

FROM TRANSGRESSION TO TRANSCRIPTION

[PRINT](#)

By Roberta Lima

Body and Space are the subjects of my work. During the last years, I've started a series of investigations between these two subjects combined one to another and interpreted them in different areas: In architecture I created spaces inspired and directed to a specific use and user. In art, I reinterpreted rituals of subculture and sideshows in order to analyze how bodies – more specifically my own body – perceive and get perceived.

In my earlier works I've exposed my own body to a series of artworks in which I confronted Michel Foucault's conception of bio-politics. Through my performances, video works and photographs I was able to begin a discussion on how bodies have been controlled and disciplined by our society and how this subject can be reviewed. My own body was pierced, penetrated, invaded, opened on its surfaces, bled, and provoked discussions on individuality.

Rewriting Love and Pain was performed in 2004 in a studio and documented with photographs. The words “amor” and “dor” (“love” and “pain”) were written on my skin with a scalpel, on each of my arms and the skin was then removed and placed on a sheet of paper, in the form of a collage. The removal caused the deformation of tissue, and when the skin fragments were placed on the paper, a new language was created. This work marks the start of my experiments with different media, as well as my first understandings of the aspects of unpredictability in performance.



Rewriting Love and Pain, Studio performance, 2004. C-print on aluminum, 24 cm x 30 cm.

For *The Rings* (2005) both my arms were pierced with fifteen needles, which were later replaced, one by one, with small rings. A ribbon was threaded through the rings and my arms were tied together. *The Rings* was primarily conceived to be a video work. The main idea was to place a video camera on a tripod with the focus on my eyes to document, without any interruptions, only the reactions (to the pain, tiredness, or even to the light changes) my eyes register during the piercing process. After the video was shot, a photograph was made. Initially – and besides the debate on the limits of the body and the skin as surface – my questions were regarding the choice of media for documenting performances and the differences between static image and motion (or later on, the combination of both). After the performance, these questions developed into my decisions concerning the editing of the video material. Besides the footage of the main camera, I had a series of low quality and short videos shot with a digital photo camera.

These making-of videos showed the skin being pierced by the needles, their replacement with the rings and the threading of the ribbon. When I saw the main camera footage I noticed that my eyes closed every time a needle pierced me. I decided then to edit the video in a non-chronological sequence of 2 minutes and 3 seconds, interweaving the images of both the main camera and the making-of camera. *The Rings* was presented in various formats: The first time, I hung the

photograph (of the last scene, when all rings were already inserted and arms were tied together) beside a monitor with the video loop; The second time, I hung the photograph separate from the video, which was projected in loop in a black box room; and lastly I showed only the video in loop and on a monitor. Each one of these forms of presentation had different repercussions and effects on the viewers.



The Rings, Studio performance, 2004. C-print on aluminum, 90 cm x 70 cm.

The Rings, Making of, 2005. C-print.

From the start, I intentionally made choices regarding the media, space, and form for presenting my artworks. My work was enhanced though, when I started to combine these practices to theory and historical research: theory lead me into better understanding my work and I was able to better understand theory through my work.

For my MFA work, entitled *Inversion* (2006 / 2007), I developed a project combining video, performance, theory, and historical research. In this project I performed a body modification ritual[] and situated it in the context of circus and sideshows. This work was presented as a three-form combination with a book, video installation, and short lecture.

The starting point for this work was a character from the film *Freaks* (directed by Tod Browning in 1932), a female trapeze performer, played by actress Olga Baclanova, who represents the image of the beautiful immaculate female transformed into a monstrous figure.

The research includes a brief history of the development and fall of circus and sideshows, and the analysis of the performers' bodies, their perceptions, and movements in space. Another part of the research was to inquire into the relationship between the grotesque and the carnivalesque, when I came to Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body as transgressive, a body which ignores the impenetrable surfaces that closes and limits the body and displays inner features such as blood, organs, etc. This historical and theoretical research, as well as my own experience with circus and trapeze, are described and illustrated in the book *Inversion*. Also included in the book are a series of interviews with circus and sideshow performers – which opened the field of cultural performance to the comprehension of how the interviewed women position themselves towards their work and society, and witnessing how they use body modification language for their work.





Inversion, Studio performance, Vienna, 2007. Video still.

