



Erinç Seymen, *Portrait of a Pasha*, 2009  
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## Queer Art of Sodomitical Sabotage, Queer Ethics of Surfaces: Embodying Militarism and Masculinity in Erinç Seymen's *Portrait of a Pasha* (2009)

*I see art as sabotage.  
If you can't plan it well,  
you'll end up with the police.*  
(Erinç Seymen)<sup>1</sup>

So the story goes, in the late 1980s, the Turkish general Kenan Evren, who led the 1980 coup d'état in Turkey, encountered the popular Turkish music icon known widely as 'the *Pasha* of Art', Zeki Müren, who was a much respected performer – well-known for his extravagant costumes on stage and his mannered queer performance. This encounter was followed by a conversation initiated by the general's curiosity about the honorary title bestowed on Müren by the Turkish public, namely *pasha*, a title reserved under the Ottoman sultanate for high-ranking military personnel.<sup>2</sup> Evren asked Müren why this symbolic title had been given to him. After some hesitation, and at the general's insistence, Müren answered the question: 'This nation was so angry about what you did during the military coup, but they couldn't be very open with their anger. Rather than calling you and your colleagues faggots (*ibne*), they called me *pasha*'.

Despite the variously different versions of this story, what matters here is that the final answer remains the same, where the story gains its so-called narrative climax in queer performativity and works to exploit the national/ist accents of homophobic masculinity and militarism in Turkey. The 'conventionally non-evidential'<sup>3</sup>, but seriously viral propagation of the story acquired the status of gossip and seemed to presuppose another gossipy truth about Müren's gayness. The stubborn everyday presence of this story addresses, and makes the listener witness, a collective signature of the Turkish cultural memory: an effect of phantasmatic investment in testimony, evidence and historical truth-telling. As Irit Rogoff has argued, in gossip one can find 'a radical model of postmodern knowledge which would serve well in the reading and rewriting of gendered historical narratives'.<sup>4</sup> Aligning with, but articulating further Rogoff's critical framework, Gavin Butt reads the queer potential of gossip and its epistemic status as the 'projections of interpretive desire and curiosity' about deviant encounters and sexual practices.<sup>5</sup> Implicating Zeki Müren's homosexuality publicly never outed, both the above story and Seymen's artwork enable a discursive articulation of Butt's focus on gossip as a de-closeting performative speech-act with regard to marginal sexual identities and practices. However, what the artwork might also mobilize is a quest for a queer possibility



Erinç Seymen, *Portrait of a Pasha*, 2009 Photo: Cuneyt Cakirlar. Courtesy of galerist and the artist. Reproduced with permission.

for translating a rumoured-thus-fantasized encounter into a deviant artistic pleasure, so as to disclose 'the homosexual' as the repudiated, but constitutive abject-other of the militarist nationalist masculinity.

Briefly, the artistic performance in Erinç Seymen's *Portrait of a Pasha* (2009) is inspired by the gossipy story of Müren and the general, and the artwork's reclamation of this event attempts to play with the very ontological foundations of straight masculinity and national identity in Turkey. It treats the encounter as an imagined confrontation between the two oppositional, culturally phantasmatic bodies, the Soldier-Citizen and the Male Homosexual, within the history of the modern/ized Turkish subject. In this particular national context, Seymen reanimates and re-embodies that moment in order to queer the identification with militarist masculinity. Seymen's *Portrait* appears to put an emphasis on the ritualistic process of making the portrait – by means of supplementing the artwork with a single-screen video installation. In the video, the image of Zeki Müren is roughly portrayed by the artist on canvas covering a white wooden panel. In fact, we see that the panel is a target in a shooting range being shot at by a licensed marksman. Thus, the finished portrait appears from the bullet holes on the panel, after the canvas having been removed. By canvas, I do not mean a conventional sheet or surface which covers uniformly the wooden panel. The artist's sketch of Zeki Müren on the panel is neither a laboriously crafted drawing nor a pure mechanically

reproduced copy. Seymen uses yellow sticky dots on black background to produce target points for the marksman's performance of gun-shooting. The word 'canvas' is thus used as the skin of the artist's aesthetic authority, a minimal surface of artistic intentionality/mind, or in other words, a projective skin of the artist's bodily agency removed from the final product. The remaining bullet holes seem to embody the flirtatious gaze of Zeki Müren's eyes. I wish to explore here Seymen's performative translation and transposition of the fantasized *pasha-to-pasha* encounter into queer art-practice through a libidinal reappropriation.

