

## SUMMARY

Title:

**THE HUMAN BODY AS IMAGE AND INSTRUMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ART. Identity aspects from existentialism to trans-humanism**

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The human body as image and instrument in contemporary art and the identity aspects it cumulates from existentialism to trans-humanism constitute the subject of the present research and are related to personal theoretical preoccupations, as well as to the artistic approach which is offered as an application of the research thesis.

The structure of the thesis with the title: *The human body as image and instrument in contemporary art. Identity aspects from existentialism to humanism* consists in the following: *Introduction*, four chapters divided into subchapters and sections, *Annexes* (an integrated part to the fourth chapter), *Conclusions*, *Bibliography*.

The *Introduction* shapes a general temporal template about the perception of the human body in modern art and the evolutionary premises of approaching it in contemporary art. It presents existentialist philosophical perspectives, the paradigm shifts of the 20th century, along with the influences of the two World Wars, new artistic perspectives and a synthesis of Marcel Duchamp's input in the process of moving towards contemporary art through the introduction of the *ready-made*.

Existentialism starts with the XIX-th century philosophers: Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the period 1940-1950, French existentialists like Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre have elaborated scientific and fictional works that raised existential questions like alienation, the absurd, freedom, fear, nothingness. This philosophical current develops the idea that man is in charge of his own meaning in life and that absolute freedom of choice challenges him to make rational decisions in an irrational universe. The existence of God is denied, along with any other transcendental force, making human existence

absurd in the absence of clear explanations regarding its provenance and its purpose. A solution to face this nothingness is postulated in finding the meaning of existence through knowledge and acceptance of the mortal condition.

Marcel Duchamp's most important and consistent contribution to 20th century art was the *ready-made*, through which he forever transformed the visual arts from the point of view of their conception and their perception. The perspective that he suggests is profoundly existentialist: the artist, being in a position of absolute freedom to decide can create from any material, and the context that he offers, represented by an exhibition space, a gallery or a museum - transforms that object into a piece of art.

The main idea of the *Introduction* defines the body as image and instrument in a game of retracing the new identity coordinates of post-war man – which gives the artist a new position in front of art, society and himself.

The first chapter, *Identity aspects in the 20th century*, is divided into three subchapters and two sections, with different areas of analysis, successively questioning the cultural impact of existentialism and its representatives in art. It presents the body at the border between modern and contemporary art and the paradigm shift in 20th century art, illustrated by the process of going from expression to language.

The first subchapter *Existentialism and its cultural impact in the 20th century. Representatives of existentialism in the visual arts*, analyses the total freedom of man which influences a certain type of approach in contemporary art, leading to interdisciplinarity. The fusion of the arts led to works which cannot be catalogued as belonging to a sole technique or a single visual means. Thus, through expression, art becomes language and reaches for a direct dialogue with the intellect and the senses of those who come into contact with it. The formal borders of reception start to progressively dissolve, the character of the works becoming more and more immersive and allowing the spectator to refer to art as an extension and interpreted projection of their own existence. Art comes from life and is life, yet keeps death in mind as a second layer. Man is questioning his meaning, the consciousness of existence and his creation becomes a protraction and development of that search.

The subchapter also mentions man's relation to his own body which becomes paradoxical in a somewhat dual relationship: man loves and at the same times hates his body, and going from one to the other materializes in the different identity aspects that he manifests. By analysing the

deconstruction and the reconstruction of the human figure in traditional artistic forms: painting, drawing and sculpting, by questioning the new body aesthetics and its interactive potential in an activity or performance with an existential or social character, the conclusion is that its expressive and conceptual resources are inexhaustible. The body is represented desecrated, through the filter of a harsh reality that shows the specifics of the complex and problematic life of contemporary man. The receptor can identify and find points of reference to their own existence, having been freed from the formal barriers of perceiving a work of art. Starting with the 20th century and into our days, in the 21st century, corporality in the works of the artists starts to have a very personal character, in relation to their identity and vision of the world. The confessional aspect of the body becomes a symbolic intermediary between the artist and the spectator, encapsulating all the existentialist dilemmas thus far presented theoretically.