It was when I performed the knee suspension^[ii] that *Inversion* shifted from theoretical research into a practical exploration of body and spatial perceptions. The suspension occurred in January 2006, when I placed multiple cameras – almost as an extension of my body – in different spots of the Mehrzwecksaal in Semperdepot (Vienna). The videos show the gestures I made with my arms and hands when trying to adapt to the situation of being suspended upside down. These gestures are connected to a certain moment of the performance; they represent the sensations of disorientation as well as liberating playful moments of being suspended. The video sequence called *Going Up* shows the suspension from its start – when the hooks were attached to the suspension structure – until the moment I started to make the gestures and swing my body. It was shot from above (the camera was placed at 90 degrees facing downwards and towards my body) and offers a view of the performance and the occupation of the space not only by my body, but also by the structures, by the cameras and even by the rest of people who participated in the process of making this work. It was only when I saw the video material that I discovered other elements: the shadows of people who were moving around me, slight changes on the light, camera movements while searching for the perfect position. These elements, which might be seen initially as imperfections, in my opinion, define performances as unpredictable and give a more human characteristic to the work. Once more and as in my earlier works, these elements of surprise influenced my choices and decisions concerning the editing of the material I presented at the video installation one year later, in February 2007.

In conclusion, with *Inversion* I traced a parallel between my body, which was penetrated and suspended by the hooks, and the bodies of trapeze artists who transgress not only the limits of physics and gravity, but also the ones of gender and established social norms.



Inversion, Studio performance, Vienna, 2007. Video still.

Throughout the past years, I experienced performance as a very instant form of starting discussions and I felt an immense

necessity to position myself socially. While my earlier works were performed exclusively for the camera and question my own perceptions, with the works following *Inversion* I aimed to expand the debates. Despite the fact that I continue to intervene with my body, I decided to take a step further in experimenting with live performance and in seeing the audience as central and integrative element of my works. Between the years 2007 and 2008, I developed a series of three live performances and video installations. In these performances, a dress was pierced and adjusted to my body with the main theme being the construction and deconstruction of femininity.

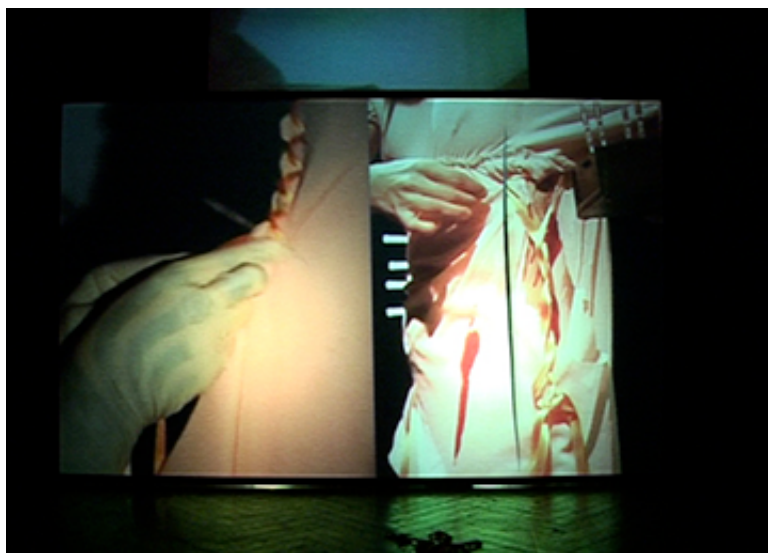
I continued to use historical research and cultural references as support for my work. This time, I searched for historical references in the nineteenth century women's dress reform movements to initiate a critique on female standards of beauty. In collaboration with a fashion designer, I developed a dress inspired by the Bloomerism, which is considered to be one of the first feminist attempts at banishing the corset and reformulating the female wardrobe.

The first performance, entitled *Cut it Out!*, took place at Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana in March 2007. Kapelica Gallery has, since over ten years, been a platform for contemporary artists (hosting famous artists like Stelarc, Ron Athey, Franko B, Orlan, Marcel-li Antunez, etc.) and research: "The gallery's programme is divided into four main thematic groups: installations and *ad hoc* projects, technology through art, science through art and corporeality through art. The *Bitshift* performances and workshops focus on sound."^[iii] Although Kapelica's international prestige and its devoted audience offered a "safe" environment for my first live performance, I decided not to perform entirely in front of the audience and therefore I divided the performance into three parts: construction, transformation, and destruction of the dress.

