ON THE AESTHETICS OF SHAME

Anne Kølbæk Iversen

ABSTRACT

Building upon theories of affect and emotion, this article focuses on how shame circulates through affective infrastructures and objects of emotion, engaging with the two distinctive arts practices of Maja Malou Lyse (DK, 1993) and Reba Maybury (UK, 1990). The article pursues the ways in which shame ties to aesthetics; how it is based in a feeling of exposure and rejection that may be negotiated through performative staging, but also how it links to aesthetic evaluation and the public sharing of what is preferably kept private.

KEYWORDS

Feminist art, Affect theory, Performativity, Shame, Aesthetic Categories

> Shame is a feeling and a topic in which visibility and politics, visibility and violence, visibility and social norms intersect.[1]

In this article, I discuss the function of the affect, emotion, or feeling of shame in the visual arts as it connects to distributions of gazes and affects with a particular focus on the practices of contemporary artists Maja Malou Lyse (DK, 1993) and Reba Maybury (UK, 1990). What characterizes both artists is an interest in the boundaries between a feeling of shame, shamelessness, and shaming related to claiming the right to one's own body, sexuality, and image.

Informed by an understanding of shame as a social, infrastructural, and aesthetic emotion developed by theorists Sara Ahmed, Andrea Büttner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sianne Ngai, and Lauren Berlant, supplied with insights from Martha Nussbaum's analysis of shame in legal and psychological terms, I will discuss the articulations of shame in the works by examining how they perform experiences of shame tied to the exposure and transgression of ideals and the ways in which they negotiate existing affective infrastructures of shame. I borrow the term affective infrastructures from Berlant, defining circuits of affects, energies, and desires that form alongside political imaginaries and economic and architectural (and, I would add, technological) infrastructures.[2] Through transforming the aspirations of the *sensus communis*, understood as a shared sensibility or a sensitivity to what is shared, affective infrastructures decouple and recouple what is common.[3] Viewing shame as an affect and emotion distributed through social, cultural, and technical infrastructures, I ask in which ways shame "sticks," as Ahmed would say, but also how this stickiness may be negotiated through performing and short-circuiting existing circuits of images and affects. Through looking at how shame is evoked in the artworks as well as potentially in the viewer, I discuss the patterning of affective infrastructures of shame and how it functions aesthetically, as a shared but contested feeling.

My argument rests on the hypothesis that the selected artists through exposing their eroticized bodies along with the very frameworks for their erotization, sexualization, and potential shaming perform existing affective infrastructures to exhibit them rather than reproduce and affirm them. In this sense the works become an updated form of institutional or infrastructural critique, establishing the space of art as one in which the affective circuits can be paused and maybe redistributed.[4] Informed by Büttner's and Ngai's analyses of the aesthetics of affects—and affects of aesthetics—and Ahmed's

proposition that affect circulates through objects of emotion, I argue that visual art is a crucial arena for making visible exactly what is rather kept invisible, exhibiting motifs that are deemed shame-prone, shameful, but also shameless, to explore the threshold between the private and a "cultural politics" of emotions.[5]

The notion of infrastructure here serves to analyze how affects connect and disconnect subjects from other subjects as well as subjects and objects. Understood as a process of patterning affects not yet consciously defined or graspable,[6] an attention to infrastructure focuses on how affects are tied to objects, discourses, or modes of circulation; how infrastructure "repeats." In the words of Marina Vishmidt, infrastructure "works to enable a set of activities, and it works because the preconditions of its effectivity are neither visible nor relevant; these jut out when the infrastructure breaks down or if an element is isolated from the whole."[7] From this, we might consider infrastructural critique as a short-circuiting of processes that reproduce existing conditions, in this case shame and shaming, through recoupling affects, subjects, and objects.

SHAME: EXPOSURE AND TRANSGRESSION

> Sometimes, however, our 'abnormal' weaknesses are uncovered anyway, and then we blush, we cover ourselves, we turn away our eyes. Shame is the painful emotion that responds to that uncovering. It brands the face with its unmistakable signs.[8]

Most people will recognize the signs and sensations of shame: the blushing and an urge to look away or hide that are well-known motives from the repertoire of shamefulness. While there is obviously no universally fixed account of what defines as shameful, some contemporary theorists of affect agree that there is a certain structure, or grammar in the words of Sedgwick, accounting for what is at play in experiences of shame—on an interpersonal level and in wider social, political, and aesthetic realms.[9] Psychologist and pioneer of affect theory Silvan Tomkins (1911–91) explained how the child feels shame when its object of desire does not reciprocate its desire and thus "breaks the circuit" of attachment.[10] Within this framework the child's looking away because it feels rejected by its mother is the exemplary moment of shame. In addition to this lack of reciprocity, shame can be triggered by the confrontation with one's own or others' transgression of socially accepted boundaries and ideals—transgressions that are perhaps made unknowingly or unwillingly, but which, if they become apparent *as* transgressions

will most likely cause a feeling of shame. The emphasis on a want to cover oneself testifies to the close connection of shame to an external gaze, by which we are exposed to the approval or judgment of others.[11] In the words of Carsten Stage, we "constantly evaluate ourselves in light of how other people see us, and therefore we may want to avoid their gaze if we expect to be judged negatively."[12]

The negative expectation implies that not only do we attempt to avoid the negative judgment from others that might result in a feeling of shame; in feeling shame we also wish to become invisible. The experience of shame is doubled in that shame entails a self-reflexive judgment, which is enforced by its being witnessed, i.e., to be exposed in one's exposure. In the words of Ahmed: "To be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed: to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame."[13]