The second subchapter, *The body as representation at the temporal border between modern and contemporary art*, analyses artistic approaches on corporality at the last stage of Modern Art, when there are big shifts on perception and paradigm regarding the function and aesthetics of the body. Modern art has consecrated an approach which has gradually distanced itself from the mimetic and has developed a new way of experimenting with form and its expressive potential starting from the deconstruction of the artistic language.

The artist has grown apart from imitating reality as his primal purpose and started on a path of understanding reality by extracting specific details, depending on the area of interest and the way in which he wishes to experiment visually and conceptually.

The human body was laid, from the point of view of artistic explorations, on the “dissection table”, as one of the main elements, we could even say centre – around which man understood and also rebuilt his reality. The deconstruction and reconstruction of shape in portraying the human body from tri-dimensional to bi-dimensional raised problems for the spatial representation of forms and a new picturale aesthetics was born. Picasso reconsidered the role of the artistic elements, imposing a revolutionary approach to portraying reality and a self referential vision of the means he used. Marcel Duchamp’s revolutionary vision on the artistic language marked 20th century art, questioning art’s and artist’s role in society and the relevance of artistic production regarding the new existential paradigm. In a world which was dehumanized by war and death, in which traditional values no longer connected to people’s view of life, the

artist focused on visual language and his conceptual art to reconfigure the perception of the body, society, the objectual world, the image and art's aesthetic and social function.

The section *The deconstruction and reconstruction of the human figure. Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon*, analyses the visionary artistic endeavours as to the representation of the human figure of two of the most emblematic artists of the 20th century, who contributed to the progressive transformation of modern art into contemporary art. For Picasso, the body was an inexhaustible source to exploit: shapely, aesthetically and conceptually – as a social message. It appears in all the artistic periods which the artist went through almost like a leitmotif, becoming a reflection of his relation to the world. It doesn't matter if we speak about the blue period or the pink, the neoclassical or Cubism, the human figure plays a fundamental role in his work. Picasso was an existentialist by definition; he took upon him the role of a demiurge by the ampleness of his creation, as one of the most important figures of modern art, who founded the principles of later contemporary art. The ease with which he experimented, whether technical means, manner of representation and elements of artistic language: the dot, the line and the blot – marked essential changes in perception of the creative process and the reception of the artistic object.

Picasso deconstructs the image of the human body in his cubist periods, where he takes the anatomical traits to their essence with the purpose of increasing its expressivity and giving us a new perception over what is real. The source of inspiration of this approach were the African masks that fascinated him and whose presence is extremely visible in his first official cubist work: *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)* (*The ladies of Avignon, 1907*). This painting created a lot of controversy both through the novelty of the female nude and through the conceptual ideas inserted with the goal of changing the perception over the human figure and painting. This shocking act of the artist betrays a profoundly existentialist desire to change the figurative paradigm in modern art.

Bacon's art has a strong expressionist side, although it's very hard to label, having suffered various influences from several currents: Baroque (Rembrandt, Velasquez), Cubism (Picasso's bio-morphism) and Surrealism. Being very different from Picasso but gifted with the same type of creative force, in Bacon's painting the body is visceral, precious and grotesque. His bodies resemble screams coming from a troubled existence and conscience that erupt on the canvas in a chromatic and carnal symphony. Bacon's deconstruction and reconstruction of the human figure are not geometrical but fluid and the planes and volumes intertwine in configurations that disturb

the viewer through the intensity of the atmosphere created. The two recurring themes are the crucifixion and the scream, which insinuate themselves as symbols for the tragedy of the human condition. The painter's entire world of shapes is strongly connected to his life and the experiences that he had throughout his tumultuous existence, marked mainly by sex and death. His picturale approach comes from an inner universe that seems to burst as a result of repression, revealing the most hidden and dark corners of a human being.

The section *The female nude and body expressivity: Amedeo Modigliani and Egon Schiele* presents two distinct perspectives of the female nude in modern art, marked by expressivity and suffering, which contributed to the progressive shift from the modern period to the contemporary one. Modigliani's formal exploration was characterized by a late mannerism, manifested through elongated physiognomies, distorted figures with long necks and sometimes empty, pupil less eyes, portraits resembling masks. The uniqueness of his paintings' atmosphere is not created by a precise constructive drawing, as the line has a lyrical beauty that elegantly shapes the naked female bodies but by the chromatic atmosphere. The quiet and soft lasciviousness of Modigliani's women give shape to a tender and somehow sentimental vision on their bodies and identities, being offered for admiration in an almost innocent manner. There is no carnal objectifying or explicit sexuality as the artist's eye analyses them voyeuristically but gives them an enigmatic halo. The woman's image becomes in a certain way sacred in Modigliani's representation, its existence being strongly tied to the eternal mystery of the feminine.

