

## **Wounded Identity**

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Olivia Mihălțianu, Pusha Petrov

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What is left today, in the age of globalization, of our European identity – here is a disquieting question, which cannot be answered spontaneously. To find an answer, we have to question ourselves and, at the same time, to look at the various data coming from our every-day life and from the contemporary artistic environment. If an identity is defined in relation with the other, with Otherness, then the contemporary society is facing a serious crisis, the result of many fragmented identities. Because of the confrontation with strange and diverse identities, there have been confused, plural, contradictory developments at the global scale, or, sometimes, marginal and subaltern positions have been accepted, as Kevin Hetherington argues.

In the western world after the 1960s, the clash with a hedonistic and narcissistic counter-culture, directed against the modernist middle-class culture of the self, led to a new fragmentation of identity, while, in Eastern Europe, the communist system enforced equality upon the society, without taking into consideration various ethnic, religious, gender identities, the traditional identities of social classes or even the identity derived from belonging to various professional groups or those making up the civil society.

Denying all those identities the right to assert themselves or repressing them openly, the communist system managed to fracture, once more, the contemporary identity and isolate the individual from the society, with the view to transforming it into a „docile body” to use Michel Foucault’s term; a body which is manipulated by the power and tamed, the result, after a long „moulding” process, through the individual’s repression, being the „machine human” responding to commands and following orders.

In the totalitarian communist regimes, the artists, with their projects, systematically opposed the erasure of identities and the enforced levelling, militating for

the freedom of expression, for the assertion of the individual as such, with their own identity, undistorted under ideological pressure. For the artists in the 1980s generation (who continued to express themselves freely especially after 1990) the body was considered a means of expression charged with raw and even brutal power. The artists researched this topic thoroughly, without avoiding its controversial aspects.

Nowadays, the artists are the ones who in their discourse are questioning and are revealing multiple possible identities, in a discourse that is both turned inwards towards the Self, as it is expressed outwards towards society. For a more recent generation of artists, starting with the 2000s, the body becomes a more subtle medium, increasingly more processed towards a more harmonious and yet more artificial image. Many of the performances from this period of time are mediated by photography or by video art and they represent a way of understanding and to relate to gender identity, to medium or to express the outrage towards consumerism, in accordance to the issues of contemporary society.

Adriana Jebeleanu passionately positioned her work in the midst of these concerns in order to find herself in the midst of life, which she in turn „absorbed” by transposing it in her photographic and video actions. Her artistic practice connected painting, photography, performances enacted directly in front of the audience. After studying painting, she turned towards performance in reaction to the crisis of the language of painting. One of the most significant of her appearances in front of the audiences appears to be I am nothing more than a talking blood stain in which the artist builds a subordinate relation towards painting and pure colours (with a significant meaning for her) – bright red gesturally set on a white canvas which in turn is placed directly on the wall. There is something in her actions, but also in her video films (small recorded actions) a strange power of colours reduced to white, red and black. The visual impact of these pure colours and non-colours fascinates the viewer, who slips, willingly or unwillingly, into her seductive but morbid discourse.

In some cases, she resumed actions elaborated and performed in front of the camera, as in a remake, delivering her audience new nuances. The “Blind, Deaf, Mute” („Orb, surd, mut”), a performative act which took place at Anca Poteraşu gallery in 2011 showed the artist in front of a silent piano, yet playing music produced live, performing pianistic gestures. The photographic action happened in like manner – the artist dressed in a long white dress, with a hood of a different colour on her head, sitting with her back to the piano and pretending to touch the invisible piano keys. The three similar,

yet different photos depict her with three hoods at a time (white, red and black), each corresponding to a main stage of human evolution: the high-purity embryonic period of time, a life full of passion and love, as well as death. In search of a true identity (one that is actually illusory), Adriana Jebeleanu put her physical and especially her psychological limitations to the test throughout the actions, by confronting death and the transient nature of the human body.

