

Theory and action in feminist art practices – a self-centered approach

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is on the resources of the artistic practice that generates the visual construction and significance in the art work. The “self-centered approach” refers to the point of view from which considerations are made – one’s own artistic practice, based on the reconsideration of one’s own biography.

Between the theoretical frame and the artistic act there is a link that generates a coherent harangue. The feminist label of one’s work comes as a conclusion – the practice being mainly in the area of performance and installation art. Part of this analysis is dedicated to the use of the female body in contemporary art and to the debate on how this aspect can be influenced by contextualization of the art work.

The conclusions are open in this text because it deals with the personal experience of an artist, involved in different projects on the female image, stereotypes, citizenship, politics and political representation of women in contemporary Romania – like a testimonial, analysed in a Freudian manner (the figure of the father being overused).

Keywords: visual art, feminist practice, performance art, art and politics.

The artistic practice is seen as a result, as an answer to the question „What kind of art do you make?”. Who is answering this question, when the answer comes (after or before the art is done) is generating a certain kind of taxonomy of the art word – the so called „labelling” of the art object, or the artistic action.

This paper refers to „a personal approach” on how art – my own art, in this case – balances between being integrated in a theoretical argument and the actions that actually generate the art work discourse.

The main aspect of the feminist work – as it is in my work – consists in using the body, or the image of the body, one’s own body, or the body of other women.



In the book *Understanding Body Language* there is a consideration on the contemporary mentality that is very important in the context of the present analysis – by using the body we are promised that we will understand the motivation and feelings of others; we will communicate more efficiently; we will create faster connections; we will convince without producing remorse¹. Performance, as an artistic practice, involves a reconsideration of the functions of the body. By using one's own body, the symbolic meaning is amplified, and paraphrasing the classic saying "every gesture is political", we get an argument that can be put on debate: "any artistic action in which a female body is involved is automatically a feminist one". Here is an example of the relationship between the communicator and the use of language. Recognition by an empowered critical voice (art critic, curator, cultural journalist, reviewer, or anyone else who may have an authorized opinion) and then the acceptance of that opinion by an audience, more or less competent on the matter, gives meaning to that artistic action.

If we start from the assumption that human expression is one of the primary aspects involved in establishing recognizable behavioural typologies, then the acknowledgment of certain basic elements in others and creating general truths, make the artistic productions to become accessible to their audiences, considered as principles of a common world². In practice, this criterion of recognition of the artistic phenomenon functions in the sense of causing disorder into the mind of the viewer. My own artistic production is based on the emotional relations within a group, positive or negative affinities³ that are stimulated by actions labelled as feminist.

In developing the visual discourse, an important role lies in the process of questioning the idea of a standard (and standardization). Placing oneself into a positive or negative position to a standard generates the socio-behavioural rules in a community. How the body looks like can indicate the membership of a particular group⁴.

The "Daddy's Little Princess" performance takes in consideration the debate around the idea of the human body that is treated as an object, but also as a subject, put under the evaluation of the viewer. This artistic project opened the discussion resumed in the exhibitions "Upper-class

¹ Geoff Ribbens and Richard Thompson, *Understanding Body Language* (New York: Barro's Educational Series, 2001), 7.

² Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Constituirea a realității. Tratat de sociologia cunoașterii* (Bucharest: Art, 2008), 54.

³ Alex Mucchelli, "Modelele comunicării", in *Comunicarea*, ed. Philippe Cabin and Jean- François Dortier (Iași: Polirom, 2010), 58.

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Istoria urâtului* (Bucharest: Rao, 2007), 426.

Supervised” (Calina Gallery, Timisoara, 2014) and ”I’m a Spoiled Daughter of a Politician” (Victoria Art Center, Bucharest, 2014). The inspiration behind came from two sources: my own biography, encompassing the status of being the daughter of a politician, a fact that generated an identity pattern in Romanian society and gender identity, and what it means to be a woman-accessory, ready to be presented to the public as a trophy.

The woman objectifies herself in ways that follow the logic of the consumerist society. In his book "Paradoxical Happiness - Essay on Hyperconsumption Society", Gilles Lipovesky proposes a comprehensive analysis of how opinion is created in the contemporary society. Newspapers, online press, magazines, television, internet become means where "the incarnation of the fullness of life" is displayed daily and where the patterns of a happy life are exalted through overexposure⁵. The goal is to improve appearances, and the targeted effect is to trigger envy. Therefore, the exit of the object-woman from this predetermined logic is, symbolically, a damage to her image.