My own spectatorial enjoyment of and intellectual investments in Seymen's artwork, embrace, contest, negotiate and sublimate the dichotomies of Western/non-Western, global/local and universal/particular.<sup>6</sup> What is embedded within Seymen's aesthetic discourse of queer appropriation is what it works to allegorize within its Turkish referentiality.

The use of Müren's iconic image in *Portrait of a Pasha* does not work to assign the figure to the critical, and resistant, agency of marginal gender subjectivity, but enables this popular queer image to disclose and re-enact the hypocrisy of Turkish nation-building project and its heterosexualizing normative urge in the sociopolitical treatment of the queer citizen.<sup>7</sup> To call Müren *pasha* does not imply any sense of irony: He was, in fact, widely admired as a performer. The title *pasha* demonstrates a way of managing the 'Queer Müren'

by negotiating with and normalizing his persona through valorizing his professional artistic achievement. In his work on the cultural image of Müren, the ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes, argues that it is 'necessary to probe the hyper-normativity' of that nationalist negotiation with Müren's gendered persona 'for the contradictions and tensions that lie within it'.<sup>8</sup> As well as the heteronormative investment in Zeki Müren through Turkish melodrama, and the 'pseudo-autobiographic' scholarship and journalistic inquiries, Stokes also refers to the viability of what he calls 'the nostalgic argument spun around' the singer:

It is that [he] and other queer singers represent a continuous Middle Eastern tradition of gender ambiguity and deviance, nourished by the Ottomans, but forcibly repressed by obsessively heteronormative republicans in the early twentieth century. For them 'the freedom of women' was a key rallying point, and westernization was constantly imagined in terms of 'hygienic' and 'efficient' nuclear family. Queer critique in Turkey on the subject of popular culture, as on Islam and globalization, sees the late Ottoman period as a model of cosmopolitan civic, political, and cultural virtues in the light of the bankruptcy of the republican tradition.<sup>9</sup>

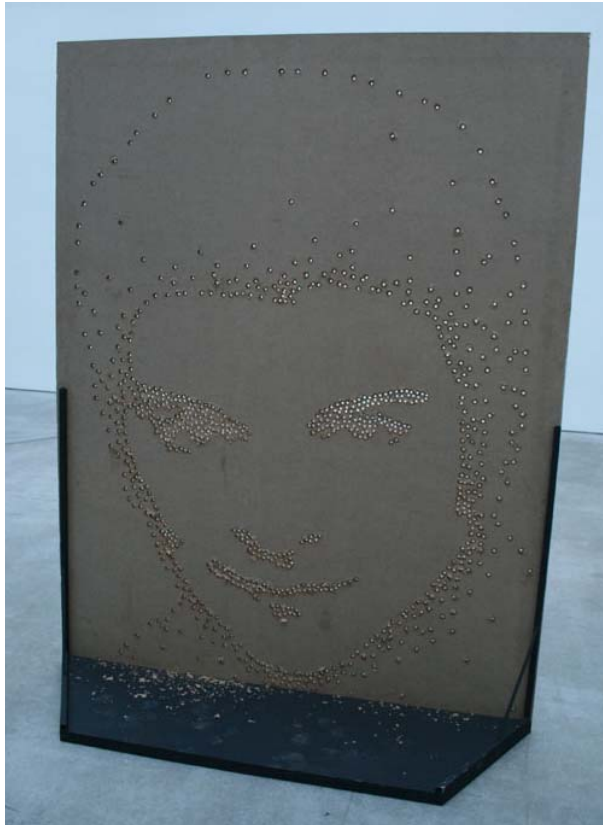
I would argue that Turkey's experience of a localized form of modernity and of a never-ending crisis in the very status of a homogenized citizenship (a crisis cathected by the cross-fertilization of Islam and modern nation-state) strongly affects patterns of heterosexualities, body politics, or, more generally, identificatory regimes of genders/sexualities. If idealized national heterosexuality (by which I mean 'the mechanism by which a core of national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship'<sup>10</sup>), is perturbed and hybridized by Islamic heterosexualities within the context of a crisis of secularism, then how can we rethink the relationship between the local, the 'off-white', the queer and the heterosexual itself? As in the case of Islamism as the return of the repressed, is it possible to treat the Ottoman inheritance of gender ambiguity and sexual dissidence, repressed by the modernist machinery of Turkish nation-building, as a queer *dispositif* for a strategic return from the collective cultural unconscious? Can we think today of an ideological dynamic of the normal/normative to be mobilized cross-culturally by a queer discourse? In particular, what would it mean to be(come) a queer, to queer, to perform 'queer art', in Turkey after all? What *could* becoming-queer signify in a collective geopolitical memory that has no historic catalyst like Stonewall, without an AIDS-crisis to be melancholically reflected upon, to be grieved over, and to act 'militantly' upon?<sup>11</sup> How might a contemporary artist in Turkey, by sublating the particular and the universal, the local and the global, cultivate a queer critique in art?

