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THE BODY – A UTOPIA OF INTERIORITY THE DISPUTE BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE BODY IN ROMANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

Introduction

The body has become one of the most fascinating and recurrent subjects of debate in the contemporary period, especially since the “breaking down” of taboos dating to the 1960s and ‘70s. From a psychological and philosophical point of view, the body is not objective and accessible in itself, but rather part of the human personality as *eigenes Leib* (“one’s own body”) and different from *Körper* (“the material body”), according to J.G. Fichte’s definition in *Naturrecht*.¹ Owing to this ambiguous duality, the body can be considered at the same time both “actor” and “product”, a reflex of subjectivity with a tendency to become objective.

Consequently, we can reconsider the history of culture as a history of multiple interpretations in which the body, by turns, is reality, fiction, an expression of nature or culture, of the natural or the artificial, to mention only a few of the possible interpretations. As a dual and ambiguous entity, the body opens the way for multiple possibilities of interdisciplinary research, combining anthropology with ethnology, sociology with psychoanalysis, history of the art and theatre with semiotics, etc.

The body can be briefly defined as a receptacle for the subject, the space of the subject’s confinement and freedom, a symbolic construction that is difficult to grasp.² From an anthropological perspective, the body has always formed the basis for the conceptions and practices of a certain epoch, thus becoming the object of anthropocentric hermeneutics.³ The body is not accessible in a pure state, but only following an analysis that enables it to be perceived as an integral part of a cultural ensemble.

Researchers may also analyze this subject in terms of the *body-sign* analogy, thereby opening the way for a semiotic interpretation. The body then has a “hermeneutic existence”, built on an interpretative approach. It may be a sign, a language or even a text. Marius Lazurcă⁴ speaks of the “textual construction of the body”, which “is written or spoken in a language”.

The body may also become the object of social analysis, given the complex relationship between the individual and society. E. Goffman⁵ discusses the relationship between the public and the private in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which the body, examined from the perspective of interiority, of the self, becomes the connective element between the self and the external world. This relationship imposes a certain type of behavior, a “strategy” of highlighting, revealing or hiding private facets that takes its inspiration from theatrical “staging”. The body therefore forms the interface between the individual and others, those who represent society as a whole, a relationship also defined by the contact established between individual space and the space of others.

The relationship between the individual – symbolically represented by the body or its attributes – and society is also defined with the help of “total institutions”, such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons, boarding schools, military barracks or monasteries; this relationship has been analyzed both by Goffman and Foucault. The people placed in these institutions are denied the environment of their previous way of life and end up under the control of the staff, a process that occurs simultaneously with a change of identity resulting from having to live in new circumstances. In the context of abusive power relations in total institutions, Goffman has studied the phenomenon of institutional profanation of the self and the subsequent emergence of an “underground life” within this framework. The “underground life” refers to the efforts and subterfuge performed by the person “admitted” to such institutions in order to achieve a simulacrum of personal life.

Michel Foucault,⁶ in *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, emphasizes the connection between state and “body” in which there exists a double metaphor: the state is likened to a body, while the way of organizing the study of the body is considered a miniature state. From this point of view, the analysis of penal systems becomes a chapter of “political anatomy.” The power or abusive power exercised over the condemned results, according to Foucault, in a “body split”: the body of

the king, just like the body of the condemned, is split: on the one hand there is the transitory body, on the other the permanent body that endures and embodies the very concept of king (or condemned man), a body associated with a specific theoretical discourse.

From the condemned man's point of view, the body becomes the object and target of power to which means of punishment, surveillance or constraint are applied. Foucault talks about the "docile body", likened to the "machine-man" or the automaton, a sort of reduced body, created with the help of power and constrained by the interdictions and obligations that derive from it. In the same context, Foucault introduces the "disciplinary space", the space where the "docile man" leads his existence and where power extends its control.

The body may be the expression of one person's individuality, but at the same time it can also be an expression of group behavior with a social impact. From this point of view, we can talk about a public body that is used in collective performances, physical exercise, demonstrations, shows with many participants.

The inheritance of a dualist conception in European thought led to the appearance of the complementary, antagonistic pairs *body-soul*, *matter-spirit*, *body-mind*,⁷ and these in turn have determined two different perceptions of the body: the *object body*, as viewed from the outside, is a simple mechanism, as opposed to the "*lived body*", which, viewed from the inside, is perceived as tension, impetus, and desire.⁸

This relationship between *the interior* and *the exterior* defines the notion of body, which, by turns, becomes *an expression of interiority* (*psyche*) or the space of psychic life corresponding to the 'ego' as described by Freud, or *an expression of exteriority*, which is a shape/structure. Between these two permanent states, the ego stores information based on individual memory and consciousness of the self and the body, something reflected both in language and relationships with others. According to Freud's theory, the ego is first of all corporeal, "the projection of a surface". The body therefore expresses human psychic life through a language of its own, the language of gestures, which represents a code to be deciphered through an "applied" reading. The concept of gesture is defined by Giorgio Agamben⁹ as a relationship between body language and the environment. Consequently, the gesture is the communication of that which cannot be expressed verbally, a kind of improvisation that compensates for the inability to talk. Gilles Deleuze calls this body-specific

language “body linguistics”.¹⁰ However, the body may equally be an expression of exteriority, to be seen in a shape or a structure; it has thus been perceived as a functional or behavioral model and compared to a mechanical structure. Just like a machine, in the collective mind it becomes an “automatic body”, disciplined from the exterior and treated as if it were a mechanism.

But this dualist vision, transposed to the contemporary world, places man in opposition to his body, which then becomes an “alter ego”, a privileged space of the state of “well-being”, expressed in its perfect shape as modeled through body-building or the use of cosmetics. As David Le Breton notes, by strengthening the idea of the relationship between body and “alter-ego”, modern medicine has estranged man from his body, from his personal history; it is concerned with nothing but organic processes, showing more interest in the disease than the patient. Jean Baudrillard¹¹ writes about the “repressive solicitude” manifest in all collective modern obsessions with the body. Rooted in the obsession with the “in shape” body, to which the “figure” is of utmost importance, this “repressive solicitude” expresses an obsession with hygiene and, ultimately, a denial of the “organic” body, which secretes and excretes, in favor of a “freed”, phantasmatic body.

Taking this research as his point of departure, Jean Baudrillard¹² sees in the body an exemplary model and a network of “brands” within a system of values and symbolic exchanges. In his approach, medicine focuses on the body as the *cadaver*, something which provides the framework for medical studies and thus contributes to the preservation of life. In its analysis of the body, religion takes the *animal* as a model when describing instincts and “lusts”, whereas the political economy has as its model of the ideal body the *robot*. The latter symbolizes the power of asexual work which functions according to the rules of an absolute rationality. Finally, within the “framework of the political economy of the signs”, Baudrillard highlights the role of the *mannequin*, a body that functions perfectly in terms of the law of value, and is even a site for value production and sign production, respectively. He sees the mannequin as a body in which sexuality itself has become a model. Consequently, every system displays a type of reductive “phantasm” that governs it and has as ideal goals health, resurrection of the soul, rational productivity and freed sexuality.

