

## INTERVIEW Roberta Lima

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Roberta Lima is a Vienna-based artist whose work focuses on body modification and concepts of space and architecture. Her most recent show, "Displacement," took place in New York at White Box NYC. She is currently doing a residency in Chicago with the Austrian Ministry of Arts and Cultures. Riot of Perfume conducted an interview with Lima regarding the ties in her work to architecture.

**EUGENIE DALLAND:** How did your initial studies in architecture lead you to a focus in the performative arts?

**ROBERTA LIMA:** It is very interesting that you start the interview with this question. In several texts, I introduce the main subject of my work as a link between the body and space. My graduation project in architecture was entitled "Freak Show—Cultural Center for Body Modification." For this project, I created an analogy between the changes in architecture and the altered bodies in the subculture of body modification (such as tattooing, piercing, scarification or body suspension). This was the process I developed to create architectural forms as well as the concept for the building. "Freak Show—Cultural Center for Body Modification" marked the beginning of an investigation that has been extended for the past 10 years. I would go further to say that architecture (has indeed) lead me in to the performative arts and yet I've never left it behind. It has always been there: in my practice and in my Ph.D. project, which is entitled "Rethinking Space Through Action."

**DALLAND:** How does your work with body modification relate to your pursuits in architectural theory/praxis?

**LIMA:** I believe those analogies encouraged me to investigate the relationship between body and space. I noticed that the intersection between praxis and theory helped me show the different layers of my work. I worked with body modification from 2001 to 2008. Nevertheless, this series of works isn't only about body modification. I had access to body modification because it was part of my life and I still have friends who are very active in the scene. Hence, when I brought the subculture to another area—the arts—it became a question of appropriation: I used the language of body modification to start debates on bio-politics and spatiality. The relation between body modification and space was examined in different ways: in architecture it was done in a formalistic way—the architectural structure was projected analogically to the body and to function within the needs of those who would inhabit it—and with the performative arts I was able to extend my questions and stumble into different realizations. It was when I put my own body in the center of the debates that I discovered a fast way to communicate ideas. I also started to think of performance as relational: the people (the performer, the piercer, the camera crew, the audience, et cetera), the objects (the needles, the ribbons, the trapeze, the suspension structures, the cameras, et cetera), and the way they were positioned in a room and in relation to one another was what configured the space. Although I don't work with body modification anymore, I continue to pose the questions that arose with the work done at that time in my current practice and theory.





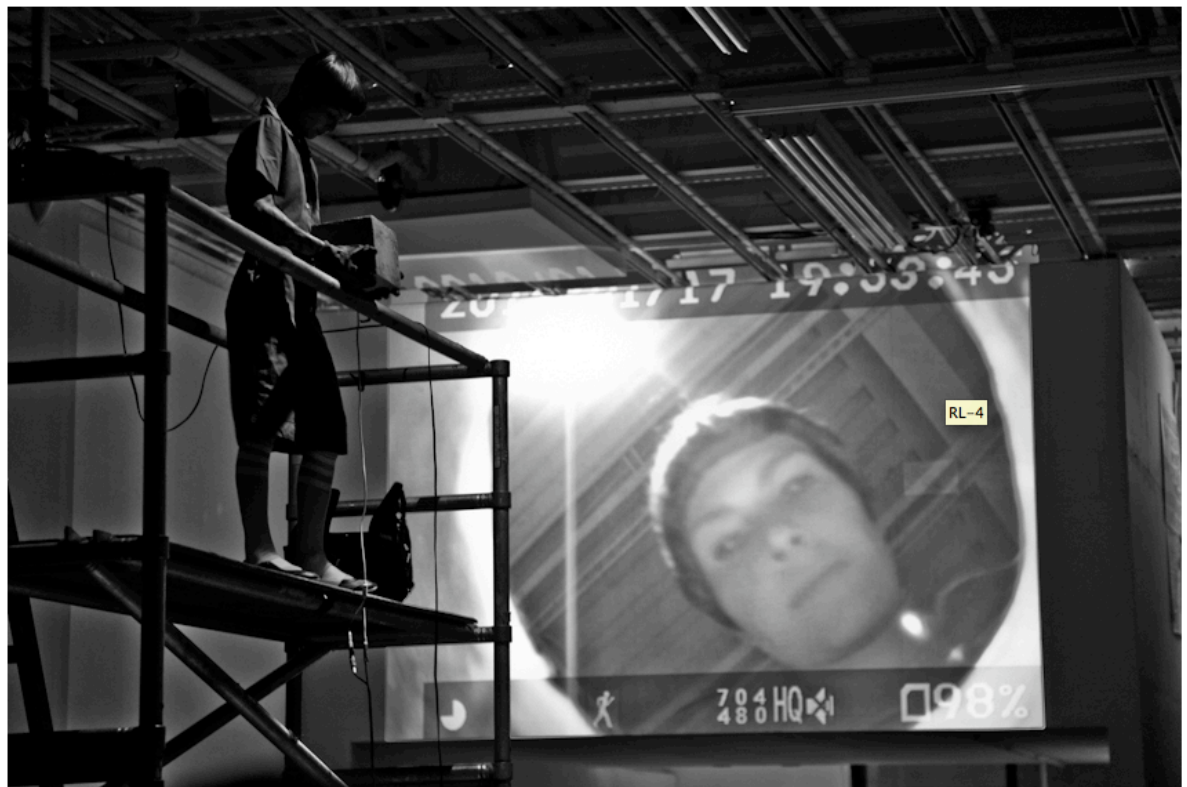
DALLAND: You wrote in an essay for *Art&Research* that the “body and space” are the main themes of your investigations. The article was particularly informative because it illustrated your great attention to the physical environment in which your performances take place, even if the focus of the piece does not involve the space itself, such as in “The Dress Trilogy.” Would you say that “Displacement” is addressed, either directly or abstractly, to the environment in which it took place?