Queer aesthetics, according to William Haver, implicates and inspires a pornographic art of existence. Haver argues that

queer's obsession with, and insistence on, surface as 'being's most profound depth', works to undo the heteronormative constitution of sexual differentiability where the corporeal depth can operate only as an abyss to be *veiled* in the field of vision.<sup>12</sup> What Haver embraces as queer is an erotic of critique where the queer critic's 'pornographic reading' and his/her 'absolute devotion to the flesh' remain the only way to 'make the [queerly] political happen'.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Erinc Seymen's art practice prioritizes a queer agenda: 'My art is concerned with normalization of any mode of violence ... violence of the state and the police ... any xenophobic discourse of hate including militarism, transphobia, racist nationalism, class elitism, etc.'<sup>14</sup> Seymen's queer vision and method, his strategic erotics and politics of appropriation/exploitation, 'operate through a series of technologies of otherness', the critical urge of which Erden Kosova discusses under the conceptual markers of 'curiosity', 'cruelty', and 'contamination'.<sup>15</sup>

The logic of surface and the visual rhetoric of embodied penetration in Seymen's *Portrait* work to invert the performative of militarist masculinity by enacting a masochistic *jouissance*. The work over-genders the rumoured encounter by which it has been inspired. The animated encounter in *Portrait* acts as a commentary on heteronormative masculinity in Turkish society, which the image of Müren is mirroring back to: the more exposed the figure is to the penetration of bullets, the more radically visual it becomes. Seymen enacts a queer methodology in such a way that the art object functions not only to address what has been universally valorized as the discursive patterns of queer theory, praxis and aesthetics, but also to recontextualize and re-localize it, and thus re-write it, from within the context of the contemporary Turkish subject.

While queer theory – as a cultural, theoretical, aesthetic and/or political practice in imagining different ways of knowing gender and sexuality – inhabits various critical and methodological tendencies, one might still argue that its critical agenda crystallizes around the exclusionary political economies and imageries of the heteronormative constitution of body and desire. In this regard, critical interventions into and interpretations of 'the figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body' (where norms of masculinity operate through its 'phantasmatic dematerialization') are fundamental matters of queer practice.<sup>16</sup> Its implication of the Foucauldian emphasis on 'pleasure as an ethical substance' and 'the stylistics of life' triggers an analytical and ontological affinity between art, performance and queer/ness.<sup>17</sup> Arguing for an anti-instrumentalist conception of queer theory and practice, I would argue that *Portrait of a Pasha* enables queer performativity to be read not as a hegemonic and universalizing but as an effectively travelling concept. Through Seymen's performative and even scatological use of the queer male, portrayed as the receptacle penetrated by militarist ejaculatory virility, hegemonic disembodied masculinity operates as



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a rematerialized and thus troubled referent in *Portrait*.