The body is a fixed, well-established framework ruled by the principle of reality, by the ability to feel and by thoughts. However, at the same

time, through a process of social and cultural transformation, the body may also be associated with a *utopia*.¹³ We can apply utopian principles to the body, such as the “reformation of the body”: the regularization of clothes, nutritive prescriptions, the regularization of sexuality. If, simplistically speaking, utopia is a space of desire, then the body is the frame within which desires come to life.

The body tends to become utopian through the increasingly refined culture created for it: fitness, medicine, gene therapy, use of cosmetics or high performance sport; the body of sportspeople, for instance, “improved” by means of doping, transcends effort and pain in order to set records people once would only have dreamt of.

The utopization of the body is expressed through a variety of bodily constructs or fantasies, and the handling of the body may become utopian in itself. Utopian concepts such as “body politic”, “governing body”, “organ”, “organization”, “the body of the people” (“Volkkörper”), or “the body of the nation” have given rise to unexpected interpretations and uses, the most spectacular of which being those related to the semantic extension of “national bodies” – the abusive treatment of the Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib.¹⁴ From this point of view, the body of the enemy is perceived as a “germ” that might start a “biological war” or spread an infectious disease, while state borders are considered “borders of the body of the nation”.

Utopia and the utopian have been semantically reactivated by postmodernism, and in this context emphasis must be placed on the appearance of the hybrid, post-humanist body, the result of excessive use of technology. The relationship between utopia and body translates, as shown previously, into bold experiments, of which the most excessive and spectacular seem to be genetic interventions. However, such experiments are nothing but the pursuit of a utopia or a *chimera*. A hybrid monster in Antiquity, the Chimera¹⁵ seduces and then destroys those watching her, and, just like the Sphinx or Medusa, it cannot be killed from the front, but only if taken by surprise. The transformation of this mythological figure into a common theme takes place slowly, over centuries, until the chimera becomes an ideal that is related to utopia and expressing unshakeable faith in a seductive idea still full of danger and exaltation.

To Baudelaire, the chimera has no precise contour; it is mysterious, unidentified and, above all, specific to each person (“Chacun sa Chimère”). The poet perceives in the chimera an ideal that belongs to the self, is part of the self, and is to be examined in the modern period by psychoanalysis.

The Chimera therefore becomes the ideal of the ego, “a pure ideal which people feel like a burden, which they obey and which they resemble,”¹⁶ their most intimate and familiar side, which may become the target of criticism.

We can include in the category of utopian bodies an artificial construct par excellence, such as “the body of art”, which, since it belongs to the artifact, distances itself from the natural world. The artist Annette Messager critically analyzes the daily stereotypes that have become chimeras: the body subject to the requirements of fashion or advertising, which is thus fragmented. This body, which is not only transformed but also deformed, through visual experimentation becomes a sort of hybrid and even, being an artistic product, a utopian body (*Propositions de bonheur*, 1975-1976).

The “symbolic geography” of the artist’s exposed body

Never has obsession with the body been more alive and powerful than in the narcissistically inwards-looking, contemporary period. According to the definition given by psychoanalysis, the term “narcissism” describes the behavior of a person who treats their own body as they would a “sexual object”.¹⁷ Observations from this same field show that “the narcissistic behavior of identification” acknowledges both “awareness of the body” and “awareness of the self” as symbolic forms that are distinct but in permanent correlation with each other.

The body, unfettered by the psychoanalytic discourse, set free from prejudice and taboos, becomes the most obvious expression of the self, the embodiment of its quests and aspirations. We can talk about the development of a discourse around the endless exposure of the body, reinforced by a true “hysteria” of the gaze, a yearning for seeing, which has been accused of “voyeurism” and has acquired inconceivable dimensions in comparison with previous eras. Starting from the “forbidden gaze”, which Freud defines as a form of perversion, the voyeur watches an object (of contemplation) through the “keyhole”, thus gazing at a forbidden detail of the object. It is normally the naked body that arouses the interest of the traditional voyeur, but this taboo has lost the force it used to have, being continually broken and desacralized through the proliferation of commercial sexual images. The freeing of the gaze has

at the same time been encouraged by the media, which have frantically made use of the crudest aspects of everyday occurrences and the most eccentric of images.

The contemporary artist's interest in the body – his own body as “material” or “surface” – should be examined in the context of the following change in perception: that from the *artistic product*, an artifact about to be objectified, to the *subject* itself, which becomes art by means of exacerbating its own self and presenting its creation as a process (work in progress). The body is therefore the space where the unique subjective essence finds its expression, the center of physical, sensorial and spiritual energy, as Yves Klein puts it. The body can be considered an essential vector of expression, a privileged space for the artist that becomes a “visual territory” (Carolee Schneeman). This “territory” shapes a “symbolic geography” that still retains its mysterious regions, which are still insufficiently explored and revealed gradually, thanks, in particular, to the efforts of objectification on behalf of the artist.

A possible source for the appearance of body art is the artist's gesture during the execution of abstract expressionist paintings; a role-model in this sense was the American painter Jackson Pollock, who, by using the technique of gesture painting on a horizontal surface, would start to paint by making movements involving his entire body. His *gesture* tends to become more important than his *work* as such. Harald Rosenberg¹⁸ states that the gesture of painting has set American artists free from political, aesthetic and moral values, turning the surface of the canvas into a sort of “arena where one performs”.¹⁹ The direct relationship between the artist and the material surface of his work, seen as a receptacle of the artist's gesture, highlights the degree of the subject's involvement, whose body seems to be a sort of “tool”.

Starting with Pollock, painting became “a condensed result of the dynamic action of painting”, the product of an *event*, and the artist's status “heroic”. The artist should be regarded as “a new Narcissus, an explorer in search of his own self, who has no past, but no destination either, and who constantly re-creates, living one moment of a continuous presence”.²⁰ From this perspective, the artist's person, as shown in the picture taken while working in his studio, has been criticized by feminists as “an icon of the paternalistic modernism, a paradigmatic figure”.

J. Pollock's experiments, performed in his studio, but intensely publicized during the early 1950s, mark the beginning of painting as a

public spectacle; the first Western artist who decided to use this form of expression in a public performance was the informal painter George Mathieu, who was of the belief that art was spontaneous, direct and freed from the past (1957). It was only one step from gesture painting, which retains the idea of the artist's unmediated body involvement, to the painting that uses "live bodies" as brushes. At the beginning of the 1960s, Yves Klein carried out an action called "The Anthropometers of the Blue Age", in which he directed a few female nudes to paint themselves with ultramarine ("International Klein Blue", which the artist called his own invention) and then leave the print of their bodies on the surface of a large sheet of white paper, which was eventually displayed as a painting. These prints represent the body, without the head, in fact the "essential body mass", reminiscent of prehistoric female nudes.

