

Conor McGrady

Time, Narrative and Representation: Milcho Manchevski's Work in Performance and Photography

Early Work

"Does a film have to exist to be a film?"¹

In an early work consisting of a grid of Polaroid photos, a sequential arrangement of images depicts a further series of Polaroids, some in varying stages of development. These images reveal a youthful Milcho Manchevski, photographed from a distance. As the photos within photographs gradually emerge into focus he appears with a full beard, which gradually disappears through a sequence of four images, leaving the artist clean-shaven. In this piece, *Beard/Polaroids* (Fig 1, Fig X), the original photos of the beard are re-photographed and presented as part of the overall work. This approach to documenting transformation provides a window into the development of Manchevski's later work in film, as it reveals two of his primary concerns, namely those of time and representation. Taking its cue from structuralism, this work reveals the mechanics of the development of Polaroid images as a chemical reaction between light and film. Through re-photography the initial images are incorporated as both originals in their final form, and as repeated components of the overall piece. Time progresses sequentially as the beard disappears, inversely mirroring the images slowly coming to life through Polaroid film. This process of cataloging is a symbolic iteration of the means by which something is revealed, with the photograph acting as a signifier of time, both as image and object. Included as a compositional footnote, the entire sequence of images is re-photographed, adding yet another layer and further highlighting the sense of distance that always remains implicit in photography. In a second 'footnote' the artist appears to be scrutinizing the piece, examining the process by which time is marked, compressed, presented and re-presented (Fig 2).

Like *Beard/Polaroids*, Manchevski's other early works from the 1980's reveal a post-conceptual art practice that establishes the foundations for his feature length films and later work in photography. Working under the title *1AM*, individual or collaborative pieces drew upon Dada, structuralism and conceptualism to push artistic boundaries. Some of these works, including *Beard/Polaroids* were created while he was attending film school in Carbondale, Illinois, and later exhibited and performed in Macedonia and multiple venues across the former Yugoslavia. Other early works created in Carbondale include three single-shot experimental films. One of these,

1 1.74 Questionnaire. Available online at: <http://manchevski.com/art/1-74/> Accessed Nov 2, 2014