Although this critical meditation would seem to resonate well with the queer rhetorics of parody, drag and/or copy, I will not venture into what Sedgwick identifies as paranoid queer discourses that work to 'place paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure'.<sup>18</sup> Aesthetic and/or critical investments in exposure can also be interpreted by means of what Sedgwick conceptualizes – in opposition to 'paranoid mode of reading' – as 'reparative reading': a relational 'motive of seeking pleasure', an 'additive and accretive ... desire of a reparative impulse', and an ethics of sustainability in cultural critique.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, I would argue that Seymen's agenda in portraying Müren goes beyond a paranoid urge to expose the homosexual reference. It fictionalizes a queer encounter and attempts to form an artistic agency which confronts the Turkish militarist hegemony with its erotic investments in what it abjects.

The constitutive anxiety of heteronormative masculinity is an anxiety of bodily production. The fear of liminalized corporeality 'is not so much one of influence, but as one of exfluence, of excorporation, a general anxiety about flux and fluidity, an unease not only about what comes out of the body but also about the ways bodies themselves originally come out'.<sup>20</sup> Calvin Thomas further claims that 'the masculine productivity as excorporation becomes destruction ... a search for a killable other', which can possibly be subverted by writing the male body 'as a bodily function': an *écriture* of queer masculinity.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the ejaculatory act of firing a gun employed in Seymen's *Portrait* signifies anxious masculine productivity as penetration, via excorporation. It confronts the masculine with its repudiated other whose visual emergence is the very effect of the penetrative virility enjoyed by the culturally iconic image of Turkish homosexuality. Alluding to Erden Kosova's argument on 'technologies of otherness', I would argue that Seymen 'contaminates' the gossip-encounter between the Soldier and the Homosexual by overwhelming the visual discourse with a homoerotic economy of sadomasochism.<sup>22</sup> The portraiture and its logics of penetration become sodomy. After all, the rhetoric of appropriation in contemporary queer pastiche, its politics of intertextual incorporation, enacts the embodied discourse of the queer fuckee's pleasure. The haunting image of Müren comes to function as the 'sodomitical sublime' of Turkish modernity.<sup>23</sup>

The canvas acts as a temporary skin, which covers the white wooden panel, and it allows the gunman to be guided by the outlines of Seymen's portrayal. It is detached and discarded, not part of the finished product. The only evidence of Seymen's authorial potency and bodily labour is lost from the performed scene of enacted violence of shooting at the canvas/panel: The artist removes his 'hand'. The artistic process becomes strategically ego-shattering. My argument here flirts with Bersani and Dutoit's conceptualization of failure



as a mode of aesthetic relationality: an act of 'self-divestiture', 'a renunciation of cultural authority', which seems to 'refuse to serve the complacency of a culture that expects art to reinforce its moral and epistemological authority'.<sup>24</sup> What the spectator is exposed to in Seymen's *Portrait* is the series of bullet holes on a wooden panel, i.e. the body which remains after the process. Ejaculation as excorporation becomes the incorporation or the enjoyed penetration of not only the artist, and his signature, but also that which the embodied presence of the portrait comes to allegorize: the Effeminate Passive Homosexual, one of the most abject, 'unfit', male bodies in contemporary Turkey. Through *Portrait*'s de-ontologized performative authorial status as well as its queer discourse as (to paraphrase Calvin Thomas) ass-fuck-as-écriture, the artwork appears to *perform* as a conscientious objector against the pervading ideology that surrounds the mandatory military service in Turkey. Seymen's anti-militarist gesture is articulated through the very performative mode of his artistic practice: 'a conscientiously failed writing as a model of conscientiously failed masculinity'.<sup>25</sup> Calvin Thomas situates 'the *anti-generative* in writing' against 'expressivity [or] any 'creativity' traditionally linked to paternity, maternity, or any other imperative of the successful heterosexual reproduction of "life", but rather on writing's intimately sexual connection, its degeneratively metonymic connection, to murderous or suicidal ecstasy, to failure, to 'death' – its connection, in other words, to the rectum'.<sup>26</sup>