LIMA: It's very interesting for me to answer this question, because you traced a link between the “The Dress Trilogy” and “Displacement.” Those works are related in many ways. Yes, like “The Dress Trilogy,” “Displacement” directly addressed the environment in which it took place. In the article published in *Art&Research*, I explain how important it was for my work to move from the studio to public space. The communication of ideas was accelerated. By opening up the studio and adding an audience, the spaces expanded; relationships increased since they needed to happen immediately. “The Dress Trilogy” inaugurated my experience with live performance. I learned that live performance required communication with the viewer and I chose video to enable this communication: The performances were captured on video and simultaneously projected. The video production—which included the cameras and all people involved in the process of making and showing the images—was performative per se and integrated the work as a whole.

For the works following “The Dress Trilogy,” I started to turn my point of view to others, filming from my point of view instead of only pointing the cameras towards myself. I started to use a spy camera attached to my chest. I also started to experiment with the voyeuristic aspects of video and surveillance cameras. Finally I looked into the political and social contexts in which artworks were and are performed. In all my live performances in which I invaded the public space—whether it was a gallery or a festival of 2,000 people—I changed its function from merely spaces of consumption into spaces for production. In “Displacement,” I dared to take a step further and question the classical ways of producing and viewing performance. The first question was, “How is performance documented?”

Normally the documents of performance are presented after the act. The first part of “Displacement” happened two days before the show, in closed doors and in the same space and setting you saw on January 17 at the White Box. I produced a video called “The Burial” in which I “displace” the documents (the original sketches, the contract between me and White Box, or even my boarding pass), burying, transforming, and revealing them only later. The projection of “The Burial,” placed in the entrance of the gallery, displaced people's perception and their understanding of space and time. Some visitors thought that action happened just a minute earlier, a day, or even a week before. Others—especially the ones who came later—thought that the video was the performance they missed. So, when does performance start?

In the second part called “The Fall” I displaced the spy camera. Instead of attaching it to my chest, the camera was placed inside a hole in the concrete box. I carried it up the ladder and dropped it from a height of five meters. This whole trajectory was broadcasted in real time and projected on a wall. I didn't know if the camera was going to survive the crash, but I was hoping it would, because my intention was to displace the video frame as well. So when I left the space and flipped over a sign that read, “Pick up a tool,” the viewers would switch roles with me. That is when the third part occurred. In “The Excavation,” the viewers got close to the sculpture and dug into it, looking for those documents that were then exposed. They might not have been caught on video, but they surely became performers.





DALLAND: Among other things, "Displacement" examines fundamental architectural concepts, but in a way that subverts them by emphasizing the instability of a physical structure. How does this focus on space relate to your focus on the body?

LIMA: As matter fact, it creates a correspondence and a paradox between the space and the body. The correspondence is that nothing is impenetrable. In my earlier works, as I mentioned before, I questioned the notions of bio-politics, the ways institutions of power in capitalist societies have controlled human bodies and introduced the idea of the bodies impenetrable. In my earlier performances my body was pierced, cut, it bled. I wanted to break through with the conventional ideas of bio-politics and to show that they are still present in today's societies—if not even stronger, since they are disguised in conformity and excess of information. Additionally, I thought of the penetration of the body as an act of transgression. I started then to think of architectural structures as passive to interference as well. I like to say that, if as an architect I was taught to create stability, as a performer I am given the chance of mess with it—to make structures unstable. I realized that, to the body, I can choose when I want to stop; in regards to architecture, I dare to take a step further, even allowing the audience to take over.

DALLAND: Can you talk about your next performance in Chicago?

LIMA: The piece in Chicago is called "ReBirth." It has similarities to "Displacement." It also happens in three parts. In the first, also called "The Burial," I trace the chronology of my collaboration with Fearghus Ó Conchúir. It is also a video of a big sheet of paper in which I wrote keywords, pointed out questions, and indicated connections tracing the links between what we started in 2009, what we continued in 2010, and finally the works we produced in Chicago in December 2011. This sheet of paper was then placed on a thin layer of concrete, covered (or buried) with a second layer, and cast inside a wooden mold.

