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Multimedia Exhibition *Shine a Life* (2023)

The art-activist photography exhibition *Shine a Life* (in Serbian *Obasjaj život*) was designed as a project activity performed by the non-governmental organization Kolektiv Talas TIRV from Belgrade, Serbia. The entire concept of the exhibition, as well as the included photographs and videos, is under my authorship since at the time I was the art and culture coordinator in Kolektiv Talas TIRV. The exhibition was presented to the public on August 21, 2023, in the NGO Hub gallery in downtown Belgrade. The exhibition comprised 18 photographs and 1 video, featuring 15 trans and non-binary individuals from Serbia who participated in this project as models in both photographs and video.

Only during the writing process of this essay did I understand the origins of this exhibition. Saturated with exhibitions that showcase a series of portraits of queer people year after year, conveying one or another variation of the “we’re human after all” message to the audience, with *Shine a Life*, we aimed to explore motives that are often unspoken to the public. The ones our queer lives revolve around.

I remember that as a queer community we often spoke of unfairness and loss and grief in a way that acknowledged them as an integral part that threads our lives together into shared queer existence, as something we needed to share amongst ourselves to keep recognizing each other’s reality. We were each other’s mirrors. We were weightlifters unburdening ourselves whenever we met. We internalize these things and label them as queer culture when we speak of it because we need to see them outside our individual selves and make others look and gasp at the weight of it with understanding. We want proof that there is meaning and cause-and-effect to them.

So, there was an agenda to *Shine a Life* that I only semi-recognized at the time. An agenda for participation. We took that weight, sliced it into ‘slice of life’ motives that spoke candidly of queer life, and maybe for the first time, we played with them, not as a burden to be lifted but as a gift to be shared. We would soon be seen.

The original plan for the choice of motives was slightly thwarted by the gruesome murder of a trans woman by the name of Noa that happened during the development of our project. We focused even more on motives that would heal us, rather than showcasing our edginess and performativeness.

I’ve divided motives based on locations I previously scouted. For the series of pictures – “On this side of fire” – we went to nature, forest, and grass plains, dressed in fur, plain white dresses, and robes, and danced around the fire at night in circles. It was a joy to see people who are socially disenfranchised from their Slavic folklore

and othered from patriarchal cisgender heteronormative tradition, reclaim the meaning of past customs and tales through role-playing. We found a forest clearing, built a pyre-like pile, and set it ablaze. We played folklore music, and I told them to dance barefoot in circles around rising flames. The results were photographs titled: “On this side of fire”, “New Roots”, “Dance against dying of the light”, “Ancestors dance”, and “Fairy’s circle”.

For our second location, we visited Glinara, a protected area on the outskirts of Belgrade, reminiscent of prairies, and famous for its small cliffs. Our original plan to rent a retro classic car and have a photo shoot with props was at odds with our budget and the inaccessibility of the terrain. The location was beneficial to us because it had blue skies filled with bright, low clouds, as if part of some planned scenography, so we used most of it. One of the significant motives we covered was the notion of queer time, which refers to a passage of time in the lives of queer people that is disjointed from all normative, cisgender timelines. For many queer people, even in times of societal stability, things, people, and events like the first kiss with someone we like, steady employment, family celebrations, lived authenticity, engagement, and marriage are scattered through their lives seemingly without a fixed, pre-planned position. Something that most normies go through in their teens and early 20s, queer people feel secure enough or discover only in their 30s or even later. The time it takes to realize, unlearn, and learn anew, reassessing your life to act on it, can consume chunks of our lives, leaving us yearning for the ‘wasted’ or ‘best’ years that went by. “Queer time” photo shows that reality. A group of people with their lives in order stands at the edge of a cliff, holding items that symbolize the passage of time. They look down upon a drag queen in mid-run who reaches after them with the contents of her suitcase spilling out in an arc, in empty space between her and the people on a cliff. The distance between them might as well be miles long. The photo “It happens all the time in heaven” was inspired by a poem of the same name written by Hafiz. The poem itself speaks about the beautiful universality of romantic love and the promise of its return to earth. In the photo, a queer person on a bent knee offers the bride a bouquet. Queer love is rarely allowed such a simple gesture of love to the point that they rarely consider making it. “Pride Supernova” was all about capturing a ‘perfect’ moment of queer celebration. We charged the scene with the right timing, which delivered an explosion of laughter, shouting, jumping, running, and non-degradable confetti, which we later had to clean up. Other photos that celebrated us were “Queer Joy” and “Charge towards the clash of the worlds”.

Taken on a building with an open roof, the photos “People are safe spaces” and “Sights” diptych offer more intimate moments inside a queer friend group. Half-nude acts of cis and trans women from the back show comfort with one another and sensuality over sexualization of identities. Some of the locations were streets. “Transpotting” showcases life in action, with characters running through the streets in a manic-like fashion, similar to the movie *Trainspotting*. Although fun and dynamic in its aesthetic, its inspiration comes from minority stress. Anxiety-powered functioning

in a society that's dozing you with subtle stressors, which you internalize and keep in your body. Gender non-conforming people can be especially susceptible to minority stress, which is a consequence of living in a society that offers no safety to those who differ from the norm. Other more playful photos from the city location are "Tribe", "Cheers", and "Lost in supermarket".