Given the significance of reciprocity from an object of desire and the role of the external gaze in feeling shame, shame manifests itself as an inherently interpersonal emotion. However, the important shift from the theories of Tomkins to contemporary theorists of affect is the discussion of the role of shame (and other affects) not simply in interpersonal, but rather in social and political terms, arguing that certain subjects are more exposed to shame than others because of how desires, affects, and feelings are attached to specific narratives and objects, including forms of life that are deemed either desirable or unwanted. Ahmed and Berlant, in their discussions of "happy objects" and "cruel optimism," respectively,[14] discuss the relation between the subject and its world, or in-between subjects, by questioning existing distributions and circuits of affect, analyzing who defines and has access to existing narratives, desired objects, and ideals. Similarly, but focusing specifically on shame, Sedgwick in her analysis of "queer performativity" argues that shame is an affect that delineates identity, not simply in intrapsychic terms, but in terms of attachments that intensify or alter the meaning of "almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behaviour."[15] According to Sedgwick shame is at the core of identity formation, because even in interrupting identification through the non-reciprocity of desire and attachment, as theorized by Tomkins, shame makes identity.[16] "(O)ne *is something*, in experiencing shame."[17] Therefore, shame in the solidified form of social stigma offers a crucial entrance to understanding identity as identity politics and why some identities are more shame-prone

than others. "I want to say that *at least* for certain ('queer') people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities."[18] Sedgwick argues for a specific connection between the introversion of the signifier in the deconstructive notion of performativity and the extroversion of theatrical performance, where in its extroverted performative reenactment an eventual transformation of the shame of the refused return takes place *through* shame.[19] This hypothesis of the relation between performativity and performance asserts that the performative repetition of the circuit of attachment, which moves through the child's expression of interest or desire over a refusal that results in shame, can be employed creatively in theatrical performance to transform the initial shame, even if, and this is an important point, this can never be fully excised or left behind. "If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy."[20] I take this to imply that the aim for sociability are at stake in everyday performativity and theatrical performance alike and that the latter marks an opportunity to mirror the primary narcissistic circuit, but only at the risk of simultaneously repeating its refused return.

Ahmed is similarly concerned with the everyday encounters shaped by affects. In her analysis of shame in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) she underlines the relation of the emotion to an experience of failure and an inability to live up to certain ideals or expectations: that the feeling of shame is felt more intensely when the exposure takes place in front of someone who you care about and that you would like to care about you. Ahmed emphasizes the physicality of shame, how it works in and through bodies, meaning that shame also involves "the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame. The 'turning' of shame is painful, but it involves a specific kind of pain."[21] This specific kind of pain relating to the turning away from an external gaze connects to what Ahmed understands as a failure of love; a failure of complying to what would make us an object of love. In this way shame is tied to a positive and constructive wish to be or stay integrated in a community by marking the crossing of a threshold. This experience testifies to the ambivalence of shame that as a negative emotion of self is an expression of internalized ideals and expectations. Ahmed says:

> If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practices of love*. What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love.[22]

Shame thus holds a repressive function, where the fear of triggering shame secures the compliance to certain ideals, norms, and rules, and the experience or expectation of shame reminds the individual of established ideals. In the words of Ahmed, shame in this way offers a sense of belonging, while simultaneously serving a function of domestication. The boundaries creating the threshold to shame is a means of protection, but also of repression, and shame may often be the price we pay for countering established ideals and norms. However, if there is a tension between the wish to be loved and the failure of love exposed in shame, Ahmed's analysis shows that it is a tension created by circulations and the saturation of affects in certain objects; a tension which the individual may attempt to renegotiate by attaching and recirculating affects and objects differently. The negation of belonging and identification exposed in shame, on its reverse side, produces *something*, e.g., feeling shameful, negated, but potentially also proud, rebellious, or belonging somewhere else.

Thus, building on but also breaking from a psychological approach that understands the exposure inherent in shame through strictly individual terms, and shame as the moral effect of unveiling, these thinkers of shame show how affects are tied in with social, political, and aesthetic expressions in shaping social relations and cultural narratives. In this article, I take a closer look at how the two contemporary visual artists Maja Malou Lyse and Reba Maybury tackle issues of shame and the urge to either hide or look away through interrogating motifs of feminine pleasure and sexuality, gendered power dynamics, and the status of sex work. As I read them, their works offer a simultaneous presentation and negotiation of what Ahmed terms "objects of emotions" or "sticky objects," i.e., texts, images, or motifs charged with affective tension.

Objects of emotions are objects loaded with affect and thus *sticky*. I argue that the erotized feminine body is such a sticky object, through which affective infrastructures of shame become visible and analyzable. Ahmed proposes to look at objects of emotion rather than emotion as such, pointing out how emotions such as shame belong neither to the subject nor object but are produced as effects of circulation.