Seymen's conscientious failure in masculinity and authorship starts with a fragment of gossip, exploits it, takes it 'from behind'. In an entirely different queer context, using Deleuze's account of philosophy as 'a sort of buggery, ... an immaculate conception ... taking [the author] from behind',<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Kemp's conceptual reading of the penetrated male body and its possibly queerable metaphors may be of use here:

The concept of 'man' ... [is] no longer a universal, unmarked and neutral monolith but a flux of radical *jouissance*, a surface shot through with holes into which and out of which sensations flow, deterritorializing masculine subjectivity and locating the penetrated/penetrable (male) body as a condition of territorialized male subjectivity. ... All representation is the embodiment of erotic thought. ... The term *behind* tries to make a link between the so-called crisis of masculinity and the so-called crisis of reason. To characterize a certain anxiety that is common to both corporeal and intellectual uncertainty.<sup>28</sup>

The bullet-riddled wooden panel of Seymen's *Portrait* also has a behind, which acts as 'a homograph that binds together a physical as well as an epistemological location'.<sup>29</sup> Seymen's portrait is a free-standing work of art. The curatorial location of the artwork in the centre of a spatial junction bridging the exhibition paths does not allow the spectator to treat the behind as a behind. It is, bodily and visually, as accessible as the front of the *Portrait*. The inescapable spectatorial exposure to the behind of the artwork turns the two-dimensional

surface of the *Portrait* into an obscene depth of abject flesh. As the *Portrait*'s view from behind also shows, the splinters of wood from gunshots seen on the black panel of the back stand convey a scatological effect, which allows this interpretation of the work to flirt with the artist's subversive intent: an inverted discourse of penetration. Seymen's queer strategy of anal(ized) anti-militarist sabotage politicizes the unutterable 'behind' of Zeki Müren in Turkey's cultural memory, or in other words, what body, what body part and what joy the hegemonic Performative of Soldier-Citizen left 'behind his discourse'. Seymen's gift addresses both the military *pa-shas* and the queer *pashas* in contemporary Turkey.

1 See the interview in Pınar Ögünç, 'Zaten hadım edilmiş bir kusunun çocuklarıyız ['We are the children of a castrated generation anyway': An Interview with Erinç Seymen]', *Radikal*, 07/04/2007. ([http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek\\_haber.php?ek=cts&haberno=6604](http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek_haber.php?ek=cts&haberno=6604), last visit on 25/09/2009).

2 After his unforgettable performance in the 1969 concert at the ancient theatre Aspendos, Turkish admirers of the artist called him 'the Pasha of Art'. It would still be very hard and ambitious to identify and read the initial discursive urge of the Turkish public to name the artist as *Pasha*. Surely, this was to reward Müren and his memorable achievement in performance on the Aspendos stage. However, the contrast between the artist's queer presence and performative excess on stage, and the gendered status of the public's 'gift', attaching a masculine and militarist virtue to the artistic achievement with the very name *pasha*, is nonetheless striking.

3 Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3.

4 Irit Rogoff, 'Gossip as Testimony: a Postmodern Signature' in Pollock, Griselda (ed), *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 59.

5 Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me*, pp. 6-7.

6 Here, by sublation, I allude to the Butlerian interpretation of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, that is 'an active [and] negating movement', 'a cancellation but not quite an extinction; suspension, preservation and overcoming'. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 176. Thus, what I intend to suggest, methodologically, as a 'middled', sublated, intellectual engagement in reading *Portrait of a Pasha* (with regard to the mentioned binarisms) is what Seymen's artistic and critical agency makes possible within its queer performativity.

