession enters different areas, like law, medicine, pedagogy, family, love relationships etc.⁵ Frequently, we make confessions in art as well. Today, confession has become a way of producing truth: truth can become visible, or come to the surface, only by means of confession. Truth wants out and if it fails to reveal itself then one needs to get rid of the limitations that prevent that from happening. Only by means confession can we establish our own singularity, in which the following essential rule must be observed: I must incessantly utter what is hardest to say. In order to achieve that, I need to feel confession as a deeply personal, intimate need. Foucault says that this need to confess, this obligation to confess, has been so deeply internalized that we no longer feel it as an effect of power. It is no longer felt as an effect of dominance, but becomes our deep intimate need, our proof that we are capable of changing. Foucault connects this need to confess with the analysis of the new forms of power and control, which are no longer connected with traditional discipline techniques but make use of refined ways of self-control. His analysis is still very topical, especially given the various ways of subjectivisation available to us nowadays as users of and workers at the labour market. We are subjects continuously capable of transforming, exhausting and selling the most intimate in us (for this is where our essence is supposed to lie). We always need to be free enough to make confessions, always feel the confession as our innermost need, and at the same time, be shameless and flexible enough to reject, utterly profane the very truth we have reached and disclosed with such great difficulty. If we namely, constantly utter what is hardest to say then what is told is no longer of particular secrecy.

It is not unusual that, today, confession has been turned into a media spectacle; it is not so much about a “cheap” spectacle and un-informed voyeur spectators, but about a radical change in the manner of controlling and shaping contemporary subjectivity. Confession is not a disclosure where someone shows themselves as they really are, but especially a mechanism of subordination and part of the flexible subjectivisation enabled by contemporary society and its numerous apparatuses (of technological, political and economic nature). Today, our surplus lies primarily in the fact that we are subjects about whom something new can always be discovered; we constantly need to reveal and topicalize our potential abilities. “It is a lot worse to hear ‘you lack potential’ than that you have screwed-up. The former statement tells a lot more about who you are. It shows one’s uselessness in a much deeper sense.”⁶

However, if the subject is constantly established through confession - which is also the traumatic point of rejecting the old and establishing the new – then this subject cannot exist in any other way than in a state of constant crisis. This crisis, or split in the subject, is also at the core of the many performance and performance art works in the 20th century; it can also be described as the need for the realization and performing of negativity, which is essential for every subjectivisation. Radical consumption in art is a consequence of performing the crisis of the subject, or that of the need for the visibility of the split, through which the radical critique of essentialism is established. It could also be described as a way of transgression and resistance to authenticity. The disclosure of the subject’s negativity as a constitutive moment of subjectivisation has deeply marked the theatrical reforms of performing and the ways of presence

in performance art. At the same time, however, it is also the foundation of the “emancipator” power of art, especially its resistance to the rigid ways of contemporary life. In contemporary performance, the live event often becomes an opportunity for the radical consumption of the subject, an event without a repetition,⁷ for a radical use of the body and a phenomenological blurring of the border between the observing and the visible, the body and its edge. The potential power of the live event is often seen in the liberating power of negativity. This negativity not only breaks down the border between the stage and the spectator, but radically shifts the symbolic mandate of the actor and the spectator; it shatters the safe conventions within which the live artistic event is supposed to take place. At the same time, the crisis of the subject is at the core of the acting reform and the researches of how to embrace the consumption of the acting energy and power, how to fight fake efficiency, open the intercommunicative potential of theatre and establish a split between presence and representation. The private, the intimate, the most hidden thus enters performance through the main entrance, but not as cheap exhibitionism (as strengthened by the cheap voyeurism of the other side). It is rather a rebellion to the rigid structures of power and a confrontation with the conventional apparatus of representation. The split within the subject namely becomes visible though the absence of the equality between presence and representation, which is at the core of every subjectivisation process. It is especially body art that frequently works as an apparatus of the most hidden of acts. It is some sort of field for testing liberation, in terms of how far we can go and what drives us to go that far. The event establishes itself through the intercommunicative relationship of visibility and invisibility, where not only the border between

the stage and the audience is shifted, but other sensory experiences are enabled as well.