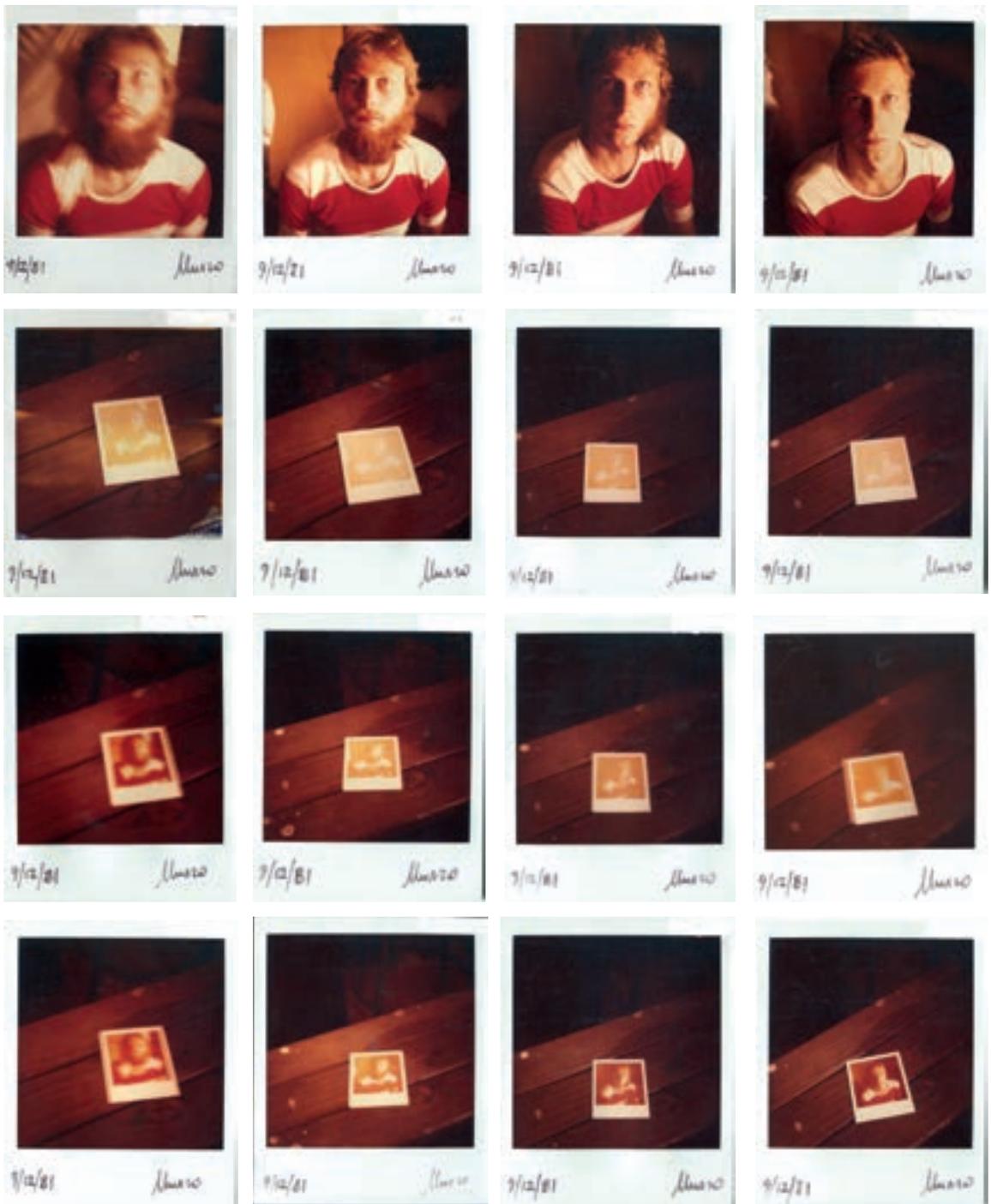


Fig 1



Fig X

the Untitled Film, features a black screen with a voice-over, and refers to the desire to make an original work in film, given that all other approaches have seemingly been tried. Manchevski refers to this piece in Text of the Untitled Film, which formed part of an extensive 1 AM performance (described below). In a statement read to the audience on the soundtrack he responds to the potential or imagined accusation that his approach to this film had been done before “even by Godard”. “Yes, but it’s never been with this voice-over. And, even if it has been, it certainly wasn’t my voice.”² Another of these films, *The Wire*, involved a hand-held shot climbing a set of stairs to an attic room, including a glimpse of the shadow of the cameraman and the wire linking the camera to the battery belt. *Paths of Glory* involved a single take of a slacker drinking on a porch to the soundtrack of “Act Naturally” by the Beatles. The film ends with the film stuck in the camera.

Returning to Skopje after film school, Manchevski created a number of collaborative 1AM events, performances and screenings, which the collective referred to as “appearance art”. In one event in Skopje on December 10th, 1983, *The Members of the Group 1 AM Will Perform a Presentation* (Fig Y), multiple actions and screenings took place over the course of the evening. A List of Performance Elements of the Group 1 AM was read out, then distributed in photocopy (Fig Z), followed by a reading of the Conceptualist Manifesto, which consisted of its title followed by 23 signatures. In other parts of the event the audience watched an ice cube melting, and art works installed to face the wall were turned to face the audience. In *Cyril and Methodius Blues*, Manchevski sang the Cyrillic alphabet accompanied by a band, and in *Elegies for Cyril and Methodius*, two actors performed an overlapping recital of the alphabet as if it were a revolutionary poem. In *Elements for Interpreting the Performances of the Group 1 AM*, an exhibit witnessed as the audience first walked into the gallery, the group listed everything the performance was not: “The performance by the group 1 AM is not: a conceptualist piece, a happening, a performance piece, body art, a structuralist piece, GASP-art, a minimalistic piece, mail art, an environmental piece, camp-art, Dadaism (Fig 3).”³ This text elaborated further, stating that, “To evaluate an art piece on a regular basis means to fail to cognize the new, as evaluating means viewing through tradition.”⁴ A year later to the day, 1 AM performed *How to Explain Joseph Beuys’ “How to Explain Pictures to Dead Hare”* to a Living Rabbit, which involved Manchevski walking around an exhibition space while trying to explain the Beuys piece to a rabbit. Two pictures on the walls of the space accompanied the piece, a portrait of Joseph Beuys and a cross by Kazimir Malevich (Fig 4).