Ever since painting began to be considered an "arena", where the artist performs live, even in public, ritual, its theatrical and staging aspects have grown in importance together with a shift of emphasis away from the work (*object*) and towards the artist (*subject*). At the same time, gesture painting introduced new materials and techniques corresponding to a new visual expressivity.

In the Vienna of the 1960s, a group of painters affected by "the crisis of painting" (caused by the changing of traditional painting methods as well as traditional materials) became interested in Pollock's and Klein's experiments. The four Viennese Actionists – Otto Mühl, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler – were all searching for a way to renew the language of contemporary art and were using the bodies of models or their own bodies as painting surfaces onto which they released all the tension in their gestures. Otto Mühl initiated the so-called "Materialaktionen", by sprinkling colored pigments on different bodies, thus obtaining a special plasticity resulting from the spontaneous combination of pigment, water, and honey.

It was Hermann Nitsch who formulated the concept of "Orgienmysterientheater", a form of action painting that has evolved towards a longer performance with a ritualistic, theatrical script. In these actions Nitsch used animal blood and bowels instead of pigments, and focused not only on the plasticity of the materials, but also on their symbolism.

Günter Brus planned a series of performances entitled "Selbstbemalung", in which he would paint his body in white pigment and then "section"

it with a black line in a make-believe play. Gradually he began testing his levels of physical endurance in some of his actions by simply cutting himself or by staging dramatic situations, such as the placing close to his body of “aggressive” objects: razors, a hatchet, scissors, a scalpel or seemingly electrically-charged cables. If Bruss began with the problems raised by gesture painting on an unconventional surface – the body – over time he began to question and re-examine this new material as it crossed new thresholds of pain. The staging of the body in rituals or even in action painting raised issues of subject identity and its relation to society, questions that allow for psychoanalytical interpretations.

Rudolf Schwarzkogler saw his actions in the same manner of action painting, in that he predominantly used blue pigment, in a homage to Yves Klein. With one exception, he did not participate himself in these actions, but played the role of director, watching events unfold or issuing instructions from the wings. For his first action, “The Wedding”, the artist planned the painting with blue pigment of a female model dressed in white and included a sliced fish or chicken in the props. Like Bruss, apart from action painting, he also introduced the idea of the threatened or “mutilated” body. The bandaged, injured body, exposed as an object of contemplation alongside surgical instruments or electric cables, has a dramatic effect and encourages the contemplation of vulnerability. As Valie Export²¹ explains, the Viennese Actionists emphasized the equation “material = body = nature”, which was later replaced with the equation “body = social construct = transfiguration of nature” by the generation that followed the Actionists and to whom the artist herself belongs.

It is perhaps Joseph Beuys who makes the most intense use of a symbolic language in his actions and who performs rituals in which he himself appears to be a “shaman”. The body of the artist, brought to the fore in these ritualistic actions, becomes a mediator between nature and a modern society no longer able to grasp the profound meaning of things. Among the objects endowed with symbolic value, some of them with personal value, are copper, wood, felt, fat and honey.

In contrast to Beuys’s ritual actions, in which the artist places his charisma at stake, Bruce Nauman, isolated in his studio, introduces a new form of experimental and conceptual action. The problems raised by these actions are complex: on the one hand, there is the artist’s withdrawal from the stage, from public space, while, on the other, the video camera which mediates his presence to the public. Nauman began with a kind of “living

sculptures”, which represent certain body postures, such as, for example, “Self-Portrait as a Fountain”, in which the artist appears metaphorically as a source of life/creation; he studies the relationship between his body and space, using his body as a type of “material” to be manipulated. Taking this approach as his point of departure, the artist emphasizes his relationship with space in a series of video-performances entitled “Corridor”, in which he conceives some narrow and empty spaces, observed with closed-circuit cameras (“Life / taped Video Corridor”, 1970), which later were to inhibit visitors to his exhibitions.

These actions were no longer aimed at painting, but at the body itself, which was foregrounded, turned into a visible measure of human existence. In the 1970s, the body became a means of expressing an identity established by genres. In opposition to the group of Viennese Actionists, Valie Export openly and daringly affirmed her female identity as established by her own body. In a self-portrait in which she parodied an advertisement for a cigarette company with which she shared the same name – “EXPORT” – the artist revealed herself as freed from taboos and shattered the stereotypical image of the woman constrained by society. To her, the body becomes the human “measure” of the environment, the urban landscape or nature. It is through her body that she perceives the environment, and she exposes it publicly in order to express her will to define herself and to find her own place in the ensemble. With the series entitled “Körperkonfigurationen”, Valie Export began using technology – photography and film – for conceptual art experiments in which the body no longer appears in direct performances in front of an audience, but is mediated by the filmed image. The artist uses two video cameras, one located on the back of the body, the other positioned towards the front, so as to reflect her visual range and thus to test her perception.

Marina Abramović chose to use her body as “material”, together with the German artist Ulay, as part of a couple. Both tested their limits of physical and mental endurance in the 1977 action entitled “Imponderabilia”, in which, as part of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Bologna, they stood naked in the main entrance, forcing the public to pass through the small space between them; the performance was filmed and projected in the halls of the museum, the two artists remaining in the same position until all the visitors had entered. They also tried to demonstrate physical inseparability in a performance during which they plaited their hair together to form a single plait.

The social body and the political body under communism

Another theme constantly explored in the last period of Marina Abramović's work is identity or the relationship between female identity and national identity. In an attempt to evoke her mother's partisan past, she marked her naked body with the communist coat of arms, cutting directly into her skin with a razor in an impressive performance, full of pain ("The Lips of Thomas"), during which the artist sacrificed herself in the name of an idea and a memory.²² This long-standing performance forms part of the series dedicated to physical suffering inflicted for the purpose of releasing powerful energies through pain, in which she tried to portray how ideology acts on the individual's body.

Raša Todosijević's conceptualism is especially visible in the well-known happening entitled "Was ist Kunst, Marinela Koželj?" [il.1, 2], in which the artist obsessive repetition of this question is reinforced by physical aggression directed towards the person to whom the question is directed. The question – fundamental for an artist – remains unanswered, and the brutal and obsessive manner in which it is asked is a reference to the repressive techniques used by dictatorial regimes.

In 1970, after Czechoslovakia had been invaded by Soviet tanks and the hope that a more relaxed political system would develop was eradicated, Koller created his own aesthetic system that was critical of modern society. He conceived a system of objects which he named UFO (Universal Futurological Orientations), an anti-illusionist anti-painting and anti-happening "realistic" concept that induced an idea of uncertainty about the future and worked with pseudo-scientific irony. He created a series of "anti-happenings", photographs featuring the artist as a ping-pong player, equipped with a bat and the familiar white balls, in the most unexpected of places, such as an attic window.

