

Ana Grahovac

*Aliza Shvarts's Art of Aborting: Queer Conceptions and Resistance to Reproductive Futurism*

**Introduction**

On 18<sup>th</sup> April 2008, the Yale Daily News published an article introducing Yale University fine arts student Aliza Shvarts's senior undergraduate art project. In the article, Shvarts (2008) announced that as part of her project she had been privately artificially inseminating herself every month during a nine-month period and performing self-induced miscarriages by ingesting abortifacient drugs each month (Shvarts 2008: para. 1). Shvarts never took a pregnancy test, and the ingestion of legal abortifacient drugs was intentionally timed to coincide with the expected day of her menstruation, i.e. on the twenty-eighth day of her cycle (ibid.). This made it impossible to know whether any of her inseminations were effective and whether she ever aborted an embryo (ibid.: para. 4). In fact, there was no evidence that any part of her performance ever took place (Doyle 2009: 37). The ambiguity surrounding the 'biological possibility of pregnancy' (ibid.) had the effect of the piece existing only in the form of a narrative and public discourse:

To protect myself and others, only I know the number of fabricators<sup>1</sup> who participated, the frequency and accuracy with which I inseminated and the specific abortifacient I used. Because of these measures of privacy, the piece exists only in its telling. [...] The artwork exists as the verbal narrative you see above, as an installation that will take place in Green Hall, as a time-based performance, as an independent concept, as a myth and as a public discourse. (Shvarts 2008: para. 2-3)

The planned installation was meant to include a public display of preserved samples of Shvarts's blood discharge and the documentary videos she took of herself while bleeding in a bath tub following the ingestion of abortifacients (Fears 2009: para. 1).

The announcement ignited a national controversy. It was reported by almost all national newspapers, sparking university protests and 'pro-life' outcries across internet communities (ibid.: para. 7). Even pro-abortion groups disapproved of Shvarts's project on the grounds that she mistreated 'very serious aspects of reproductive rights' (Ydnimporter 2008: para. 2). Ultimately, the Yale School of Art asked Shvarts to either proclaim that the

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project was fiction or have the project banned from being exhibited. Shvarts rejected Yale's eventual claims of the fictitious nature of her project and submitted a new senior art project. As Jennifer Doyle (2009) notes, no feminist made an immediate defence of Shvarts's work<sup>2</sup> (Doyle 2009: 26).

Postmodernism has broadened our understanding of political possibilities by showing that an artwork can give rise to power resistance as much as a direct action group (Halberstam 1993: 190). The spheres of the imaginary and the fantasmatic found in art, literature, and popular culture are not to be thought of as the antithesis of our reality but its constitutive outside. Perhaps, as David Wojnarowicz contends, imagination is 'one of the last frontiers left for the radical gesture' (Wojnarowicz 1991 as cited in Halberstam 1993: 194). Michael Taussig (1992) notes that the social-symbolic order, the domain of our social existence, is a 'nervous system' (Taussig 1992 as cited in Halberstam 1993: 190) produced and sustained through fantasies that discipline the subjects into its perpetuation. Art can then be a means by which these fantasies are accessed and reconfigured, symbolic positions re-constituted, the 'nervous system' troubled.

I would like to assert that this is precisely what Shvarts attempted to do with her performance. It was an exploration into the possibility of emptying the realm of femininity of its symbolic 'function' within a patriarchal order. By means of her radical refusal of reproduction, manifested in a series of repeated abortions<sup>3</sup>, she staged a resistance to the symbolic positioning of a woman, tied up in its pre-determined reproductive narrative within the social, so that a multitude of new narratives and possibilities could be birthed. Her performance is a call for a future that is not mapped in advance for a woman – a future in which she is not an 'object' of reproduction but an 'author'.

Drawing on Jack Halberstam's (2011) concept of 'shadow feminism' (Halberstam 2011: 4) and Lee Edelman's (2004) 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman 2004: 2), I will suggest that Shvarts's performance represents a radical manifesto grounded in queer<sup>4</sup> and feminist politics of negativity. This is the politics that is against assimilation into a heteronormative<sup>5</sup> social order, ideological naturalisation of a woman's body, and a vision of the future as something always bound up with linear descendancy<sup>6</sup>.

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## **What does it mean to say ‘no’ to reproduction?: Reproductive Futurism and Queer Negativity**

As Sara Ahmed (2010) asserts, ‘[t]o arrive into the world is to inherit what you arrive into’ (Ahmed 2010: 95). A woman’s body is a site of inheritance, charged with the reproduction of social norms, family lines, nation, and the future. Her body has been a site of social control and regulation, exercised through the narrative of a ‘natural’ development of womanhood – ‘starting at the moment a child is sexed female and moving to her inscription in public heterosexuality, her ascension to reproduction, and her commitment to performing the abstract values of instrumental empathy and service that have characterized norms of female fulfillment’ (Berlant 1994: 152). The history of a woman’s body is then a *history* of biopower<sup>7</sup>. Patriarchal power normalised women’s lives by imposing the norm of motherhood as the only way through which a woman’s life could be granted intelligibility.

