

BORYANA ROSSA

AMAZON ARMOR



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Sofia, 2014

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INTRO

This book covers my projects completed in 2013 and 2014, representing my thoughts on the body as an active political agent that constructs the attitude towards ourselves and the others. All works have been inspired by my double mastectomy and the changes in my physical and mental understanding of self after this radical body change. The myth about the women-warriors – the Amazons – who cut their breasts off to better steady their bows, was the inspiration not only for this series of projects, but also for the way I think about myself, my new body shape, its functionality and beauty.

Boryana Rossa, 2014

ARMOR FOR THE DISARMED

NADIA PLUNGIAN

Boryana Rossa belongs to the breed of thoughtful contemporary artists whose works represent the synthesis of diverse modes of expression – from academic and curatorial, to socially-conscious and political as well as the directly artistic. Since the end of the 1990s, her central concerns have been corporeality as examined through the prism of cultural codes and various historical circumstances, and political constructions of gender. While the artist is acutely aware of the mechanisms of power and gender hierarchies, her analysis of the framework of social violence is not direct, but performed by means of art, creating a silence between the work and the viewer. These silent spaces, where the pause of meaning lays bare the audience's reaction, become, in her work, markers of social change, delineating the difference between contemporary social mechanisms, and markers of how art is experienced in general.

In her dissertation *Post-Cold War Gender Performances* (2012), as in her early performances, the artist presents multifaceted perspectives on the manifold media representations of the gender structure and the simultaneous co-existence of various gender scenarios in the collective historical memory. Among other subjects, Boryana Rossa invites the viewer to contemplate the role of a-genderedness in culture (*Official Invitation*, 2007), addresses ideas of the mechanical body (*I Am A Robot, But I Am Not Your Slave!*, 2004, made as part of the ULTRAFUTURO Collective), and the damaged, vulnerable, sacrificial body (*Woman President*, 2011), at times, uniting these with the common denominator of the problem of voluntary violence.

An excellent example of this kind of artistically rendered reflexivity of multiple social layers is one of her early video pieces, *The Moon and The Sunshine*, 2000. I would like to speak about this separately, as it addresses issues that emerge as programmatic in subsequent performances.

In this piece, Rossa investigates the territory of normative femininity, donning the tentative mask of the socially legitimated woman. Her image is drawn in several broad strokes: painted lips, curled hair, and a naked body. The emotional accent is the artist's open sensitivity.

The immediate details of the image/construct are intensified with impressive concision of the setting, an easily recognizable late Soviet interior, with its concomitant polarization of gender. The crocheted napkins, vases, artificial and real flowers displayed on little tables and shelves are shown in strict order, defining the register of femininity (excess, emotionality, sentimentalism) or the function of mother (care, domesticity, interior decorations). Detailed interior shots are replaced with close-ups of the television, showing a video game where characters shoot at each other. In this setting, a naked woman focuses on ritualistic work, taping bandages over her breasts, and, while looking in the mirror, painting bruise-like marks on her body with makeup.



The Good Woman, the Bad Woman and the Ugly Man, 2001. Boryana Rossa. Series of five photographs

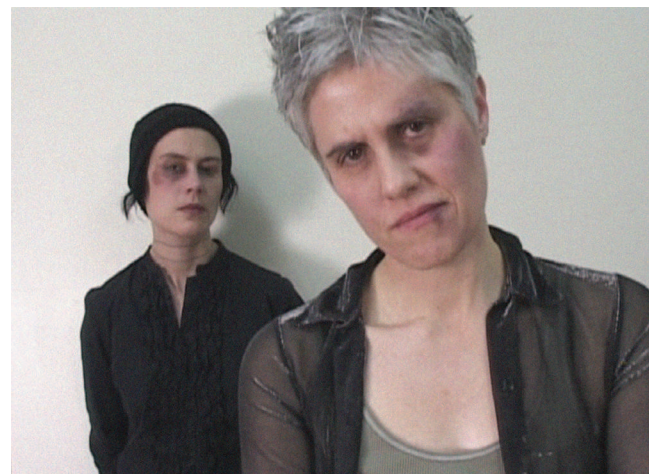
In her artist's statement, Rossa writes that bruises may be signs of love, providing the space for other, inverse interpretations for the piece. The video's dramaturgy is constructed on inversion: women generally use makeup to conceal bruises, not create them. We see an inverted social contract, wherein what was assumed to be a stigma becomes an object of pride and is demonstrated to the viewer before the backdrop where the stigma usually has no space to exist. The suffocating air and regimented quality of the 'feminine' interior suddenly loses its power over the viewer: the flowers, the crystal, and fringe become private décor, freely chosen – in other words, they cease to connote the realm of power, and come to designate the realm of identity.

Another important aspect is the absence of the representation of the male gender. Other than the videogame with the fight, which is more likely associated with teenage boys than with men, the male as an active figure is taken out of the brackets of the performance. At the same time, the man is the one whose blows or caresses blossom into bruises; he is the one who leaves marks denoting his power over another's body, which puts the woman into a new social situation. The right to "make your own bruises," demonstrated in the work is the right to consider the marks of pain decoration, voluntary entertainment, and once again lead us to the broken social contract. The dominant postulate of this agreement, however, remains unchanged: the visibility of representatives of socially oppressed groups increases when they can show their wounds, demonstrate evidence of violence or some other physical effects.

When the unwillingness to endure violence is not expressed directly or when it's outside of the discussion entirely, the suffering body is, in one way or another, demonstrating its vulnerability, and thus becoming capable of asserting its physical and/or social presence through the fact of its suffering. It is presented equivocally, that along with the exploitation of the idea of femininity and the attempts to analyze the gender order of the 20th century, the subject of the "mirror of violence" through self-mutilation has been and remains to be a consistent feature in the contemporary art from post-Socialist countries.

Many of today's scholars and practitioners of post-Soviet performance art will agree that its main characterizing feature is the reproduction of violence, manifested as criticism or reflexivity (in the Russian context, these discussions often spotlight Voina art collective and the work of the Moscow actionists). One of the few exceptions is Oleg Mavromatti, whose artistic actions tend to focus on self-mutilation and exploring his own vulnerability; after he began working with Boryana Rossa, this reflexivity also took on a feminist dimension. The ULTRAFUTURO Collective, with whom Rossa and Mavromatti worked for many years, employed unusual strategies in addressing issues not commonly seen in the Russian art world including alliances viewed through the prism of personal experience – for instance, the rights of a robot, which was represented as a generalized alienated Other. The ULTRAFUTURO Collective was serious about the mechanical body: while subjectivizing the robot, their treatment also touched on themes of (self)coercion, dis-

Official Invitation, 2006. Boryana Rossa.
Video 6.5 min



tance, alienation, and exploitation within the boundaries of the body. The discussion of their work in this realm deserves its own analysis.

