41 SHARES

# IN CONVERSATION: EFREM ZELONY-MINDELL ON ‘ N E W F L E S H ’

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*Efrem Zelony-Mindell is an independent curator, writer, and artist. Their curatorial endeavors include shows in New York City — a r e f l e x, the You Gathering, the International Center of Photography Blurb's 2017 MFA thesis show Familiar Strange, and Re: Art Show's This Is Not Here. They write about art for Unseen, DEAR DAVE, VICE, Baxter Street Camera Club of New York, Rocket Science Magazine, Wyatt Magazine, SPOT, and numerous essays for artists monographs. Their first monograph n a r f l e x is being published by New York's Errant Book and will be available in August of 2019. They received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts.*

Yvonne Dekkers, Stage 1.8, 2013, Courtesy of Yvonne Dekkers

n e w f l e s h

The study of gender, identity, and queerness is often exemplified by a kind of idealized sexuality. The work of ‘r e a r f l e x’ x Efrem Zelony-Mindell, book collaboration (shop by Efrem Zelony-Mindell), refuses to view a person as disparate or specific parts. Like in Cronenberg’s Behind the Head, there is more than just hair or women. There’s a person in a human-shell of so many parts: feelings, and ideas. You can buy the book [HERE](#).

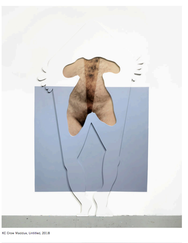
‘r e a r f l e x’ looks to study queerness beyond the body and to stop just looking at the things that we know, so that we may see them for what they could become.

Matthew Brackley, Untitled, 2013

**Writer:** When I first started flipping through ‘r e a r f l e x’ I was very impressed with its roster of artists and how you’ve managed to fill the book with one another. Having so many works cooperate and be in dialogue without conforming to a kind of scripted checklist must made me wonder how long ‘r e a r f l e x’ has been in progress and how the idea first came to you.

**Efrem:** I dunno man. The voices whisper my friend. Let’s see if I can break this down some. How long has this been going on? Very late 2015, early 2016 is when I first started looking at works for r e a r f l e x for the better part of these three years I've been looking at 75 artists, give or take.

The idea came because someone offered me the opportunity to make something free of constraints. Stephen Presley the Editor-in-Chief, of *DEAR DAVE* magazine asked me one day if I'd be interested in writing about a group of works that I could choose for the magazine. He told me that whatever I organized only had to be contemporary, and pluralistic in nature. Shortly after I found myself in a situation where I was handing into discomfort as opposed to running away from it. I'm not sure if I'm a masochist or just a glutton for punishment, but I immediately felt obligated to me, I realized that I've subconsciously spent a lot of my life leaning into awkwardness so as to expose something of myself. I see an injustice in the world, homogeny, and I want to shout back against it.



KC Crow Rostow, Untitled, 2018

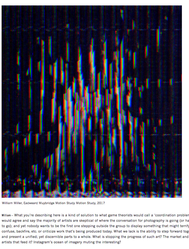
Martin Wannam, Senior Aranda Dancer, Colonia el Cahuenco. 4 de Noviembre 2009, Guatemala, 2018

**Writer:** When you say discomfort and leaning into this awkwardness, do you feel as though the work in ‘r e a r f l e x’ connotes the idea of bending the rules and/or purposely interleaving various genres of photography? How is ‘r e a r f l e x’ kind a push back against the homogenous nature of photography in our current culture? What does fighting back against what's popular now look like to you?

**Efrem:** The works definitely bend rules in and of themselves, and especially as a group living together. But I mean for the works, and concepts of r e a r f l e x to break the rules as well. Here I have a body of work that's not only queerness, but I clearly state that the works, "Have many things in common, homosexuality is not one of them," I mean to turn the expectations of photography and queerness on their head. I hope to. I want to. Now is the time to stop letting specificity and comfortability dominate any community. Things are coming along, but growth and change are painful, and I'm not sure if we're ready to be uncomfortable enough to grow. I'm not sure if we're ready to celebrate difference and receive experimentation so as to put everyone on a level playing field. There are street photographers and there are abstractionists making works totally free of a camera. There are old folks and young folks. Some have illustrious fine art and commercial careers and some are only about to graduate from school. The hierarchy is freed of its burden here, we can give it the day off, because we want to look at great art, draw connections that bring us together, and have conversations that will make people uneasy so that they might become realized.

The art world deserves a better class criminal, and I'm going to give it to them.

I think fighting back against what's popular is unique to individuals and shouldn't be dictated. The only thing that should be dictated is whether or not you're making art. I'm not interested in making work that's uncomfortable for me, for me fighting back means not being silent anymore when I see something that makes me uncomfortable. For others I see something that parades as speaking for the garment masses when it's completely exclusionary and only provides a very fixed world view. Underneath that I think it's very important to make it clear that fighting back also includes bringing many different kinds of people to the table to have really genuine and meaningful conversations. We all have different positions in life, but we'll only drive forward if we can love and listen to discomfort.