Prior to the performance itself, some studio photos were made – a variety of studies of movement and posture that allude to the rigidity of a doll. The resulting images assumed beautification and makeover, the purpose being to bring them into a formula similar to fashion photography or product photos. By assuming this position – to be a mass-market item, the woman is an investment and therefore a profit is expected.

The conceptual game is centered on the image of a paternal figure, opening interpretations that come from psychology and psychoanalysis. The "father" appears as a mental necessity, a virtual representation of a supreme instance that puts things in order, and is responsible for the happiness of "the little girl". The woman, by fulfilling her submissive role, is bound to be happy. Happiness becomes mandatory and is a brand equivalent to success.

The live performances of ”Daddy's Little Princess” lasted for three and a half hours and implied self-assumed confinement in a box, as a doll, in an almost motionless position, waiting for the viewers to have a noticeable and describable reaction. All the action was carried out at the entrance of Aiurart Gallery exhibition space in Bucharest. ”Momentum II” took place in the spring of 2014, and was curated by Olivia Nițiș and Oana Băluță⁶.

⁵ Gilles Lipovesky, *Fericeirea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum*, (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 274.

⁶ *Momentum 2* [catalog], (Bucharest: Experimental Project, 2014), 8-17.

Active participation in an engaged approach requires an alignment to the moral ideas promoted through the event. This is the point of this argumentation where we return to the issue of conceptual construction and to the process of categorizing (or putting a tag) on the artistic practice. Sociologist Oana Băluță sees the exhibition "Momentum II" as a way to "deconstruct meanings and representations of feminine and womanly once one assumes a political language", and the images become a "complementary vehicles of communication that may be situated in the public space of the experiences of the women and raise public awareness"⁷.

Tracking the reactions of others and my own organic reactions became the main concerns during the performance. There were reactions of embarrassment among viewers. Some of them left, but came back after a while. In some cases "games of power" between the viewed and the viewer occurred. The spectator was trying to induce a state of uneasiness to the "objective", seeking eye contact and struggling to maintain it for a long period of time. The result was favourable to the "doll", which, behind the glass, was in control.

Once accustomed to the objectification of the living being, the box took the role of a piece of furniture. Leaned back against the oversized "package", two young women were talking to one another. A group of visitors had a discussion about the artist and its action less than half a meter away. I overheard the conclusion that the action, at first, appears as a funny game, the constructed image in itself is fun, but as time passes, it becomes disturbing and creates a strange atmosphere.

The organic reactions were acute pain in my feet, which made blood flow difficult, and made me give up my shoes – those were removed by the curator through a ventilation hole at the top of the box as another (unplanned) action in this performance. The psychological effect was a decrease in the ability to control the public and an increase in vulnerability. The state of perfect puppet was attacked. Finally, the two coordinators of the project faked a break in the glass of the box.

The same scenario was repeated for the closing of the exhibition, "Momentum 2". The clothes were hung on a wire frame that was not visible, in a construction designed to give the feeling that there is an imaginary body in those clothes.

In this context, we can also begin a wider discussion on assuming an "ante factum" or a "post factum" feminist position.

⁷ Oana Băluță, "Momentum 1 și Momentum 2 decupaje și integrări politico-estetice ale feminității, femeiescului și femininului" in *Momentum 2* [catalog], 15.

According to my personal experience, assigning an artistic belief to an act can start from its "intentionality". As an artist, I can intend to have a feminist discourse and build my "artefact" to support my feminist convictions, or my object (or action) fits into a feminist theoretical construction, but with no previous intention.

In developing the actions, I started from the premise that identity cannot be fully reproduced. Because of this, in the description of my own methodology, one can enter the term *apparent identity* - the subject looks like, and it is endowed with all the properties of a phenomenon or of the objects reproduced. There is a process of extraction that makes the artistic phenomenon become a relationship. The recreated entity (image) appears to be perceived as the entity subjected to recreation (subject). The comparison is non-linear and constant, it can be more like a spiral, not being a singular act in time. In the case of a work of art, even a performance, we can mentally go back and find new meaning that can have a source, a temporal detachment from the moment it appeared, or by having extra information about the context in which it was created or about what it refers to.