Around this time, Manchevski created *The Ghost of my Mother*, a small conceptualist book that consisted of 36 different elements. These included the Table of Contents from a book on art, a description of Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* broken down into a poem, and a number of expressive Haiku pieces. The overall impact of the work alternates between two extremes, the seeming dry and conceptual on the one hand, and the emotional or sentimental on the other, a polarity that Manchevski would return to again in his film work, particularly *Mothers*. In another work, *1.74*, which was performed in Belgrade, Split and Brooklyn, and won the Belgrade award for experimental film, the artist mounted a stage holding a 1.74m piece of unexposed film. After it was subjected to 24 simultaneous flashes he took the film to the projection booth and screened it. Returning to the stage he cut it up and stapled it to 100 questionnaires (Fig 5). Distributed to the audience, they contained some of the following inquiries: “Does a film have to be exposed? Does a film have to be shown? Does a film have to contain a film strip? Does a film have to have an image? Does a film have to have a story? Does a film have to exist to be a film?”

2 Interview with Milcho Manchevski by the author, February 12, 2014.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*



Fig 2

СПИСОК НА ЕЛЕМЕНТИТЕ НА РАБОТНИ НА ГРУПАТА 1 AM

- 1-200. Двете уникални покани за изложбата
 201. Истражување на поканите
 202. План на изложбата
 203. Читање на планот на изложбата
 204. Деловна на планот на изложбата
 205. Истражување на планот на изложбата
 206. Список на елементите на изложбата*
 207. Читање на списокот
 208. Деловна на списокот
 209. Уводен збор
 210. Читање на Уводниот збор
 211. Деловна на Уводниот збор
 212. Постер
 213. Продавање на шест примероци на планот
 214. Отворање на галеријата и вклучување на светлото
 215. Прво слушање на "Царки и Методиј блуз"
 216. Второ слушање на "Царки и Методиј блуз"
 217. Филмот "Патеки на слава"
 218. Премисија на филмот "Патеки на слава"
 219. Филмот "Лица"
 220. Премисија на филмот "Лица"
 221. Филмот без наслов
 222. Премисија на филмот без наслов
 223. Истакнување на експонатите
 224. Првот експонат, т.е. полароид-проектот "Лица"
 225. Второт експонат, т.е. првот примерок од Концептуалистичкиот манифест
 226. Третиот експонат, т.е. вториот примерок од Концептуалистичкиот манифест
 227. Четвртиот експонат, т.е. третиот примерок од Концептуалистичкиот манифест
 228. Истакнување на Манифестот
- *Овој лист е со овој список.

Fig Z

LIST OF PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS OF THE GROUP 1 AM

- 1-200. Two hundred unique invitations to the performance
201. Mailing the invitations
202. Plan of performance
203. Reading the Plan of performance
204. Distribution of the Plan of performance
205. Mailing the Plan of performance
206. List of performance elements
207. Reading of the List
208. Distribution of the List
209. Introduction
210. Reading of the Introduction
211. Distribution of the Introduction
212. Poster
213. Selling six copies of the poster
214. Unlocking the gallery and switching on the light
215. First listening of *Cyril and Methodius Blues*
216. Second listening of *Cyril and Methodius Blues*
217. The film *Paths of Glory*
218. Screening of the film *Paths of Glory*
219. The film *Wire*
220. Screening of the film *Wire*
221. Untitled film
222. Screening of the untitled film
223. Displaying the exhibits
224. The first exhibit, i.e. the Polaroid-project *Faces*
225. The second exhibit, i.e. the first copy of Conceptualist Manifesto
226. The third exhibit, i.e. the second copy of Conceptualist Manifesto
227. The fourth exhibit, i.e. the third copy of Conceptualist Manifesto
228. Signing the Manifesto

+ This page with this list

229. Петтиот експонат, т.е. Дефиниција на местото на групата 1 AM
 230. Шесттиот експонат, т.е. - парче мраз
 231. Откривање на парчето мраз
 232. Набљудување на времето за кое се топи парчето мраз
 233. Внесување на времето за кое се стопило парчето мраз во Планот
 234. - 3170. Фази на оттопување на парчето мраз
 3171. Врвеше на Проектот "Лица" кон публиката
 3172. Листот со потписите од Манифестот
 3173. Фотографирање на изложбата со полароид-апарат
 3174. Изложување на полароидите
 3175. Фотографирање на изложените полароиди
 3176. Изложување на вторите полароиди
 3177. Првите полароиди
 3178. Вторите полароиди
 3179. Рецитал "Елегии за Кирил и Методиј"
 3180. Текстот за рециталот "Елегии за Кирил и Методиј"
 3181. Етикетки под експонатите
 3182. Скицување на експонатите
 3183. Скицување на плакатот
 3184. Заклучување на светлото и заклучување на галеријата
 3185. Публиката

 Заклучено со 3185.