William Wilke Gatewood Wuybridge Motion Study Motion Study, 2017

**Writer:** What you're describing here is a kind of solution to what genre theorists would call a ‘coordination problem’. I think that's why the work is so interesting, because it's trying to coordinate a solution to a problem that we've not yet thought about yet and nobody seems to be for hire one stepping outside the group to fully see something that might be curious, feasible, etc. or criticize work that's being produced today. What we lack is the ability to step forward together and present a unified, yet dissentible parts to a whole. What is stopping the progress of such art? The market and the artists that feed it? Instagram's ocean of imagery muting the interesting?

**Efrem:** The interesting is a locomotive. It won't be stopped. It will plonk the ocean and scramble the current in its wake.

I think we as artists stop the art really. We find an equation that works, or is profitable, and we become machines. 1+1=2, 1+1=2, over and over again. Introduce a little anarchy. It's hard to want to continually introduce uncertainty because making the work is hard, but not nearly as difficult as pulling in the effort to push ourselves and the way we think about art forward. The fact that we're not constantly questioning ourselves is a real issue. I'm not sure if everything reduces to chaos. That fear that might keep us from our potential should ignite the fire of our invention.

There are so many parts that play into what stops the progress. Artists need to stop solely playing to each other and start asking, "Who are we in the service of?" Because we're not in the service of each other. It's wonderful and validating to have a group of artists who support you, but that's not the end goal. We're not the end goal. We're subtle, we are the problem, and we are everything party that many people think of as The market wants trends, that construct is completely malleable. Think of an artist like John Waters who now is so popular he represented The United States of America at the Venice Biennale in 2017. Waters, by his own admission, has said about his career, "Maybe it's time to throw caution to the wind, really shake things up and reinvent yourself as a new version of your previous version." Waters is a genius. He's a genius for a lot of reasons, but mostly because he's a genius of change. Think about it, I didn't change, secretly did." If we accept an atmosphere like this quote it'll be shaking things up for the newest of reinvention that chaos will only continue to provide its benefit. For me, I am the instrument of that chaos.

Mao Lo Lai Golf, It's What It Is or What Is It, 2013

Quinn Tormes, Sandpaper Glass and Bag, 2018.jpg

**Writer:** It's kind of hilarious (in the same way the best comedy wants to make you laugh and cry) that what was once called "not art" and / or considered "crazy" is now in major museums and venues. Of course, it's amazing to see work that was once considered not palatable or "whatever" by members of the upper echelon are now being championed, but occasionally it feels like it's being done for pure marketing purposes, rather than an actual love of the craft and the artist. I'm curious what you think about the commodification of artists like Waters, Mao, and Wilke, and what role they in the high art world for his deviancy and filth. That being said, Waters is a person I adore, because he's never strayed 'still' in his art (or life), he's constantly reinventing himself to understand himself. Which is art next to do and think about when you don't have a gallery or a patron to back you when he's due in a week and you need supplies, groceries, etc.

**Efrem:** You know it's interesting to read the conversation in this direction. One of the things that's so important to me about r e a r f l e x is something that Charlotte Cotton speaks about in her essay in the book. r e a r f l e x it is not a, "Re-skinning with the paths of youthful creativity – for a pre-existing and fixed idea of photography." It reaches backwards as much as it does forwards throughout time. This may be an unpopular opinion, but if I'm being honest I'm not interested in what's popular. I'm interested in what's going to be popular in the future, and more exclusively in the art world has always been interested at least and has always been the name of the game. We as young evening professionals need to understand the current systems as well as be doing the best we can to get ahead of those systems. The balance isn't easy and I fiercely don't think there is any perfect way to navigate those waters. We also live in a world with a lot of people who don't want to share. There's a big fucking clout pie(s) and I am not in the big fucking club.

There's also a big "some for you means less for me" mentality in a huge portion of the art world that I interact with. It happens amongst colleagues and peers, sometimes even amongst friends. I frankly don't understand this mentality. We're all going to be doing this a very long time which means we have to do it together. I would say that yes we do have to be competitive, because competition breeds growth, but I think we have to be very careful with how we do it and we can be doing it better. I'm sorry to say another unpopular opinion, but a person can always be more exhausted. I'm constantly thinking that to myself in moments when I feel overwhelmed and at my limit, "You can always be more exhausted." Because I've been there. I've been there and I've been there and I've been there. I've been there in a happy ending to this reality. I will say this, there's a hallmark-esque saying that I see and think that rarely made me angry. It said, "Find a job that you love so you won't ever have to work a day in your life." That's bullshit. I feel the same way about Dan Savage's "It gets better" More like/don't We should find jobs that we love so we'll **WANT** to do them every everyday. Again, borrowing from John Waters, "If I didn't work this hard for myself I'd have to do it for somebody else."