7 After his death from a heart attack during a live performance on stage in 1996, it was discovered that Zeki Müren had left a considerable portion of his wealth to the Turkish Military Foundation, known as *Mehmetçik Vakfı*.

8 Martin Stokes, 'The Tearful Public Sphere: Turkey's "Sun of Art", Zeki Müren', *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, edited by Tullia Magrini (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 307.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 312. In his ongoing research on Janissaries, titled 'Recollecting Ottoman masculinities and male intimacies: A history of empire, modernity, and heteronormativity in the Ottoman Middle East', the Ottoman historian Serkan Delice points out the urgency

of 'revealing different modes of masculinity and male intimacies' and 'identify[ing] a cultural tradition of homosociality in which identifications by desire types seemed to be more fluid and ambiguous, rather than being fully-formed and clear-cut'. Underlining the significance of the 'web of connections between State-led modernization, military reforms, and masculinities', Delice gestures to and critiques the heteronormative ideologies in researching Ottoman history. What is constitutive of Stokes's account of 'the nostalgic argument' with reference to Müren, is, I contend, reclaimed by Delice in order to see more clearly the historical ruptures – de-queerings – of epistemological and political regimes of gender-sexuality in the Ottoman-Turkish context. The encounter that Erinc Seymen has animated (with or without his artistic intentions) contains these historical references, which work to demonstrate successfully the homophobic, anxious, heteronormatively modernizing process of constituting the military, or, the soldier-citizen. See Serkan Delice, 'Osmanlı'yı Bugün Nasıl Tefsir Ediyoruz? Tarih ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Üzerine Düşünceler', *Cinsiyet Halleri: Türkiye'de Toplumsal Cinsiyet'in Kesilim Sınırları*, edited by Nil Mutluer (Istanbul:Varlık, 2008), pp. 72-87.

10 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public'. *Critical Inquiry* 24:2, 1998, p. 549.

11 Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (London: MIT Press, 2002).

12 William Haver, 'Really Bad Affinities: Queer's Honour and the Pornographic Life'. *Parallax* 5:4, 1999, p. 13.

13 Ibid., p.20.

14 See the interview in Pınar Ögünç, 'Zaten hadım edilmiş bir kusagin çocuklarıyız ['We are the children of a castrated generation anyway': An Interview with Erinc Seymen]', *Radikal*, 07/04/2007. ([http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek\\_haber.php?ek=cts&haberno=6604](http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek_haber.php?ek=cts&haberno=6604), last visit on 25/09/2009)

15 Erden Kosova, 'Technologies of Otherness', *Erinc Seymen* (Istanbul: galerist, 2002), p. 3. For Kosova's reference to 'the technologies of otherness', see Sue Golding, *Eight Technologies of Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1997).

16 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 48-9.

17 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: Care of the Self*, edited and translated by Robert Huxley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 67-8. See also Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault Volume 1, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1997), pp. 253-80.

18 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 144.

19 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 149-51.

20 Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety and the Male Body on the Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 13-4.

21 Ibid., p. 18.

22 Erden Kosova, 'Technologies of Otherness', pp. 3-8.

23 Sally R Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 223-4.

24 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8. In the introduction of their readings of Beckett, Rothko and Resnais, 'Art and Authority', Bersani and Dutoit suggest: 'Let us try to imagine a form of political and cultural resistance and renewal consistent with self-divestiture and the renunciation of authority. To be lost or disseminated in a space that cannot be dominated, and to register attentively how relations are affected by a shattered ego's displacements within that space, may at least begin to reverse or arrest the devastating effect of a view of a space as an appropriable collection of objects and human subjects. Without an authoritative center, the impoverished and dispersed self may become an unlocatable target. ... Might there be a "power" in such impotence?' (Ibid., p. 9).

25 Calvin Thomas, 'Must Desire Be Taken Literally?', *Parallax* 8:4, 2002, p. 49

26 Ibid.

27 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 6.

28 Jonathan Kemp, 'Schreber and the Penetrated Male', *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanti Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 156.