The construction of the dress was made in the studio and before the performance. It was documented on video and later projected as a background image and metaphorically referred to the historical research. The following steps (the transformation and destruction of the dress) were performed at Kapelica Gallery and simultaneously captured on video and projected onto the space.

The transformation of the dress occurred when both sides of my body (waist) were pierced by needles and through the dress, and lastly fastened with ribbon. This action was made visible only through the video projection – a close up of the piercing process – and through a silhouette of the piercer's and my bodies. The piercing and adjustment of the dress indicated a body to be disciplined; the piercing and adjustment recreated the dress and reshaped my body into a more rigorous form. Opposite to that, the penetration of the needles was subtle, hidden behind the dress' fabric and the piercer eventually looked like a tailor. After the dress was adjusted, the camera stopped recording, the tape was rewound and the video was looped over and over again.

The destruction of the dress was the moment I removed the needles myself, one by one, and placed them in a wooden box. This action represented liberation and freedom and was performed entirely in front of the audience and parallel to the loop of *The Transformation of the Dress* video. As well as in the transformation video, the destruction of the dress was recorded and projected simultaneously to the live act. Immediately after I removed the last needle and the ribbons fell down to the floor, I left the sight of the audience. The camera stopped recording and the tape was rewound. Both videos *The Transformation of the Dress* and *The Destruction of the Dress* continued to be projected and looped side by side. My last action was to take off the dress, hang it up on a mannequin, and leave the room. This action was not documented on video and was only perceived once again through a silhouette of me. The video projections and objects of the performance (the dress, the ribbons, the needles) stayed in the Kapelica Gallery in the form of an installation.



Cut it Out!, Video Installation, Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, 2007. C-print.

In September 2007, I was awarded with H13, a performance prize given by Kunstraum NOE. For the performance *Lights out!* I planned not only to repeat what was done in the Kapelica Gallery, but to extend and adapt *Cut it out!* into an experiment with performing for an Austrian audience and observing the difference in their responses. Kunstraum NOE offered me the opportunity to perform for audiences from various areas, contrary to the rather “safe” platform of the Kapelica Gallery.

For *Lights out!*, I invited designer Danijel Radic to reinvent the bloomer dress. Danijel designed a dress for me inspired by my work, which I like to call “a contemporary feminist dress”. In *Lights out!* the dress was adjusted and pierced this time to my hips.

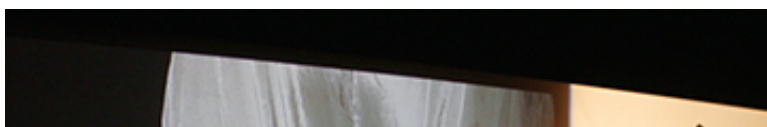


Lights Out!, The Dress, 2007. C-print.

On the same day that I performed *Lights out!*, an article was published in the Austrian newspaper, *Der Standard*, referring to me as an artist and winner of the H13 prize. At this moment, my work had definitely reached distinguished segments of society and was far away from the safe environment of Kapelica (and even from the art scene). The repercussions in the media raised some of the main questions for my PhD research and have strongly influenced my next performances.

In April 2008, I performed *6teen Stitches* at Donau Festival^[iv] in Krems, closing the dress performance trilogy. *6teen Stitches*' title plays with a double meaning: sixteen needles that penetrated my body for this performance and the age that girls are traditionally introduced to society as young women. With *6teen Stitches* I anticipated the subject of my next work: the construction and deconstruction of one's identity. I referred to the rituals of presenting young women to society, such as balls, common in Western society. Ironically, I chose to use the dress my mother wore at her debutant ball in the 1960s in Brazil.

As in *Cut it out!* and *Lights out!*, I also produced a video in studio for *6teen Stitches* in which I wore my mother's debutant dress. The video shows how I spread my legs so I cut the dress in the middle and rip it apart, as if trousers would be made out of the dress. This video – among the sound of scissors and sewing machines – was shown during the performance, where the ripped parts were put back together, were pierced through my skin and tied to my legs, and then both my legs were tied one to another.





6teen Stitches, Performance and Installation, Donau Festival, Krems, 2008. C-print.

Besides the critique on female standards of beauty, with this cycle of performances I explored some of the crucial questions of my PhD dissertation. From spatial perception and configuration to the relationships built between performer and audience and through art spaces. Each one of these performances was conceived for a specific room: the disposition of the video projections and the architectonic solutions were always different. Besides that, I never knew how many people to expect as an audience and how the final configuration of the space would look. The way people positioned themselves in the room and toward the video projections resulted in the spatial and body perceptions of both the performer (in this case me) and the audience itself.