> I suggest that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such. My argument still explores how emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects. Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension.[23]

Ahmed explains emotions as fundamentally social in that they form and produce surfaces of social space by creating tensions and connections between subjects and objects as well as in between subjects. Emotions, Ahmed insists, do not reside *within* the individual or social already formed, but produce the surfaces and boundaries making the individual and the social appear as objects.[24] Emotions in Ahmed's analysis are thus inherently relational and dynamic, just as objects loaded with emotion are. "My analysis will show how emotions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated. The objects of emotion take shape as effects of circulation."[25]

From Ahmed's delineation follows that objects of emotion are the product of circulation just as they themselves circulate through the social fabric that forms from the attachment or distancing to these objects of emotion. Just as objects of emotion have a capacity to move someone or something,[26] Ahmed explains how emotions are also always in motion. This means that an emotion is not simply something someone has and can pass on to somebody else without any change happening on the way. An emotion may create tensions, but the emotion itself also exists within a field of tension. Even if we are two people feeling shame, we cannot be sure that we have the same relation to the emotion, Ahmed argues. Being moved by something entails being attached to it, and it is these specific attachments, broken circuits, and social surfaces that I will investigate further in the following.

SEXUAL AUTONOMY ON DISPLAY

A central example when discussing issues of exposure, erotization, and the power of images in a Danish context is visual artist Maja Malou Lyse. Lyse is born in 1993 and graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2022. Her practice includes sexual education transmitted through social media and on national TV alongside artworks referencing pin-up aesthetics, pornography, and sex work in presentations of sexuality as a commodity and expression of individual desire.

Lyse's work lingers in the intersection between sexual education, critical sex studies, and post-porn aesthetics and the reception of her work has been split between a blank dismissal of its references to pornography and likeness to commercial images on the one hand and appraisals of the empowerment and liberation in these self-expressions on the other.[27] I see her working with and through the body as an exploration and performance of the ideals and images that circulate in a contemporary visual culture. The display or displacement of images that would normally—or to many, at least, *preferably*—be consumed in a private sphere into an art sphere puts it on the fine line between shameful and shameless just as its reception testifies to a heightened interest in wanting to close it off as one or the other.

Lyse's practice thus becomes a relevant site for examining and questioning infrastructures of shame and the use of shame within art. Her practice emerged from partaking in communities which explore their own bodies and experiment with how to express and stage themselves. In an interview around her self-staging photographic works, Lyse explains how coming across a community on Tumblr created a new pathway for her practice.

> I think my parents were uncomprehending and worried about what I was doing. Maybe they were even ashamed. In that way, it felt lonely until I accidentally came across an online community on Tumblr, where those reservations didn't exist. Here were young women posting images of themselves. Mostly selfies. And there were all kinds of nudity and all kinds of bodies. No one shaved their armpits. No one was ashamed. I was totally captivated by them.[28]

The quote reflects how the experience of shame in one context (the parents' alleged shame in response to her images) can be negotiated through a shift of context (the lack of shame in the women posting images of themselves in a Tumblr community), resulting in a shift in affective attachment to the images. Even if this example has anecdotal character, I read it as an expression of Lyse's attempt at articulating alternative affective infrastructures that takes place within her art as well. Through her works she embodies the ambivalences that surround the discussion about the objectified female body, for whom it poses, and whose gaze and power it is captured by.

Fig. 1
Maja Malou Lyse, *BOMBSHELL, BOOM!* December 12, 2024–February 1, 2025, Politikens Forhal.
Photo: Jan Søndergaard.

BOMBSHELL, BOOM!

While she often appears in her works as either model, performer, or host, her most recent exhibitions centered around the showcasing of found material: a nude photograph of Marilyn Monroe and samples from the archive of *Ekstra Bladet's* Page 9 Girl—a feature showing semi-nude young women since 1976—respectively, in discussions of the right to one's image and the potential exploitation of erotic images vis-à-vis censorship of female autonomous sexuality.

In the case of the exhibition *Bombshell, Boom!*, on show at Politikens Forhal December 12, 2024–1 February 2025, Lyse exhibited censored reproductions of archival images of former Page 9 Girl under the age of 18 alongside the cabinets holding the censored images. In addition to the posters and cabinets displayed in the exhibition space Lyse had a pair of eyes belonging to a current Page 9 model installed on the billboard overseeing the City Hall Square in Copenhagen **(Fig. 1)** in a reversal of the gazes of onlooker and looked at, while the artist herself posed as a Page 9 Girl in an edition of the newspaper. The exhibition in this way borrowed existing formats of display and distribution putting an emphasis on the consensual sharing of images and the returned gaze of the portrayed subject as an example of autonomous sexuality.

As explained in the exhibition text, *Ekstra Bladet* had wanted to erase the images of girls down to the age of 15 from their archive, because contemporary ethics and legislation illegalize the publishing of erotized images of minors. However, the models responded to this form of censorship expressing a wish to keep the images in the archive as part of cultural heritage. They argued that "erasing the images would be to erase an important part of history and instead called for a say in the fate of the photographs. Today, the images are stored in a locked cabinet."[29] By presenting the file cabinets holding the censored images as a contested cultural artefact, Lyse's exhibition highlighted the political, societal changes as well as changes in sexual morals. Through this conceptual appropriation Lyse points to the surrounding cultural, social, and aesthetic environment, which does not simply present or represent, but to a high degree produces and shapes our sexuality.

