

Critical Stages/Scènes critiques

The IATC webjournal/Revue web de l'AICT – June 2011: Issue No 4



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“To Visualize the Invisible, the In-Between Space” – An Interview with the Macedonian Performance Artist Igor Josifov

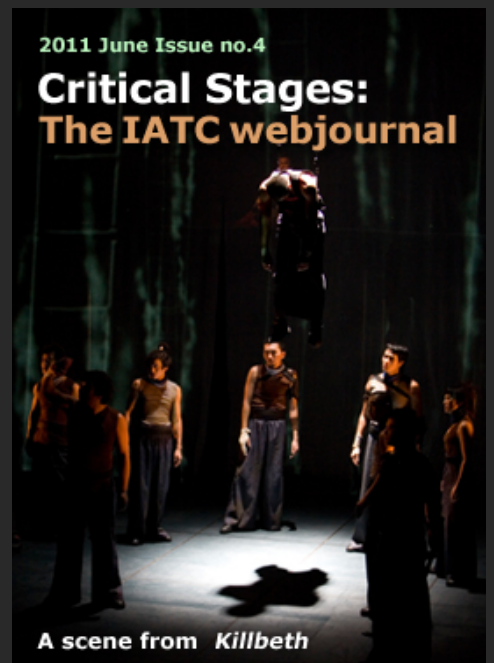
Interview by Randy Gener^[1]



Macedonia performance artist Igor Josifov © performaart

Critics and curators who strictly police the territories of traditional theatre and visual art might be surprised to find the Macedonian performance artist Igor Josifov included in this peer-reviewed webjournal devoted to the international theatre. But those experimentally minded others who are sympathetic to the porosity of aesthetic forms and theatrical expressions coming out of the Balkan regions today will instantly recognize and appreciate how Josifov’s work does more than transgress the borders and upset genre categories. Along with the new generation of independent artists working in that region and outside of the state-subsidized institutions, Josifov’s conceptual approach collapses the boundaries between performance art, theatre and visual art.

Certainly, Josifov’s inclusion in the annual Perforations Festival in Croatia – which was recently presented in March 2011 at La MaMa E.T.C. in New York City – goes a long way toward offering a tangible curatorial vision that argues in behalf of the aesthetic blurring proposed by new and emerging artists from the Central and Eastern Europe.



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Usually produced in several cities in Croatia, the Perforations Festival is one of the largest initiatives focused on artists from Central and Eastern Europe whose works are created within the so-called independent artistic scene. Curator and producer of Perforations Zvonimir Dobrovic states: "State-subsidized venues receive the majority of available arts funding in the Balkans, but some of the most exciting and compelling work in the region is being developed by independent artists working outside of these institutions. It is this group of artists that Perforations supports and presents, in part, to counter established funding and cultural policy that has not created a sustainable working environment for these more progressive artists."



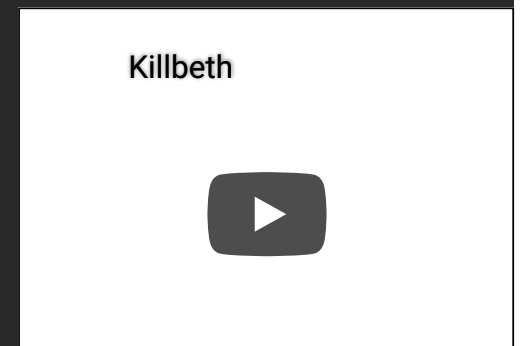
Igor Josifov performing Two Dimensional at the Art Institute of Chicago (USA), duration 4 hours, May 2009 © performaart

Presented within the framework of a New York edition of Perforations Festival, Igor Josifov touches upon live-wire issues of identity (public, political, religious), redefining nationalist borders and performative spaces and artistic genres. He wrestles with how a collective Macedonia past impacts upon the present moment and his own personal history. Born in 1986 in Kavadarci, Macedonia and presently counting San Francisco as his alternative home base, Josifov attended the School of Applied Arts in Skopje, Macedonia, and started his secondary education and career in San Francisco, Calif. In his performances, the body is a medium that translates his personal and cultural experience into a broader context. Josifov's work, as his artist's statement says, "is based on psychoanalytic perception and the cultural and moral realities of contemporary living. The subject of his work deals with identity, death, loss, and social commentary. He uses concept as the first and most crucial part of the process and then uses the medium and its symbolic function to support the concept as an element. After years of experience with all mediums he decided that the most important and primary medium is his body — it is a common form that communicates his own experience and reflects the viewer's own ideas of self. The liberation of the body in his work has a metaphoric meaning for the freedom of people in the contemporary world."