In the continuation, I wish to defend the hypothesis that the above description of the role of radical consumption no longer suffices for performance, i.e. that its power or potentiality of intercommunicativity is no longer sufficient, especially given the fact that the situation of art and the live event has profoundly changed. This is also argued by the performances of “Via Negativa;” they persuade us precisely by what they do not give us, by not creating any surplus, by being full of radical actions which do not hold any power despite the inexorable consumption. Is it not the phenomenological openness, fluidity of consumption and investment (as driven by the constant crisis of the subject – both on the performer’s and spectator’s sides) something that still persists as a sort of misunderstanding? Isn’t this openness of the economy of looking and the dialectic of the pleasure of the spectator, this desiring participation that convinces us of the intersubjectivity of performing, something that exists today as an anachronistic truth about the live event? Isn’t the performing of the crisis of the subject there precisely in order to cover up this basic commodification of the artistic event, the political powerlessness of performance and performance art and of the body’s action? In other words, do the radical actions of physical rebellion to rigid power structures not make it succumb to the power even more? It is true, that radical consumption can still affect us (causing shame and repulsion in the case of “Via Negativa”). We can still be shocked, surprised and also exposed in our symbolic mandate of the spectator, we can still be caught in the “feedback loop.”⁸ Nevertheless, it seems that the potentiality of radical consumption has been profoundly weakened. There has been a lessening

of tension in the contemporary culture of pleasure. This strong affect, disclosure of desire, intersubjectivity is at the core of the contemporary structures of power – the ways of producing and controlling social relations. “The more diverse, even erratic, the better. Normality is losing its support. The regularities begin to loosen. This loosening of normality is part of the dynamics of capitalism. It is not simply about liberation. It is about the form of power/authority characteristic of capitalism. This is no longer a disciplinary institutional power /authority which determines everything, but the power /authority in order to produce diversity – because markets get saturated. Even the weirdest affective tendencies are in order – as long as they bring money.”⁹ This loosening of normality is problematic because, according to Massumi, there is a sort of relationship today between the dynamics of power and rebellion, where the strategies of rebellion can no longer be simply extracted; we are also not able to claim like Foucault that “rebellion is first”. The exact opposite is taking place: the field of relationships between people, our ethical values, actions, desires, expectations as well as shameful bizarreness (no matter what clean expectations and possibilities it may be connected with), our desiring exchange – all this forms the surplus value of contemporary economy. Radical consumption (not in the sense of money but energy and human possibilities and actions) is at the core of the contemporary spirit of post-industrial capitalism, where protestant asceticism has been replaced by the imperative of pleasure. The crisis of the subject thus reveals itself as an endless barrage of human abilities, actions and aspirations, the driving force of contemporary immaterial production. In this sense, I am becoming increasingly reserved towards radical consumption in art, especially if hailed as a sign of liberation, a sensory openness which should continuously

help us place ourselves as subjects. It sooner seems to me that radical consumption directly gives rise to a new form of power – the power springing from the loosening and fluidity of our desires, or from the power arising from our need for liberation and transformation, and from the imperative that we should be as shameless as possible in all of this.

It is to this misunderstanding regarding power that I describe the interesting feeling of uneasiness which accompanies me when watching the performances by “Via Negativa.” The “Via Negativa” research uses confession and radical consumption of the body (with its fluids and openings, physical exhaustion, repetition, mental concentration) as a strategy for achieving the intercommunicativeness and transfer of the spectator’s functions. In this sense, it consistently follows especially the performance art practices of phenomenologically shattering of the live event; it focuses on the body as the means of the achieving of affective reactions. On the other hand, this consumption of the body in the “Via Negativa” research does not have any concrete placement; it seems somewhat rigid, unsuccessful, a sort of void consumption. It seems as if it were clear in advance that the selected strategy had no effect. Its signification and purpose is abolished at the very moment when it could become. “something” At the same time, there is another important trait there, the one that frames the project into very topical contradictions of subjectivisation. The confessions uttered by the performers are closely connected to the work done by these performers – with the expectations, social and professional status of the persons/actors speaking. The sinfulness or research of human weaknesses can hereby be connected with the classical findings of Max Weber about rational lifestyle, based on the idea of profession