Through the title *BOMBSHELL, BOOM!*, the exhibition raises the question: Why are images of attractive, eroticized women potentially explosive? What happens if the bombshell explodes—and in the hands of whom? Whereas eroticized images in the late 1960s

and 70s was in large part a reaction to the restrictive sexual morals of the 1950s, today the potential threat of having one's image circulated marks a similar threshold to eventual stigmatization and shaming. A recent study of young Danish women who had experienced digital sexual assaults explained how these women showed traits of an "anxiety of shame" related to the non-consensual sharing of their images.[30] This is an example of how shame "sticks" to images of the female body even if the sharing of sexual images in an intimate relation is not directly deemed shameful within the cultural context in which they are circulated. The same study argues for the importance of "breaking the loop" of shame by shifting the focus from the young women's presumed ignorance and victimization to the non-consensual acts of the aggressors. This is also a way of shifting the focus from the *shame* of the victims to the *guilt* of the aggressors.[31] A similar redirection of affects took place through the #MeToo movement, through which women gained momentum to distance themselves from a feeling of shame for others' behavior towards them, and through the public sharing of experiences to see them as exactly shared. In both cases, the infrastructure between shamed subjects proves crucial, giving subjects who have been abused and felt ashamed and responsible for what has taken place the ability to turn their shame into a realization of the misconduct of the violators. #MeToo is an example of how the feeling of shame builds an infrastructure which has a potential of transforming it into a revolutionizing feeling, as Marx predicted.[32]

By showcasing the censored Page 9 Girls Lyse insists to keep these women's images in view and thus raises questions of the power of images walking the fine line between the protection of (sexual) autonomy and its repression.

Through pushing cultural stigmas towards a discussion of consent, Lyse's works can be read as an attempt to represent and embody the anonymous and faceless women whose bodies and images are exchanged and exploited every day. Lyse's position here aligns with a pro-sex, or post-porn, perspective, which advocates for sexual freedom and sexual expression with consent being a key concept to the practicing, performing, and image production of sex.[33] From this position, dissident representations and independent productions of sexuality are seen as an opportunity for the empowerment of women and sexual minorities, and pro-sex and post-porn theorists will argue to distinguish between, on the one hand, the visual representation of, say, submission and treating or being treated like

an object within a contractual and consensual setting and a general objectification and instrumentalization, on the other.[34]

This gesture is particularly emphasized in the exhibition *BOMBSHELL, BOOM!*, but also at play in the exhibition *MM* displayed at O—Overgaden—Institute of Contemporary Art in the fall of 2024. As the title indicates—being an acronym for both Maja Malou and Marilyn Monroe—Lyse here explores her own imbrication with Monroe's legacy and the experience of being trapped in the ideal of the "siren;" the young and sexy woman. The exhibition revolves around Lyse's purchase of the nude photograph of Monroe, which Playboy-magnate Hugh Hefner acquired without Monroe's knowledge and consent and printed as the centerfold of the first issue of *Playboy* in December 1953. Hefner kept the photograph in his office until his death in 2017. Bizarrely, the photograph is signed on the front by Hefner, indicating that he is the creator of this image of Monroe—which he in some uncanny sense might be, if we see the image as Hefner's appropriation of Monroe's image. In Lyse's display of Hefner's image of Monroe lies a performative gesture that at once repeats and highlights it. By appropriating this iconic example of objectification and nonconsensual sharing to circulate it outside of Playboy's distribution channels as an historical artifact Lyse strips bare the erotic charge that Hefner attempted to encapsulate and exploit for his own sake.

Through these examples I see Maja Malou Lyse's practice as illuminating of the ideals and constraints prevalent not just within the social realm, but more so in art by testing the boundaries of what can be shared. Lyse's exhibitions show different ways of recirculating and redefining sticky objects, for instance portrayals of sexualized imagery, while making visible the affective infrastructure that potentially forms between those whose image has been circulated without their consent, between those who recognize art produced in the tackling of these issues aesthetically, but also between those who do not. Also, in Lyse's explorations of feminine sexuality and desire within an art field, I see a refusal of the shame tied to a demand to keep this private; an insistence on discussing the stakes of the nude and the power dynamics at play in the gaze between the onlooker and the observed.

> Presentations of My physicality as a Woman must at all times confirm that I am not just a hole to enter, instead I am the hole that eclipses.[35]

I see a similar defiance of the shame conventionally sticking to the female body in the practice of Reba Maybury, however through different means. Born in 1990, Maybury graduated in Fashion History and Theory in 2013 at the Faculty of Arts and Design Central Saint Martins in London.

Maybury has built an artistic practice around her work as a "political dominatrix," under the alias Mistress Rebecca, commissioning submissives to produce works, or elements of works, for her. The work as a dominatrix is a way of disclosing power-structures and turning the hierarchy between the sex worker and client on its head. In her book *Faster than an Erection* (2021), she explains her way of working as a dominatrix and an artist.

> My method of dominating attacks and reassembles what the division of labour is, making it hard to categorise within capitalist structures. I am giving service which I turn into one that services Me, these expressions of desire cannot easily be recouped.[36]

Turning the service of the dominatrix into a service of the submissive is the central play of the power dynamic within the BDSM relationship and formulated in contractual terms. Apart from being a recoupling of the division of labor, Maybury in her book directly talks about shame and its devastating effects, and how through disrupting the power relation she has been able to move beyond the shame conventionally sticking to the sex worker. Instead, her work as a dominatrix feeds from the shame of her submissives, who seek out the simultaneous affirmation and humiliation from her. "By being open I went on to free Myself further than them. I do not hide, I am energized by refuting the density of shame. Then in return they can not shame Me and with that I use their shame as My currency. This makes Me feel free and this is ecstatic."[37] (Note how she has commissioned a submissive to upper case all appearances of "My" and "Woman" in the text). As I read this, the submissives' desire to be humiliated by the dominatrix covers over a fear of being exposed and humiliated in "reality"—i.e., outside of the BDSM relationship.