Using one's own person as subject can be seen as a tendency towards narcissism, tendency that exists more or less in each individual, and for the contemporary artist, it can become a tool. Lea Vergine in the book "Body art and performance" raises a crucial question: is there or is there not an identification to equivalence between a performance artist and the person himself. The *apparent identity* occurs through a process of extracting the essential, what is worthy of being shown⁸. The woman who can be seen looks like the works' author up to a false identification, but does not totalize all her attributes. Physical appearance is justified for certain purposes, gathered under this themes: the male-female relationship and the public-artist relationship (where the artist is seen as a body- an object). The exhibition of the inner world becomes prominent along with the transformation of emotional and cognitive moods in visual images. The effect achieved through art is to make public something that should remain private.

What should be noted is that, in the elaboration of the projects, a relationship of equivalences between the real objects and the artistic objects was not intended, it was but a sham⁹. Even if I refer to events that actually took place at some point in time, the institutional context of art distorts their meaning.

⁸ Lea Vergine, *Body art and performance. The body as language* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 7-8, 26-30.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Eseuri critice* (Chişinău: Cartier, 2006), 249.

The "institutional theory of art" by George Dickie says that a work of art is an artefact created specifically to be submitted to the art world¹⁰.

The works may correspond to an idealistic attachment to concepts promoted in contemporary activism, challenging a social fact, but the potential alarm signal exists in subsidiary. Activism, in this case, comes as a consequence and not as the main purpose.

The psychological concept of "false recognition", which belongs to Henri Bergson, is an extended theoretical support for the series of works "Upper-Class Supervised" and "I Am The Spoiled Daughter of a Politician". "False recognition" appears from the identification of current perception with a prior perception that looks like the first in its content or in the emotional hue and is based on the principle that two images have a real existence, one of those being the reproduction of the other¹¹.

Between the body and image of the body a relationship of complicity starts developing. However, one can translate into images Pierre Bourdieu's statement: "the social world builds the body as sexed reality and considers it the depositary of sexual principles of vision and division"¹².

The relationship between the body and image of the body has been speculated in the participatory work "Flavia Lupu for Finish' it" (2013). There a symbolic creative transfer takes place, from the artist to the audience, by using the image of the artist's body. Each of the participants could contribute, per their discretion, with the tools provided to "vandalize" the image of artist's body. That image was a self-portrait, a photographic transposition, scale 1:1, in underwear, but not having a sexual meaning, that could react: once "wounded", it would bleed (paint used for wounds in films was used to gain this effect). Again, just as in "Daddy's Little Princess", the question regarding the relationship between truth and false, between real and unreal pops up.

Hypothetically, a woman offers herself to the public to dispose of her. A golden hammer, nails and other objects are on a table, all objects generally used in the medical system, all painted gold – a scenography leading to an amplification of the gestures, transforming them into a ritual. In the space of Atelier 030202, in an event which involved the interaction between visitors and artworks, participants "played", and were most probably amused. It becomes unclear, however,

¹⁰ George Dickie, *Introduction to aesthetics. An analytic approach*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Energia spirituală*, (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2003), 80.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Dominația masculină*, (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2003), 18.

whether the audience felt that they exercised power over a simple sheet of paper, or that they really felt the freedom feeling of disposing of a person in a way that would have been impossible in real life, without subsequent repercussions.

The issue of the personal relationship between art and politics for my own art projects was a way to exploit my personal biography in order to create art, but also became a critical hypostasis for the contemporary Romanian political scene. I do not necessarily refer to a real involvement in politics (being a member of a political party or being a candidate for public office), but rather to a borderline relationship. The self-assumed status of being (at that time) the daughter of a politician who, at the same time, happened to be an artist, generated a series of favourable circumstances for the analysis of the cause and effect on the relationships with others in this case, and also on the manifestations of political campaigns.

The exhibitions "Upper-Class Supervised" (Calina Gallery, Timisoara, 2014) and "I Am The Spoiled Daughter of a Politician" (Victoria Art Center, Bucharest, 2014) are part of a common discourse that refers to the elaboration of contemporary mythologies.