and the spirit of capitalism, which puts one’s “professional duty”¹⁰ first. This also profoundly changes our relationship to the hidden and the intimate: it is no longer about the dark sinfulness of our untameable flesh, but about any kind of secrecy related to professional asceticism, to the imperative of work; in this, human weakness is regarded as a consequence of the irrational consumption of property. The cardinal sin in the ideal of professional asceticism is therefore void consumption of human abilities and actions.¹¹ What needs to be added to this realisation is an important characteristic of the present time, or that of the current social relations. The professional asceticism, the active realisation of the human will in the profession as discussed by Weber, has nowadays been replaced by the imperative of “professional” enjoyment. Now, we must incessantly consume human abilities and actions. If we wish to work successfully, we must come across as relaxed as possible, babble as much as possible, be as shameful, flexible and creative as possible, enjoy and show all of our potentiality in this and also be critical to boot. In this sense, the actor becomes the ideal virtuoso worker of contemporary capitalism, producing “communication through the means of communication;” his means are namely the language and actions of the body.¹² Here is the core of the cynicism which underlies the tasks of actors and performance artists in the scenes, or their relationship to the actions they perform. It seems that the confessing actors are in some sort of extremely cynical relationship with the fetishised status that they have in contemporary social economy and production, and also in cynical relation with what is expected from them by us, the spectators. The actor/actress is namely the idealized shameless subject, but one who nevertheless fails to reach an orgasm, the fetishised subject of production whose work is without value, the liberated profession

with freedom full of loneliness. The actions of the actors are physically highly exhausting, their tasks utterly demanding and merciless, but what makes them purposeless and empty is the way they are carried out – by means of ridicule but without an apology, with humour but no sparing, with irony but without discretion. At the same time, radical void consumption is also a reflection of the expectation of the surplus of the transformation which does not take place. This work drives us ‘completely and utterly into ourselves,’ both in our artistic and social lives, but actually produces nothing of value. The result is a radically failed subjectivisation, non-potency, powerlessness, an impotent promise that is never fulfilled.

On the Power of Apparatus

At this point I will try to shed light upon confession from another perspective and analyse its mechanism and form. The fact that the “Via Negativa” process has in fact built a sort of mechanism (even convention) which determines the horizon of the expectations is evident from the scene with Katarina Stegnar in the performance Viva Verdi. This scene, which I understand as an attempt of reflecting upon one’s own impossibility of subjectivisation, is not coincidental given the fact that the performance Viva Verdi deals with sloth; despite the imperative of pleasure, sloth (along with stealing) remains the cardinal sin of the spirit of capitalism and is also the most difficult to commodify. In her scene, Katarina Stegnar focuses upon the basic apparatus of “Via Negativa” and with the confession performs only its form. She does not tell us anything new in doing so, quite the opposite: she performs precisely what we have expected.

The scene can be read as a lesson about the complex effect of the apparatus (*dispositif* in French), defined by Agamben as “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”¹³ For Agamben, the subject is always a result of the relationship between living beings and apparatuses, in which the apparatus – as a conglomerate of practices, tasks, processes, inclusions and exclusions – must always imply some process of subjectivisation; without subjectivisation, the apparatus would be sheer violence.¹⁴ Interestingly, Agamben compares the structure of the apparatus to the apparatus of remorse, which brings us back to the topic of confession: the need for the disclosure of the subject (in order for it to be able to become a subject that is at the core of modern subjectivisation). Agamben says that there is always a double dynamic at work in the apparatus. In the case of remorse, the new self is constituted through negation; at the same time, the negation enables it to get back the old self. The subject thus needs to split in order to be able to find its truth, in order to be able to become a subject. In Agamben’s terms: the subject finds its truth in the non-truth of its sinful self. This brings us back to the crisis of the subject, which Agamben defines as the distinction that takes place through every constituting of the subject.