Maybury's account points to a situation that may be understood through Martha Nussbaum's analysis of primitive shame and weak narcissism, causing people with an inherent sense of shame to be particularly prone to shaming others. Nussbaum connects the idea of shame as stigma developed by sociologist Erving Goffman with developmental psychological analyses of infantile narcissism and primitive shame as a starting point for her analysis of social organization and group formations based on shame and shaming.[38] She explains how primitive shame is satisfied only through the humiliation of others, and that groups of people who feel ashamed themselves are more prone to advocate for so-called "shame-penalties."[39] Through the performative, relational, and contractual aspects of her artworks, Maybury inverts the conventional hierarchy between the female sex worker and male client through a conceptual reframing, what may also be read as a non-compliance with the shame that others wish to stick onto her.

> The main tenet of My Life's actions is that I am beyond shame. Once I chose to keep My legs open—nothing could harm Me. I cannot be smeared. My sexual behaviour is a vehicle for both exhilaration and peace of mind, but most importantly a pulsating desire for power disruption. Shame kills and I am here, right now, talking to you, completely present because I reject what harms Me.[40]

As the quote exemplifies, Maybury, through the work as a dominatrix, succeeds in transgressing the shaming and shame related to her body, sexuality, and sex work. In the exhibition *Moralists at a Costume Party* at Huset for Kunst og Design (HFKD) displayed in the spring and summer of 2021 Maybury asked four submissive men to strip down, leaving their clothes and shoes on the floor of the exhibition space as a trace of their presence, their desire to be subdued by her, and the exchange of services. A similar installation was presented in the exhibition *The Happy Man* at Company Gallery in 2024, where visitors were invited to circle these piles of clothes, described by Jeppe Ugelvig as "post-minimalist assisted readymades."[41] Ugelvig points to the ways in which Maybury's exhibition highlights the oftentimes hidden or invisible male partaking in sexual transactions—"the John"—leaving his female counterpart with the cultural shame. Instead of representations of the female sex worker, viewers are left with the marks of the men paying visits to this implicit worker: "This is a sculptural proposition with an effect nothing short of titillating. Denied access to these explicit acts,

viewers are instead invited to re-construct the John in their minds by inspecting his underwear up close, safely re-branded as artwork."[42]

While subjecting herself to and reclaiming the historically vulnerable position of the sex worker, she weaponizes the potential shaming of this profession by directing it into the production of conceptual artworks. When a man she met on a plane photographed her while asleep and later circulated her image without her consent, she chose to display it as part of the exhibition at HFKD, thus framing it as an example of his wish to capture her, instead of the exposure of her that the image entailed. This recoupling of affects and objects is a way of making new paths and infrastructures for affects to flow between subjects and objects.

The exhibition *Mr V Neck and Mr Polo Shirt are Friends* at Simian, October 12–December 15, 2024, featured a work, which consisted of impressions on the floor, made by a local submissive instructed by the artist. The marks are only visible when lit by UV-lighting and thus represent only in a subtle way the bodily presence of this man. The lights in the exhibition space were hung at the height of an average Danish man's crotch—approximately 83 cm—to direct attention to the gendered distribution of gazes. Titled *Faster than an Erection*—homonymous to the publication—the work is an example of the strategic work of the dominatrix, who must be able to predict and preempt the reactions of her submissives. In a conversation printed in the booklet for the exhibition, Maybury explains her considerations for this installation:

> So much of what I do is about zooming into the minutiae of gendered power dynamics of the everyday and how, as a dominatrix, these observations become tools to humiliate and control. I know for certain that a man's crotch is not publicly surveyed in the same way a woman's chest or behind is. I want people to be able to enjoy these often bland but potent observations of where and how male entitlement live and thrive [sic].[43]

In recalibrating whose bodies are served as pleasing collections of consumable holes and other body parts by submerging her submissives in inescapable exposure, reducing the man to something smaller,[44] Maybury's practice functions as a catalyst for existing and possible relations of power, if by power we understand the competency to define relations and (re)direct affects. That said, even if the positions of dominatrix and submissive within the works are

contractual rather than personal and the submissives' misogyny structural rather than pathological, I see a potential risk in the work of upholding a tension of shame instead of transgressing or transforming it. As I read it, the push between the dominatrix' control of her submissives and their desire to submit to her while attempting to get the upper hand, stripping her of her power, creates a suspense which is driven by shame. My suspicion is that instead of changing gendered dynamics, the domination and humiliation may only feed further misogyny. To move beyond shame entirely would necessitate that the submissives look beyond their own shame and potential proneness to shaming others. But then there would be no art of the dominatrix.

SHAME AS AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY, OR, BROKEN CIRCUITS AND BREAKING THE LOOP

In my analysis of works by Maja Malou Lyse and Reba Maybury, I have discussed the negotiation of affective infrastructures proposed by the two artists through their alternative circulations of images and affects. The forms of refusal of external projections and judgments that the artworks exhibit may be read as shamelessness; the absence of a feeling of shame, when others would find it necessary that one was, in fact, shameful, as in the idiom: *Shame on you!* While shamelessness is often read as a provocation, an attempt to push for a certain reaction in the other, it may also exhibit–as proposed by Berlant–existing structures of shame, reflecting the affective protocols of the onlooker by refusing to produce the "appropriate" affective response in that situation. As Berlant underscores: "The structure of shamelessness doesn't necessarily involve in-your-faceness. It can involve any frank refusal to produce the affect for you that you need someone to have in order for you to feel in control of the situation of exchange."[45] Along these lines, the artists' repeated display of sexualized images in art museums and galleries may be read as a refusal to produce the appropriate affect of these spaces.[46]

I read the gestures of Lyse and Maybury as renunciations of an immediate feeling of shame and I find them relevant to a discussion of shame as a cultural affect and aesthetic category that raises questions of what transgressions need to be made to dismantle not just one's own shame but existing infrastructures of shame. In the last part of my article, I wish to further reflect on the aesthetics of shame that the practices of Lyse and Maybury seem to call for by supplementing the thoughts of Ahmed and Sedgwick with a discussion of Andrea Büttner and Sianne Ngai.