"Upper-class Supervised", exhibition held at Calina Gallery in Timișoara, in the summer of 2014, included works that had a history that related to the performance art and to its physicality, even if the body was not actually present.

The state of surveillance and self-surveillance generates self-objectification that is, as Olivia Nițiș, the curator of the two projects, noted in a written text for the opening at Calina Gallery, a "desired object". The clothes become a symbolic expression of personal characteristics and in the work in "Transfer" – a series of images that were part of the exhibition in Timișoara, resulted from an improvised photo shoot that took place at my own birthday party and became a participatory performance with burlesque characteristics. The action was ironic and self-ironic. This was an experiment in which I offer my own outfits to other women. The masquerade emphasizes certain desirable characteristics of the female appearance that come from the action of framing the female body in a certain pattern. It was a comparative process – the participants were asked to choose an outfit that belonged to me from a stander, free of charge and to take it home with them, after they had tried it on - the offer to take the clothes home was largely denied. However, even in the case of the participants who indeed took the clothes home, none of them were worn in circumstances other than during the shoot. Therefore, the identity transfer was a game that was performed on a short term, in a controlled environment without further effects.

The identity relationship begins to deconstruct through an exchange in the relationship between the public and the private space: I'm relating to society and society relates to me. This process is not a direct one, but it is mediated through filters such as stereotypes, prejudices, and other circumstantial connections that we all make during different situations in real life.

The French sociologist Alain Touraine, in his book "The Women's World", notices the distrust and irritation of women when "feminism" is evoked, especially when it is integrated into the political discourse. The author states that, according to his interviews, that we are dealing with a "post feminism" era, when the rights, which were previously fought for, in contemporary social society become self-evident¹³. However, according to my own social experiences, there is a contradictory duality on how women are seen in the Romanian society. Career, financial independence, careful studies are encouraged and even "preached", but, at the same time, the pressure to fulfil the gender role (mother, wife) is maintained on both women and men, as this is often considered the ultimate proof of the utility of their existence in the world. The denial or the lack of this attribute in one's life, from various reasons, may appear as a malfunction or as a personal incapacity and is regarded by others, or even by people themselves, as a failure, difficult to overcome.

"Romania - transition START!", title under which I incorporated a few family photos from the '90s, is the point from which I begin to extract meaning related to my personal development, but also to the development of contemporary Romania. Here we can find the images of my mother, in the first day of school photos, the only "in bodied" visual references in the exhibition.

Women in the Romanian men's world were seen mostly as annexes of their husbands or fathers. The mark of their marital status becomes even more important than their own personal achievements, which brings a misogynistic component even into the relationships established between women.

In the exhibition "I'm The Spoiled Daughter of a Politician" there was a corner where my own shoes were mixed with my mother's shoes – the proposal was to open a topic on how the established female behaviour pattern is transmitted from one generation to another in Romanian society. An identity transfer occurs between generations, with a desirable pattern, based on a potential "pseudo-good", together with a "what is right" component that does not require any explanations.

¹³ Alain Touraine, *Lumea femeilor*, (Bucharest: Art, 2007), 34-35.

The autobiographical references are also a visual research on the problems of everyday life. Quoting Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, everyday life is an invention of the modern world, which involves techniques and skills, projects and resources¹⁴. The two authors consider that the daily reality becomes the objective reality par excellence and is generated by institutions and space limitations, being complemented by a subjective reality that is shaped according to personal experiences. The individual is not born as a member of the society, but during his existence there is a temporal succession, when he "trains" himself to participate to society's dialectics.

In the book "The Social Construction of Reality" two types of socialization are described: primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization occurs in childhood, when parents are the equivalent of the world itself. Conflicts arise when the child becomes aware of the fact that his parents' world is not the only possible world and there is a second world, institutionalized, with a higher degree of anonymity.

A "successful socialization" requires a high degree of symmetry between two realities: the subjective one, dictated by inner impulses, and the objective one, institutionally organized. Therefore, success arises from this fact: everyone is what they allegedly are, and biographical clues become the most relevant. An individual may react to the classification imposed by the others, but by doing so one could become undesirable among his own. The outcome of contrary self-identification, as Berger and Luckmann mentioned, can have a fault in its structure of verisimilitude and is considered a fleeting fantasy¹⁵.