Belonging to the second generation of actionists stemming from the end of the 1970s, Jiri Kovanda created a series of minimalist happenings, or happenings similar to those of the Fluxus movement, with obvious utopian aims. These happenings expressed the artist's position/attitude, rather than his aesthetic research; due to minimalization and their ephemeral character, these happenings also had a therapeutic function, expressing a survival strategy.

For a group of artists from the former Yugoslavia, the search for identity is synonymous with the relationship between politics, society, and the

individual: “the body of the nation” can be found in countless individual bodies marked by ideology. Their criticism primarily addresses the impact produced by the encounter between two types of “monocultures”: the Balkan, ideologically oppressive, xenophobic and patriarchal monoculture, and that dominated by western feminism.²³ In different periods and situations, these women artists criticized the two cultural stereotypes, trying to define something of an individual identity devoid of ideological meanings.

As Jovana Stokić notes pertinently, Yugoslav socialism was an original combination of communist ideology and consumerist elements in perfect cohabitation. The criticism of artists from this region also addressed this contradictory reality; thus the Croatian artist Sanja Iveković created several series of works analyzing the connections between the individual and a “standardized” identity, the latter being perfectly illustrated by fashion magazines containing advertisements for various cosmetic products. In the 1975 series “Double Life”,²⁴ in search of her own/a feminine identity, the artist exhibited photographs published in fashion magazines alongside her own photographs that tried to “imitate” the models’ poses. The bringing together of the two types of images reveals the restless search for identity, the questions the artist poses in her effort to define her feminine as well as her individual identity.

This same theme of questioning different identities in relation to the past is repeated many years later, in 2000, by Sanja Iveković in the series entitled “Gender XX”, where she borrows from fashion magazines various images of models of an impersonal and standardized “beauty”, but which transmit the idea of luxury and voluptuousness, onto which she prints the names and details of various anti-Fascist female militants and communist heroines. This information is limited to announcing, in a dry manner, the young age when they were executed or committed suicide immediately upon their capture.

Sanja Iveković’s preoccupations are directed more towards feminine, intimate themes. In the happening entitled “Inter nos”, she communicates with the public – from whom she is separated by a transparent surface – with the help of a screen. This happening focuses on the isolation and confinement the artist is trying to overcome by establishing a rapport with the audience.

The problem of national identity becomes increasingly acute in the case of a number of artists from the younger generation dramatically affected by

the wars in the ex-Yugoslavia space. For Milica Tomić, national identity is the central theme in a video performance in which the artist appears smiling and proclaiming countless identities in as many foreign languages ("I am Milica Tomić, I am Dutch, etc"); however, in the meantime, many blood stains begin to appear on her young body, leaking out of numerous invisible wounds. This performance reveals an association between the idea of national identity and the wound (the result of the imaginary guilt of belonging to a certain nation) and contains direct allusions to the trauma caused by the Serbs' nationalistic pathos of recent years.

At the same time, another artist, Tanja Ostojić, adopted a different, more radical approach to national and individual identity. In the interactive project "Looking for a Husband with EU Passport" [il.3, 4], the artist develops this idea in multiple ways: on the one hand, this is a strategy of self-salvation from the Eastern ghetto; on the other, it is a case study about the sexes and the relationships between them. She uses her own naked body, purified of hair – and thus breaking religious taboos – as a mediator between private and public space, deliberately choosing a form devoid of seduction and sensuality, a simple "tool" in the process of contemplation. Branislav Dimitrijević holds an interesting opinion of her performance: he says the artist chooses to represent herself as a sort of "living picture" – not a "living sculpture", but rather a "living monument" or even a "ready made".

Offering the image of her own naked body over the Internet, she transforms it into a social body that communicates with other people with the help of the Internet. After placing the "search" advertisement on the Internet – one that mocks modern-day match-making or sex advertisements – Tanja Ostojić received several replies accompanied by short presentations from a number of candidates. Using the Internet, a fast and global means of communication, contradicts the idea of confinement or the ghetto and was used by the artist as a way to combat isolation while her country was isolated from the rest of the world and the population confined to this given space.

During a later stage, the artist selects the "offers" of marriage and organizes a first date with her future husband, who was accepted after "selection", the German artist Klemens Golf. This first date took place in public, and the theme for discussion – marriage – became a public/private topic of conversation. If, in Tanja Ostojić's interpretation of Lacan's psychoanalysis, through marriage the man assumes an active role in the public space while the woman plays only a passive role, that of an object

of the man's desire, then in her performance, "Looking for a Husband with EU Passport", she proves and undermines this role assigned to the man. Even if she uses her publicly presented body as an object of desire, as a result of her "selection" of the man chosen for marriage, Tanja changes the meaning generally assigned by the aforementioned theory.

In accepting a role featuring stereotypes about people's sexual identity, Tanja Ostojić also analyzed the system of power and relations at work in the world of contemporary art. In 2002, she placed on the internet the serial project "Success Strategies: Holidays with a Curator", in which she had pictures of herself taken on a beach in the very same way famous people are captured in the photos of the paparazzi. She appeared as a young artist, at the peak of her success, close to a male curator who symbolically represented power in the system of contemporary art institutions. In this series of performances, she publicly declared that a female artist's success was the result of a relationship of seduction with a male curator. This series was preceded, in 2001, by "Black Square on White and I'll Be Your Angel", a performance in which Tanja Ostojić became the "escort" of the main curator of the Venice Biennale, Harald Szeeman. Playing the role of a "guardian angel", during the opening festivities Tanja appeared as a woman of the world, dressed in "haute couture" outfits and in the center of attention beside the most desired and admired personality, the curator of the Biennale.

The body of the artist and Romanian society

In the contemporary period it is the artists who, in their self-oriented and society-oriented discourse, discuss and reveal numerous possible identities. In communist totalitarian societies, artists, through their projects, systematically opposed the abolition of identities and enforced equality while militating for freedom of expression, the assertion of the individual as such, with his own identity, undistorted by ideological pressure.

It is in particular of these communist societies that the artist's body as a carrier of signs appears as an identity problem of the subject and a social construct. A taboo theme, the body becomes a "material" handled by the artist in a social construction that transfigures nature. But the presence of the body in its unequivocal reality becomes subversive in a conservative totalitarian society.

In the Romanian context, an open approach to the body and an analysis of its language with everything this subject implies – nakedness, free bodily expression translated into gestures, sexuality, discussion of the sexes and their relationship – meant breaking the taboos cultivated by this conservative society that preferred to remain silent about an entire philosophy related to the body. The socialist Romanian society of the time – just like other dictatorial societies throughout history – cultivated the image of the “classical body” embodying an ideal of beauty and perfection best represented by the athletic body of sportsmen. In fact, their physical “demonstrations”, in huge collective shows in stadiums, provided a reference model for the entire society and became a free or imposed source of inspiration for the traditional artistic representations conceived in the so-called “social-realist” style.