As Lauren Berlant (1994) argues, in a patriarchal society, a woman is perceived as a potentially productive citizen insofar as she procreates; other forms of her creativity have come to stand as an impediment to national reproduction (ibid.: 153). Berlant traces the evolution of American ‘pro-life’ rhetoric and points out that in addition to the extensive use of ‘nature’, in the context of linking motherhood to ‘proper’ womanhood, ‘pro-life’ discourse has increasingly linked reproduction to the categories of citizenship, nation, and future. We thus hear ‘pro-life’ slogans such as ‘Abortion is destroying America’s future’ (Berlant 1994: 173) or ‘Support Our Future Troops!’ (ibid.: 154). Therefore, a woman who, like Shvarts, refuses reproduction, not only threatens to destabilise the patriarchal norm of femininity, because motherhood is positioned as an intrinsic value of womanhood, ‘but threatens the *national future* as well’ (ibid.: 153; my emphasis). Within this discourse, the ‘national future’ that women are charged with delivering is the future that does not belong to them. A woman’s gradual erasure from the representations of a pregnancy scene over the past couple of decades is rather telling of a diminished public value she is attributed within national narratives of social reproduction<sup>8</sup>. As Berlant writes, the pregnant woman is ‘more minor and less politically represented than the foetus, which is in turn more privileged by law, paternity, and other less institutional family strategies of contemporary American culture’ (ibid.: 147). A woman’s ‘future’ becomes a circular perpetuation folded into a normative narrative of birth, marriage, motherhood, and death. Those who dare to disobey this ‘destiny’ might find themselves subsumed into an image of a terrorist anti-madonna killing the nation’s ‘child,’ or

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a victim of a ‘pro-life’ group’s terrorist attack on a gay and lesbian night club.<sup>9</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that Shvarts became an immediate target of insults and accusations by ‘pro-life’ advocates, who charged her with madness and murder (Broussard-Wilson 2008: para. 20). Interestingly, the question of the future reappears when we consider that this refusal of reproduction came from a privileged student of one of America’s most prestigious universities. Yale is known for its reputation as an educator of ‘the nation’s top national leaders’<sup>10</sup> (Camins et al. 2007: 175) and a ‘laboratory for [the] future leaders’ (Mehren 2000: para. 5) of America.<sup>11</sup> As Halberstam suggests, a message of powerful symbolic resistance can be emitted when ‘a woman or feminine subject who occupies a privileged relation to dominant culture occupies her own undoing’ (Halberstam 2011: 133). Shvarts used her privileges not to perpetuate an American national ideal of a female liberal subject but to undo it.

While this ideological coupling of reproduction with the future of the nation has been made most explicit in ‘pro-life’ discourse, Edelman argues in his book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), that all (both Left and Right) political projects are organised around the logic of ‘reproductive futurism.’ This ideology positions heterosexual reproduction and the institution of family at the heart of futurity, thus ‘preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations’ (Edelman 2004: 2).

Edelman argues that in our society, futurity is imagined in the figure of a ‘Child’, whose innocence citizens are constantly invited to defend, and who is ‘the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention’ (ibid.: 3). This ‘Child’ figure is everywhere around us, even in pro-abortion campaigns, since fighting for the future has become equated with fighting for the ‘children’ (ibid.). For Edelman, we can no longer imagine the future without thinking of the ‘Child’, i.e. reproduction, family, motherhood. Political slogans such as ‘We’re fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?’ (ibid.: 2) impose an ideological binarism that pathologises anyone who chooses to be on ‘the other side’ (who would be against children?). What is concealed in this sentimentalised figure of the ‘Child’ is then a deeply homophobic and conservative investment in the preservation of a heteronormative social order rather than an enabling future. A woman’s reproductive body is, again, fundamentally implicated, as there can be no ‘Child’ without a mother. Her position is that of a mere

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reproducer of the conditions for the future of the other. Her journey is always already known and thus robbed of an open future pregnant with the multitude of imaginable alternatives to pursue – what Jaques Derrida called ‘l’avenir’ or ‘the unpredictable future’ (Derrida 2002).

