

THE POST EXPOSURE HANGOVER

And so here I am on the sidewalk, in front of the large gallery windows, somewhere in Bethnal Green, East London.

Gusts of wind bring the first drops of rain in the reddish night sky, foreboding a downpour. London is illuminated. The exhibition opening is gearing up. More and more people come in from the impending rain. Some seeking art, some seeking exposition, some seeking shelter and some seeking the cheap plastic cups of wine that lift all spirits.

I feel invisible. I feel unnoticed. Dressed smart in jacket and jeans, I could be an artist, a collector, a spectator – anything really. There are works of dozens of artists on the walls, being observed by dozens of their friends. I don't stand out – I'm part of the crowd, immersed. Only the two curators, busy and distracted in their small talk, know me. As the place gets more crowded, I silently observe, asking for some wine.

So far, the pseudonym I use for my HIV work has been my cloak of invisibility. It has shielded me from the others gaze, from questioning eyes and curious enquiries. On one hand I had a desire to show more, to show myself, my face and my defiance. Until the next wave of anxiety would drown that thought with fears of exposure, refraining any ambitions to reveal myself.

I've had exhibitions before. Under my real name, during my life as a photographer, showing pictures of places and people. Nervously standing at the center of attention, while someone interprets things into my pretty plain photographs. I had always wished to vanish into thin air. I've always hated the attention, freezing in the spotlight, enduring it painfully. Dozens of judging eyes penetrating me. So here in London I embrace the anonymity, for it gives me shelter. I hover around the two large rooms, reading the other artists works and descriptions meticulously. Over and over again, so as not to get too close to my own works.

In silence, I down the next plastic cup of wine.

From the distance I look at my diptych hanging on the wall. Self portraits – more or less nude. My penis is featured prominently. My face, hidden behind a mask.

I view the viewers. Curiously reading the description underneath my pictures, while my condom-covered cock is displayed a few centimeters above their noses.

"Well-hung in their faces" I chuckle to myself, sad that I can't share the ridiculous pun.

I'm nervous. I'm shy. I want to go there and reveal myself, but courage fails me. I hover back to the bar and get my next cup of wine. I walk around the gallery again. It is filled with strangers and humidity, adding to the heat and nervous sweat. While the rain starts outside, I inspect one work at a time, inching my way towards my own again.

On the desk featuring business cards, I see mine have almost run out; so I silently add another stack. And scurry back into the chatter, the laughs and the giggles. Camouflaged

in the crowd. I am impressed by the versatility and honesty of the works. Of the artists standing their ground, in front of their creations.

In defiance of their depressions, their fears and anxieties. I envy them for their courage. They talk openly, freely, proudly. So I wander back to my displayed intimacy. In hope for courage to find me there.

I see more guests examining my pictures. My nudity. "Is this all a joke to me?" I wonder, and start laughing to myself. "Here I am, showing my penis to the world. Hidden behind a mask. And I watch people watching it..." In these few moments, I simply question my motivation for all of this. "What do I want with this? What is the goal? Am I just taking the piss out of everyone? I can't believe this is happening..." I laugh inside, but I can't quite figure out how I'm feeling.

A young man in his early twenties looks at me while talking to another artist. "That's you isn't it?" he smiles, pointing to my pictures on the wall.

"It is!" I burst out smiling. Revealed. Exposed. Exuberant. Frightened.

The artists he was speaking to turn my way. I've been caught in the headlights. The truck was aiming straight for me – and I froze.

It turns out the young man saw me place my cards on the table. And he had the courage to approach me.

And uncontrollably, I go on a roll. The levy broke. My mouth starts to gush out words, sentences, phrases and monologues. I answer all their questions, I ask them all of mine. I start talking about my work, my art and especially about HIV. About the controversies I have caused, about the questioning of morality and asking of their knowledge. Another older woman joins in on the discussion. I become a magnet, waving arms and speaking expressively. And I think I even make sense.

I focus on the young artists around me. I make them laugh, I ask them of their experiences. As always with the topic of HIV, we start talking about sexual issues – fantasies, practices, positions, periods and the lustful joys of sex. I am elevated. I feel radiant. The weight of years of hiding was lifted a little bit.

As the rain subsides, so does my fear. Our conversation moves outside. More guests had arrived. I meet more curious artists and spectators, from turkey and germany and london and albania. And while I talk about HIV, I notice my ease. And I notice pride. I notice the difference to all the exhibitions I have had before.

Here I was, showing work I believed in. Talking about a topic that had weight and meaning and informed of a realm unknown to many. I was giving insights to a dark underworld that most were afraid of. Sparking curiosity and the desire to know more. I spoke fearlessly of fear. Of conviction and reassurance. I had taken my place. I had held my ground. I was armored and felt bulletproof. In this moment, I gained an audience and an army.

All the worries I had at the beginning of the night, the fears of exposure and of false judgements had vanished. The process of an outing, of standing to my work and of showing myself was entering the next phase. For the first time in public, Philipp Spiegel had become a face to speak to. More than just a name – more than the invisible identity he had been for the past year, hidden on the internet, behind articles and pictures. The switch had been thrown, the currents reverberating in my body. I had become real.

We strolled to the pub next door and continued our intense conversations. Of love and sex and identities. On a usual opening I would have drank and danced into the night. But since pubs close at 11 and I had a flight to catch the next day, I parted from the crowd and any further entanglements.

A strange, exhausted grin of satisfaction was smeared on my tired face while I floated back home through the streets of London. A lightness that resembled relief carried me home. It would take days to process the whole ordeal, but I knew something had happened. Something had changed. I was ready for the next chapter.

A friend once called it the “Post Exposure Hangover”. After an exhibition, an interview or any public appearance in which your art and your persona are exposed to the public, you have made yourself vulnerable. What follows is often a night of drinking, or in the least, a strange feeling the next day. Even without alcohol it resembles a hangover. An exhaustion down to the bone, weary and heavy-headed, vulnerable and in need of a hug, a blanket and sweet nothingness. The experience repeating itself in your head, over and over, with only vague memory snippets from it. Details blackened and forgotten. Like a stirred up liquid of your memories in their milky white state of confusion.

And all you can do is wait for it to settle. To become clear again.

