

# *Clown in a Bathtub*

Live Installation by Krzysztof Zarebski with Kasia Zarebska

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Krzysztof Zarebski's mode of "performance art" is thoroughly imbued with the *art* aspect of *performance art*. He treads the boundary between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned. He dares to confront taboos that are ubiquitous in nearly all human societies - especially sexual taboos, such as incest. Zarebski also explores the relationship between memory and the genetic memory encoded in the DNA, using vintage analogue recording technologies such as magnetic audio tape and vinyl long play records, alongside current digital recording technologies such as camcorders and computers. These are a metaphor for memory and genetic encoding. Zarebski also alludes to nanotechnologies, embedded within the human biological organism, such as the sperm and the egg, which generate according to code, developing into adult human organisms. All of this science and intricate creativity through memory and encoding is perversely interrupted by an overarching masculine/feminine dichotomy. A sexual rift plays itself out in the "macro" realm of family and society, disrupting the completion of the code, its unity and its message, which is reduced to incoherence.



*Clown in a Bathtub* is the inaugural public show which initiated a new artistic venue dubbed *The Rivington School Underground* by its founder, the sculptor, Ray Kelly. Kelly has transmuted his own basement Broome street BOHO (Bowery below Houston) studio into a showcase for artists that are associated with the Rivington school, and, more broadly, the Rivington scene. *The Rivington School Underground* suggests that the Rivington scene is far from over and represents much more than a glitch in terms of art history. The Rivington School is a group of sculptors and the painters, writers, poets, musicians dancers and multimedia artists that worked with and around the Rivington School sculpture. The Rivington School metal sculpture was a project that was born on Rivington Street in New York's Lower East Side

between 1985 and 1987, when the city finally bulldozed the entire mammoth sculpture. This was a highly condensed scene that revolved around three storefront “galleries.” These were Nada, Freddy the Dreamer and No Se No. No Se No spearheaded the “Rivington School,” whereas Nada and Freddy the Dreamer influenced the overall Rivington “scene.” This scene helped to drive the artistic momentum and atmosphere of creative and destructive competition that fueled much of the activity around this location (the buildings adjacent to an abandoned corner lot at Rivington and Forsyth street). Kelly’s curatorial sense and acumen has brought Krzysztof Zarebski to the fore as a cohesive link between the many disparate Rivington artists. Zarebski’s art represents a crucial aesthetic focal point and launch pad for the Rivington scene’s most recent oeuvre.

Zarebski made his mark on the scene, as he executed performances in each of the physical areas of artistic production - the three galleries and the outdoor lot - on Rivington Street during the 1980s. Zarebski’s bold yet enigmatic artistic statements exerted a profound influence on the emerging Rivington artists. Zarebski’s art attempted to push the boundaries of acceptability and to question age old assumptions as to the nature of art and artistic production. His *Frozen Erection* featured a penis embedded in a large chunk of ice. Zarebski would paint plus and minus signs on the legs of a woman (Krystyna Jachniewicz) while the ice would slowly melt. The artist addresses societal issues of censorship, of the sublimation and negation of male behavioral tendencies (which may have been beneficial at least during the neolithic) such as voyeurism, aggression, competition, and an urge toward creation and destruction - tendencies that are no longer acceptable in a more sanitized and, perhaps, feminized societal construct. Visceral male urges are generally considered to be, simply, “politically incorrect,” as the emergence of post modern civility effectively serve to push “maleness” to the edges of acceptability, perhaps outside the boundary of permissible behavior.

*Clown in a Bathtub* is the most recent iteration of Zarebski’s controversial art. In it, Zarebski echoes similar issues to his Rivington era work, but the new work is complicated by references to past, present and future, tangled into a complex whole. Zarebski uses “secret symbols” that suggest the presence of otherworldly beings, such as the ghost of Zarebski’s friend, the Polish playwright Helmut Kajzar, who died an untimely death at the age of 41 and whose last play, *The Clown’s Hair* is directly referenced by the title of Zarebski’s performance art, *Clown in a Bathtub*. Further, Kajzar’s disembodied voice is heard making several utterances, as it is played through a magnetic tape recording which was made while the playwright was still alive. Thus the magnetic tape serves to encapsulate a snippet of code which revitalizes the dead poet, if only for a fleeting moment and in a highly mechanized fashion. Yet Zarebski wishes to further question and complicate even this assumption! The “Clown in the Bathtub” is, in “real time” and in all actuality, a sentient and living being, Zarebski’s own daughter, Kasia! Zarebski creates the clown image out of Kasia, with a pointed clown hat, red bulbous clown nose and a frilly clown’s collar. The clown is otherwise naked! All of this provocative nudity is concealed from the audience, yet is simultaneously being transmitted through electronic devices, into the viewer’s space with the use of *circa* 2008 state of the art “Vj” equipment, including a digital camcorder, streaming into a computer, which electronically alters the visual, which then passes through an interactive touch sensitive plate where the viewers can then intersect with the images through touching the “Kaoss Pad.” The viewers then become artists themselves as they alter and

reconfigure the streaming image of the *Clown in the Bathtub*. The performance looks like a media blitz. The tub is surrounded by camera flashes and videographers. The only way the audience has of viewing this performance is through the mediation of electronic impulses, which carry the real-time performance in digital code, into the viewer's arena. It is as though one were experiencing an excerpt from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) live, first hand, for it is Baudrillard's thesis that contemporary realities are systems of signs - electronically mediated *simulacra* - which replace reality. At this point, the viewer may question whether or not one is actually viewing the live performance in actuality. Even though the images are being streamed in real time, they are being manipulated electronically in an interactive fashion as well. Whether one is experiencing reality, an authentic experience of actuality or a simulation of that reality, is in serious question. Zarebski's affirmation that understandings and memories and even life itself is all bound up in recordings and secret symbols and codes is thus reaffirmed.

Zarebski creates a kind of "Pop Surrealism," as described by the artist and critic Dominick Lombardi. Zarebski has the Clown covered in vinyl long play records. Zarebski then has a mechanical frog with a tone-arm and needle swimming toward the Clown. Zarebski then produces a frightening display of masculine ferocity and anxiety that only a father can produce. He clenches a pair of stockings in his teeth and attempts to clothe his daughter, the Clown, shouting, "Put your clothes on!" At this point certain references, perhaps to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) come to mind. The Kafkaesque image of the father as domineering and punishing, overshadows and negates all sexual and youth-like naive behavior. The finalé of the *Clown in a Bathtub* makes references to ideas which are unique to Zarebski's art, such as "Djism," "Vjism" and a certain "Djism Jism Schism!" Zarebski's aversion to minimalism succeeds in setting a new standard for anti-minimalist and maximalist modes of artistic expression. *The Rivington School Underground* and *Clown in a Bathtub* forge new frontiers in 21st century art which seeks to break down barriers between artistic disciplines. Artistic production in *The Rivington School Underground* represents the struggle for a human voice to be heard above the din and cacophony of machines which mediate our human experience today.