In the history of 20th century performance such distinction between subjectivisation and desubjectivisation was very often at the core of experimentation with bodily presence and part of the performance relation to the audience. In that way new apparatuses of observing were constructed which brought the audience closer as witnesses to the subjectivisation process. Performance often affirms itself as a sort of open negativity, the emancipatory

power of differentiation and transformation, and this negativity always produces some sort of symbolic surplus, however disgusting and repulsive it may be. The fact that, nowadays, this potentiality of negativity shows itself as something problematic, or as something radically powerless and completely commodified, as a kind of misunderstanding, can be ascribed to what Agamben defines as a change in the apparatuses we are dealing with in the current phase of capitalism. It is namely necessary to go one step further and say that, today, apparatuses “no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called de-subjectification.”¹⁵ Today, the differences between both processes are increasingly blurred; since there is no more distinction, the place of the recompensation of the new subject gets lost. “In the non-truth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake.”¹⁶

Thus, Agamben’s finding, if applied to the history of radical consumption in art, affects the accepted understanding of performance art as artistic form. In performance art, it is always about the process, the process of subjectivisation or objectivisation, etc.; something happens, shifts, we literally enter the split and though this entering, we spectators are addressed as subjects. Due to the changes in the ways the networks of practices, manners and actions direct subjectivisation nowadays (i.e. the changes resulting from the fact that today’s daily human actions, ways and practices are becoming the driving force of contemporary production), apparatuses are forever multiplied. These apparatuses are also accompanied by an excessive proliferation of subjectivisation processes. We live in a time of endless choices between subjectivities, endless offers of identities and opportunities; at the same time, however, it seems that subjectivity profoundly eludes us.

Despite the increasing number of the apparatuses through which we can establish ourselves as subjects, even the most common of our daily activities are controlled by these very processes, which, paradoxically, give us the freedom of realizing ourselves. Although we are driven by strong desire, we do not acquire subjectivity, but only a new form of control. Let us go back to theatre and the powerlessness of radical consumption: have not the numerous contemporary ways of subjectivisation, the diversity and flexibility at the market of contemporary subjectivities, radically delineated the choice of practices in the live event, or radically narrowed its political and transgressive potentiality? Isn’t the powerlessness of the action in art precisely in this blockade (in terms of constant de-subjectivisation) of contemporary ways of being, this expansion of the masquerade of actualisation of everything we do – and accompanies us in our daily and professional lives?

This point seems essential to me for the understanding of the form of the “Via Negativa” scenes, which I myself read as examples of radically unsuccessful subjectivisation. Every utterance is closely connected with subjectivisation. When we speak up, we get subjectivised and subordinated at the same time; through speech, we get our action from the power we resist. Agamben finds, however, that in contemporaneity, this dynamic of subordination and establishment is sharpened because the division between the processes of subjectivisation and de-subjectivisation disappears. What remains is “non-violent subordination,” a voluntary slavery where no subjectivity can be acquired. In the “Via Negativa” performance with Katarina Stegnar, this subordination is the most obvious when, in explaining the mechanism of the scene, she discloses the very spot where, in her terms,

a revolting, shocking act usually follows. Since she has never received a bad review (and shall not receive one today either), Katarina Stegnar pisses herself on stage and then bizarrely hops off the stage with her legs tied.

This scene can be read / interpreted in two different ways, which result in two different interpretations of its effect. The aforementioned moment in the scene establishes itself as a radical self-reference of the principles of the performance, where subversion is at work in the identification process; I identify with the principles of power, with the mechanisms or apparatuses of performing itself and establishing subjectivity. This kind of self-referential subversion results in cynicism, the sort of “perverted consciousnesses” reflected on by Sloterdijk. I know very well and I am very critical towards the fact that everything is bullshit, but I cannot help but co-operate.¹⁷ In order to satisfy the drive of pleasure (i.e. in order not to receive a bad review), I do precisely what is expected of me and nothing more; through this, I actually prove to you that I know very well and am also critical towards what I have just done. Can the result of radical consumption, Katarina Stegnar’s act on stage, or the power of radical self-referentiality in the theatre event, be understood as a cynical “perverted” consciousness? Is this the only effect left to radical consumption nowadays - this cynical detachment whose impotence produces little more but fun? Is there not a perverse moralism at work, where the audience washes their hands of the whole affair and also has a good time in the process?