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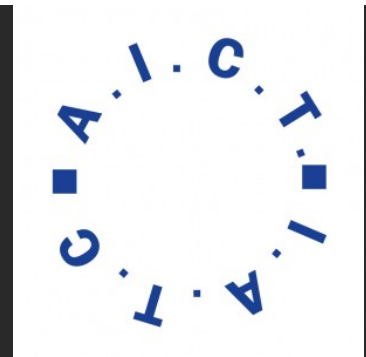
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Presenting Memories, a performance installation that he performed near the foundation in the Washington Square Park (a stone's throw away from New York University in Greenwich Village), was a unique opportunity to sample Josifov's body of work (pun very much intended). Why? Because it was an anthology of previous Josifov pieces, albeit shown in a foreign environment. Presented over several hours in an outdoor park setting, Josifov sampled elements and pieces from his five previous works: *Purification Process*, *PPP Mental Prison*, *Emit, 2 Dimensional*, and *Reflection on Originality*. For those who have never seen Josifov's sculptural performances, *Presenting Memories* was a chance to sample his body-centered conceptual pieces. And yet Josifov disrupts the retrospective or archival quality of this performance anthology by insisting that what matters the most are not the individual pieces per se (after all they are being presented out of their original context) but the very process of re-entering and moving through each work. For Josifov, *Presenting Memories* is most theatrically alive only during those in-between spaces and moments as each piece transitions into the next piece – what the Macedonian artist calls “the different mental constructs that artists embody during performance.”

In embodying those “mental constructs,” Josifov exposes how his Macedonian body can often put us, the spectators, in a somewhat uncomfortable state of anxiety, restlessness and expectation. His body, though manly and beautiful to gaze upon, confronts us with the complexities and contradictions of Balkan identity, Macedonian history, local traditions, artistic integrity, creative vision, intellectual property, appreciation and interpretation. In *Manumission*, for example, Josifov performs the very act of transformation and liberation of the captive human mind and soul. The leather masks, displaying simplified motifs from Christian and Muslim iconography, represent the human inability in the Balkans to overcome internal inhibitions that prevent dialogue and mutual understanding.

Another example: In *Purification Process*, Josifov has installed a shower stall with blurred glass in a performance space and then takes a shower for several hours. A microphone and camera were placed inside the stall, thus exaggerating the sound of water and the movement and breathing of the artist so that the viewer can feel the same interaction with the elements as the performer. This process, Josifov says, serves to break down the trap of his art education and the disciplines associated with the act of painting and theatre. The text, written in Macedonia, is constantly projected onto the performance: “endless travel, rules, regulations, absurd limits, deep loneliness. passion superficial things, I'm drowning in stupidity, morals, cultural ethics, suicide, suicidal thoughts, depressive illusions, religion, how to become an idiot, superficiality, how to use and be used, how much you lose, where am I, Why am I, suppressed consciousness, exchange thoughts...”

Always carefully thought out and theatrical, Igor Josifov's performances raise our critical awareness of Balkan alienation at the same time that



they capture the incomprehensible side and irrational elements of cultural regeneration.



Igor Josifov performing *Two Dimensional* at the Art Institute of Chicago (USA), duration 4 hours, May 2009 © performaart

1. In your country/city, is there any major issue (e.g. a contemporary social problem) that artists fail or neglect to address on stage? Why? Is this due to censorship, or to a blind spot in the community's shared perception of the world?—or to a community's consciously or unconsciously avoiding it?