From this perspective, the artist’s naked body appeared as a way of flouting the norms and the official order, a challenging representation whose “dim” meaning had to be eliminated. Thus the censorship in operation within the institutions that staged exhibitions rejected anything that could arouse the suspicion that it did not obey the norms imposed by the state. Under these circumstances, the exploration of the body and its language of nakedness became genuine “heroic gestures”, equal to a political engagement, a reaction against the official position. This peculiar situation, quite different from the “liberal” socialist countries (former Yugoslavia, Poland), led to the isolation of the artists who experimented with body language and deprived them of the right to express themselves in public.

The central figure of this research into the body in the 1970s is undoubtedly Ion Grigorescu.²⁵ Based on his interest in the world and its people, he devoted himself to researching both the human psyche and society by experimenting on his own body. Through his artistic voyage, he tried to find an answer to the questions about identity that each and every one of us may wonder about at any given moment. In a series of performances performed before the camera, Grigorescu experimented with the loss of individual identity and the intimacy of space during the communist period. He did so using a self-made superangular lens, which focused the image like a sight. With it, the artist manipulated the image, suggesting an “external” look, focusing on an indoor space and violating its intimacy. The sight seems to be a “surveilling eye”, transmitting the confusing and dismaying image of a “docile body” caught in the middle

of some physical exercise reminiscent of imprisonment “rituals”: a salute, drills, or the enforced gesture of swallowing some simple food (“In Prison”, 1978) [il. 5]. The indiscreet look oriented towards the inside of the apartment, together with the docility of the body, which, even in its intimate rituals, seems to obey the invisible commands of power, is a metaphor for daily life during the dictatorship, when, in the “dormitory-blocks”, the life of the inhabitants was easy to control. In those enclosed spaces, through enforced discipline, a “docile body” was shaped on which pressure was exerted each and every second.

The disappearance of private space and the individual’s intimacy, something characteristic of that period and an important stage for the dictatorship in building the “new man”, a fearful hybrid whose personal and collective memory had been annihilated, was one of the themes used by the artist and repeated in other performances, such as “Body Art inside the House” [il. 6]. Here the angle of view, indiscreetly introduced, is again superangular; the image records the nude body caught in a moment of intimacy, relaxed, viewed with the “coldness” and objectivity of a surveillance mechanism. In the sequences of photograms, the image gradually comes closer, first showing the torso, then the chest, and finally only a detail of the face in an act of fragmentation.

But most of Grigorescu’s performances in front of the camera were devoted to the exploration of the “forbidden body”, something unanimously considered a taboo subject in Romanian society. On the one hand, he was interested in the exact recording of his body at a given moment as an expression of absolute nudity and intimacy and often in relation with the intimate space (the room), which was given anthropomorphic features. On the other hand, he experimented with the “visual mechanism” of recording by placing the camera at the most unexpected angles and positions, sometimes giving an impression of aggressiveness towards the image.

In “Self-portrait with Mirrors”, a performance dating from 1973 and repeated in several variations, Grigorescu used two moving mirrors to obtain the multiplication of the subject, an amplification and dynamization of the movement. Highly enthusiastic about experiments connected to the body and the search for individual identity, the artist considers himself an obsessive *voyeur* in his search for the illusion produced by the virtual, a search which leads him to a genuine state of psychic excitation, a restlessness that engenders other optical settings. In the photo action “Overlappings” [il. 7], Grigorescu used chaotic multiplications of his own

body with the help of a mirror as well as superimposed prints on the same frame of colored film. The effect was one of confusion, multiplication, and false reflection, which the artist regarded as the desired result.

His searching for and experimentation with individual identity led the artist to research sexual identity – a vast and ambiguous theme, especially in the political context of that period. He tries to remake the lost unity of the original being – the androgyny – in the 1976 film “Masculine-Feminine”; the camera scans his own body, recording at the same time the space of the studio that becomes a receiver engaged in dialogue with the body, as does also the façade of a nearby house. A game of ambiguities, an exchange of fixed poles are also at stake when masculinity and femininity are perceived in relation to the body as such. The film suggests an even crossing of the surfaces of a passive body (that of the artist, of course) that is lacking in any expression or attitude, alternated with the crossing of the space of the studio or an external piece of architecture, where the femininity of the body is a verified hypothesis. The film also presents some hypotheses and research on the body in relation to space, but the main issue still remains that of sexual identity.

The problem of sexual identity and the androgyny – the result of looking for and finding the two reunited poles – can be found in the 1977 series of photographic performances entitled “Birth”. Taking this idea further, the artist creates a typically feminine situation, experimenting with the transgression of a natural state and evoking pregnancy, birth, and lying on his own body, the series concluding with the appearance of the human figure in fetal position. It thus tests the artist’s capacity to overcome the taboos imposed by a conservative society and its cliché images of the two sexes. Ion Grigorescu’s body-related research was not unique, but overlapped in the 1970s with Geta Brătescu’s interests;²⁶ the female artist was constantly engaged in defining a feminine identity without, however, tackling the issue of the thematized body, which is considered a *locus* of the identity she contemplates in a series of textile collages dating from the 1980s entitled “Medea’s Portraits”. She dedicates her work to Medea, a controversial and feared mythological character, a combination of a witch and an ordinary woman. Due to this character’s final solutions, her tenacity in pursuing her plans, her strength of character, her initiatives and decisions, she brought disapproval and disgrace upon herself, becoming the symbol of outraged femininity, witnessing the repetition of scenarios such as repudiation and abandonment. “Medea’s Portraits” thus become

internal feminine “states of mind”, a dazzling sequence of such states the artist appeals to by hiding the truth in mythological vagueness. These “portraits” illustrate the destruction of the codified patriarchal image of femininity. Not accidentally, the use of the textile medium and the creation of the collages with the help of a sewing machine provide an ironic comment on “feminine” materials. In parallel, Geta Brătescu also devoted herself to researching her body as an identity object specific to representation, being one of the few artists to study the relationship between the body and intimate space; the studio is regarded as a *topos* with anthropomorphic features bearing the size of her own body, an intimate space that becomes a sort of “alter ego”.

In a series of photographed and filmed events, she subjects herself to an imposed fragmentation that symbolizes a substitute representation. In “Towards White” (1976), the artist is in her studio, which is gradually transformed into a stainless space by covering the walls with large sheets of paper. In the end she covers herself with paper, painting her face and hands white in an attempt to identify with the space and in order to erase the details and hide herself behind the mask. Continuing the series of photographs begun previously, she creates “Self-portrait towards White” in a similar context: the image of the face regarded frontally is gradually hidden in an increasingly conspicuously manner by covering it with a transparent film that turns opaque, alternating as if in a challenging game of revealing and hiding identity.