Katarina Stegnar’s act of disclosing the apparatus, however, can also be approached from another perspective, which takes us away from the cynical postulate and cuts much deeper into contemporary subjectivisation

processes. What if her act is actually without subversion of any kind? What if it is only about an act of dry repetition, obedience, dispossession of the subject? Radicalisation of experience does not only stand for the self-constitution of the subject; with radicalisation of experience, the subject is not established - quite the contrary, it is dispossessed. We again end up with nothing, with negativity, with an act that does not lead anywhere, with the dismembered apparatus which we already know. What Katarina Stegnar does with her act is repeat the apparatus of the scene; she literally meets it and, through the repetition, establishes a minimal difference: the apparatus of the scene is revealed to us in all of its profanity, which has no residue, no surplus. *If you really wish that nothing is left to me, then there you go: look at me, there is really nothing left to you.*

On the Gestures of Profanation

According to Agamben, profanation is the strategy that can be successful in “meeting apparatuses ‘face-to-face’” although he immediately warns that this is by no means simple. For Agamben, profanation is a procedure through which “what was captured and divided by means of apparatuses, is set free and returned into common use.”¹⁸ Agamben connects his reflections on profanation with the role of religion, which can be defined as “what detaches things, places, people, animals, persons from the sphere of common use into some separate sphere.”¹⁹ Profanation therefore means the returning of these things into common use and can also be understood as the “anti-apparatus which returns into common use what has been differentiated and divided.”²⁰ Profanation is a powerful procedure because it brings about a neutralisation of what

it profanes; it takes the aura away from things and people. Profanation is a frequent procedure in 20th century art and is deeply inscribed into the paradoxical relationship between art and life. Art is thereby established as a sort of field of radical event, a field of the potentiality of rebelling against the rigid structures of contemporary life; at the same time, art also enables the autonomy of the artistic object. It is the political process that triggers intersubjectivity in the theatrical event; phenomenological openness is only possible if something becomes a thing in common use, if it is exempt from separation. By means of profanation, we could also understand the consumption of the body in the “Via Negativa” project – the fluids and openings on stage, the masturbation and the blood, the senseless and absurd tasks of persisting and being wrapped in the plastic bag for a long amount of time, the exhaustion of the body and voice, the challenging of one’s physical abilities – which have become a permanent feature of “Via Negativa” and always accompany the utterance of individual confessions. At the same time, however, we need to consider some radical change in contemporary life which makes the profanation process radically more difficult if not even impossible. Profanation no longer has the basic potentiality of returning things into common use, but only exists as an empty fetishised procedure. Agamben warns that we live at the time of profoundly changed apparatuses as processes of de-subjectivisation, which makes the profanation procedures so much more difficult. Capitalism namely establishes itself as a sort of system which, in its final stage, becomes a system for embracing all profanation behaviours (transgression, rebellion, negativity, provocation, radical consumption, etc.). In this sense, capitalism is a religion targeting the absolutely “non-profanable;” in its final form, capitalism embodies “the pure form of

separation, without anything left to separate. Absolute profanation, which has no residues, henceforth coincides with a sort of consecration, which is equally empty and integral.”²¹ It is not a coincidence that Agamben sees the realisation of this dream of the absolutely non-profanable in what is the most profane: in pornography.

Profanation has thus become impossible; according to Peter Klepec, this gesture requires special procedures nowadays.²² If we connect this premise with contemporary art, especially with the potentiality of radical consumption, we find ourselves facing a deep problem as far as radical consumption in art is concerned. This feeling is further strengthened by the fact that, today, procedures of artistic profanation exist as objects of value (e.g. documents of body art and performance art constitute an important part of numerous contemporary art collections). This entry of radical experience into museums is especially paradoxical as the museum is the ‘sacred space where something has sought refuge that has once felt real’; there is no possibility of use, being and experience.²³ Along these lines, the question arises as to what the current situation of radical experience and profanation is in theatre, whose ontology is directly connected with the live event. The scene with Katarina Stegnar shows that, in theatre, radicality is deeply caught in the apparatus as well - there is no freedom there, no potentiality, nothing more to be gained by means of action; it is a scene of a radical powerlessness. Hence the feelings of discomfort – both Katarina’s and mine; they spring from an absolute failure of self-reference, from the critical procedures of self-referentiality. However, Katarina’s scene can also be read as an attempt to find new profanation procedures, to structure a place for the exemption. To establish a special statement even if doing so actually