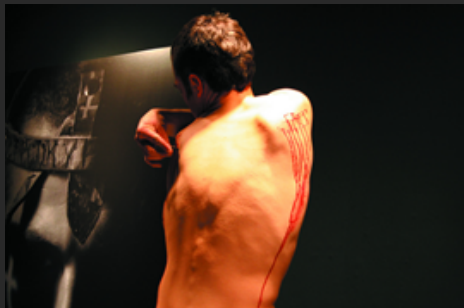
I'm from Macedonia, a very small country in the Balkans with a lot of artistic potential. It seems to me that there are very layered historical conflicts that the artists from my country somehow avoid in mediums. (Of course there are exceptions — mostly artists who have left the country and now work outside Macedonia — in mediums like film, photography, installations, etc.) I must say that my experience with growing up in Macedonia and seeing all those political and religious conflicts among people who live there has stayed in my mind. I always had the need to express those issues and communicate them with the Macedonian society. I would never see how things really are in Macedonia if I didn't move from there.

May I get specific? Why did you create and perform 2-Dimensional? What was the aim of the "performance" under plexibox?

2-Dimensional is a social commentary work where the public makes or completes the performance. In this installation, I remove part of the floor (usually the entrance of an art gallery or museum during an art opening) and place a Plexiglas in replacement of the floor. I lie underneath this

glass, and when the public comes to the opening, they have to step or walk over me. Their reactions make the work; it is an experiment where the reactions usually are self-projections of the public that attends art openings, and they really go out of control with this piece. *2-Dimensional* is about the relation between the artist and the viewer that comments on many levels.

I did this piece at the opening of the Modern Wing at the Art Institute in Chicago, then at the Performance Art institute in San Francisco, the Chic Art Fair in Paris during the Art Week in Paris and recently for the opening of "Al Ghaib—Aesthetics of Disappearance," an international show representing 12 countries (including Algeria, France, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Senegal and Turkey), which was held in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.



Igor Josifov performing Face It (Manumission) at Toomey Tourell Gallery (USA), September 2009
© performaart



Igor Josifov performing Face It (Manumission) at Toomey Tourell Gallery (USA), September 2009
© performaart

What was the aim of Presenting Memories, which you performed in the Perforations Festival in New York City?

Present Memories is a piece I did first time in Zagreb for Perforacije, the performance art festival last October. I then performed it in New York City in a completely different setting. *Presenting Memories* comments on the different mental constructions I go through during each performance I do without breaks, so I re-experience my previous works in front of the public without stops, like a marathon of performance work. In New York, I performed *Presenting Memories* in a public place outside at the Washington Square garden, and I must say it was a challenge for me to perform in that kind of outdoor settings almost out of context. The piece was very sculptural.

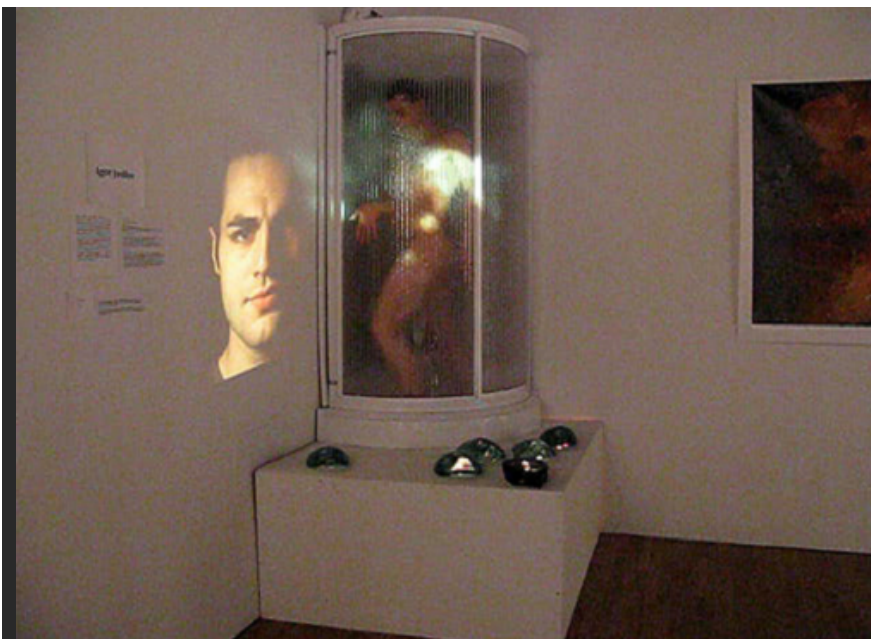
Please describe the conflict of Christians and Muslims in Face It?