229. The fifth exhibit, i.e. the Definition of the performance of the group 1 AM
 230. The sixth exhibit, i.e. - a piece of ice
 231. Uncovering the piece of ice
 232. Observing the time during which the piece of ice melts
 233. Entering the time during which the ice melted into the Plan 234.-
 3170. Phases of melting of the piece of ice
 3171. Turning the project Faces towards the audience
 3172. List of signatures of the Manifesto
 3173. Photographing the exhibition with a polaroid camera
 3174. Exhibiting the polaroids
 3175. Photographing the exhibited polaroids
 3176. Exhibiting the second polaroids
 3177. The first polaroids
 3178. The second polaroids
 3179. Recital Elegies for Cyril and Methodius
 3180. Text to the recital Elegies for Cyril and Methodius
 3181. Labels under the exhibits
 3182. Taking the exhibits downs
 3183. Taking the poster down
 3184. Turning off the lights and locking the gallery
 3185. The audience

Concluded with 3185.

1 AM

До Потенцијалниот посетител
91 000 Скопје
Југославија

ПОСЛАНА

Го молиме горниот наслов да го прочита приложениот текст.
Групата 1 AM е неформален собор на уметници. Нивниот прв настап го започнуваме со овој текст што го држите в раце. Поканата треба да побуди интересирање кај читачот и да му послужи како информација за местото и времето на настапот (Галерија на Др. Јане Насириќ, "25. мај", Скопје, Југославија, од 22.30 до 24.00 часот, на 10.12.1983, по средноевропско време).

Бидејќи така, овој текст е еден од 3185-те елементи во настапот на групата 1 AM (застапува значајна на тенденциозното повторување на името на групата 1 AM, кое кај посетителот треба да предизвика пожелен ефект, т.е. да го наведе да го започне името 1 AM). Овие елементи на настапот се наведени во СПИСОК НА ЕЛЕМЕНТИ ЗА НАСТАП НА ГРУПАТА 1 AM, кој ќе се дели од 22.30 до 24.00 часот, на 10.12.1983 (средноевропско време). Дополнително е приложен предмено направениот ПЛАН ЗА НАСТАП НА ГРУПАТА 1 AM (Планот ќе се чита од 22.39 до 22.46 часот, а ќе се дели во истиот термин како и Списокот).

Со цел да се привлече што поголем број од читачите на Поканата да дојдат на самиот настап, приложен е и ПЛИСОК, додека Списокот потенцијалниот посетител ќе може да го чуе или да го добие во горенаведените, а веќе прецизираме термин, колку групата 1 AM ќе тргне строго да се придржува.

Од групата 1 AM

Fig Y

1 AM
To the potential guest
91 000 Skopje
Yugoslavia

INVITATION

We kindly request that that the above-named addressee read the enclosed text.

The group 1 AM is an informal artist collective. Their first performance begins with this text you are holding in your hands. This invitation should stimulate the reader's interest and serve as information on the place and time of the performance (Gallery of the Youth Club "May 25th", Skopje, Yugoslavia from 10:30 PM to 00:00 AM, on Saturday, December 10th, 1983, Central European Time).

This text is also one of the 3,185 elements in the performance of the group 1 AM (please note the pointed repetition of the name of the group 1 AM, which ought to trigger the desired effect in the guest, i.e. to guide him to memorize the name 1AM). The rest of the performance elements is listed in the GROUP 1 AM LIST OF PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS, which will be distributed between 22:50 PM and 00:00 AM, on December 10th, 1983 (Central European Time), in accordance with the precisely drawn GROUP 1 AM PLAN OF PERFORMANCE (the Plan will be read between 10:39 PM and 10:46 PM, and will be distributed during the same time period as the List).

In an attempt to entice as many readers of this invitation as possible to attend the performance itself, attached is the Plan, whereas the potential guest can hear or obtain the List, the times noted above, which have been precisely established, and to which the group 1 AM will make a determined effort to keep to.