For Edelman, to refuse to reproduce and to attend to the logic of reproductive futurism is to be put outside the ‘knowable’ by society and to occupy ‘the place of the social order’s death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in stigma, sometimes fatal’ (Edelman 2004: 3). In other words, because homosexuals, queer subjects, and women who choose abortion (or who decide not to procreate) are perceived as failing to reproduce family lines and the social itself, mainstream society figures them as unproductive and anti-social forces that threaten the future and life itself (ibid.). Edelman links this figuration of ‘threatening-to-the-social-order’ queerness with death drive.<sup>12</sup> Instead of proposing that queer subjects fight against this symbolic positioning<sup>13</sup> (e.g. through assimilationist politics<sup>14</sup>), he calls for the embrace of their figuration as the social order’s death drive as a mode of radical resistance to the heteronormative social order and its sentimentalised futurity that always sacrifices the ‘here’ and ‘now’ for the ‘there’ and ‘then’. Just as the death drive poses the threat of eruptive destruction to the Symbolic order, queer subjects should figure as a symbolic ‘death’ threat against the oppressive normative power structures permeating the social. Edelman calls upon queer subjects to say ‘no’ to the future and reclaim the ‘now’.

It is precisely this space of society’s ‘unknowable’ and ‘abjected’ that Shvarts chooses to dwell within. In her first public announcement on the piece, Shvarts wrote that the performance had a number of conceptual goals, the first being an artistic intervention into ‘normative understanding of biological function’ (Shvarts 2008: para. 8): ‘Just as it is a myth that women are ‘meant’ to be feminine and men masculine [...] it is a myth that ovaries and a uterus are ‘meant’ to birth a child’ (ibid.: para. 9). Shvarts goes on to assert that her body is a generator of potentialities beyond the normative narrative of reproduction and that it is an imperative of every individual to ‘acknowledge and explore this wide realm of capability’ (ibid.: para. 10). From these statements, it is clear that Shvarts’s political project is a critique of a certain ‘naturalised’ norm of womanhood.

In their book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam poses the question of whether we could find the ‘feminist frameworks capable of recognizing the political project articulated in the form of refusal’ (Halberstam 2011: 126) and proposes new forms of feminisms grounded in negation, which they call ‘shadow feminisms’ (ibid.: 4) or ‘anti-social feminisms’

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(ibid.: 129): ‘Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, un- becoming, and violating’ (ibid.: 4). Halberstam proposes that feminists refuse to accede to the choices that are given to them – womanhood as constructed within neoliberal terms or death – and, instead, that ‘they produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is ‘not woman’ or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women’ (ibid.: 125).

I want to argue that this is precisely what Shvarts’s performance seeks to accomplish. If reproduction and motherhood are the only norms of ‘proper’ womanhood and a woman’s destiny, Shvarts echoes Halberstam’s call for failing, troubling and ‘un-becoming’ that patriarchal feminine construct. Her performance seeks to transform the symbolic positioning of a feminine subject by inducing repetitive disruptions (abortions) into a conventional narrative of a woman’s reproductive heterosexuality. She brings into the imaginary that which society seeks to foreclose – a woman’s disarticulation from procreation through the taboo of multiple abortions. Counter to the end-oriented capitalistic logic of accelerating accumulation, Shvarts turns our attention to processes (e.g. careful inseminations with the help of fabricators), which ‘disseminate’ instead of ‘accumulate’. In her performance, the repetitive delivery of the abortive acts<sup>15</sup> acquires the symbolic force of compulsive repetitions pertaining to the death drive, as if Shvarts followed Edelman’s call for embracing the figure of the threat to reproductive futurism<sup>16</sup>.

In Shvarts’s performance, nine months – the temporality symbolically reserved for a linear development of progress mapped onto a woman’s reproductive body – become transformed into an alternatively signified time, in which the story of reproduction takes an unprecedented turn. Linearity is ruptured by cyclicity<sup>17</sup> of the repetitions. Halberstam suggests that shadow feminist projects seek to disrupt the logic of the temporal linear model of generationality, which operates to ensure that the dominant norm of femininity and patriarchal legacy are passed from mother to daughter, from one generation to another (Halberstam 2011: 124). I would then suggest that Shvarts’s cyclical temporal interventions (repetitions of performed abortions) could be read as symbolic disruptions of this imposed linear descendancy and her refusal to be the vehicle for passing down the legacy of patriarchal power.

The question of temporality and ‘linearity’ is very important for understanding how ideology corporeally regulates bodies. Dana Luciano (2007) introduces the term

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‘chronobiopolitics’ to refer to the way that the state and its institutional apparatuses attach the narratives of progress and forwardness to bodies that are temporalised in a specifically normative way (e.g. procession from prematurity to maturity follows the timeline of capitalistic work patterns, marriage, biological clock, and reproduction, etc.), whilst casting aside those differently temporalised bodies (e.g. non-normative ways of being of queer subjects) as backward and underdeveloped (Luciano 2007 as cited in Freeman 2010: 4). In chronobiopolitical society, women’s ‘cyclical time’ (e.g. the time for domesticity and reproduction) is valuable inasmuch as it is the vehicle for an endless *renewal* of the social, so that society’s linear progression can be stabilised and not *ruptured* (ibid.: 5). Shvarts’s cyclicity is obviously that of a rupture. Using her non-normatively temporalised body, Shvarts raises important questions about whether a non-reproductive woman’s body can be associated with ‘progress’ in patriarchal society. One cannot help but think that a woman appears again as a vehicle rather than the subject of the history’s linear progress.