The same motif – that of the mask – is repeated many years later in a new context, rendering it more symbolic and expressive, in the video “The Earthcake”, made in 1992 together with the cameraman Alexandru Solomon, and presented at the mixed-media exhibition “The Earth” in Timișoara. Through a sequence of images, the preparation of a “cake” of earth is narrated. If, during the film, the “characters” are the two working hands – selecting the soil and moisturizing it – in the end, the artist appears with a white mask and a silver helmet on her head and swallowing, in solemn gestures, this “earthcake” in a ritual of taking possession and identification. In this case, the mask appears as a manifestation of the unmovable and universal self, giving it an unreal look and suggesting the transgression of daily time and space. The communication with the profound archetypal strata deciphered in this video performance is surprisingly similar to a performance by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera; in the happening “El peso de la culpa”, the artist eats earthcakes mixed

with salty water in a gesture of identification with Central American aboriginal populations and rejection of colonial domination and its impact in this area.²⁷

The idea of identifying herself with her own image or evoking the whole with the help of one part is repeated in the 1977 film "Hands", which has the subtitle "For the eyes my body's hand remakes my portrait". This declared identification is also based on an association of hand/eye images, which, deciphered with the aid of psychoanalysis, become substitutes for each other. Therefore, the evocation of the hand is the equivalent of a hidden self-portrait. The hands are drawing gestures of taking-over, self-referential gestures, which also have a degree of generality.

In another dialogue over time, in 1993 Geta Brătescu remakes the experiment in "Hands" in a video entitled "Automatic Cocktail". The evocation of the artist's person in absentia or by substituting her entire person with her hands recalls the same principle in this short film: in the artist's studio, among jars with brushes and paints, it is only these hands that are visible, working or sketching a human face; the performance is constantly interrupted by the gestures of the hand repeatedly and automatically hitting the arms of a chair. The artist's hands and the studio thus define a "physiognomy", evoking the whole image she identifies with at its most profound level – creation.

As we have seen, the feminine identity – just like any other individual identity – was blurred in public space during the communist period until it almost disappeared, withdrawing as if to an ultimate shelter in the private space of the studio – in Geta Brătescu's case – or that of the apartment – in Lia Perjovschi's case. The performances in front of the camera from the end of the 1980s – among which the most significant in this regard seems to be "The Test of Sleep"²⁸ – emphasize a "vegetal body" exposed to sight, a body bearing a text inscribed on the skin. This "inscribed" body, carrier of more or less intelligible messages, loses its own significance in order to become a support-surface, a depersonalized object with no identity. The desire to communicate achieved through graphic signs does not achieve its goal; on the contrary, it becomes impossible, suggesting a loss of meanings, falling into muteness and sleep identified here as a pre-conscious state characterizing the state of Romanian society at the time. On the other hand, if action is generally considered an attribute of masculinity, the passiveness of the revealed/exposed body suggests the traditional attribute of femininity and the apartment becomes a "shell" that

acts as a shield against the brutal invasion of political power into intimate life, a sort of a “uterus”, the only shelter and space where self-assertion is possible while the public space remains inaccessible.

Romanian artists have been greatly concerned with and commented in their work on certain stereotypes that have become “commonplaces” in the minds of most people. Teodor Graur, for example, has shown an interest in the typology of the “macho” man, who exhibits his half-naked body in order to show his muscles and tattoos, an expression of his belonging to a subculture. In the action entitled “The Sports Complex” [il. 8], performed in 1988 at House pARTy, alone in front of the camera, he appears as a young man from the “working class”, holding a television set showing a regular program featuring pictures of busy workers in the background. During the performance he does weight-lifting exercises, thus emphasizing the cliché of the “new man”, a socialist product brainwashed with clichés in which he naively believes. The pun in the title of the action, “The Sports Complex”, is ironic and relies on the ambiguity of the word “complex”, which may refer either to a group of buildings or to a psychological state of inferiority that causes behavioral problems.

With the fall of the communist system in 1989, the centralist state lost its hegemony, making way for the assertion of the numerous identities censored for so many decades, especially in the context of the erosion of the frontier between public and private. In Romanian post-communist society there were many debates on the topic of ethnic and religious identity. The artists were the first to have something significant to say about on this topic, and in a way they played the role of mediators in a society finding it difficult to regain its right to an opinion. Thus the doubts related to collaboration with the secret police in the case of many citizens, or the expression of distrust and dissatisfaction about the self in relation to a genuine identity that had remained hidden during the communist period, gave birth to aggressive performances in which the artists’ metaphorical expression contained a series of individual truths with a social relevance that was difficult to express in public. In these forms of staging, the body remained the artist’s privileged material.

In the performance entitled “Throwing away the Skin”, Alexandru Antik²⁹ exorcised “the evil” in every individual in front of the public and proposed a symbolic purification; he started with the difficulty of selecting and cutting a synthetic skin – a cover that could be considered his double – and fixed it in nails, a gesture equivalent to exorcising the

evil in an individual and, at the same time, a collective ritual, an action of metamorphosis and transfiguration taking place to the regular and exasperating rhythm of a metronome. Under the pressure of the present time and space, symbolized by a circle inside which the artist placed himself, Antik dramatically condensed "the liberation" from the pressure of an oppressive past and the symbolic regaining of the lost identity.

The "reality" of the body, which bears the signs of old age and represents a sort of automaton that executes various actions as if they were empty daily rituals, was analyzed by the same artist in the 1997 action "Afternoon Oscillation". Together with a feminine character, with a white, clown-like face and whose faded individual features were meant to suggest the human condition, the artist appeared suspended from a cable, gently swinging in the air to fairground music and performed a short, absurd dialogue, similar to those found in a Eugene Ionesco play.

The theme of the double and the liberation from the negative accumulations of the previous period can be found after 1989 in a series of public performances by Lia Perjovschi, two examples of which being "State of mind without a title" [il. 9] and "I fight for my right to be different"³⁰ [il. 10, 11]. The former is a street performance dating from 1991, when the artist carried on her back a sort of "double", a "shadow", made of paper. This indefinite object, the size of her body, served to emphasize a hypostasis of the body determined by the human mind, the problematic split of the human personality, something the artist used to develop the theme of the dark mental "inheritance" that affected many people at the time as well as that of split personality.

Given the time of its performance, 1993, the latter appears to be a criticism addressed to the entire post-totalitarian society in search of its identity. The unproductive idea of annulling identity and enforcing equality is opposed by the desire for free expression and the artist's own search to define this individual identity. The entire happening is focused on the theme of the double – an immobile full-sized puppet made of rags on to which she projects her affection as well as aggression; the artist thus alternates the tender gestures of putting on the doll's clothes, placing it in a position similar to hers, a faithful copy, with fits of anger expressed by throwing the puppet into black paint and then against the walls or even into the spectators. These fits are again followed by gentler gestures in which the artist lies down next to her immobile double, imitating it in a gesture of self-reflection and introspection, with an unexpected dramatic effect

on the public. Both performances give rise to the theme of the double, which may also be interpreted as a “split” of the artist’s personality and of her creation, as a crossing of the border between these two fixed poles, which shifts the focus onto the subject/author.