Family photos were present in both exhibitions, in Timișoara and in Bucharest. An important role has been played by the image of the father keeping his couple of months old baby daughter in his hand, above his head, as a trophy, but also as an image of the filiation relationship seen as a potential biological continuity of the family.

Artists like Tracy Emin - who put her own bed in the exhibition hall, or Nan Golding – who work with images regarding abusive relationships – documented their own existence and the existence of others through photos. In the exhibition held at Victoria Art Center, I presented my own testimony of institutional recognitions – diplomas, voter card and birth certificate. The documents provide relevant information in the shortest manner possible. In contrast to many

¹⁴ Berger and Luckmann, *Constituirea socială a realității*, 9, 12.

¹⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *Constituirea socială a realității*, 192, 219-222.

possible attributes as a woman, those presented here were equivalent and comparable to any other Romanian citizen, regardless of his or her social status and gender.

The electoral poster of my father and the spot he used in the campaign for the parliamentary elections of 2012 were also presented in this exhibition. They undertook a remake, a changing of the protagonists – the daughter took the place of the father, while retaining the layout and shape of the originals. This has more than one meaning: the daughter received the identity of the father; the woman appropriates the speech of the man; the citizen adopts the ideas of the politician. Furthermore, this takes us back to one essential question: whether it would be more desirable to have “male followers” in business or politics? Even though the daughter may have the same qualities as a son, a daughter is, from the start, regarded with suspicion, catalogued as less intellectually gifted, less able to meet the demands of socio-political pressures.

The remake of the images is equivalent to a falsification, just as the political character was built on an accumulation of adaptations - away from himself, transforming himself from a subject to an object. Public activity in itself, in terms of artistic practice, involves the objectification of human beings given by the need for labelling in order to become recognizable. The result is, therefore, a fake of a fake, supported by real facts.

”The Last Supper”, a staged photo with me in the place of Jesus, became the major piece of the two projects "I'm the Spoiled Daughter of a Politician" and "Upper-Class Supervised".

This image refers to the artist's position, of a woman that finds herself, by fate, in a world of people used to decision making, which in Romania is mostly a male world.

The contextualization of the image is based on the idea of dogmatic coercion in a society where masculine values and pragmatism are associated with positive and constructive elements, as opposed to feminine values, labelled sometimes as useless or insignificant in the political decision.

The process of decryption of the symbolic meanings of images is versatile and open, challenging once again the relationship between fake and authentic.

”The Last Supper”, painted between 1495-1498 by Leonardo da Vinci for the Duke of Sforza, became an emblematic work in the cultural history of humanity, and was used in advertising, visual arts and political display in many forms. In 1996, Renée Cox made ”Yo Mama's Last Supper” where she replaced Jesus and used black men around her, except Judas, who was

white, in an attempt to destroy stereotypes. The work caused protests and comments from authorities and from Catholic Church.

My own visual structure is similar, to some extent, to the Jamaican artist's, but it also follows other meanings. There is a real connection between the people in the photo, a subordinated hierarchy. Symbolically, the image refers to a transfer of power, and its possible consequences, which come from a relationship of lineage.

Substitution in the case of this "Supper" becomes a process by which a different person is gifted with the attributes that one does not naturally have; the mistakes of the father are attributable to the daughter, as the daughter becomes liable to inherit biographic errors from her father. Referring to the biblical context, the son is sent to correct an error and the question that arises here is: does the female offspring retain the same qualities?

"I'm The Spoiled Daughter of a Politician", as "Upper-Class Supervised" are two exhibitions that started from the reflective process on the connection between arts and politics, and the most disposable resource was the self-referential point of view. Creative strategies and resources were based on theoretical research, on a reflection upon the capabilities for visual expression of the objects invested with the title of artwork, as well as on a boost equivalent to inspiration or creative instinct.