The artists invited to take part in the present group show put forward a discussion about identity as a major theme in art, adding to it various possible nuances with the aim to introduce the viewer in the subtle and irrational complexity of the show. Each artist calls into question a different identity or even more at a time, conjugating them together..

For Adelina Ivan, what prevails is the feminine identity, characterized by a certain precariousness and whose vulnerability is glimpsed especially in revealing its sexual identity. Built around the female body, this identity is often outlined by its absence, evoked by the clothes in a melancholic longing or by hair extensions which bear the sensual imprint of femininity. Her latest film projects (Left Square, Right Square) bring up the evanescence of the body, seen as an illusory projection, trapped in its own drawing – the two geometric shapes designed by the artist. This evanescence of the body is also highlighted in a ritual of involuntary movements, like lying down, sleeping and waking up in the movie Circling, in which the artist replicates the daily body routines – spectral, out of this world.

The erosion of the boundaries between public and private spaces allows for a voyeuristic look at the inner states and intimacy, which nevertheless chooses to expose itself in a permanent form of narcissism, a condition that Olivia Mihălțianu assumes. Her self-examination together with the exposure of her body to the public eye reveal, on the one hand, a statement of hyper-subjectivity with reference to the Other. On the other hand, the artist stages situations playing a lead acting role, in a feminine-feminist note, while the visual defies the passing of time by showing freeze-frames through stop motion, an arrest of movement that hinders any action.

In this installation, particularly designed for the group show, Olivia Mihălțianu retraces a photo lab, which proves to be a turntable of several intertwined ideas: on one side we see a self-portrait of the artist and then, as we get closer, we discover the projection of another film shot in a similar laboratory, this time her workspace. In turn, this artist studio reveals to the now unintentional voyeuristic audience, the production

process. The public is also offered a small photo studio where everyone can capture a selfie. The artwork reiterates recurring ideas in recent years: the general need for self-reflection and positioning the self in the centre of interest, sometimes in competition with the need to look indiscreetly and contemplate something that is supposed to remain in the private sphere.

Alex Mirutziu is reluctantly seeking for an identity that would define him, which proves to be a fragile, insecure construction first of all due to the precariousness of the human condition. Everyday life, with its natural gestures, can be transformed into a space of resistance, while resistance can in turn become a policy of identity. Rising and falling on/off a podium, ambition and failure – like the lesson offered by the fashion show in *Feeding the horses of all heroes* – raises the issue of body failure, which stands next to the “failure” exercises of Bruce Nauman (*Failing to Levitate in the Studio*). Thus, dysfunction once again demonstrates the vulnerability of the human body.

For Pusha Petrov, searching one’s personal identity focuses on the cultural aspects, often under the influence of ethnic aspects. Growing up with a small conservative family of Bulgarians in Banat, the artist started her research inside the closed universe only to later discover an identity that is culturally registered as a genetic code of sorts. Old pieces of costume, interiors of homes that trace family rituals, introduced in a behavioural canon, they have all served her at the beginning and still inform her work, as sources of inspiration. Later on, her research extended over to other contemporary forms of identity, including behaviours (the series where she presents the underlining of pursers *Marsupium à main* – or of the bike seats).

Yet her research, while seeking a different kind of authenticity, led the artist towards appropriating other cultures through empathy and emotion. The hair transfers well this mark of identity as do the different hairstyles that could define certain ethnic groups; weaving hair unveils this specific cultural identity as it is acknowledged in the public space (*Privilège*). Weaving hair for Black women in Paris introduced the artists in a secret world, with its cultural taboos, with the mistrust and exclusion that the intruders are faced with. Discovering, little by little, these practices and experiencing them on her own hair, are equivalent to an initiation into a different worldview, in which the artists steps carefully by interviewing people who know more about them. These confessional interviews open another cultural world, revealing its intimacies and its sensitivities connected with the African hair weave (*Chignon chouchou*).