For *Cut it Out!*, I combined a video installation to a live performance by creating a barrier (a built projection surface) between the audience and me. This barrier was positioned inside the room, giving it a more stage or theater-like characteristic.



Cut it Out!, Performance and Installation, Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, 2007. C-print.

Lights Out! was adapted for a completely different space and extended what was done in *Cut it Out!* by experimenting with a less-defined boundary between the audience and me. The transformation of the dress happened in the space and floor level of the audience, but in the dark. The destruction of the dress happened when a spotlight was turned on in the middle of the room and guided my way through the crowd. *Lights Out!* was conceived for a crowd, who would be able to walk around and discover the room gradually, and eventually get closer to the piercer and me. When an unexpectedly large number of people attended the performance, the final configuration of the space resulted in different ways of

perception. Some people from the audience were only able to see the projections, some weren't able to see anything, some didn't even know I was inside the room.



Lights Out!, Performance and Installation, Kunstraum NOE, Vienna, 2007. Video still.

6teen Stitches occurred within a context of an art and music festival. The main questions were: “Where should performance art take place? What should be the size of the space? What is the audience going to be like?” I decided to investigate these questions by performing in two rooms of the festival venue. My objectives were to test two complete separate room and audience situations with the same artwork. The room where the performance was announced to happen had a small stage and was closed. Shortly before the time scheduled the audience started to enter this room and immediately placed themselves facing the stage (where the pre-recorded video of cutting the dress was being projected). I started the performance outside of this room, in the lounge area of the festival. The audience inside the other room realized slowly that I wasn't going to perform on the stage and turned themselves to one of the sidewalls of the venue, which was the projection screen. The audience noticed that I was behind the screen and that this screen was also the division between the two rooms. People slowly started to organize themselves in the space. On the contrary of *Cut it Out!*, the screen this time didn't entirely protect me from being observed: in the lounge area where I started the performance, there was a very dispersive audience. This audience had direct contact with me and gave the performance almost a street-like characteristic. After my legs were tied together, the piercer cut the screen surface and I finally left the lounge area and entered the closed room through the screen. The transition between two different spatial configurations was impressive. I walked among the audience and noticed that they arranged themselves in semi-circle, creating a kind of arena. I also noticed that some of the people were sitting on the floor and were really near me. Next, I started to slowly remove the needles.





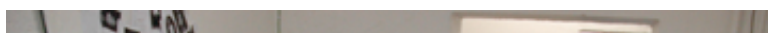
6teen Stitches, Performance and Installation, Donau Festival, Krems, 2008. C-print.

In June 2008 I presented at das weisse haus, Vienna, a performance and video installation called *Into Pieces*. The aspects of performativity, experiences in visiting installations, and the construction of space and language through action were explored. As in *6teen Stitches*, I dug into my family's memories and used them as material for *Into Pieces*. My objectives were to start a debate on the borders of private and public spaces. First, by searching for documents, pictures and letters from my grandparents. Secondly, by showing all this material in the space of das weisse haus. Finally by performing live – when I destroyed my grandparents' love letter and pieced it together by sewing the fragments onto my lap.



Into Pieces, Performance and Installation, das weisse haus, Vienna, 2008. C-print.