brings about the realisation of voluntary slavery, which, despite the reality of submission, refuses to have its own symbolic mandate taken away: “I am a good actress, I have never received a bad review in my life,” she said in *Viva Verdi*. The scene reveals that, today, dominance is based on the supremacy of the real and the submission of the symbolic – on the belief that everything can be done, released and profaned. In this field of the symbolic and non-real, the dynamics of power and dominance takes place: active devaluation of the symbolic and its “irrational” power is a component of ideological hegemony and cultural struggle that demands constant upkeep and reproduction.²⁴ The problem is, however, that this symbolic dimension of life is profoundly suppressed. But this does not mean that it has vanished, quite the opposite; it is, however, convincing us that it has disappeared, that we are free and the only masters of our pure lives and their radical consumption.

Conclusion: Some Shame

Radical consumption leaves the audience in “Via Negativa” with a feeling of uneasiness. This feeling of uneasiness can be described with the sentence from the beginning of the Lacan’s lecture. In the lecture that I mentioned at the beginning of this text, Lacan says: “We see very rarely, this needs to be said, that someone dies of shame.”²⁵ At the time of the greatest exhilaration, the rise of relaxed and liberated post-industrial culture, Lacan’s lecture detects an interesting trait of this culture, the culture of the liberated body, relaxedness, consumerism, pleasure and the liberated subject: this culture is trying to make shame disappear and disintegrate. This is why, at the end of his lecture, Lacan says to his students: if

there is a good reason for you to have come to my lecture in such great numbers, then it needs to be searched in me arousing a feeling of shame in you from time to time. It would be wrong to understand his syntagm as a complaint of a reserved professor who views the turbulent social goings-on as something obscure and reacts to them in an aristocratic fashion. It is a much more fundamental issue, this “honour” as discussed by J. A. Miller; it is namely in radical discussion with culture inasmuch this culture is abolishing shame. “Today, we are namely in a period when the ruling discourse forbids us to be ashamed of our pleasure any longer. Of everything else yes. Of our desire, but not of our pleasure.”²⁶ Today, our culture is centred around the command of pleasure; in order to be able to enjoy, however, we must get rid of shame. In order to be able to reveal the deepest in us, set ourselves free, enjoy, in order to be able to find ourselves and put ourselves first, find life in its genuineness, handle life in its vitality, we need to get rid of shame, become shameless. Increasingly coming up on public stage is a phenomenon that Linda Williams terms as “obscene;” something that does not belong on stage but actually comes to the forefront – rather than with “ob-scenity,” we are dealing with “on-scenity” nowadays (the genre that is most at the forefront is the one revealing all). Is profanation at all possible in the culture of the shameless genre? Or is every attempt of profanation sentenced to powerlessness and impotence?

The more I think about “Via Negativa,” the more I feel that with radical de-subjectivisation the performances of “Via Negativa” want to construct a set-up for exemption. They do that paradoxically by fully subordinating the performers to the shameful genre, as if this genre itself would become the most intimate need of performers. At