The problem of reproducing violence in art is universal for ruined totalitarian societies, where attempts to wrest personal space and find ways to talk about personal experience can only be accomplished via transgression and expansive suppressive behavior, that is, by the same means of conquest by which private space has been taken over by official propaganda. By performing this kind of transgression, reenacting repression as play, and comparing themselves to the government, artists strive to win the internal right to symbolic power and, in the end, to attain independence in their art and intellectual life.

The reverse side of this gesture, created in the context of the colonized consciousness (that is, in the “from-the-bottom-up” paradigm), is the absolute duplication of the repressive official rhetoric of violence and domination, which is something art cannot and should not do. Art is not comparable to violent action, and violent action should not be considered art. When this substitution occurs, art not only paradoxically restores the logic of totalitarianism but also serves its paranoid expectation of the art world to be a “bohemian” gathering of second-rate, cruel social rejects that “distort reality” as part

I Am A Robot, But I Am Not Your Slave!, 2004. Boryana Rossa and ULTRAFUTURO. Video 8.57 min. Production still. Photographer: Oleg Mavromatti



of some worldwide anti-aesthetic conspiracy. These stereotypes can be analyzed by different artists to various degrees of success, but it is critical that in the end, it is still a dead-end decision between black and white, right and wrong, which ultimately places the artistic act into the realm expression, which aligns itself with ideology of power.

In other words, the problem that is still at the core of contemporary performance art in post-Soviet territories is still the modernist perspective, the possibilities of re-imagining and deconstructing it, which seem increasingly less possible as the Russian empire is being restored. The 20th century has led us through many gateways, from the sensitive body of the

teens to the mechanical body of the twenties, and further on, toward the triumph of gender polarization in the 1930s-1950s, when the dominating masculinity signaled, sequentially and simultaneously, the breakthrough of the avant-garde, then the “strong hand” of totalitarianism, and finally, the triumph of the nuclear family and militarism as the sole legitimization of corporeality. By the 1970s, Soviet/socialist modernism had once and for all established the normative body as the universal symbol of right and left ideologies, the chief figurative chord to be struck by any and all artistic expression, and with it, fixed the spectrum of conservative representations of the feminine. It is this gender, eternally arrested in its development as the “long-suffering mother,” the “iron lady,” and the “strong but submissive beauty” that can be seen in the performances and texts of Marina Abramović, in the work of Elena Kovylyna, in the media’s interpretations of Pussy Riot, and in the macho intonations of the contemporary Russian criticism of their work.





Boryana Rossa is practically the only artist who was able to analyze this norm for femininity from the perspective of feminist criticism. Her photo series, *The Bad Woman*, *The Good Woman*, and *The Ugly Man* (2001) addresses this. By defining the underside of the façade of the successful Soviet woman with its untenable construct of “strong weakness,” she directly addresses the post-Soviet anti-feminism we encounter every day.

Her willingness to work with this problem has brought the artist closer to the possibility of discovering the bursting seams of modernist logic that, at first glance, seems like an impossible task. Is it possible to walk away from the objectivization and fetishization, universal to our societies, while simultaneously using one’s body to communicate the inadmissibility of violence? Can every subject’s internal hermeticism be combined with the movement toward allowing for a person’s right to freely change their gender and sexuality periodically? Finally, is there any potential for overcoming the non-reflexive recreation of violence and auto-aggression in post-Soviet art?

Leaving behind gender polarization, Boryana Rossa has done much work with a-gendered and gender-neutral bodies. Identifying as a queer, heterosexual woman, the artist found

The Moon and the Sunshine, 2000.
Boryana Rossa. Video 7 min



I Am A Robot, But I Am Not Your Slave!, 2004.
Boryana Rossa and ULTRAFUTURO. Video 8.57 min.
Production still. Photographer: Oleg Mavromatti

herself in the unusual position between feminine gendered emotional performance and the queer activist scene – new for the post-Soviet landscape – which began emerging in Bulgaria and Russia in the mid-2000s.

It is important to note that with its formal invitation to depart from stereotypes and xenophobia, Western European queer activism – like “export feminism” in the 1990s – has itself taken on a conservative, modernist form, endlessly reaffirming the cult of the normative, young white body. As in contemporary art, during the early stages, post-Soviet queer culture excluded or infrequently invoked feminism, transgenderedness, and

alternative femininities, most often gathering around the gay movement and aligning itself with masculine leftist initiatives. In its most varied phrases, the queer scene in Russia functioned on the assumption that media and political visibility are available to women only if they acquire class stature and receive approval for their appearance, or if they take a stance of unification without articulating their personal identity. Similar processes continued in the worlds of performance and artistic actionism. In many ways, Rossa’s performance *The Vitruvian Body* (with Oleg Mavromatti, 2009) is a response to this state of affairs.

A turning point in Boryana Rossa’s work took place in 2013, when she underwent a double mastectomy after being diagnosed with breast cancer. Understanding the new boundaries of her body and identity became the focus of several essential pieces in this new period, especially the performative re-enactment of VALIE EXPORT’s famous 1968 piece *Touch and Tap Cinema*, which she performed in Moscow as *Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT* (2013). EXPORT’s performance famously involved viewers being invited to touch the artist’s breasts, which were enclosed in a cardboard box and thereby shifted to the realm of voluntary experience. With her formal allusion to the feminist discourse of the 1970s, Rossa added a radical new layer of meaning. In demonstrating her experience of mastectomy, her absence of breasts became a maximally personal statement to the viewer, illustrating personal presence in real time and individualizing the body instead of transferring it into the realm of the universally accessible territory of entertainment or erotic fetish. Affirming vulnerability, which is impossible in the modernist paradigm, turned out to be a perfect key to the political and historical situation that post-Soviet art finds itself in. Contradiction, fear, and so-called “gender trouble” were glaringly present in the reaction of the Moscow art world: male members of the audience were rude and openly aggressive, which is rare for the usual “women’s” performances involving self-mutilation, plays on sexuality, pornography, or normative gender roles. It is likely that what inspired this aggression was the artist’s desire to define the body as a space for her personal history, drawing tactility into an unfamiliar field, far out of the boundaries of objectivization.

This was indeed the meaning of the original deconstruction in the post-war modernist tradition,

even in the feminist reading: Boryana Rossa discovered and presented a realm of true cultural silencing instead of adhering to the endless reiteration of the “hot topics” of self-exploitation.

Today, it does not seem like an accident that the media frame for the reenactment included the discussions – online and in print – of actress Angelina Jolie, who decided to undergo a double mastectomy because she was facing the threat of cancer and subsequently chose to get silicone implants, normalizing her body and gender presentation. In this context, Rossa’s conscious rejection of masking her scars in any way or undergoing any plastic surgery begins to resemble a political gesture, happening concurrently in two realms: the social and the artistic.