From the group 1 AM

These early works foreground the experimental basis of Milcho Manchevski's work across multiple disciplines, and highlight his grounding in an avant-garde practice. The context of working between the United States and Yugoslavia cannot be overlooked as an important factor in the development of this practice. In the 1980's, Yugoslavia was home to a burgeoning contemporary avant-garde art scene and home to a number of artists' collectives, such as NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) and OHO, that pushed the boundaries of performance and conceptual practice. As a non-aligned socialist country, travel between east and west and open exposure to currents in contemporary art and theoretical debate contributed to a dynamic interdisciplinary experimental culture. In the US the work of the Pictures Generation, and artists such as Jack Goldstein and Cindy Sherman refocused attention on the importance of the image as a signifier of multiple, interlocking meanings, and on the relationship between photography and film in particular. Manchevski's experiments with structure and narrative emerged from a period prior to radical shifts in the both countries. In the 1980's the art market boomed and subsequently imploded in the US, and in the early nineties, Yugoslavia disintegrated in war. As he began to work on feature length films, he continued to develop the core thematic elements of this early work in film, photography and performance. In referring to the methodologies that he continues to draw upon, Manchevski states that this strain in his work "opens you up – like taking a cold shower"⁵. His engagement with structure and representation also permeates his two major bodies of photographic work, *Street*, and *Five Drops of Dream*. Like his film work, and *The Ghost of My Mother*, these projects merge the formal and conceptual with the poetic to create multiple and open-ended readings that are seamlessly woven throughout.

5 *Ibid.*

ХИДИЈА 17.

2. -

IUAN M.

IXNIA

попуња збирковом



п.о.ш. бр. 11
Николска

Fig 3



Fig 4



1,74

- 1) Da li film mora da bude ekspoziran ?
- 2) Da li film mora da bude prikazan ?
- 3) Da li film mora da ima traku?
- 4) Da li film mora da ima sliku ?
- 5) Da li film mora da ima priču ?
- 6) Da li film mora da postoji da bi bio film ?



Fig 5

1.74

- 1) Does a film have to be exposed?
- 2) Does a film have to be shown?
- 3) Does a film have to contain a film strip?
- 4) Does a film have to have an image?
- 5) Does a film have to have a story?
- 6) Does a film have to exist to be a film?

Street

"Traces of humanity captured as if by chance, in the rhythm of their day-to-day life, routine gestures, figures met at the moment when pressing a button - who then slip away - visual structures stolen from environments that shirk every attempt to decode them."⁶

While shifting from conceptual and performance art to feature-length film, Manchevski continued to build an extensive body of work in photography. Created in the 1990's and drawn from numerous geographic locations, *Street* encapsulates the pulse of the urban. Multiple elements frame and run through this extended body of work. Texture and color, particularly the spectrum of red, blue and green, permeate the glimpsed fragments of anonymous lives. Multiple images of reflections expand the narrative potential in this series, a visual approach that is developed further in the film *Shadows*, where mirrors and reflections act as portals, letting individuals and memories from other time periods filter through. In *One Way*, 1998 (Fig 6), distortion and refraction soften and contradict the authoritative command of the "One Way" street sign. Here the road is inverted and folds back on itself, the abstract formal qualities of the image contradicting the rigidity of the command with the fluidity of its surroundings. In *Billboard*, 1998 (Fig 7), Manchevski draws our attention once more to the processes by which images are both constructed and revealed. The blurred *Central Park*, 1998 (Fig 8), on the other hand highlights how images can also conceal as much as they reveal though playing with or testing the mechanics of their production. In this instance, a photograph is an indicator of physical materiality yet fragile temporality.

Humor also permeates these works in *Who Loves You Baby?*, 1998 (Fig 9), where an unsuspecting pedestrian morphs through the lens of pop culture into Telly Savalas' *Kojak*. *Marlboro*, 1998 (Fig 10) juxtaposes a protest march with the primary colors of a Marlboro ad. The forward momentum of the protest and raised hands are echoed in the epic, quasi-visionary gesture of the Marlboro man, pointing to an undisclosed future, and also serving as a nod to the use of appropriated imagery in the work of Richard Prince. The red flag of socialism carried by the protesters mirrors the red in the ad, contrasting starkly with its mythic promise of (unattainable?) capitalist fulfillment. Through capturing the incongruous this image bears the hallmarks of cinematography, and the cinematic reverberates throughout *Street*. Gestures and body language echo compositionally in *West Broadway*, 1998 (Fig 11) and *Paris 3*, 1998 (Fig 12). Rooftop or balcony views play with proximity and distance. *Tomatoes*, 1998 (Fig 13) bridges Manchevski's film work and parallels the opening scene of *Dust*, which also features tomatoes on a market stall. With its assemblage of elements, *Pisa*, 1999 (Fig 14) reads as a DeChirico painting, its arch and leaning tower conjuring up the metaphysical works of one of the key figures in early twentieth century modernism.