Working for a long time in a couple and dealing with couple-related issues, Gusztáv Ütő, together with a female partner, is in search of an identity difficult to define in the context of transition. The questions about identity address appurtenance and determination – on the one hand gender identity (and here the theme of the couple is meant to express the importance of each individual part as well as the whole); on the other, local and regional identity versus national identity. Belonging to the Transylvanian Hungarian community, the artist tried to identify these identity features through a series of festivals organized by himself at St. Anne’s Lake, but also through his own performances. The numerous requests for the self-definition of the community were consolidated by other artists, who provided their own contributions to the already frequent themes. Among the favorite themes, we might mention bipolarity (masculine/feminine, black/white, strong/weak, etc.) or the theme of Transylvanian Hungarian identity as evoked by specific proverbs, cliché images in contrast or dynamic confrontation with a larger national identity.

Immediately after 1990, the re-discussion of the much-debated issue of national identity, combined with the negative cliché image of the country abroad, led Dan Perjovschi to stage a performance that was dramatic and a parody at one and the same time: the tattooing the name of the country – Romania³¹ – on one of his shoulders [il. 12]. This “anti-performance”, unspectacular to the public, in which the artist subjected himself willingly to a branding action, reminiscent of the concentration camps and the confrontation with the loss of one’s own identity through brutal regimentation in the name of a country, was one of the most sincere/desperate manifestations of post-December trauma, a form of protest against the “collective amnesia” manifested through a general indifference towards the serious problems that remained unsolved during the transition from communism to another stage. Through this performance, Perjovschi acknowledged and accepted his own national identity as a *stigma*.³² This performance was repeated ten years later in “Removing Romania”, in which the artist subjected himself to a surgical intervention to have the tattoo removed, “erased” with the help of a laser. In fact, the molecules containing the paint particles spread all around the

body during this surgery, a form of dissemination of content and message, the aforementioned stigma appearing as dimmer but not eradicated to the viewer.

In conclusion, the relationship between the public and the private body is closely connected to a public and a personal space. The body can be considered the expression of interiority and intimacy, which is best achieved within personal space. But, as Bachelard notes, from the perspective of an anthropology of the imagination applied to the self, interior and exterior space are two reversible concepts that interchange their “hostility” and meet on a narrow border, on a surface painful to both. Consequently, the body can be seen as the “painful surface” where interior and exterior space meet.

The projection in public space of the private body and personal space, a risk taken only by artists, has the effect of a philosophical “upheaval”,³³ and these shocking and telling disclosures are meant to change general perception, which is affected by conformism and “commonplaces”.

Both the private and the public body say something about an identity or several identities, individual or collective, which they disclose and bring to public awareness. In the contemporary context, that of transition from communism to liberal society, some of the most interesting problems in former communist countries relate to identity and encompass the dilemmas of and conflicts between multiple suppressed identities that have been regained or altered due to changes in society. These changes, some of them dramatic, have led to a reanalysis of traditional identities in light of the total collapse of a once operational value system.

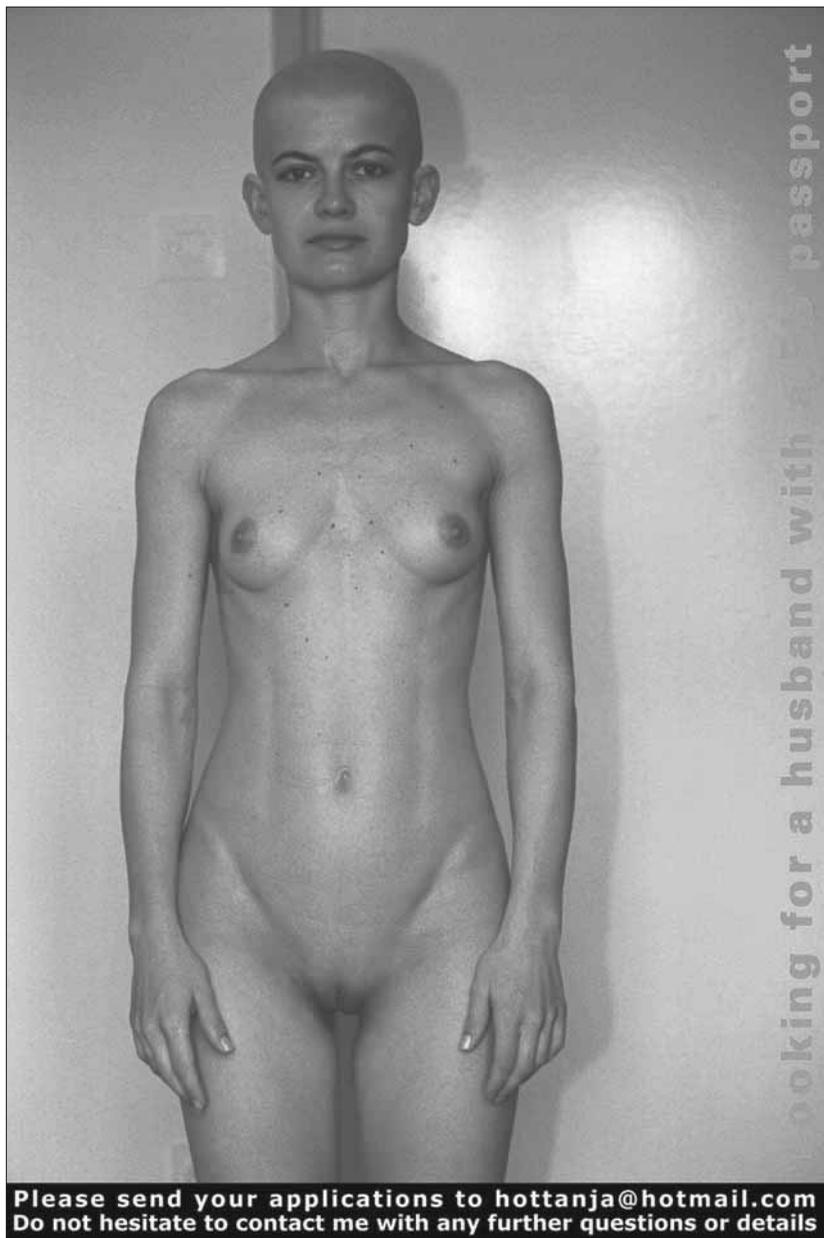
* The illustrations are reproduced by courtesy of the artists.