The artist’s decision was specifically *outer-modernist* which radically distinguished it from various forms of body-modification initiatives “augmenting” the body with quasi-futuristic additions (such as the ones, for instance, in Genesis P-Orridge’s *Breaking Sex*, which played on themes of pandrogynous affinity over the course of multiple surgical interventions). Essentially, steam punk, retrofuturism, and many other

late-modernist trends that have emerged in the past decades have been building their methods on the superfluity of expression and its quasi-social contents. Their search for the new human through the addition of decorative flourishes reflected the experimentation of the 1920s only on the surface; at the end of the 20th century, these kinds of experiments were not expected to yield any truly new scientific results, neither was there a search for God or real contacts with alien civilizations. Thus, the push toward radicalism in these initiatives actually performed the function of silencing and obscuring social problems, which seems “too serious” or “not creative enough” in comparison.

These are the issues that the artist began to address when she turned to the subject of her mastectomy and its artistic expression. Along with “Deconstruction,” since 2013, Rossa has been working on the large-scale umbrella project *Amazon Armor*, which is entirely devoted to playing with existing and imaginary breasts and includes videos, installations, objects, interactive initiatives, and several distinct photo series (*Perverv Veggies*, 2013-2014). The solution suggested in these works is amazing in its simplicity and deep understanding of the problem: one must stop imitating others in order to openly state one’s identity and acknowledge its fluidity by once and for all rejecting neurotic, heteronormative self-determination.

The variety of artistic methods and genres used by the artist, created a proverbial open wound by referencing stigmas, transferring the corporeal into the metaphysical realm, while at the same time exemplifying the emptiness and openness of sensation. This vibration of significations, the distance between the problem and the solution, turned out to be an important answer

Vitruvian Body, 2009.

Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti.

Performance at re.act.feminism –

performance art of the 1960 and 1970s
today, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Photographer: Jan Stradtman.





Woman President, 2011. Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti. Video 4.39 min.

to the question of gender fluidity/flexibility and the rights of women to speak of their external and internal changes aloud.

Amazon Armor is an intentional departure from surrealism and redundant explanations of the “additional gender,” coolly distancing itself and proposing the randomness of the decision as a political move. In the photographs, the artist, as part of a free-form play, holds up various pairs of objects to her chest, including vegetables, that are supposed to “symbolize” breasts. This situation does not require the attachment or implantation of foreign objects: it is a play, a suggestion, a shimmering.

The formal leeway here cannot be characterized as post-modernist since the entire project is conceived as reevaluation and description of the stigmatized body. The questions the artist is asking herself and the viewer are entirely concrete and involve neither subversion nor hidden irony. What inspires desire – the shape of reproductive organs or the possession of them? What leads to relationships, violence, acknowledging a partner as “the other;” what is playful and what is irrevocably inviolably serious? How exactly is the territory of the “inappropriate” formed? How can a gender-queer reconfiguration and construction in the sphere of identity be realized – not only in theory, but also in everyday practice?

By demonstrating variations for modifying breasts in performance and photography or at least in fantasizing about the possibilities, Rossa directs her question at the U.S. medical establishment, which finances plastic surgery after mastectomy, and women who are used to seeing their bodies as a structure intended to fulfill others’ expectations. The idea of a “changeable anatomy,” to which she invites all those who are interested to explore in her interactive project, appears to be a real world manifestation of queerness – at the peak

of social exclusion, from the first-person and through the support of regular people and not institutions.

The significance of *Amazon Armor* also lies in the fact that the elements (or the sub-projects) it involves, illustrate the possibilities for taking control of various cultural niches. Here the reference to an existing phenomenon – a fun interactivity, when people from around the world exchange their photos with vegetables as genitals, is playfully transformed into bourgeois normality (photographs of the artist with vegetable breasts end up printed on silk pillows, like images of “icons of femininity”). The majority of the project *Amazon Armor* addresses costume: the multi-figured mise-en-scène, with references to Renaissance compositions or Commedia dell’Arte, as part of costumes involves detachable breasts and silicone catheters that the characters exchange as part of a play. The high degree of randomness and the impressionistic use of various objects as props and costumes intensifies the effects of the photos, powerfully distinguishing them from idealized or perfectly constructed retro-futurist initiatives. To sum up, every part of the project creates its own dimension of playfulness and worthiness related to identity: there is no rhetoric of “overcoming” or grief that, as discussed above, would plant the artist in the realm of the Bulgarian and/or Soviet “strong woman.”

Returning to the re-enactment of VALIE EXPORT’s performance, it may be argued that the most important element of Boryana Rossa’s performances of 2013-2014 is her work with deconstructing the stereotype about the subservient, “beautiful” body relegated to the realms of power and possession. Through plays, political statements, and the practice of vulnerability, the artist leads us to an obvious fact: in the contemporary culture of universally normative bodies, disability emerges as the chief manifestation of subjectivity capable of creating a tangible space and “semantic pit” in the formerly entrenched gender rules of domination and submission.

The most powerful in this sense are the photos that end the project featuring a transparent bra with giant magnifying glasses in the place of breasts. Playing on the similarity between glass and silicone, Rossa pushes aggressive surveillance to the edge of meaning, inviting us to assess the references for cosmic, medical, and technological modernist myths. The array of cultural and historical associations end in mimesis: the object created to “imitate nature” deconstructs itself, looks into itself, and turns out to be not empty, but transparent.

By seizing on narrow, personal topics, Boryana Rossa opens up a global panorama of social criticism, as though accidentally discovering that the majority of political problems to this day continue to form around women’s bodies and questions of their appropriate presentation. This leads to the conclusion that in the contemporary visual field, bared women’s breasts can symbolize anything and everything from what car a consumer should buy to “Liberty Leading the People.” When there is an absence of breasts, instead of the fulfilled norms, there is bewilderment, aggression, cultural panic, and archaic fear – and what is this if not the fear of the inability to objectify, tame, and rape another person?

Because pointing out shifts and fissures in social behavior and political norms is the task of contemporary performance art, one can hope that *Amazon Armor* will, in time, become the manifesto for new civic transformations on the intersection between the Bulgarian, European, and Russian artistic traditions.

► *Amazon Armor (detail)*, 2013. Boryana Rossa. Performance for the camera.
Series of twenty five photographs. Photographer: Adam Zaretsky



SYMPATHETIC PROSTHESIS

OLEG MAVROMATTI

Perhaps there is something in our nature that compels us to look for similarities between objects and body parts. At a first glance, these comparisons seem like intriguing riddles. “Look at this anthropomorphic potato!,” someone shouts happily, while working in the garden. “Oh, and this carrot is almost like a little person! Not to mention the mandragora root!” It is precisely because of its similarity to the human body that mandragora root was once so popular among alchemists, magicians and witches.