Face It is an exhibition I did in San Francisco taken from my *Manumission* performance project, which was executed in a computer-simulated space and which I have documented in a book. *Face It* is a complex piece. Using horse leather blinders, I made leather blinders for humans, and then I burning into these human leather blinders with Christian iconography and Muslim patterns. I staged this performance for photography by wearing the blinders, so the photographs represent, in a way, contemporary icons. This project is a visual representation of the current situation of the continuous conflict between the Muslims and the Christians in the Balkans. In the first part, I wear the Christian mask and put myself into a state of mind that would reflect a Christian point of view and ideology. After that, I wear the Muslim mask using the same mental transformation. I use the energy projected by the audience, absorbing their anxiety, confusion and restlessness.

Through performance, I merge religious differences. I did performance called *Manumission* where I staged myself performing in between those two religious, iconic photographs. My goal was to achieve the effect of sculpture with my body as a medium, and with the mental condition to achieve an energy dialogue with the people who must face me and can't just be regular voyeurs." For 25 minutes intervals each, I placed masks on my head and then removed the mask and turned my back on the audience; with a razor blade, I carved lines representing each of the religions. The blood that appeared from my body formed wing patterns, which became a metaphor for freedom. Then I did a video that is in a way a metaphoric liberation from those religions – in fact, from all religions.



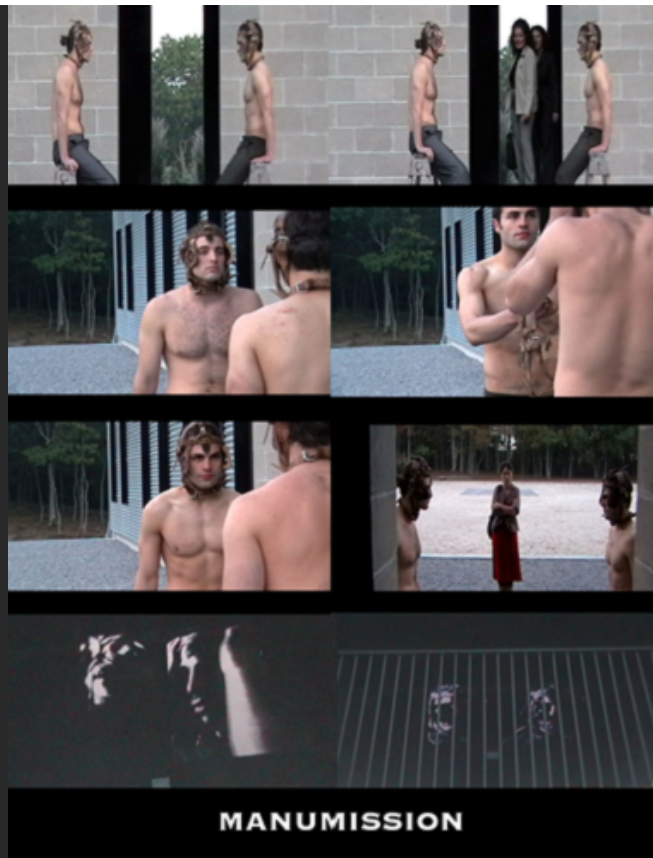
Igor Josifov performing Presenting Memories at Washington Square Park as part of Perforations Festival in New York City (USA), March 2011 © performaart



Igor Josifov performing Purification Process at Bridge Art Fair in New York City (USA),
September 2008 © performaart

2. What, if anything, is difficult in communicating with the designers or other artistic collaborators? Why? How early and how often do you exchange views about the coming production? Have you designed shows yourself, and if so, does that make communication easier?