The female nude in Schiele's work has a somewhat bizarre, troubled, almost sick atmosphere. The women he portrays are models, prostitutes or lovers, his approach to them being both empathic and glacial. He analyses them with a piercing gaze, marked by the tragic existence of a man addicted to his own carnal desires and "personal demons" which influence in time his character and evolution. Schiele's radical female nude is also portrayed as a couple, along with both men and women, as the artist represents uncensored eroticism, in all its forms through works like: *Lovers Man and Woman* (1914), *Female Lovers* (1915), *The Embrace* (1917).

Amedeo Modigliani and Egon Schiele configured two distinct visions of the human body and the female nude, their perception being visionary and contributing to the paradigm shift in representing the body in art, eliminating clichés and predictable classicist traits.

The third subchapter, *Expression versus language. The paradigm shift in the 20th century: Marcel Duchamp and his visionary work* talks about the decisive contribution of

Duchamp to changing the perception over art and the creation of an art object in the 20th century through the visionary perspective that he had on the creative process and the status of the visual arts. Duchamp set the fundamentals of contemporary artistic thinking and feeling, by freeing the technique and the visual environment from their limited conditioning and inserting the concept of interdisciplinary and shaping a mentality in which fine art becomes visual language. The term *ready-made* applies to everyday mass produced objects, taken from their ordinary template and presented as works of art in exhibitions. The power of the artist to decide what is art in front of all artistic principles thus far socially acceptable was an act of rebellion and shook the notion of fine art. He asked again the question: What is art? What determines that an object becomes art? Duchamp's answer was simple: the artist. In a world that was shaken and dehumanized by war, in which the old values seemed irrelevant and hid a harsh reality, the artist made a gesture both existentialist and anarchist by choosing objects with nothing noble in them and turning them into art. Duchamp's searches were revolutionary for the 20th century fine art, shaping an existentialist approach in setting new perspectives on how art is produced, received and last but not least, its contextual and ephemeral status.

The second chapter, *The body as image in contemporary art*, contains two subchapters, including twelve sections and analyzes both representations of the body through traditional visual means and in video art and digital environments, questioning the transgressions of the image. The first chapter, *Representations of the body through traditional means* acts as an introduction to the analysis of the image of the body in the traditional techniques of the 20th and 21st centuries. The image of the body through traditional visual means was influenced by the use of photography as a landmark in representing it, artists using it as a starting point in their works, sometimes giving up on a live model. Thus, photography became a filter in the perception of reality and its interpretation, determining the new paradigm of conceiving the image of the body in contemporary art. Painting, graphics and sculpture became visual means of probing even more profoundly reality, human identity and the self, as artists dived viscerally in the existentialist essence.

The section *Identity perspectives of the body in contemporary art. Suffering as an existentialist necessity* describes the context in which contemporary art took shape and its social conditioning. Contemporary art was formed in an extremely troubled century from a social and political point of view (the 20th century), which was marked by events like the two World Wars,

the Cold War, the Vietnam War and so on. The old values that influenced society in the previous centuries had changed, the artists felt that the only relevant attitude towards the new world is that of questioning the principles which, theoretically, were supposed to avert the dehumanisation and moral decay of society. One can say that contemporary art was born, more or less directly, from the effects that suffering produces on humanity and the disillusionment that man felt in trying to apply some principles so far considered axiomatically, rooted in the Christian morals. The fundamental transformations taking place when modern art became contemporary art were the changing of the social function of art, the idea of a visual language and its self referential and interdisciplinary character as a necessity and creative consequence.

The existentialism that brought forth the idea of an absurd world in which God is absent and Man is alone in front of life and death led to the endemic loneliness of contemporary man. Suffering becomes an existential reality, almost a necessity in the authentic perception of the nuances of life in all its complexity. The artistic approaches insinuate themselves as a normal step in understanding and assimilating the tragic condition of the present man, whose identity is always changing.