But why is it so important for us to “spread” our body over everything around us? The point is perhaps to extend our dominance to its limit: to assign a “carnal name” to things that have nothing to do with the human body. Humans seem to seek affirmation of their own importance and their supremacy over the world around them, annoyingly projecting their morbid ego over everything living and non-living. Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo used this simple archetype for his portraits of kings and dignitaries made of fruits and vegetables, thereby creating a total “prosthetic replacement” of the meaty flesh with the vegetable. This displacement was not horror-provoking at all – for some reason, it has had unbelievable commercial success for centuries.

Perhaps what the kings saw in Archimboldo’s work was visualization of the so-called “transmigration,” or in this case, the passage of the soul into the tutti-frutti universe; or perhaps a trendy alchemist metaphor, representing the primal nature of life, the secrets of being, while also being entertaining.

It is important for people to be the ones to give names and assign meanings, affirming unquestionable anthropocentrism and the chimeric phantasms of corporal existence. But in the end, the human being appears to be just a big piece of meat, shaped “in the image and likeness.” From time to time, this meat spoils and rots, and in the place of the aesthetically pleasing anthropo-perfectness appears a pile of shapeless rottenness, which can not be put back together by any means. This rottenness does not look like a carrot or an eggplant anymore; it has reached the peak of entropy, its order has been completely destroyed.

But another scenario is also possible, where entropy takes over a single organ, thereby depriving the corporeal unity of aesthetic cohesion. Often, the resulting product is scrapped by society. The defective body evokes everything but the desire to be in the same place as the scrapped organism. When the artist approaches this topic, she immediately finds herself in a mournful vacuum, surrounded by tense silence,



▲ *Replacement 001*, 2013. Boryana Rossa. Photography. Photographer: Oleg Mavromatti.

Digital Replacement, 2013. Boryana Rossa. Photography. Photographer: Oleg Mavromatti.



horror and disgust. It becomes immediately clear that this subject is actually a complete taboo. Society requires the defect to be hidden as well as possible, covered up by the prosthetic, so that the same society can be protected from the shock of facing the destandardized organism. Another tried and tested approach in this case is to glamorize the defect and transform it into a fetish. However, this only works for a small group of people. The normative majority will never accept the scrapped anthropo-model, which will never be given permission to have a wholesome presence in society again. The shameful stigma of the semi-human, the invalid, the loser will be assigned to it immediately and forever.

Yes, it is true that society has undergone much transformation because of political correctness and instated tolerance, which is why we no longer forcibly deport the powerless to places where we do not have to see them. But is this society really so welcoming and gracious? Of course not! No matter how much we discuss inclusiveness, people are most often afraid of any and all deviations from the norm. The “defective” person is like a horrible distorted mirror in which “the norm” is reflected as disgusting. “The norm” wants to see itself in its proper form, and only.

For instance, according to the standard, women must have breasts. It is inappropriate that suddenly there would be emptiness in the breasts’ place. This place has to be occupied by an aesthetic replacement. The artificial, non-living tissue has to be the one to “communicate” with the world. But the artist is an artist in order to transgress these rules, make fun of them, and instigate discussions of topics that are disruptive to our consciousness, announcing through her body the coming of the Real Alien, not just its manufactured formal analogue, a product of textual equilibristics. At the end of the day, the textual construct always loses out to the real body. “Death is just a word!,” Derrida said and transmigrated to another state of post-corporeal existence.

But let’s look at examples. There is the artist Boryana Rossa with her recent ironic re-enactment of VALIE EXPORT’s performance *Touch and Tap Cinema* (*Tapp- und Tast-Kino*, 1968) and here is also another Boryana – a post-surgical anthropo-model, deviant from the standard: “freakish” (her breasts have been removed in order to avoid cancer). What follows from that? What is to follow is of course a provocative experiment! You (the society) say, you are tolerant and patient. You applaud Angelina Jolie and worship her courage. OK then! Let’s make this “cinema” real! This cinema is coming to you! Welcome it!

“Why the hell should I have to!?,” someone might say. “I do not want to know anything about these things. Let her live out the rest of her days on the ‘island of bad luck’ while we drink our champagne!”

“Wait!,” I will say. Boryana is not the first woman in the world who has had a double mastectomy and unfortunately she will not be the last, but Boryana is an artist who illuminates this issue without sniveling or pathos. She forces society (or at least part of it) to think about it and accept the fact that this particular issue should not cut us off from irony and creativity. In the end, breasts are nothing more than an eggplant in a vegetarian diet, which can just be taken out from our daily meal and replaced with a turnip.



Amazon Armor, 2014.
Boryana Rossa. Detail
from the installation.
Vaska Emanouilova
Gallery, Sofia.
Photographer:
Filip Panchev



INTERVIEW WITH BORYANA ROSSA BY LISA VINEBAUM

FOR THE RAPID PULSE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART FESTIVAL

JUNE 2014

Before asking specifically about the work you'll be performing at Rapid Pulse, I want to ask you a few questions about your performance practice more generally. Your work often uses re-enactment to explore our relationships to history and to each other. You also use performance to initiate forms of civic and interpersonal engagement, as well as to explore non-normativity and bodily difference. Can you talk about performance as a platform for political action and engagement, both historically, and today? Does performance offer something different from traditional types of activism?

I have always believed that art has strong social and political impact, and this impact is what I have always wanted to achieve through my art. Performance specifically is the strongest media for immediate effect, in my opinion. I also believe that the difficulties experienced in efforts to monetize performance art, keep this genre at the edge, fresh and strong as a political tool. The fact that performance art engages the body and in particular the artist's body, makes it one of the most risky, but also sincere mediums in art. The presence of the body with all its properties and performativities, such as class, gender, race, nationality, body shape, etc. make the political statement and the social engagement of the work almost inescapable. The "performance of the body," and its very appearance immediately engage us with identity and personal and collective history, which instantly politicizes performance art.

In this line of thought, the "artist's life manifesto" becomes increasingly important for the message of the work. What I mean is that sometimes there is a discrepancy between how art is presented by the artist, how it may be interpreted by audiences and critics, and the values that the artist exposes through their real life or "life manifesto." I believe the artist has to be responsible with all of her life for statements she makes through her art. Otherwise this mismatch would be a big disappointment, and the political and social strength of her/his artistic message is lowered.

My next question has to do with the body's potential to create social connections. Several of your performances (Pervert Veggies, Peoples' Servants, About the Living and the Dead, Before and After) use the body – and specifically your body – as a catalyst for audience engagement and interaction. Can you talk about the potential of the body to create spaces for inter-subjective relationships and encounters? How is the use of the body different from using actions or objects?