6 Andrea Morini, "Street, Photographs by Milcho Manchevski". Available online at http://manchevski.com/docs/2_street_morini.pdf. Accessed Nov 2, 2014



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 11

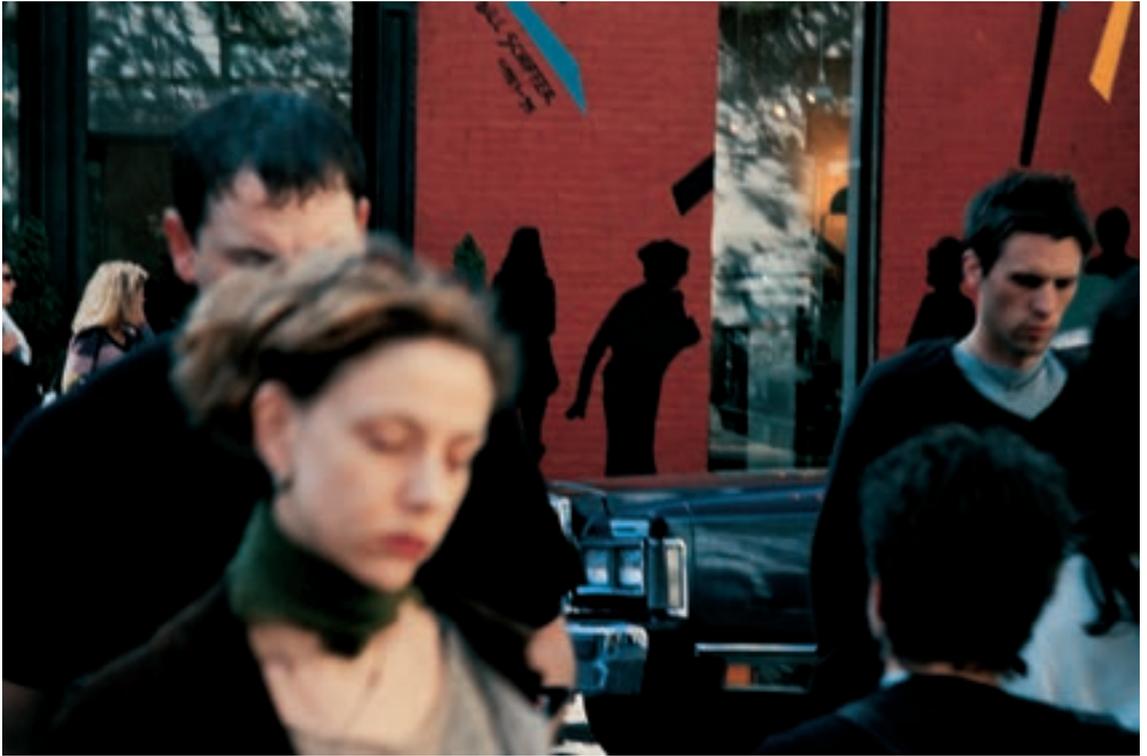


Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14

Expanding the context of this series in Riddle, Manchevski blew up a number of the photographs from Street to billboard size. When Street opened as an exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje in 1999, four billboards featuring enlarged photographs from the series of works in the exhibition were used to advertise it across the city. Subverting the conventional use of the billboard as a platform for presenting information, no details on the exhibition were provided. Decontextualized and ambiguous, the onus was on the audience engaging with these images to read, interpret or decipher any potential meaning. Traveling with the crew assembling the oversized photographic fragments on the billboards, Manchevski photographed the process of installation. The new images produced from this process once again foreground his interest in re-contextualization and re-presentation of pre-existing images. In these images the older photographs are represented as enlarged fragments undergoing combination in a new context. The fragmentation and recombination of pre-existing images back into their original form in a new context to create a new reading, builds on Manchevski's concern with the constructed nature of reality, and an inherent desire to play with and question 'reality' as a form of assemblage. Four of these images were then exhibited alongside the four original photos, amplifying their initial concerns with process and display (Fig 15).