Shame's relation to aesthetics as an emotion related to visibility and visual art is at least twofold; as an affect connected to the staged exchange of looking and being looked at within the artwork and as an aesthetic category tied to the production and consumption of art. Contending that every aesthetic judgment—including the judgment of what counts as art—entails an address to a community which may be accepted or declined, shame potentially occurs in the exposure of a work of art to a viewer and in every aesthetic judgment. This means, on the one hand, that there is a potential experience of shame in every work of art because it is always negotiated on the level of reception. Shame in relation to art is in "tension" to borrow Ahmed's term. Discussions and valuations of artistic expressions and representations of the feeling to a high degree depend upon whether the subject identifies with, distances herself from the shame articulated or, even accepts it as shame.[47] Because of shame's infectious quality, inviting either to pleasure, pity, embarrassment, or even disgust in the witnessing of the shame of others, shame as an aesthetic feeling is one that produces either proximity and sociability or distance and isolation.

Andrea Büttner, in her book *Shame*, argues that the self-reflexivity and exposure entailed in shame is closely tied to aesthetics and art-making in which the artist exhibits something to someone, thus exposing their work to a viewer and exposing their view of what defines as art. She argues that this exposure to judgment and the resulting self-reflexivity mirrors what is at stake in aesthetic judgment. Instead of dealing with art historical examples of sexuality or nudity, which have traditionally been the focus of iconographic approaches to shame as well as the analyses of this article, Büttner focuses on art as an arena for shame by arguing that every piece of art is an act of exposure to the onlookers and their judgment of the exhibited as appropriate or not within given criteria for art.

> The reasons for shame are varied and subject to change. Shame is persistently experienced and is key to understanding our behaviour in the visual realm. It is central to aesthetic judgement.[48]

Contending that aesthetic judgments, understood in the Kantian tradition as judgments of taste, rest on the attempt to reach common ideas through subjective feelings, thus determining what we define as "beautiful," "pleasurable," or even, "art,"[49] Büttner's analysis offers an entry point to discussing how shame is an emotional effect

of art production and reception. Büttner argues how in every proposition of an artwork as art, by which the artist discloses something (the work of art) to someone who then deems it either "art" or "not art," "good art" or "bad art," a potential negative judgment and experience of shame is present in that it mirrors the situation in which one exposes oneself to another, who may judge them positively or negatively.

While Büttner suggests strategies of opacity and invisibility, as a response to what she sees as a ubiquitous claim for visibility and exposure, I have wished to test the paradoxical hypothesis that the explicit exposure of the eroticized body can be a response to a fear of exposure inherent in a contemporary image culture largely building on self-staging and exposure. The motif of the eroticized female body within contemporary art, where it intersects with contemporary image culture, shows to be a sticky object because of the expectations and conventions as to what kind of images can be presented as art. We could say that shame hereby offers an invitation to cultivating a sensibility towards subjects or situations that are especially "shame-prone;" to recouple objects of emotion and create new affective infrastructures.

The double function of shame in art as an affective response to certain motifs or issues represented in an artwork and as the potential dismissal of the production or valuation of an artwork resonates with Sianne Ngai's analysis of aesthetic categories of which she focuses on the "cute," "zany," and "interesting." Ngai argues that each of the categories indexes one of late capitalism's most socially binding processes: production (the zany), circulation (the interesting), and consumption (the cute), respectively.

> It is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index the uncertain status of performing between labor and play, the increasing routing of art and aesthetic experience through the exchange of information, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to our commodities that they are 'about' production, circulation, and consumption.[50]

These categories, so Ngai, offer ways of negotiating affectively the problems of, among other things, the relation between the autonomous artwork and the commodity, the relevance of aesthetics to critical or nonaesthetic judgments, and the idea of art as play opposed to labor,

> both at the formal, objective level of style (cuteness as a sensuous quality or appearance of objects) and at the discursive, subjective level of judgment ('cute' as a feeling-based evaluation or speech act, a particular way of communicating a complex mixture of feelings about an object to others and demanding that they feel the same).[51]

In the same way, the aesthetic category of shame, I argue, offers ways to negotiate affectively issues of exposure, and the threshold between private and shared emotions.

In another analysis, Ngai proposes to read the "negative emotions" as "negative" in the sense of both something undesirable or bad, and as what is oppositional and antagonistic, showing how a focus on envy, irritation, or disgust lingers between affective consciousness and material political conditions. Importantly, Ngai shows how art is a privileged cultural praxis for reflecting upon "art's own position in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society,"[52] reflected in the powerlessness of subjects caught in situations of "restricted agency," expressed through negative emotions. Similarly, I argue, shame as it connects to the successful or unsuccessful exhibition and reception of a relevant artwork is a key prism to discuss the relevance and function of art valuation. The notion of the *sensus communis*, which is discussed by both Ngai, Büttner, and Berlant, understood as an at least aspired shared attunement to, for instance, beauty, something cute, or the category of art, can help explain why shame is powerful as an aesthetic feeling and aesthetic category. In projecting or externalizing objectifications of subjective feeling, in checking our own desires and pleasures/displeasures against the desires and pleasures/displeasures of others,[53] we make ourselves vulnerable. This resonates with Sedgwick's analysis of the theatrical performance of an initial shame, which may simply reiterate a primary refusal and rejection, but also holds the potential of recognition and transformation. This doesn't mean that a feeling of shame will be prompted universally by specific artworks, but rather that it is a fundamental aesthetic category as the potential affective by-product to aesthetic judgment.