People associate themselves very easily with other human bodies. Therefore when they see someone else's body in pain or physically expressing excitement, they can much easily connect to the art piece, as opposed to a piece, which represents disembodied metaphor of suffering or joy. Therefore I insist on using human body and specifically my body in performance art. There are few additional reasons for this.

◀ *Amazon Armor*, 2013. Boryana Rossa.
Series of 25 photographs.
Photographer: Adam Zaretsky.

▶ *Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT's Touch and Tap Cinema*, 2014. Boryana Rossa. Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival, Chicago.
Photographer: Arjuna Capulong







Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT's Touch and Tap Cinema, 2014. Boryana Rossa. Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival, Chicago. Photographer: Arjuna Capulong.

First, hurting a body is a strong political tool of expression. I use the legacy of the “yurodivy” (or the holy fool) who in Orthodox Christianity were politically active people, who used their bodies as a metaphor for political statements. In the tradition of yurodivy there is no gender and there is lots of trans-dressing, which I find specifically important for my work.

Second, hurting your own body is considered very male behavior and an expression of bravery, unachievable by women. Often in performance art circles Viennese actionists (who are mostly men, with the exception of VALIE EXPORT) are shown as the ultimate heroes. My piece *Blood Revenge 2* (2007) is a challenge to the myth about Rudolph Schvarzkogler who “cut his penis off” (which as you know never happened), which has been always juxtaposed to my body work. I am challenging this non-existent act of heroism by a man in my remake of the piece, in

which I deconstruct the genealogy of the myth and do physical work using my own female anatomy and identity, stereotypically associated with “not being brave as a man.”

Third, I am against animal cruelty. I cannot accept torturing and killing animals as a “metaphor” of war, human violence, violence to women, etc., as Viennese actionists and others do. If I want to use blood or inflicting pain as a metaphor, I should do it to myself, not to another creature who never consented to it. I use animals in art as collaborators, not as passive metaphoric flesh. The same applies to fish and crabs – extremely often used in performance art as “creatures who do not feel pain.” This argument about “not feeling pain” can be found in the history of racism but also (surprisingly) about infants – to defend genital mutilating and non-religious social male circumcision, which I am completely against. I am also a vegetarian.

Much of your performance practice seeks to question gender norms and binaries, and to queer social understanding and expectations of “ideal” bodies, considered in terms of physicality, ability, and gender. Can you talk more about this central concern in your work, and why (after all these years of performance art), the body continues to occupy such a primary place?

We live “in a body” and we represent ourselves through bodies. Although we say that many things such as gender, or beauty are social constructs we cannot escape being judged by our bodies on an everyday basis. The world is not an “Academia.” At least not yet. We do not live in a perfect world. Women still suffer from discrimination, races are looked at according to customs in specific countries, people are considered “winners” and “losers” on the basis of their class and property ownership, foreigners are perceived in certain ways – this list can be endless. The first thing people use to “categorize” a person is their body. So if we want to talk about issues, we have to use the body, specifically human body, we cannot escape it, otherwise we will be hypocrites.

Let's talk more specifically about the work you'll be performing here at Rapid Pulse. Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT is a re-enactment of the artist's 1968 Touch and Tap Cinema, in which members of the public were invited to touch her breasts, concealed by a box and a curtain attached to her chest. Your performance plays with our expectations of the encounter – you have no breasts because you had a double mastectomy when you were diagnosed with breast cancer. Why did you choose the framework of EXPORT's original performance? How does your performance foster a different type of encounter with the gendered female body?

I do not re-enact performances. I make comments on them, I refer them. I am not Marina Abramović and I do not want to be. My work does not glorify other people, or use them as a pedestal to position myself higher. I choose to work with other performances in order to make a statement in a new context, and in this specific case to build on the history of representation of female body. VALIE EXPORT made her piece in the 1960s – in the middle of the sexual revolution, when the fear of the body, and specifically the fear of exposure of emancipated female body was fading away. At the same time the objectification of the female body was also questioned. So the 1960s were not about crazy women who wanted to show themselves naked and be touched, because they were “sexually emancipated.” This is a very vulgar, mostly male understanding of this historical period and the sexual revolution as such. There were already many women who were showing themselves naked and being touched. The sexual revolution was a critique of body exploitation and an attempt to change the perspective of women's body and sexuality – from subordinated to the male gaze, to women's self-representation through their own desires and perspectives. This is what Carolee Shneeman made perfectly clear with *Fuse*.

As I understand the work of VALIE EXPORT, she questioned the “spectacle” of the female body within male dominated culture. At the same time, she speaks about the “touch behind the curtain,” the “hidden” touch of someone who desires a body, but who tries to keep this touch and his guilt behind the curtain because of puritan patriarchal culture. This is what happens in the system of sexual exploitation – prostitutes, or even women are constantly blamed of being “nasty and promiscuous.” This we see in the discussions about rape – women are blamed that their skirts are too short. But for sexual exploitation and rape to happen there is a need of another – the customer, the rapist, the man. The exposure of this unequal system of “touching,” figuratively said, was essential in the 1960s, but is still valid now. However I would like to give a bit of a queer touch to this piece and address the fact also from the perspective of a woman who lives in 2014. First: women are very different as shapes and expression of femininity. EXPORT has a very intentionally feminine appeal in this piece. She wears a wig, she is nicely dressed, therefore people are expecting to touch breasts in the box. But what if a woman does not look that feminine? That is the first thing.

The second is that I have a particular mission with this piece and related to my double mastectomy – I would like to empower women to feel comfortable and beautiful in their new bodies (this is valid also to my other pieces from the series *Amazon Armor*). Empowering women in this situation happens only through exposure. There are many women who have had a mastectomy and they hide it. They think they are freaks. Many go for reconstruction of their breast, because they think it will look OK, and will just have “little scars” – perhaps convinced by Angelina Jolie's media statements after her mastectomy. This is not always the case. It depends on medical conditions. The biggest problem is that women are so convinced that a breast-less body is not sexy, that it is ugly and horrible, that they go through the quite unpleasant and long process of

reconstruction. Even after that they are not necessarily happy with the result. I decided to skip most of my hospital visits, including therapies that I had to go through if I decided to keep my breasts (or reconstruct them). I feel much happier than some other women who went for therapies and reconstructions. Therefore I want to expose this. In this specific piece I do not show images like in *Amazon Armor*, but I offer touch. This has not been done by other artists in the field, as far as I know. I think the most important is a sense of humor and thinking about your body as re-born into something else, not a hetero normative femininity. This is the “deconstruction” of VALIE EXPORT – first deconstruction of her historical context and second, the literal “deconstruction” of the breasts (opposed to the “reconstruction” after double mastectomy).

Can you also talk about whether generating dialog with members of the public was part of how you conceived of the performance? And also talk about audience reaction.