Contrary to the conventional plot of a woman’s lifetime dedication to reproduction (birth, family, marriage, child, death), Shvarts is dedicated to the failures of that narrative, the failures of procreation. The figure of failure is important. Women and, more broadly, queer subjects who do not conform to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality, family, marriage, and reproduction are commonly considered to have failed to become productive citizens in a neoliberal capitalist society. Guy Hocquenghem (1993) argues that capitalism is the order within which homosexuals (and I would say, women refusing reproduction) are always figured as failed subjects, because of their failure to connect production to reproduction (Hocquenghem 1993 as cited in Halberstam 2011: 94). Shvarts, however, uses failure in a *productive* way – it is through these failures (to reproduce) that her art, as well as a potentially empowering feminist experience of transcendence of disciplining social norms, is produced.

As Halberstam notes:

[F]ailure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure [...] disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between [...] winners and losers. (Halberstam 2011: 3)

Shvarts suggests that if failure can offer us more liberated ways of being, then perhaps we need to ‘fail’ to conform to a rigid patriarchal construct of femininity.

Commenting on one of the artworks that inspired her performance, Shvarts writes:

The work brings up the idea of *good and bad waste*—that some waste is conducive to

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and an integral part of capitalist consumption, while other waste is deeply threatening to this system. (Shvarts 2011: para. 9; my emphasis)

The concept of waste is important to Shvarts. Waste is a signifier of undesirable excess, that which is devoid of value, unproductive, rejected, and abjected. Waste is '[t]he main production of the modern and postmodern capitalist industry' (Jacques-Alain Miller 1999 as cited in Žižek 2000: 40), and yet something that must be kept out of site, erased from our consciousness. Shvarts's performance confronts us with a question of waste: what precisely is wasted in her performance? Time? An embryo? The body of a woman who rejects procreation? Abortion for art's sake?

Shvarts's performance harnesses a number of signifiers of feminine excess and the abject, which have been traditionally associated with cultural anxieties around a female body – blood discharge<sup>18</sup>, pregnancy, a (non)reproductive female body, a (non)maternal body, and a menstruating body. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which respects no borders or rules, that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 1980: 4). According to Kristeva, abjection is an ambiguous psychic process of the splitting of the self, whereby the subject violently rejects what it is not (or that within itself, which it denies being), in order to establish the borders of the 'I' and to create the subject/object separation upon which its sense of self as an individuated being depends. The paradox, however, reveals itself in the realisation that this perceived otherness within the subject can never be fully rejected (ibid.: 9). The abject (e.g. bodily fluids and waste, blood, semen, faeces, etc.) is, therefore, that which evokes disgust and horror because it reminds us of this fundamentally tenuous relationship between the 'I' and the 'non-I', between the self and the other.

Kristeva suggests that abjection in relation to the feminine/maternal body is the most pointed form of abjection, because it is directly related to the subject constitution. According to Kristeva, the infant's rejection of the maternal body is a fundamental condition for the formation of its subjectivity and its entrance into the social Symbolic order – the separation from the maternal precedes the beginning of the 'I' (Kristeva 1980: 12). It is, therefore, this failure to distinguish oneself from the maternal body that represents the greatest threat to one's boundaries and self-determination<sup>19</sup>.

Although Kristeva revises traditional father-centric psychoanalytical assumptions<sup>20</sup> and foregrounds the maternal role in subject formation, her assertion that one assumes its

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autonomy only by means of a violent act of rejection of the maternal body risks relegating the maternal subject again to the role of a mere supporter of the other. Responding to Kristeva's analysis of the maternal, Alison Stone (2012) echoes Lisa Baraitser (2008) and writes: '[T]he mother is figured as background to the subjectivity of others rather than as a meaning-making subject in her own right' (Stone 2012: 12). With this in mind, we can read Shvarts's performance as a radical protest against this figuration of woman as a mere vehicle of reproductive experience. She expresses the desire to reverse this symbolic positioning and to assert woman as 'the author' of her reproductive process. Abortions become a symbol of Shvarts's radical autonomy: she is 'the author' of both inseminations and terminations, and the one who decides if 'separation' from her will ever take place<sup>21</sup>. Her performance creates a context in which reproduction serves a woman (her art and political expression) instead of a woman serving reproduction of the other. Shvarts suggests that the symbolic and ethical value of an aborting subject lies precisely in this reversal of a woman's position – from the position of 'an object' of reproduction to that of 'the author', the one who effectively produces either birth or abjection.