Building on Büttner's and Ngai's analyses, I thus claim that shame is an aesthetic category simultaneously relating to production, circulation, and consumption as a potential negative judgment tied to aesthetic objects. By looking at how the affective infrastructure of shame patterns and transforms through aesthetic objects in relation

to their cultural contexts and discourses, the private experience of shame proposed as art is likely to be dismissed *as* private. However, as proposed by the theorists of shame, this alleged privacy has social and political relevance. As an affect and emotion that marks the subject's wish for a desire to be reciprocated; a desire to be if not desired then acknowledged and accepted, shame is a central lens through which to understand what is at stake within a capitalist production and circulation of images branded as supposedly interpersonal, subjective, and social, yet monitored and filtered through opaque algorithms and "trends," valuing certain identities and expressions while shaming others.[54]

The work of Lyse and Maybury could be seen as contributions to an aesthetics of shame in the distinct ways in which they explore how the theatrical, extroverted, and explicit performances form part of the process of structuring identity through repeated gestures and acts. In this way, they reconfigure shame—as a "free radical" in the words of Sedgwick—and how it attaches to "a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people's behavior toward oneself."[55] Hence, instead of seeing the works as merely "shameless," I prefer to see them as negotiations of the shame sticking to the female body and to sexual imagery presented as art. The in-your-face-ness and theatricality in the practices and works analyzed read as a necessary overidentification with the claim to one's own body, image, and desire, which is still necessary within a shame-prone culture, inducing: shame for posting images of oneself; shame for working as a sex worker; shame for making these experiences and relations into an art piece. In this sense, I read the invocation of shamelessness not as a refusal of the feeling of shame but a refusal of the shaming by others. If there is a critical potential in this kind of work—and thus also a critical potential in the aesthetics of shame—it lies in the refusal of being shamed for not keeping private or hidden experiences of shamefulness, shamelessness, and shaming in breaking with the invisibility and anonymity of so many women, whose images and bodies circulate on an everyday basis, including as art.

1 Andrea Büttner, *Shame* (London: Koenig Books, 2020), 5.
2 "What remains for our pedagogy of unlearning is to build affective infrastructures that admit the work of desire as the work of an aspirational ambivalence. [...] By definition, the common forms of life are always going through a phase, as infrastructures will." Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 413.
3 Berlant, "The Commons," 399, 414.
4 I borrow the term "infrastructural critique" from Marina Vishmidt, "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique," *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Utrecht: BAK / Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 265–270.
5 Andrea Büttner, *Shame*, 10; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
6 Similar to Raymond Williams' definition of *structures of feeling*. Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–135.
7 Vishmidt, "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing," 266.
8 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 173.
9 Büttner, *Shame,* 13; Eve K. Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993): 4.
10 Tomkins is cited in, e.g., Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*": 6–7 and Lauren Berlant, "The Broken Circuit," *Cabinet Magazine* 31, accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/najafi_serlin_berlant.php.
11 The etymology of the word "shame" suggests that its original meaning was "cover." "Outside Germanic no root of corresponding form and sense has been found, but many scholars assume a pre-Germanic **skem-*, variant of **kem-* to cover (Germanic **hem-*: *ham-* as in hame *n.1*), 'covering oneself' being the natural expression of shame." "Shame," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/shame_n?tab=etymology.
12 Carsten Stage, *Skam*, Tænkepause 68 (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2019), 7.
13 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.
14 "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project [...] These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
15 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 12 and 14.
16 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5.
17 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 12.
18 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 14.
19 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5 and 6.
20 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 4.
21 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.
22 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 106.
23 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.
24 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.
25 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.
26 Ahmed here draws upon the etymology of "emotion" stemming from the latin "emovere" meaning to shake or stir.
27 See for instance: Maria Kjær Themsen, "Dansk samtidskunsts dulle realiserer en gammel feministisk våd drøm," *Information*, August 23, 2019; Barbara Hilton, "Det mest radikale ville nok være at give min krop fri," interview with Maja Malou Lyse, *Eurowoman* 292 (May 2022): 36–49; Christopher Mygind Juul, "Et opgør med pornotopien," *Costume* (March–April 2021): 56.
28 Maja Malou Lyse in an interview with Freja Bech-Jessen, *Costume* (March–April 2021): 49. Translation by the author.
29 It is important to note here that it has not been possible to verify how many of the models in question spoke out in regard to this matter and therefore difficult to ascertain whether the images are depictions of "autonomous" female sexuality as the exhibition puts forth, even if it remains probable. A former Page 9 Girl, Pia Fris Laneth, who posed as a Page 9 Girl when 20 years old in 1975 and at 15 in the magazine, *Ugens Rapport*, has pronounced that she posed entirely voluntary and in an expression of sexual liberation. Pia Fris Laneth, interviewed by Louise Lindblad and Mette Byriel-Thygesen, in *Sexhundredetallet* (lit. "The Sexteenth Hundred"), a podcast produced by the National Museum of Denmark, season 2, episode 4. The case around the archive entailing images of minors is described in an article from *Berlingske*, "Side 9-arkiv med nøgenbilleder af mindreårige skal alligevel ikke destrueres," *Berlingske*, June 20, 2023, accessed September 11, 2025, https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/side-9-arkiv-med-noegenbilleder-af-mindreaarige-skal-alligevel-ikke.
30 Signe Uldbjerg Mortensen, "Defying Shame," *MedieKultur* 67 (2020): 110. The term "shame anxiety" is defined by Léon Wurmser, who differentiates between shame affect, shame anxiety, and shame as a reaction formation. Léon Wurmser, "Primary Shame, Mortal Wound and Tragic Circularity: Some New Reflections on Shame and Shame Conflicts," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 96, no. 6 (2015): 1615–1634.
31 Ibid., 115. Another discussion is also whether the type of social justice—judgments based on shame rather than guilt—is constructive or expedient. Clearly, there have been examples of shaming and public disgrace that did not follow customary legal principles. The discussion is linked to the distinction between shame and guilt—something that Martha Nussbaum has explored in depth, but which I will not go into further in this context.