1. Rasa Todosijevic „Was ist Kunst, Marinela Kozelj?“



2. Rasa Todosijevic „Was ist Kunst, Marinela Kozelj?”



3. Tanja Ostojic „Looking for a Husband with EU Passport“

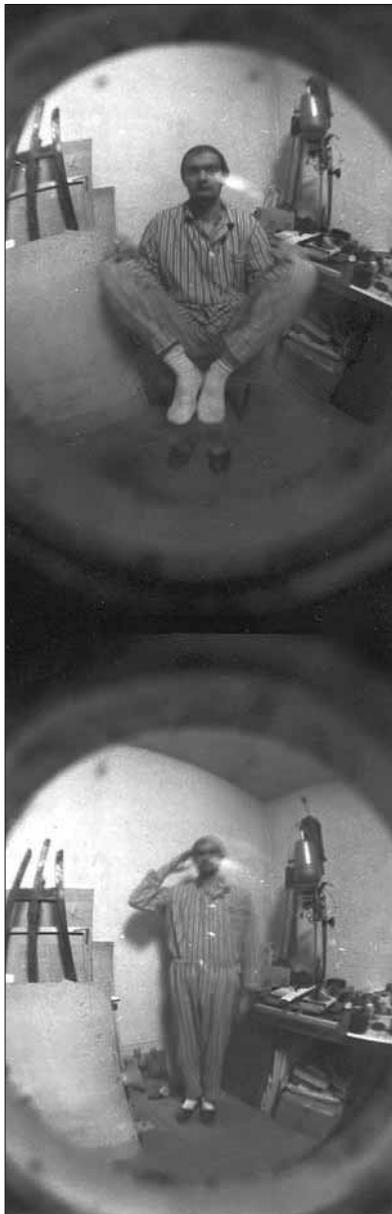
From: John Hickman
To: tanja@diplomats.com
Sent: Saturday, January 05, 2002 5:32 AM
Subject: Looking for a Husband



Hello Dear Lady,
I know this is a bit late but I just now found your add and site. Are you still in the market for a husband? I don't want to go into any great details if I am wasting my time.

John, 43 years old in Texas

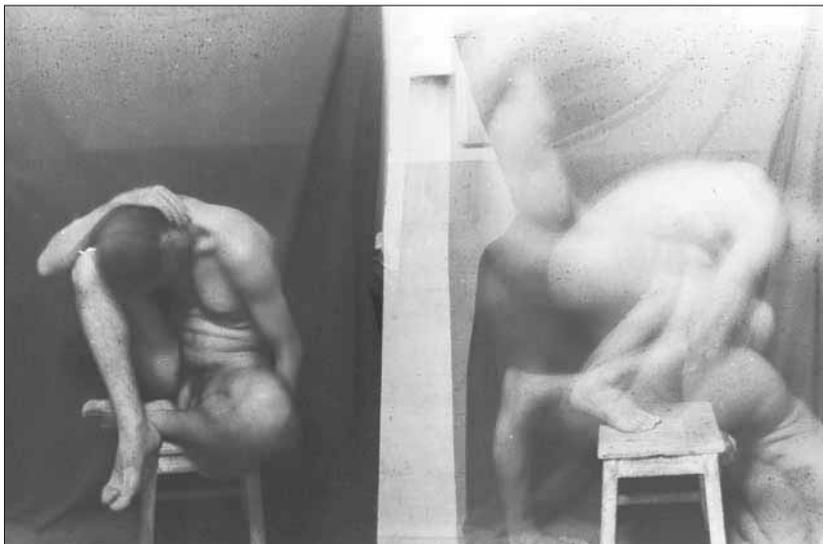
4. Tanja Ostojic „Looking for a Husband with EU Passport“



5. Ion Grigorescu „La închisoare”



6. Ion Grigorescu „Body art în interiorul casei”



7. Ion Grigorescu "Suprapuneri"



8. Teodor Graur „Complex sportiv”



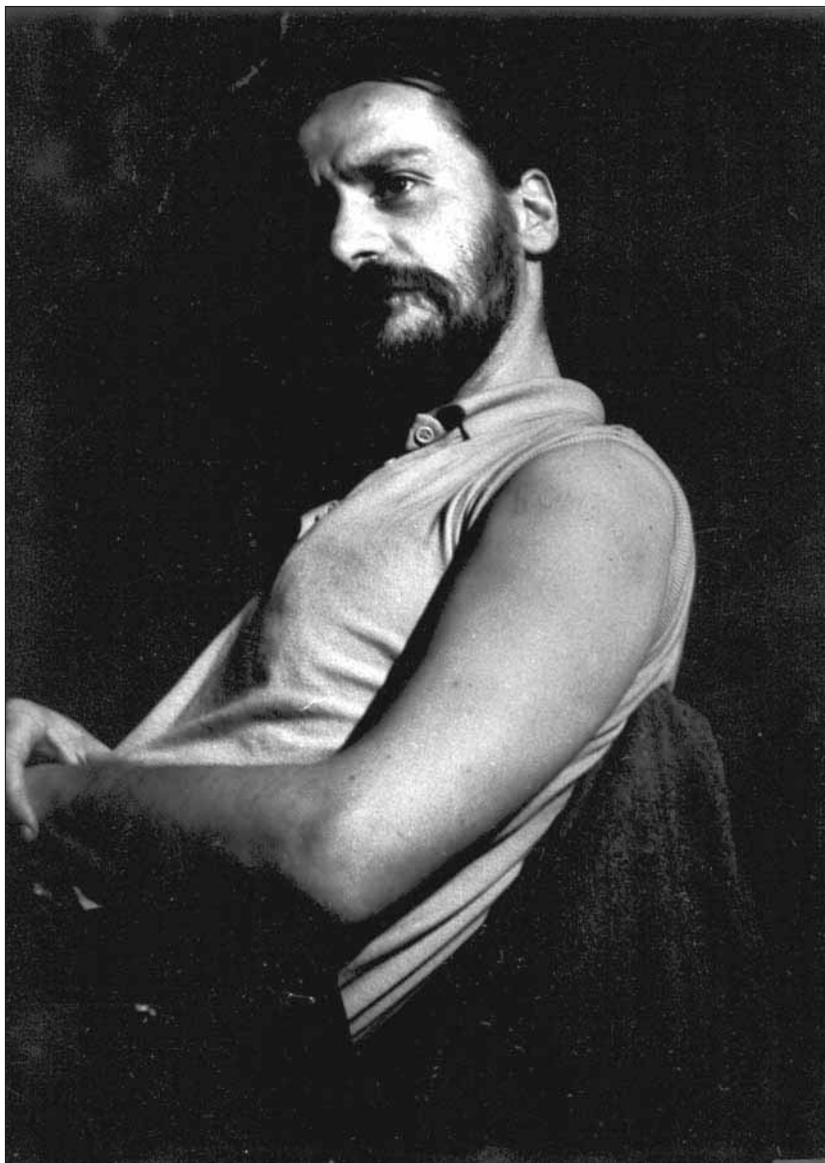
9. Lia Perjovschi „Stare fără titlu”



10. Lia Perjovschi „Lupt pentru dreptul meu de a fi altfel”



11. Lia Perjovschi „Lupt pentru dreptul meu de a fi altfel”



12. Dan Perjovschi „România”

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