the same time, it points at a basic paradox of the economy and position of acting in the contemporary world: the production of performer is desired in all the dimensions of contemporary society, but at the same time, the most slavish and radically impotent, precisely due to its central role in the contemporary economy of labour. Exactly this gesture of subjugation causes shame in the audience. Shame is an interesting affect as it is about the performative process: “Shame veils itself, points at something and projects itself, it turns its own skin inside out, shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-disclosure, shame and exhibitionism are different stitches of the same glove.”²⁷ Shame is performance, or as Alenka Zupančič claims: shame is the affect of the fact that we have not died of shame in a certain situation. This inner doubling of shame is the key point for the understanding of its essential dimension. In the “not-to-die-of-shame” situation, the subject is forced to see the downfall of his or her own signifier, the downfall of his or her own symbolic dimension. Although I am ashamed, I do not die along with my symbolic role.²⁸ If this is applied to the imperative of the contemporary culture “without-shame,” then we again see that the absence of shame exists because of the suppression of this symbolic dimension – nothing can be profaned any longer because everything is already disclosed, profaned. “The regime is watching you. And saying, ‘Look at them enjoying it!’”²⁹ With this sentence from 1969, Lacan announced the creation of a new kind of power, based on the imperative of pleasure. Through its new forms of subtle control and self-regulation, this new power would take in all rebellious and profane actions. Performances and actions in “Via Negativa,” its radical consumption of the body can be therefore understood as a try which with subordination is re-addressing

this vanished, suppressed symbolic dimension. This is what gives rise an unusual tension between the confessions and actions of the performers; the tension that does not spring from the dramatic difference between the two but from their radical sameness, rigid repetition. Nevertheless, in this repetition, in the performing action itself, we can find an important difference: it is good that the feeling of shame is aroused from time-to-time. The Master quickly denudes those who do not make themselves responsible for his pleasure.

Notes:

1. The text is centred around the series of performances which came out from a long research project of Slovenian performance group “Via Negativa.” I use the work of this internationally established performance group not to make a case study about them but to think through their work about the position and role of the body in contemporary performance and its relationship to contemporary politics. The shorter version of the text was written first for the lecture performance “Nobody Should Have Seen This,” which I did together with Katarina Stegnar, one of the performers from “Via Negativa” group and was published in Slovenian language. The text was later rewritten and extended for publication.
2. “Via Negativa,” web: <http://www.vntheatre.com/vianegativa.html>.
3. “Via Nova” is the title of the new “Via Negativa” project, a series of 30 performance art pieces based on the eight performances of the “Via Negativa” research project.
4. Flagellants were a radical European Christian movement in the 13th and 14th centuries. They publicly carried out their penitence in mass processions with whipping.
5. Michel Foucault, *Zgodovina seksualnosti. Volja do znanja*. (Ljubljana: SKUC, 2000), 63.
6. Richard Sennett, *Kultura novega kapitalizma*. (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 2008), 85.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Gledališče in zapora krutosti," in *Teorije sodobnega gledališča*, ed. Emil Hrvatin (Ljubljana: Maska, 2001).
8. Erika Fischer Lichte, *Estetika performativnega* (Ljubljana: Koda, 2007).
9. Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements" in *Hope*, ed. M. Zaournazzi (New York: Routledge, 2003), 224.
10. Max Weber, *Protestantska etika in duh kapitalizma* (Ljubljana: ŠKUC, Filozofska fakulteta, 1988)
11. Along these lines, the discourse of sexuality developed in the Victorian period – the forbidding of sexuality – closely matches that irrational spending of property.
12. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For analysis of contemporary Forms of Life*. (New York, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).
13. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.
14. Agamben bases this on Foucault, whose works thoroughly analyze the dispositive as a creation of obeying yet free bodies, as the manner in which subjects accept their subject identities in the very process of subordination.
15. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 19.
16. Ibid., 20.
17. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
18. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*, 25.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*. (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 102.
22. Peter Klepec, *Dobičkonosne strasti: Kapitalizem in perverzija* (Ljubljana: Analecta, 2008).
23. This is discussed by Agamben; for him, the notion of "the museum" not only stands for art museums, but also protected nature reserves, tourist sites, etc.
24. Alenka Zupančič, "Lacan in sram," *Problemi*, 7-8 (2006): 107.
25. Jacques Lacan, "Moč Nemožnosti," *Problemi*, 7-8 (2006): 50.
26. Jacques – Alain Miller, "Beležka o sramu," *Problemi*, 7-8 (2006): 23-44.
27. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Dotik občutka, Afekt, pedagogika, performativnost*. (Ljubljana: Emanat, 2007).
28. Zupančič, "Lacan in sram," 99.
29. Lacan, "Moč nemožnosti," 50.