Since 2004, I usually talk to the audience while performing. This is an incredibly important part of my pieces. I believe in the direct contact, which does not repeat the clichéd glorification of the “brave artist,” who allows the “cruel audience” to hurt her body. I want to talk to people, not to blame them. I like works where the artist offers her body to be hurt, however, I do not think this shortens the distance between artist and audience. These pieces turn the artist into a martyr, which actually increases the distance. A dialogue is much more egalitarian and much more interesting because very fastly you can understand how people feel and what they think. This is the good thing about performance art. Of course the artist will always be the “master of ceremony,” no matter how close to the audience she wants to get. It is a lie and hypocrisy if someone claims to have “erased” the border between artist and audience. But again – it is possible to create closer relationship to the audience, although knowing that I will be the one to direct where the conversation goes.

Performance scholar Mechtild Widrich writes extensively about EXPORT’s performance in her book Performative Monuments: The Rematerialization of Public Art. One of the things she discusses, is how the original work was as much about the gaze as it was about the physical encounter between VALIE EXPORT and the public: many photos of the performance also document the artist making direct eye contact with the viewer. For me, these documentary images reveal something a bit more confrontational and empowering about the performance from the artists’ point of view. So I’m interested in both EXPORT’s performance, and your re-enactment of it, as specifically feminist performances, staged at very different cultural moments, as you say. Can you reflect on your performance as feminist action?

I already said many things about this piece and my interpretation. I would just want to add some personal experiences of interacting with the audience. People are different, they come with their histories and identities. During the “touching” some closed their eyes. There was a girl who wanted to touch me twice. Older women were very gentle. Men, some of them, were flirty and even a bit rude. There was one person, who seemed to be very surprised he was not finding a breast. He tried to “sculpt me” and to “model” my breasts. I am not sure what he was thinking, but he tried to get some of the skin from my back and pull it up front, as if I am made of clay. At the same time he was looking straight in my eyes, it was very flirty. I told him he will break the box and he should be more gentle. The box was pretty fragile, so it was true.

Another funny thing is that the person I asked to document my piece (a guy, a friend) became very anxious at a certain point. During the second half of the performance he stood in the middle of the gallery and shouted “Boryana, cut this up, you have already shown your tits”. He was drunk, but this is not that important and not an excuse. He got frustrated that this action is the center of attention I guess, I am not sure why he reacted that way. Many women thought what he did was extremely misogynist (he never apologized, his girlfriend apologized for him, which was very nice of her but strange). So this is the direct effect of performance, the direct interaction with audience I am talking about. This is the impossibility to escape who we are, what is our body, what does it represent and how it is perceived by other people and their gendered perspectives.

In some ways, very little has changed since 1968, men still see women’s bodies as something that they have the “right” to access – this is being discussed in the USA in the wake of the recent mass shooting in Santa Barbara. Obviously you could not foresee this happening so close to your upcoming performance here – but do you have anything to say about your performance in this specific context? Or maybe in terms of your performance in relation to the idea of “access” to women’s bodies in general?

I was amazed by how many people think that if this boy had sex everything could have been OK. Many blame women for what had happened. Of course there are many smart thoughts from both women and men, like the lacigreen vVlog entry (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPFcspwbrq8&bpctr=1401944436), or the campaign #YesAllWomen. But the very fact that people blame women for not paying attention to this guy and for not offering him sex is shocking. I think this unfortunate case and the reactions I have mentioned are a result of the lack of questioning the right of women to deny sexual intercourse.

Another thing is the existing consumerist culture that values material property more than anything else. The actions of this guy are hyperboles of this culture, they are almost like a caricature or some South

Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT’s Touch and Tap Cinema, 2014. Boryana Rossa. Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival, Chicago. Photographer: Arjuna Capulong.



Park script twist. Can you imagine – a combination of expensive sunglasses, cars, fancy looks and a winning lottery ticket as the only condition for definite access to women’s bodies. This idea that money buys everything and that money is the ultimate success is what destroyed this guy and is constructing not only the attitude to women, but among people, and the attitude of women to men too. The idea that “The money buys everything” is also how we treat environment and nature, how we build our lives, around what values. I think the questions about values are extremely important. Putting money as the center of our Universe is what kills us in every aspect. As an artist I feel responsible addressing the value system, creating discussion about it.

But returning back to women: I had also a case with a professor who said he prefers not to address feminism in class because there are some very conserva-

tive guys among students, especially from fraternities. If we continue not addressing feminism, because someone will be upset, we actively sustain a culture of destructive values. Art and any other social activity should be circumscribed to this mission – not to destroy but to create.

There is an amazing image of you on the Rapid Pulse website: you're holding a smart phone over each of your breasts, and each phone has an image of a breast on it. I'm interested in talking about the haptic, and the fact that this image suggests a very different type of possible performance experience for the viewer: obviously touching the body and touching a screen-based image are very different, but they both involve touch and a relationship to the body. Can you talk more about this? Is this another way that the work can be performed? What possibilities can the digital encounter provide in terms of questioning gender and body norms and binaries?

Actually all my work dedicated to my “missing breasts” is created under the umbrella name *Amazon Armor*. It has many incarnations – photos, performances, objects, installations. Our bodies are obviously perceived a lot through media. This is another aspect of EXPORT's piece – it is about TV, about cinema (the original name is *Tapp- und Tast-Kino*), it is about media spectacle, about the “society of the spectacle” (if we wish to add a bit of Guy Debord to it). Nowadays we have smart phones and YouTube channels. This is a very different culture, which creates different media and social phenomena. When we see something, many of us make a picture and post it on social networks as opposed of just looking at it in reality and than keeping it only in memories.

Of course this relates to the body too. We see Photoshopped bodies every day. Photoshop is also a technique many of us use to represent ourselves better to the world. But there is something else – with digital tools we can create also fantastic bodies. Bio-tech and plastic surgery is trying to make it reality – although we sometimes see more monsters than beauties. But that is another theme. I have another project for a phone app, where everybody can add a fantastic breast, which does not even need to be made out of skin, but can be metal, fur, feathers, plastic, fruits, anything one wants. I want to make the performance piece *Pervert Veggies* – in which real people were posing with props to replace their breasts and genitalia – into a phone app. This is for the future, I am looking for a programmer to help me with that.

Finally, I want to ask about Sofia Queer Forum, and specifically, how it connects to your interests in history, politics, and civic engagement.

I also do curatorial projects and Sofia Queer Forum is one of them. We started it with Stanimir Panayotov, who is a young Bulgarian philosopher and activist. When I see a gap in some issue in the public discourse that I am interested in, I like to address it. Sometimes there are no curators that I know, who are interested in it and would like to work with me as an artist on this very topic of my interest. So I have to create the environment for that issue to be exposed. I have to be the curator. This is also how I create the context for my works as well, since there is no curator or theorist who is already working in this sphere and can invite my work. The curatorial projects I do are very different in nature. Like my art is. For instance, I did an international bio-art curatorial project at Exit Art (2009) called *Corpus Extremus (Life+)*. It addressed how notions of life and death are changed nowadays by advances in science and technology. Of course with changing these notions, we change notions like gender, race, nationality, age and class.