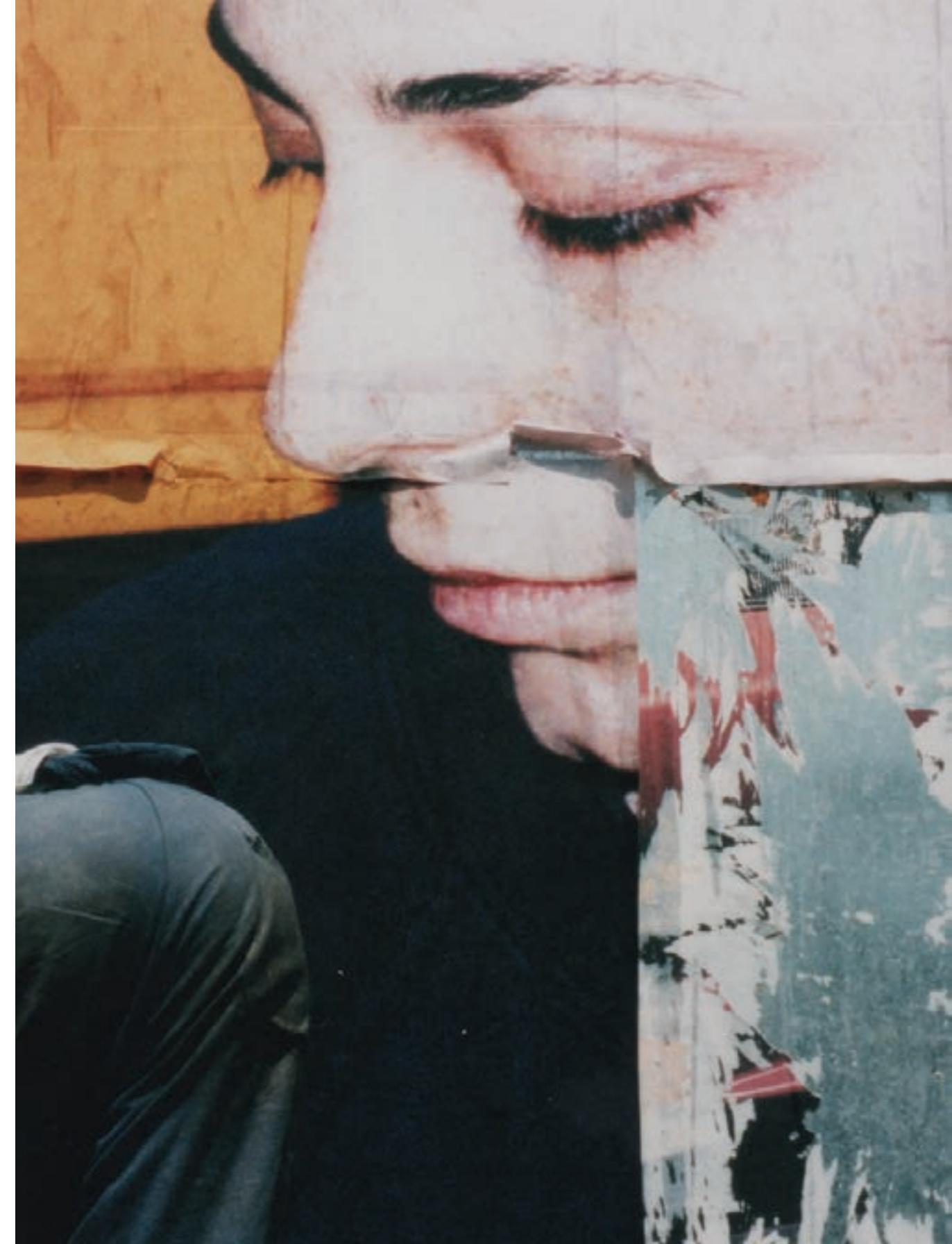




Fig 15















Five Drops of Dream

"In the collection of compositions FIVE DROPS OF DREAM I am interested in two things:

- 1. The explosion of the visual in the mundane moment; and*
- 2. The wrestle and embrace of the narrative and the formal.*

*These photographs live only when they are together and when they form compositions. Like notes in a song."*⁷

Encompassing photographs taken over a ten-year period, *Five Drops of Dream* spans time and, like *Street*, multiple geographic locations which are folded into each other in a series of 49 compositions called strings. Each string is comprised of 5 photographs aligned in a row, their composition serving as the locus for multiple associative readings. The images themselves are often close ups, or shot from askew angles and peripheral viewpoints, capturing what Manchevski describes as "mundane moments" in time. Like *Street*, these images feature the interplay between the incidental and the mysterious, and between light and texture. The richness of the light illuminates fragments of the built environment - concrete, walls, roadways and sidewalks - and activates the anonymous lives that define and pass through it. The balance between light and shadow accentuates the sense of mystery alongside the formal qualities it lends the composition of each piece. Walls and bodies emerge from shadows, and light defines and captures seemingly banal moments in time, its revealing glare asserting and elevating their presence (Fig 16).