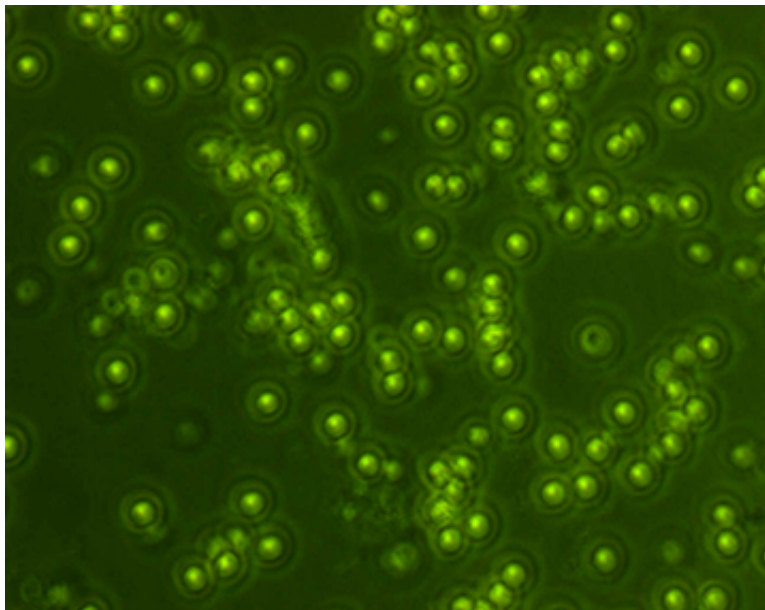
Besides relating to my family's history, I searched for elements in language, colonial Brazil, contemporary arts to refer to “the lap” and its significant feminist symbolism. In *Into Pieces* I started to experiment with the voyeuristic aspects of video and surveillance cameras. Over 160 meter of cable ran along rooms and corridors of das weisse haus, connecting 7 cameras to 6 monitors. The audience could choose between watching the performance from either looking inside the room I was (but only through a window or through the holes of an installation – a sort of puzzle, made by other paper fragments of my family's memorabilia), or through monitors placed in other rooms. Additionally, people could walk around and discover the various ways of perceiving the space, the bodies (my body and the audience itself), and the images broadcasted in the monitors during and after the live act. The surveillance cameras supported my ideas of the audience as an integrative and active element for the work.





Into Pieces, Performance and Installation, das weisse haus, Vienna, 2008. C-print.

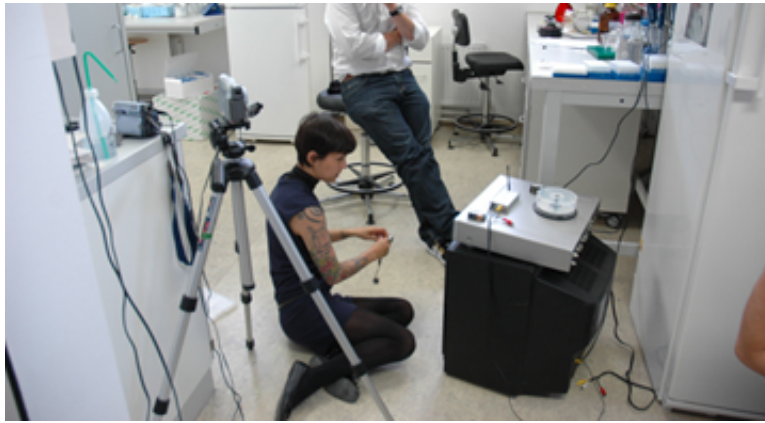
For my latest work *RNA Chips and Butterflies* (2008), I briefly put aside the inquiry into the social relationships built during live performance to explore a new space: the biological laboratory. On top of that, I experimented a new way of invading my body for the first time: I explored its inside with a microscopic view of it.



RNA Chips and Butterflies, Studio Performance, Vienna, 2008. C-print.

The biological laboratory provided not only new tools for documentation (such as microscopic photography, RNA chips and prints, etc.) then again, I encountered a space for interdisciplinary relationships: the artist and the scientist switch roles between performing and observing. I also researched theories, such as theories of chaos and the butterfly effect. I expounded upon the critiques of bio-political mechanisms regarding the regulatory process of the body – and the population as a whole – and focus on the aspects of unpredictability and irregularity in the body, space, and performance.





RNA Chips and Butterflies, Studio Performance, Vienna, 2008. C-print.

In conclusion, I have aimed throughout the last years to reinvent my work by finding new tools, new spaces, or by posing various questions. Although each work has left unique traces, they still share something in common, the interplay between transgression and transcription: from the documentation of bodily transformation to its translation into architectural language; from experiments with my own body's boundaries to the transgression of art spaces; and from the transgression of my body's perception to its transcriptions into video and to the audience.

Footnotes:

[i] Body modification is the voluntary modification of the human body. For example: tattooing, piercing, cutting, branding, amputation, etc. For more information, please visit <http://www.bmezine.com>.

[ii] Suspension is a ritual, ordeal, form of body play, or rite where a person hangs from flesh hooks put through (normally) temporary piercings.

[iii] Retrieved October 14, 2008, from <http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/slovenia/Units/5454.html>.

[iv] For more information, please visit <http://www.donaufestival.at>.

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<http://www.robortalima.com>

(Nov. 18, 2008)

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