To make the claim of authorship is not exactly the same as to make one of agency. Although in the context of Shvarts's performance, the former implies the latter to a certain extent, it is never entirely reducible to it, especially if we understand agency through a standard liberal argument of an autonomous subject who possesses the capacity for self-determination, choice, and control over one's own acting. Agency in this sense is understood as an attribute of the sovereign subject, expressed through her deliberate deeds and marked by her intentionality. The rhetoric of reproductive freedom in the United States, with its claims on the rights of women to their 'bodily self-determination' or sovereignty over their own bodies and their reproductive capacity, reflects precisely this liberal conception of agency<sup>22</sup>. However, the argument I would like to make is that there is more to Shvarts's 'authoring' than her act of controlling her reproductive capacity. On one hand, Shvarts as the author of her artwork is the origin of deeds that constitute this art piece (abortion being one of them). To that extent, agency defined within aforementioned terms could be attributed fairly unproblematically to Shvarts. And yet, Shvarts's artwork assumed a life of its own post partum – a life whose form and effects could no longer be controlled or determined by its creator's intentionality<sup>23</sup>. Her artwork opens up a discursive and political space for women to imagine themselves otherwise – otherwise of subject positions within which they are always

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already defined by reproduction. What is authored then within this performance is not only Shvarts's bodily effects but discourses which themselves author and reproduce new subject positions. Thus, an account of agency that would presume the subject capable of controlling all significations and meanings in which it is implicated is challenged in this instance.

Moreover, Shvarts's art performance sets in motion a series of discursive 'acts' within the social imaginary through which her own subject position is produced – i.e. her position as a subject defined through an active disidentification with the heteronormative signification of femininity is effected in and by the 'deed' of the artwork. That is to say that the artwork 'authors' Shvarts at the same time that it constitutes her as an author, complicating further assumptions behind the liberal account of agency. Enacting multiple abortions at her own will certainly reflects a form of Shvarts's sovereignty. And yet, in Shvarts's performance this sovereignty is not an end in itself, but a means to her radical 'un-doing' and de-stabilising of that which in this process exposes itself to be an only seemingly fixed position of femininity within the patriarchal order. It is as if Shvarts suggests that the whole point is not necessarily a woman's right to self-determination but her right to a radical 'self-indetermination', because it is the fundamental instability of our subject positions that ultimately holds the promise of their transformation. As noted earlier, the authorship never implies fully determinable effects, and it is for this reason that I invoke authorship (rather than agency) in relation to Shvarts's position, i.e. instability of Shvarts's position as a maternal subject and a bearer of normative womanhood.

Judith Butler (1993) writes that exposing 'the abject' - that constitutive outside of every subject position against which the domain of cultural intelligibility is delineated - is crucial for unfolding the inherent instability of all social positions and, thus, for opening them up to the possibility of their transformed, re-signified future.

In his theorisation of abjection, queer theorist David Halperin (2007) departs from Kristeva's psychoanalytical account of the abject and instead positions abjection as a social concept, a product of society's collective rejection and judgement (Halperin 2007: 69): 'Its vicissitudes are not those of an unconscious instinct but of social death – the annihilating experience of exclusion from the world of decent people' (ibid.: 70). For Halperin, abjection is, therefore, located in the social, as a dynamic process through which the subjectivities of gay and other socially 'inferiorised' individuals emerge. Although Kristeva also analysed the social operating of abjection (for example, in political practices of social exclusion<sup>24</sup>), Halperin

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develops a further understanding of abjection as a collective experience that could be ‘imaginatively shared’ (Halperin 2007: 74) by socially abjected groups, and that could be sublimated into a form of a resistance to the social power that seeks to annihilate them.

Could we then not view Shvarts’s performance as her imaginative substitution of herself for all subjects that are abjected or shamed in mainstream society for standing in the way of heteronormativity’s propulsion towards the future? Shvarts’s body becomes a locus of collective disgust and stigma that patriarchal society attributes to all those unseated by family tables, those subjects that fail to reproduce society’s heteronormative social ideals. And yet, perhaps art can be a means by which to sublimate abjection into collective imaginative resistance to normative moral judgements and turn ‘social objectification into queer subjectivity’ (Halperin 2007: 77), ‘[h]umiliation [...] into defiance’ (ibid.: 83). This act of performed abortions and ‘cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate’ (Halberstam 2011: 144) is then not Shvarts’s masochistic act, not finding pleasure in pain, but finding in the ‘very exposure to social condemnation[,] an unexpected opportunity for surviving the annihilating force of conventional moral judgements’ (Halperin 2007: 80), and, thus, exposing the new livability on the margins of the social norms. Her performance uncomfortably confronts us with that which is usually publically foreclosed or unspoken – a woman’s refusal of reproduction. And in this process, I would argue, the aborting subject emerges as an empowered subject who returns society’s gaze, refusing to be ‘fixed’ or silenced.