If *Street* references the language of painting and the avant-garde, *Five Drops of Dream* pushes these references further. The use of line, color and shape in defining the formal considerations of each string, appropriates the strategies and techniques of twentieth century painting. In some of the strings, a line cuts or sweeps through the composition, unifying otherwise seemingly unrelated elements and linking disparate moments in time and space. As with the early work, images appear within images, and the predominance of windows and reflections add depth, accentuating their spatial considerations and expanding their narrative potential (Fig 17). Vibrant explosions of color and pattern punctuate the strings. A color is picked up in one image and echoed in another. Circles, verticals and diagonals repeat, underpinning the structure of each composition (Fig 18). Form defines these works, from the choices in the framing of the initial photographs, to their alignment into groups of five. This process of selection and arrangement evokes the cut-up method that informed cubism and other subsequent avant-garde practices that emerged during the twentieth century. In effect, each string is a linear collage; its totality wholly dependent on its separate composite elements. The formal considerations underpinning each composition provide a mechanism for the viewer to make numerous and overlapping assumptions about the suggested, if fragmentary, narrative or sets of narratives within each work.

7 Manchevski, Milcho, *Five Drops of Dream*, National Institution Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, 2010, P. 5.

In looking at Manchevski's work in film, similar concerns can be distinguished in *Five Drops of Dream*. Rapid shifts in time and location characterize his films, as does a desire to play with temporal structure and conventional filmic narrative. While film is inherently dependant on the progression of time, the photograph, through its silent stasis remains divorced from this temporal flow. The power of photography, as in painting, lays in the silence of the image; a silence that demands an act of contemplation in order to elicit meaning. Manchevski's films, of course, also demand the active participation of the viewer in constructing meaning, refusing to let them become passive consumers of conventional cinematic narrative. But the encapsulation of time and place in *Five Drops of Dream* provides a wholly different experience to that of cinematic time. The grouping of images in each string may formally echo the progression of images on a filmstrip, but there the comparison ends. As collages, these works are essentially polyptychs. Each individual image has a power and presence of its own, but it is only in their role as component elements within a larger singular framework that they activate the capacity for multiple readings.

The lived experience of the urban predominates in *Street* and *Five Drops of Dream*. It's dynamic rhythm and flow framing the anonymity, work, poverty, and in some cases hints of conflict, that play out in these images. Children and animals form an almost constant presence in the works, foregrounding their poetic, erotic and dramatic context. The viewer is often peripheral, and in many of the works the gaze downwards, drawing attention to the surfaces of the built environment on (and within) which life is played out. In *Five Drops of Dream*, the peripheral or seemingly incidental is recast to become not simply a document of a moment in time, but a possibility. In each work the most overlooked aspects of life are transformed into an intimate visual experience that invites the viewer into a world of open-ended associative contexts and potential meanings.

List of Images:

Fig 1. Beard/Polaroids

Fig 2. Beard/Polaroids

Fig 3. 1 AM Manifesto

Fig 4. How to Explain Joseph Beuys' "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" to a Live Rabbit

Fig 5. 1.74

Fig 6. One Way

Fig 7. Billboard

Fig 8. Central Park

Fig 9. Who Loves You Baby

Fig 10. Marlboro

Fig 11. Paris 3

Fig 12. West Broadway

Fig 13. Tomatoes

Fig 14. Pisa

Fig 15. Riddle

Fig 16. String 1

Fig 17. String 2

Fig 18. String 3

Fig X. A series of 4 Polaroid shots depicting a Polaroid shot in various stages of development

Fig Y. 1 AM Invitation

Fig Z. List of Performance Elements of the Group 1 AM



1

1999-2010



2

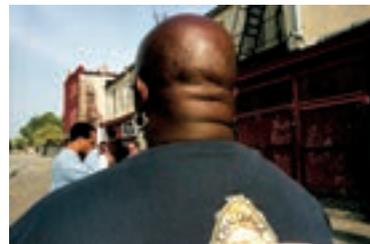
1999-2010



Fig 16



Fig 17



3

1999-2010



4

1999-2010



Fig 18





12 1999-2010



16 1999-2010





21 1999-2010



49 1999-2010