Although the projects are different in genre and sometimes direction, they are all focused around my interests in gender, technology, science, performance art, film, video and media culture.

Is there anything that you want to add about your practice or your upcoming performance that I did not ask you about?

Yes, I think one important piece of mine, which will add more light to the entire conversation about my practice is *The Last Valve* (2004). In this piece I stitch up my vagina with surgical thread to express the possibility of shutting up the hostility between genders. The piece refers to one of the points of the ULTRAFUTURO manifesto (the first manifesto of my collective ULTRAFUTURO), which anticipates the appearance of artificially constructed biological bodies that will lack sexual characteristics. The existence of these bodies proposes the idea that life can exist without the “essential” marks of the sexes, that are often referred to as fundamental for constructing our gender discrepancies. So maybe by looking at these future bodies we can decide that gender hostility creates more problems than happiness and try to overcome it? This utopic scenario for “overcoming gender” (this is how we defined it) has been metaphorically expressed in this piece.

The last piece I would like to mention is *Vitruvian Body* (2009) – which takes a similar direction, although not that utopian. I comment on the drawing *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo as a limiting ideal of beauty and universality. The drawing represented universal human proportions (which are of a white man) to be applied in arts and architecture. But the same image is also used widely in medical iconography and branding to represent “humanity” and applies also to social relations. In this piece my partner Oleg is stitching me up to a construction made out of a circle and a square, the shapes in which the Vitruvian Man is inscribed. By that I represent the limits of this “universality” which does not include varieties of bodies and puts one ideal above all others. Here again I bring together notions from technology and science and try to look at how they are affecting social life.

A condensed version of this interview was published on the Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival blog: www.rapidpulse.org/interview-with-boryana-rossa.



*Pervert Veggies 1, 2013. Boryana Rossa.
Photographer: Laura Heyman*



PERVERT VEGGIES 1

Series of ten photographs

2013

Photographer: Laura Heyman

Through this series of photos shot by my friend the artist Laura Heyman I intended to present a finished pictorial form of my plays with vegetables, fruits and other objects to replace my missing breasts. Since my approach to photography comes from performance art, these photos are a record of an action in front of the camera – the replacement of a breast. My subsequent projects originate from this initial idea, involving audience and fellow artists in the same play. These next series present other improvisations, in different contexts, also directed by me.



PERVERT VEGGIES, BERLIN

Performance for the camera

2013

Photographers: Unknown and Boryana Rossa

After playing with vegetables for the camera, I have decided to involve other people: fellow artists and random audience members. My idea was to create a context in which the act of replacement becomes a shared act. My belief is that people learn more actively through participation and through personal experience rather than absorbing information detached from action. I bought fruit and vegetables from one of Berlin's markets in Kreuzberg and went to a birthday party with fellow artist Voin de Voin. The party was in a backyard where we played with the vegetables. The photos were taken by me and some guests at the party, whose names I do not know.







PERVERT VEGGIES, SYRACUSE

Performance for the camera

2013

Photographers: Ben Jackson, Oleg Mavromatti and Boryana Rossa

In Berlin, with the help of Voin de Voin, I organized a relatively intimate environment designed for visitors who played with vegetables for the camera. These party-goers were artists in one or another way. In Syracuse, I decided to develop the same idea for a larger audience less experienced with participation in performance art pieces and perhaps more shy and incapable of improvisation as a result. For the staging of the piece, I was inspired by the portable photo studios on Bulgarian seaside, usually situated next to the beach, which offer passers-by an extensive and extravagant wardrobe with retro clothes or costumes they can have their picture taken in by a professional photographer. Usually, these studios have previously made photos hanging on the walls and curtains and naïve landscape paintings as backdrops. Here, the audience was provided with vegetables, fruit, various objects and costumes to improvise with and the background was decorated by photos from the first two versions of the project, placed in antique frames evoking a private home interior.











AMAZON ARMOR

Performance for the camera. Series of twenty five photographs
2013

Photographers: Boryana Rossa, Adam Zaretsky

This performance was meant to be similar to the ones in Berlin and Syracuse. However it was made in close collaboration with artist Adam Zaretsky. Therefore, it evolved into a different interpretation of the initial idea. The queerness moved into realms referencing other artistic and cultural contexts, from classical Greek aesthetics and the myth of the Amazons--women warriors who cut their breast off to better steady their bows--to depictions of St. Sebastian, Peter Pan and Alice in Wonderland. These series were made during a residency at Byrdcliffe Artists Colony in Woodstock, NY.















DECONSTRUCTION OF VALIE EXPORT'S TOUCH AND TAP CINEMA

MOSCOW

performance, Solyanka State Gallery, Moscow
2013

Photographers: Ilmira Bolotyan, Tatyana Sherstyuk

This is my contemporary queer version of the classic performance by VALIE EXPORT in which she invites the audience to touch her breasts that are hidden in a box covering her upper body. During the performance I project the iconic image from her performance on the wall, and discuss how we look at images from performance art pieces and how we read them. I talk about how different place and time contexts give different readings of the same piece. I also talk about the different points artists make in various historical and geographical contexts due to these differences in time and place. People are invited to touch me under the curtain that covers the open front of the box hanging on my chest. I give them a hint that they may experience something unexpected, because my body is different from the norms for women's bodies, but I do not tell them I do not have breasts. Their reactions reveal a lot about perceptions of femininity. One girl in Moscow came to touch me twice. She tried to meditate and closed her eyes while touching me. A man was surprised he could not feel the usual forms and tried to "sculpt" my breasts out of my skin and muscles. He was so aggressive he almost broke the box. Toward the end of the performance, another man shouted "Come on Boryana, you have already showed us your tits, cut it out!"