### **Denaturalising the Reproductive Body: Destabilising the Nature/Culture Binary**

To paraphrase Butler, the privilege of the ‘reproductive narrative of womanhood’ (heterosexuality, family, children) over other forms of women’s lives operates by naturalising itself and by positioning itself as ‘the original’<sup>25</sup> (Butler 1993: 125-126). Shvarts’s artwork addresses the problematic nature of the naturalised and essentialised reproductive body.

One of the most subversive elements of Shvarts’s performance is the very ambiguity through which it is delivered. As mentioned earlier, Shvarts never took a pregnancy test and her ingestion of abortifacient drugs was intentionally timed to coincide with the expected day of her menstruation. This ambiguity made it impossible to know if her artificial inseminations were effective and if she, thus, ever aborted an embryo. As she wrote, the reality of the pregnancy, both for herself and for the audience, was ‘a matter of reading’ (Shvarts 2008: para. 4). Whether Shvarts was pregnant or not became the central question on almost every

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pair of the public's lips (Doyle 2009: 39). Her choice of the words, 'matter' and 'reading', deftly draws our attention to a complex relationship between our bodily materiality and its cultural signification. Shvarts provokes us to think how flesh and body can only come to 'matter' through their cultural 'reading'. Discursive practices lend meaning to our embodiment. There is no 'body' beyond its cultural representation. Butler's assertion that the 'reiterative power of discourse' (Butler 1993: 2) always produces 'the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (ibid.) comes to mind as we witness Shvarts's bodily condition, her pregnancy, becoming an effect of discourse and the public's reading. Boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture' become undone. Her performance not only makes us question the fictitious nature of her art narrative but also the fictitious nature of 'Nature' itself.

Shvarts's ambiguous condition reminds us that a woman's maternal potentiality, contrary to the patriarchal representations of maternity as a woman's invariable essence and natural determination, is never 'a simple fact or static condition of a body' (ibid.). Moreover, the temporality of Shvarts's performance adds to this perspective. By announcing her project only after the nine-month process she described, Shvarts made the public participate in a *retroactive* construction of her 'bodily truth', reminding us of Butler's assertion that the performance of gender always retroactively produces an illusion of 'a true and abiding feminine essence or disposition' (Butler as cited in Bell 2007: 17). Positioning her pregnancy as an artistic and discursive rather than a natural and biological 'truth', Shvarts rejects biological determinism and challenges the naturalisation of reproduction in relation to womanhood.

In Shvarts's piece, her pregnant embodiment and identity become something that is performed and that, far from being fixed, gains different forms and meanings as its multiple readings by the public unfold. It is through telling and narration that her performance acquires its actuality. In her first public announcement regarding the piece, Shvarts wrote: 'This telling can take textual, visual, spatial, temporal and performative forms. Copies of copies of which there is no original' (Shvarts 2008: para. 2). Insistence on the constitutive performativity of narrative is very important for Shvarts. Adriana Cavarero's (2000) understanding of subject constitution and her concept of 'narratable' self might be helpful here. In Arendtian spirit, Cavarero asserts that we are constitutively exposed to the other – there is no 'I' without 'You'. Discussing Cavarero, Paul Kottman explains that this constitutive exposure of the self to the other emerges through our fundamental desire to hear

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the story of our life (from birth to death) narrated by the other (Kottman 2000: xvii). For Cavarero, this constitutive relationality and dependability on the other's narrative of ourselves is the condition for our social and political life<sup>26</sup>. Shvarts makes herself narratable as she invites us to read her body in different ways. Narrative becomes a space in which she engages with the public politically.

Following Cavarero, I would argue that Shvarts wants to compel us to think of the self that is relational, unstable and unfolding – what Kristeva calls a 'subject in process' (Kristeva 1989 as cited in Cavallaro 2003: 78). This understanding of selfhood stands in opposition to the Western philosophical tradition that speaks of the self in terms of one's 'essence' and 'being'. Although we can never be reduced to an effect or content of the others' narratives of ourselves, our identity is nevertheless fundamentally implicated in and travels through them (Cavarero 2000: 35). Does this not resonate with Shvarts's performance and its constitutive dependency on the narratives that the public assigns to it? Narrative becomes an embodied, relational and political act in her performance. What I am trying to emphasise is that Shvarts sets in motion a number of processes that work to de-essentialise the notions of selfhood and womanhood in order to promote a more fluid and plastic understanding of the self. And she does so very imaginatively in the context that in practice continues to be a stubbornly difficult material to de-essentialise – a 'fleshy' reproductive woman's body.

### **Towards L'avenir: Imagining Otherwise**

By making her reproductive body a site of production and a medium of her art, Shvarts raises important questions over a historically tense relationship between a woman as a reproductive subject and a woman as a creative subject. Shvarts's body as a producer of 'flesh' is also a producer of culture and creativity. Her art speaks of a strong feminist desire for a woman to become 'an author' rather than a mere vehicle of reproduction of the future for the other. Did Shvarts produce anything or was she a vehicle of production? Did staging the scenes of birth and their 'authorisations' (through autonomous prohibitions) make her 'an author' in the end?