We truly collaborated on this project. Half of it turned out to be just capturing spontaneous moments instead of blocking the shots and scenes. We gave models authorship freedom without letting them know by giving them simple tasks, which, over time, invited more and more spontaneity. All that was left to do was to capture it. The goal with *Shine a Life* was to share ourselves with the world, which knew nothing of our lives beyond what it allowed itself to acknowledge, which was not much. Our lives were briefly illuminated and continue to remain as such in photographs. From queer time and the search for belonging, from planting, replanting, and knitting together our roots to rediscovering a sense of belonging, from minority stress, a cost of personal freedom and pride, to the joy we feel when, together, revealed publicly, we are seen, and it is healing to our world.



Photo #1: "Novi koreni" ("New Roots")



Photo #2: “Kvir vreme” (“Queer Time”)



Photo #3: “It happens all the time in heaven”



Photo #4: “Kvir radost” (“Queer Joy”)



Photo #5: “Pogledi” (“Sights”)

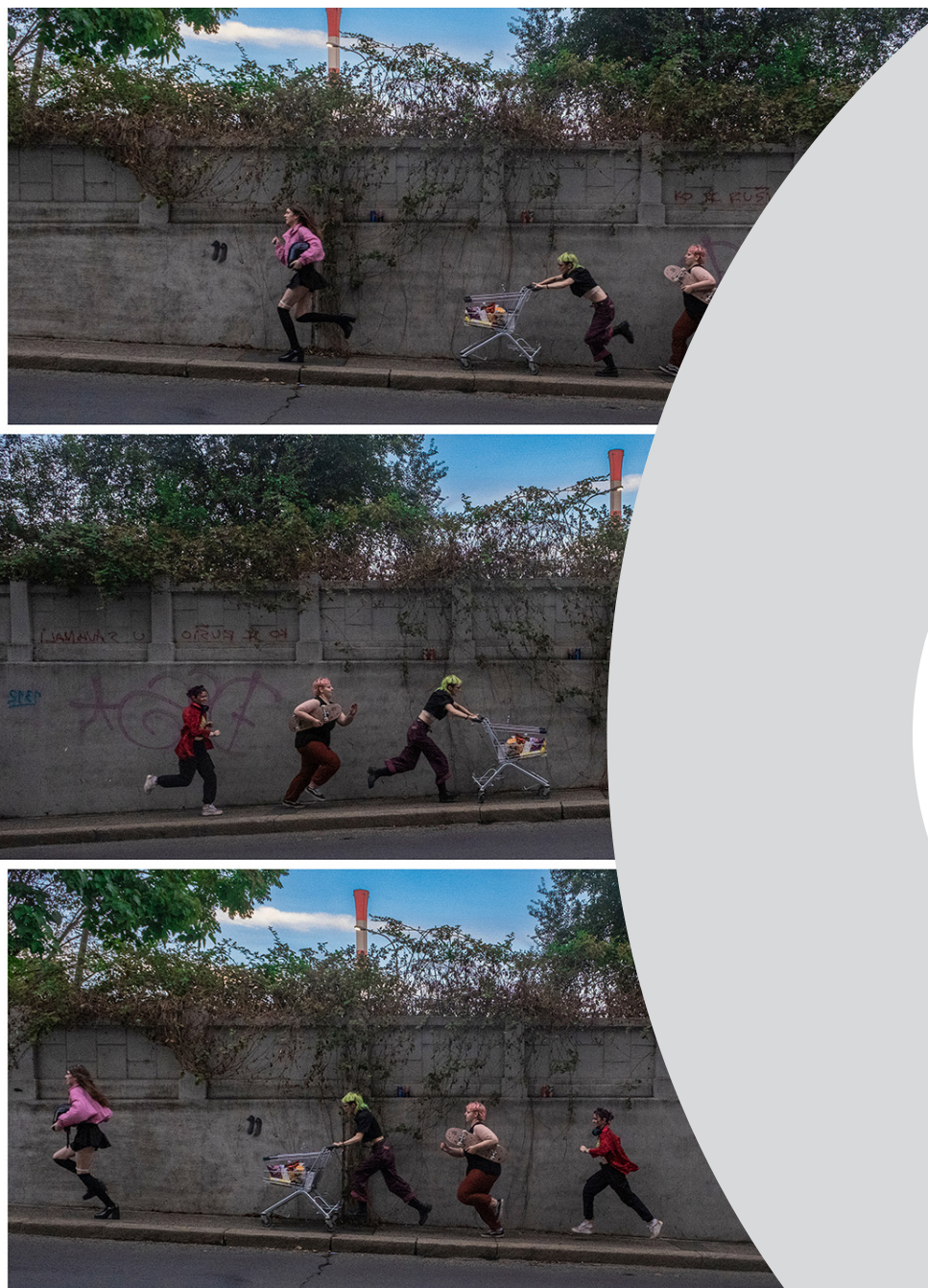


Photo #6: “Transpotting”