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Flavia Lupu, Flavia Lupu Poster, digital print, 100x70 cm, 2014



Flavia Lupu, Mihai Lupu Poster, digital print, 100x70 cm, 2014



Flavia Lupu, The Last Supper, digital print, 300x116 cm, 2014



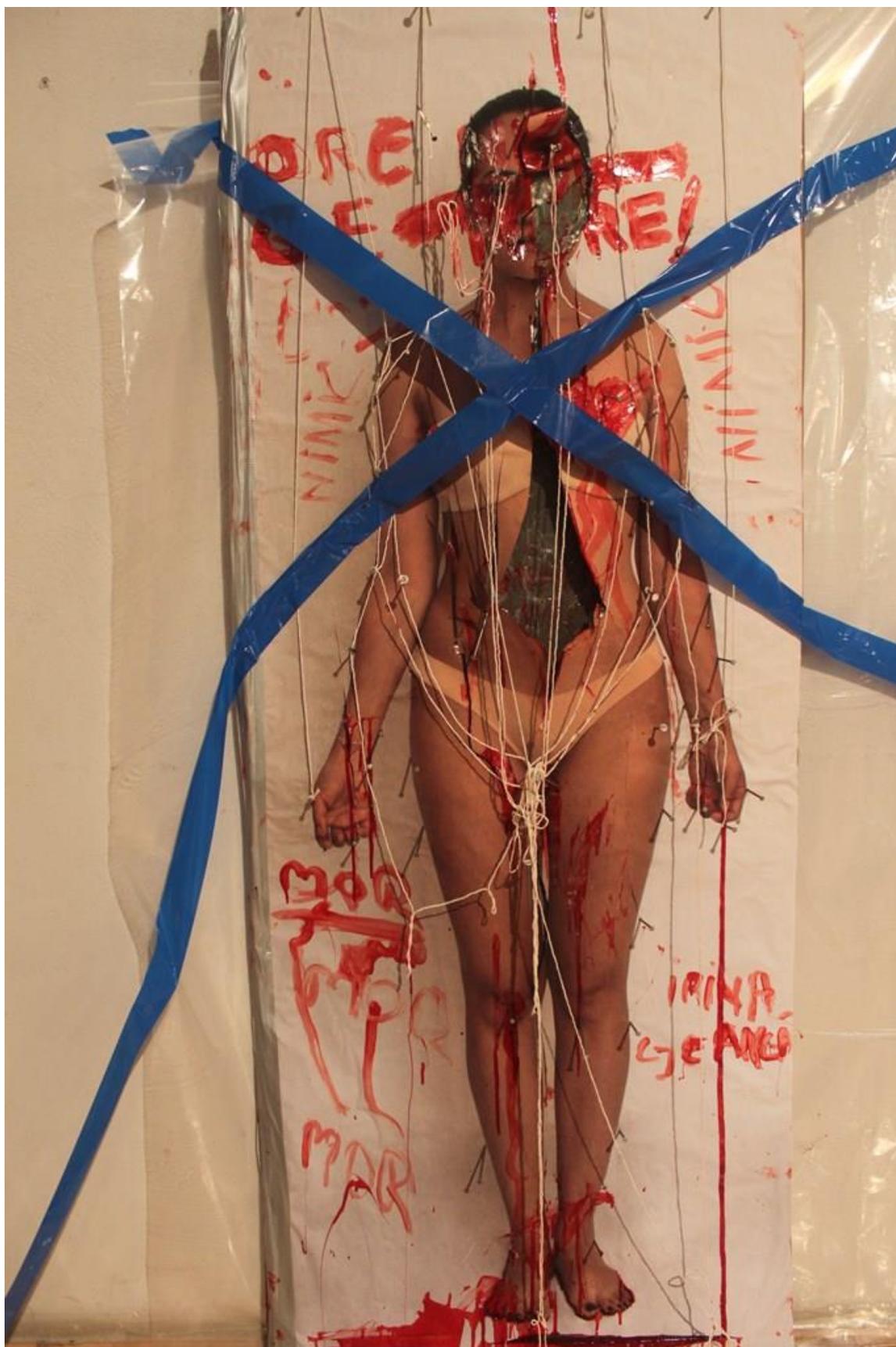
Flavia Lupu, Transition go!, Instalation, 2014



Flavia Lupu, Daddy's little princess (1), performance Aiurart, 2014



Flavia Lupu, Daddy's little princess (2), performance Aiurart, 2014



Flavia Lupu for Finish'it_Atelier 030202, 2013



Flavia Lupu, Photo from Transfer happening, 2014