Throughout this essay I have argued that, for Shvarts, her art and her body are her battleground, where she forges a radical resistance to the patriarchal symbolic positioning of a woman – the positioning within which a woman's life is intelligible insofar as it follows the pre-determined reproductive narrative of 'natural' womanhood. From the moment the infant

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is sexed female, she learns to negotiate in her desire that it is this future that is wanted from her, just as it was wanted from her mother and her grandmother. The price of not conforming is the unthinkability of one's own desire. Shvarts is the author of the possibility for imagining 'the otherwise' for women – the otherwise of women's heteronormative future. There are no new ways of being without the resistance to the social order that perpetually forecloses that possibility. We must be able to imagine alternatives 'because the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real' (Halberstam 1993: 199). The resistance within the imaginary is not enough to change the world, but it makes the previously unthinkable thinkable, and that is a start. And it is precisely this opening towards 'the otherwise' from which Shvarts's art derives its great ethical value. What futurities her opening will spawn is up to us to imagine and authorise.

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteers who donated their sperm samples to Shvarts and who agreed to their full anonymity (Shvarts, 2008: para. 1).

<sup>2</sup> As Doyle writes in relation to the public's response to Shvarts's performance, abortion remains, within contemporary discourse on reproduction, 'always in some sense "wrong"; it is always bad, and even in liberal settings women may abort only when ... [they] manifest the proper degree of regret' (Doyle, 2009: 42). Drawing on Jeannie Ludlow's research into abortion narratives, Doyle highlights how most feminist discourses on abortion privilege narratives of traumatising and victimising experiences of unwanted pregnancies (e.g., rape, abuse, medically risky pregnancies, or states of severe economic deprivation leading to the necessity of pregnancy termination, etc.); this implies that in order to be justified abortion must be represented *not* as an ordinary part of many women's (sexual) lives, but rather as an unfortunate, exceptional, and necessary event in their lives (ibid.: 26). Although one can see well how the emphasis on 'traumatic' abortion narratives and making the claim of 'abortion as the exception' can and has represented an important political move and a viable pro-choice strategy against the right-wing rhetoric that goes devastatingly against the agency of the pregnant woman, one of the very problematic consequences of this position 'is the stigmatization of the agency of the vast majority of women who choose to have abortions— their choice becomes a disorder of will and desire' (ibid.). As Doyle elaborates further, Shvarts's performance is then harshly judged by many pro-abortion activists and liberal feminists for not pertaining to these 'serious narratives of necessity' and being a 'bad representative' of beneficiaries of the right to choice, who could do harm to pro-abortion rhetoric (and its hard-won victories) by materialising 'the right wing's claims that abortion on demand leads to women aborting at will, recklessly, pointlessly, and for fun' (ibid.: 40). Shvarts's position as a middle-class white woman adds on to this as the questions of privileged access to abortion on demand are raised, as Doyle notes. For a more nuanced analysis of these issues, please see Doyle (2009). However, in this essay I choose to focus on a fundamental premise

underpinning both ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life’ discourses – that of a sacred child and/or woman as always already defined as a potential mother.

<sup>3</sup> As previously mentioned, it is impossible to know if any of Shvarts’s inseminations were effective, and if she, therefore, ever aborted an embryo. I will explore this ambiguity in more detail later, but given her ingestion of abortifacient drugs, ergo the intentionality of abortion, I will continue to simply use the term ‘abortion’ throughout this essay.

<sup>4</sup> I am using Jack Halberstam’s (2005) definition of ‘queer’ to refer to ‘nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time’ (Halberstam, 2005: 6).

<sup>5</sup> I am using the definition of ‘heteronormativity’ introduced by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) – ‘[b]y heteronormativity, we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 548).

<sup>6</sup> I would like to note from the outset that although I am conscious of a rich creative dialogue that Shvarts’s artwork establishes with a significant number of notable feminist artists who precede her, it is not my intention to provide the historical context of Shvarts’s art piece in this paper. Instead, I will engage with the questions surrounding the politics of reproduction and the rhetoric of futurity in relation to a woman’s social and symbolic positioning in Western culture that this artwork raises, using psychoanalytic, feminist and queer theoretical frameworks and concepts.

<sup>7</sup> The term introduced by Michel Foucault (1976) to refer to a modern form of disciplinary and regulatory power (emerging approximately in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), which subjugates bodies and controls populations by taking ‘hold over life’ (Foucault, 1976: 239) rather than using the threat of death. It is life or the biological that becomes the object of state control within this modern regime of power.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky (1987).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the terrorist bombings in 1997 of an abortion clinic and a nightclub attended by lesbians and gay men in Atlanta were attributed to the radical ‘pro-life’ group Army of God (Edelman, 2004: 15).