32 Karl Marx in a letter to his friend Arnold Ruge in 1843 writes: "You look at me with a smile and ask: What is gained by that? No revolution is made out of shame. I reply: Shame is already a revolution of a kind... Shame is a kind of anger which is turned inward. And if a whole nation really experienced a sense of shame, it would be like a lion, crouching ready to spring." Karl Marx, "Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 133. As quoted in Büttner, *Shame*, 19.

33 See, for instance, Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

34 See, for instance, Tim Stüttgen, ed., *Post/Porn/Politics* (Berlin: b_books, 2009) and Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 249–291.

35 Reba Maybury, *Faster than an Erection*, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Faster than an Erection*, June 2–September 12, 2021, at MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome (Rome: MACRO, 2021), 10.

36 Maybury, *Faster than an Erection*, 33.

37 Maybury, *Faster than an Erection*, 24.

38 Nussbaum founds her analysis on the theories of Erving Goffman, *Stigma – Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New Yersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1963), and the developmental psychology and attachment theories of Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby.

39 Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 233. This type of penalty refers to amends of humiliation or shaming in response to acts perceived as deviant/unacceptable behavior, but which does not necessarily endanger anyone, e.g. urinating in the street; drinking alcohol (driving with alcohol in the blood as an exception here); gambling etc.)—the main point being the public display and humiliation of the person being penalized. The distinction between guilt and shame lies at the core of Nussbaum's analysis. From a legal perspective, Nussbaum discusses shame judgments and their negative effects and is interested in how it can be that certain individuals and groups lean towards shaming as punishment. She is very critical of judging based on shame, as it will stick to the individual and perhaps also to the individual's entire family and circle of friends: In shaming and shame penalties you have not just done something wrong, you *are* wrong.

40 Maybury, *Faster than an Erection*, 10.

41 Jeppe Ugelvig, "Reba Maybury Deconstructs the Sexual-Economic Contract," *Frieze*, 9 May 2024, accessed September 11, 2025, https://www.frieze.com/article/reba-maybury-happy-man-2024-review.

42 Ugelvig, "Reba Maybury Deconstructs the Sexual-Economic Contract." Whereas Ugelvig writes "the John" in *Faster than an Erection*, this is consequently spelled "the john."

43 Reba Maybury in conversation with Lucy McKenzie, "An Enlightenment to Entitlement," in *Mr V Neck and Mr Polo Shirt are Friends*, Simiana, October 2024, accessed September 11, 2025, https://strapi.ssiimmiiaann.org/uploads/Reba_Maybury_646c4c7644.pdf.

44 Maybury in conversation with Lucy McKenzie, "An Enlightenment to Entitlement."

45 Lauren Berlant, "The Broken Circuit," *Cabinet Magazine* 31, accessed 19 April, 2024, https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/najafi_serlin_berlant.php.

46 Preciado analyses how erotic imagery is not included into the history and institutions of art, concerned with upholding the distinction between a critical subject and the "imbecile masturbator." Preciado writes: "[A] new historiography of art is being built in which porn, prostitution and feminism aren't part of the same story. Segregated into different rooms, contexts and concepts, good girls and good lookers aren't allowed make history together." Beatriz (Paul) Preciado, "Museum, Urban Detritus and Pornography," *Zehar* 64 (2008): 32.

47 Freud argues that the creative writer through the aesthetic expression delivers his or her forbidden (i.e., shameful) fantasies in fictional form to a reader, which readers then gain pleasure from when reading. Sigmund Freud "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *On Freud's Creative Writers and Day-dreaming*, ed. Ethel Spector Person, Peter Fonagy, and Sérgio T. Figueira (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995 [(1908)]), 13.

48 Büttner, *Shame*, 10.

49 See, for instance, Berlant, "The Commons," and Thierry de Duve, "This is Art: Anatomy of a Sentence," *Artforum*, April 1, 2014, accessed September 11, 2025, https://www.artforum.com/features/thierry-de-duve-on-aesthetic-judgment-219746/.

50 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 13.

51 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2.

52 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

53 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 41.

54 See, for instance, Taina Bucher, *If... then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Justin Grandinetti and Jeffrey Bruinsma, "The Affective Algorithms of Conspiracy TikTok," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, no. 3., vol. 67 (2023): 274-293.

55 Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 12.