It is very difficult to find ideal collaborator. I've done collaborative projects with other artists depending on the concept and the need of collaborations. I worked with Michael Ryan Noble on a series called "Lost Bodies / The dying artist" where we exchanged the role of artists and model in order to achieve one piece of performance documented through photography. We also worked on another project, called "Reflection on Originality," which we did at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center in Southampton, N.Y., in 2008. This project explored the roles of audience and curators in responding to the originality of performance art works. We did four performances where one person has the original idea and the other one is copying that idea at the same time and in the same space so the public doesn't really recognize who is the original and who is not. The piece comments on how the art world really works: so many artists get recognized for "unique" works that are actually a copy. For me the original idea is the most important part of the creative process, and when you copying something there is no creative process at all. Going back to your original question I think that when you make art and collaborate you really need to kill your own ego and focus on the work itself. In that way there will always be a pleasant working energy.



Igor Josifov and Ryan Noble performing Manumission at Watermill in Southampton, New York (USA), October 2008 © performaart

*3. In your creative process, which part do you enjoy least? Why?
How do you tackle it?*

In my work, the concept or idea is the main and most important part of my work. Developing that concept with thinking and having the time to process that idea and visualize it into a form that would communicate with society. My work is based on psychoanalytical perception and the cultural and moral realities of contemporary living. I use all mediums with their own symbolism to support the concept. I started using my body as a medium five years ago, and that is when I started making performances. For me, making a performance is the most fulfilling and satisfying, because you really have to work on your own body and mind and then perform in front of the public. Performances are the most challenging. It is the most direct form of art, and it is a great tool to communicate ideas with the public.



Igor Josifov performing PPP (Mental Prison) at Tunnel Space in New York City (USA), March 2009 © performaart



Igor Josifov performing PPP (Mental Prison) at Tunnel Space in New York City (USA), March 2009 © performaart

4. During your career, have you ever received a particularly insightful piece of criticism? When, and what did it say? What made it especially important for you?

I am very grateful for being critically recognized at an early age, and I have been working with great people. Yes, I have been getting lots of reviews especially for my performances. It is really rewarding to read reviews where the critics actually fully understand the concept and the work; the critical reception gives me confirmation on how I present and place my work. The reviews I got in Paris from the critic Klaus Speidel that was published in the Sorbonne publication *Art 21* – I am especially happy with.

Why is body the most important and primary medium in your work?

For me the body is a great tool for communicating; we all have bodies and faces, so we can all relate to them. As a visual form, every part of the body has its own symbolic function, so I usually try to reduce the idea to its minimum, and I perform that idea by exchanging energy with the public.



Document from Igor Josifov's Purification Lost Bodies © performaart

How do you see the relationship of your body and your mind and the spectator?

I like to visualize the invisible: the in-between space that connects the artist with the public.

What is the function of sexuality in your work?

I'm actually working on a piece, called "In-Between Sexuality," that will comment on the different spectrums of gender and sexuality. This experimental performance explores the sexual relationships between different gender combinations. I will be using six bodies in the form of heterosexual, homosexual and lesbian couples. Each couple is placed within a confined square that forces interaction without physical touching. Rather the interaction will be achieved through breathing, looking and creating sexual energy. This work will investigate the animus anima, instead of the obvious sexual intercourse, as it differs between the sexual groups. What will be observed is the mysterious magnetism — and the subtle arousing — between the different sexualities.



[1] *Randy Gener* is a writer, editor, critic, playwright and visual artist in New York City. He recently debuted a photographic installation-art exhibition, “In the Garden of One World,” at New York’s La MaMa La Galleria and is the author of “Love Seats for Virginia Woolf” and other Off-Broadway plays. He is the 2009 winner of the George Jean Nathan Award, the highest accolade for dramatic criticism in the United States for his essays in *American Theatre* magazine, published by Theatre Communications Group. He was named Journalist of the Year 2010 by the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association.

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