<sup>10</sup> Yale alumni have been represented on the Democratic or Republican ticket in every U.S. Presidential election since 1972 (Camins et al, 2008: 175).

<sup>11</sup> Doyle makes a comment on Shvarts’s privileged status, but she addresses a different issue – that of access to abortion (Doyle, 2009: 41).

<sup>12</sup> According to Sigmund Freud (1923), the operation of the human psyche is characterised by two conflicting forces – sexual and self-preservative instincts (the life drives), and the death drives. The death drive here represents an impulse towards self-destruction and aggression, ‘the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state’ (Freud, 1923: 40). In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), Freud describes the death drive as an inherently anti-social force (pertaining to human nature) which threatens to ‘undo’ the processes of Eros (the life drives) that keep the social order (civilisation) in place: combining ‘single human individuals, and after that

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families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind' (Freud, 1930: 74). Edelman's deployment of the term is most in line with this conception of the death drive, but he complements it with Lacanian analysis. The death drive is an irrepressible remainder (surplus) of the Real, both internal and threatening to the Symbolic order (the threat to plunge the Symbolic order into non-meaning), which has the power to shatter the subject from within (Edelman, 2004: 9).

<sup>13</sup> One of the most obvious examples of this figuration is the representation of gay men as deviant and murderously sexualised 'others' in the mid-eighties (outburst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the US), to whom genocidal fantasy applied. See, for example, Leo Bersani (1987).

<sup>14</sup> Edelman argues that the politics of assimilation and inclusion, which lends intelligibility to queer subjects at the price of their adherence to the normalising logic of reproductive futurism, must be rejected. Assimilation ensures that the heteronormative power structure remains unchallenged and that the status quo favouring dominant groups is perpetuated. Moreover, the logic of political inclusion always depends on 'othering' someone else who will come to bear the burden of the 'constitutive outside.'

<sup>15</sup> As a reminder, Shvarts allegedly performed nine abortions (ingested abortifacients) over the course of nine months.

<sup>16</sup> In our email discussion, Shvarts shared her great investment in queer and radical resistance to reproductive futurism. She has also been working actively with many radical queer artists and activists (e.g. Ron Athey), so I think it is important to emphasise the relationality across queer communities that her work establishes. Doyle also made this connection between Shvarts's performance and queer politics by connecting Shvarts's pro-abortion politics to the sex/gender radicalism of queer theory (Doyle, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva (1979) suggests that time can be thought of as gendered - a woman's time is actually cyclical time (i.e. female subjectivity is linked to cycles - menstruating cycle, pregnancy, reproduction), whereas history and language follow the logic of male linear time (Kristeva, 1979: 191-193).

<sup>18</sup> Although Shvarts's blood samples existed only in her discursive intentions due to the project's ban, my brief overview of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection will make it clear that abjection is a complex psychic and social experience that goes beyond the 'materiality' of what is considered abject.

<sup>19</sup> In other words, in order to be rejected the maternal body must be made abject (Kristeva, 1980: 13). It is through this primary rejection that the feminine obtains the status of 'excess' in our culture. In *Black Sun* (1987), Kristeva elaborates further that the symbolic 'matricide' (rejection of the maternal) is a biological and psychic necessity for both men and women - their first step towards autonomy and individuation (Kristeva, 1987: 38).

<sup>20</sup> For example, according to Noelle McAfee (2004), Freud's influential writings on subject development can be interpreted as suggesting that the infant enters the social Symbolic order by way of *paternal function*, i.e. the child separates from the mother via paternal threats of castration (McAfee, 2004: 21; my emphasis). And there is almost no mention of the maternal in Lacan's account of the infant's entrance into the Symbolic order through a 'mirror stage' (Lacan, 1966: 1-8).

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<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, sinisterly, by constantly aborting she is ‘keeping’ a ‘child’ as a symbol continually attached to her body, never letting it go into life and liberation, almost as if the whole point is one of origin and impossible independence.

<sup>22</sup> For a good overview of the liberal concept of agency as it relates to the rhetoric of reproductive freedom in the United States, see, for example, Petchesky (1980).

<sup>23</sup> To slightly paraphrase Roland Barthes (1968), an artwork’s effects and unity do not reside in its origin (i.e. its author) but in its destination, and ‘this destination can no longer be personal’ (Barthes, 1968: 6).

<sup>24</sup> See for a brief overview, for example, Imogen Tyler (2009).

<sup>25</sup> Butler referred to heterosexual privilege.

<sup>26</sup> Using Hannah Arendt’s understanding of politics as a ‘plural and interactive space of exhibition’ (Kottman, 2000: xxiii), Cavarero positions narrative, i.e. the scene of reciprocal exchange of narratives between the self and the other, as a political act.

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