CHICAGO

performance, Rapid Pulse Performance Art Festival
Defibrillator Gallery, Chicago
2014

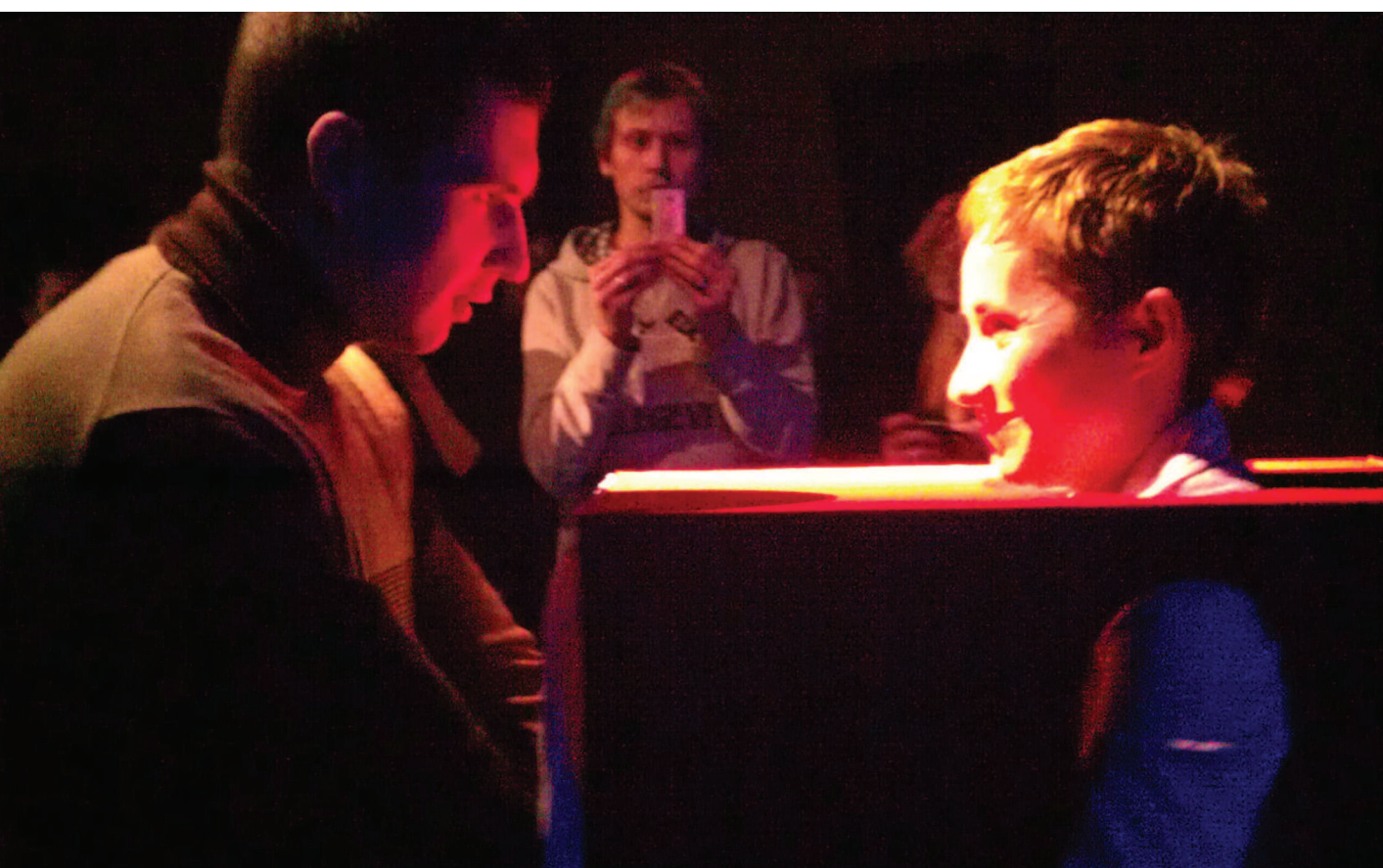
Photographer: Arjuna Capulong

For the Rapid Pulse Festival, I performed the same piece I did in Moscow. I asked people to suggest endings for the performance. Since the original piece was performed on the street and not in a gallery, its end remained open. People suggested I go out into the street, or show my chest and remove the box. I did both.

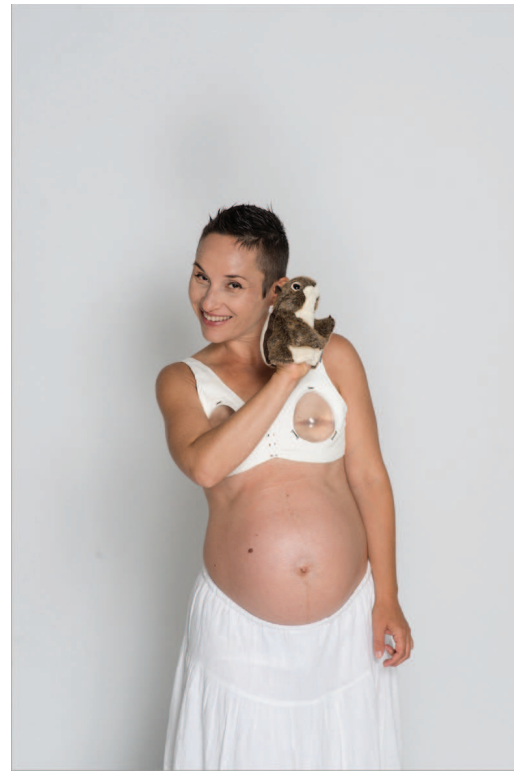
◀ *Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT's Touch and Tap Cinema*, 2014. Boryana Rossa.
Performance at Solyanka State Gallery, Moscow.

▶ *Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT's Touch and Tap Cinema*, 2014. Boryana Rossa. Performance at Solyanka State Gallery, Moscow.

▶▶ *Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT's Touch and Tap Cinema*, 2014. Boryana Rossa, Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival, Defibrillator Gallery, Chicago.







AMAZON ARMOR: MADONNA OF THE EXTERNAL SILICONE BREAST

photographs, object: PVC, fabric
2014

Object design: Boryana Rossa

Production: Laurel Morton and Michael Giannattasio

Photographer: Patrick Sopko

Breast reconstruction is a surgical procedure performed in accordance with the patient's desire, reflecting her ideas about good breast shape and beauty. Since I decided to not get breast reconstruction after being diagnosed with breast cancer, I had many other opportunities to occupy the empty place with different fantastical things. One of these was a transparent plastic breast that magnifies my scars while imitating the original shape of my breasts. This object is open for interpretation. One of the reactions was, "Silicone on the outside – that's new!" In these photos I am also eight months pregnant with my son Mario.





Boryana Rossa
Amazon Armor

Authors: Nadia Plungian, Oleg Mavromatti, Lisa Vinebaum, Boryana Rossa
Editors: Boryana Rossa, Stanimir Panayotov

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Collective for Social Interventions
Sofia, 2014
novilevi@gmail.com
koibooks.novilevi.org

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This book covers projects done in 2013 and 2014 representing my thoughts on the body as an active political agent that constructs the attitude towards us and the others. All works have been inspired by my double mastectomy and the changes in my physical and mental understanding of self after this radical body change. The myth about the women-warriors – the Amazons – who cut their breasts off to better steady their bows, was the inspiration not only for this series of projects, but also for the way I think about myself, my new body shape, its functionality and beauty.

Boryana Rossa, 2014