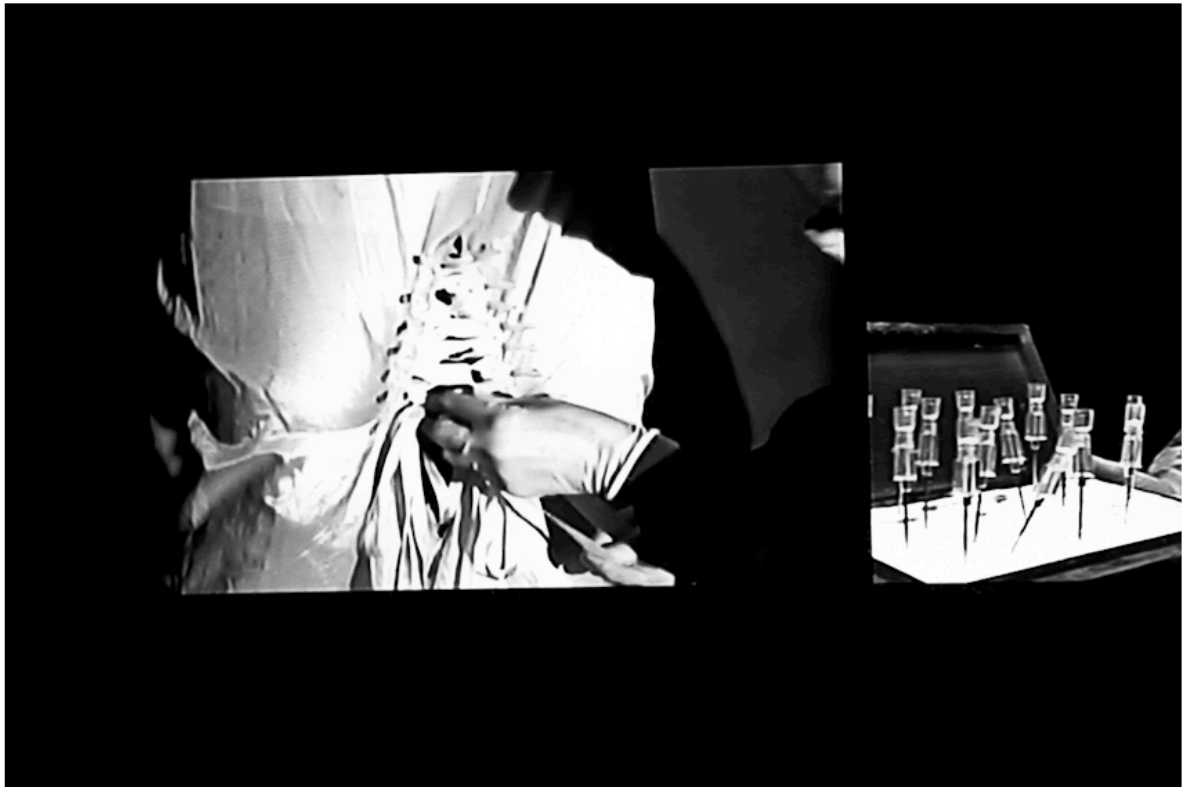
The difference between "ReBirth" and "Displacement" is that the collaboration with Fearghus took place in December, in the middle of my residency in Chicago and prior to the show that will open on February 7. Therefore, the second part, "Imprints," was made in studio. We used gestures of my body falling, dropping, dragging, and crashing to transform and shape the concrete. Moreover, we started a new exchange, bringing together elements from my earlier performances (such as pain) to others I had already started in the first three months of my residency (the sculptures). Besides that, we found a way of re-positioning my body in the center of the work—and the frame of the camera.

The third part, "Revelation," will happen live at Defibrillator Gallery on February 10 in the context of an installation. The installation will be composed of the sculpture placed on the floor in the center of the gallery, a small monitor showing "The Burial," a projection of the "Imprints" video, and other fragments of the performance.

The main action of "Revelation" will be my attempt to remove the sculpture from its base (which was originally part of the wooden mold). I intend to use my body to attempt to move the sculpture. I aim to point out the paradox between strength and fragility. The piece is going to break and reveal the sheet of paper that was buried inside. As well as in "Displacement," various tools will be displayed to induce audience interaction. In "ReBirth," the body was used, bruised, and scratched, yet it remained strong. The concrete piece (as mentioned before) allows for more intense (inter)actions—even if eventually it could break only with movement, it will break for sure when the tools are used. Once more, the fragility of the concrete piece creates a paradox: Nothing is impenetrable. Concrete might be as fragile as the body, impassive to invasion; we are aware of its borders and are daring to transgress it.

Just as in "Displacement," the audience will be invited to interact with the sculpture. I'm just curious to see if they will wait until I flip over the sign and leave the space [laughs].





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For more information: the artist's [website](#).

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