The section *Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Visual and conceptual interferences* describes the figurative work of two iconic figures of the American art scene in the second half of the 20th century, who were also friends and collaborators. Andy Warhol is distinguished as one of the strongest and most prolific personalities of American Pop Art, becoming an idol for Jean-Michel Basquiat as an artist and making him long for the star status that he was enjoying. Warhol's art is an exploration of the relations established between the public image and the culture of celebrities, filtered through the artistic expression to capture the essence of the American dream. Warhol's vision of contemporary society was transposed in series of works (especially painting and serigraphy) which reflected, through the multiplication and advertisement illustrative manner, the essence of the time: consumerism as a lifestyle and fame as existential purpose. Andy Warhol's human figure is actually an image empty of an authentic identity that can work as *persona* for some socially confectioned celebrities, whose personalities seem to follow the same facile and transient principles.

Basquiat, Like Warhol, wanted fame and glory and reached them in just a few years, his recognition coming after the promotion he got from the famous gallery owner Larry Gagosian. He painted assiduously, producing thousands of works in just a few years (1981-1988) and

becoming one of the iconic figures of the New York bohemia through his eclectic personality, shaped as a symbol for the American Dream. Basquiat's neo-expressionism is dual: tough, forceful yet poetic, almost metaphysical when he introduces text. Most of his paintings are self-referential, either related to his racial status, his own identity in self-portraits and self-representations and the three-spiked crown motif which suggests and imposes his sovereignty in the art world. Life and death are interconnected, with funerary elements appearing throughout his entire creation, like a *memento mori*. Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat were two of the most influential and visionary artists of the 20th century, redefining the status of the artist and how he is perceived, as a celebrity who establishes new artistic and social values.

The section *Body/ Antibody: Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz* analyses the works of two of the most important artists of the German figurative wave from after the Second World War: Richter and Baselitz. Gerhard Richter kept his loyalty to the representation and interpretation of the photographic image, yet focused on the capacity of the painting to not just render mimetically the entire photography but confer a mysterious halo to the image. Richter has a visual understanding in which photography, painting and projection fuse together to coagulate a final work suggesting that the artistic vision is a conversion of the real into the imaginary.

The lack of a precise outline of volumes and its timeless atmosphere, submerged in a pictorial seductive mist betrays the artist's attitude of not pretending, even as an adult that he had a clear view of himself and the external world. But through his manner of representation he insinuated the opposite. Thus, Richter does not pretend to truly know himself, to have fully understood the mechanisms of life and his own existence in the world. He paints impressions, sensations, emotions, laden with all the technical, conceptual and cultural knowledge he had gained throughout his existence, but doesn't pretend to really understand it nor does he hold that as his purpose. The miracle of life and its mechanisms are, to Richter, surrounded by a subtle and refined mystery. Although having all the technical means to become a „reporter“ of human existence, he decides to stay somewhere outside it and extract that which life shows in its natural flow.

Georg Baselitz – despite the fact that other artists have adopted the principles of conceptual art, Pop Art or have experimented with Arte Povera – grew apart from such approaches, resuscitating the German Expressionism which was discredited by the Nazis and



placing the human figure on a central stage again. He produced some controversies already from his emerging period from 1963 and even two decades later, when he started to sculpt, managing to revitalise the German Neo-Expressionism in the 70s. During a social time when Germany was being reconstructed after the American consumerism model, Baselitz's approach formed a protest and a rejection of the new values. The figures from the *Heroes* series reflect this stance and can be interpreted as a returning to the atmosphere of an era prior to that of the new Germany, a past, more romantic time.

His artistic vision was influenced over time by the works of some great artists like Alberto Giacometti, Pablo Picasso and the expressionists from *Die Brücke*. The relation body-space in his works takes shape organically, the framing merging with the bodies through gestures. The body has an interpreted image, metamorphosed, used as an instrument to reconfigure the perception of the surrounding world. His bodies, through all his techniques become in fact anti-bodies, stressing the inner tribulation of humanity by the fragmented volumes and gestural strokes through which he applies colour. Contemporary man's troubled existence is captured in violent compositions, describing a precious universe in plasticity and expression which seems to decompose under the moral deficiencies of today's world.

The section *Absence through presence: Michaël Borremans* describes the artistic approach of one of the most representative and spectacular Belgian artists towards contemporary corporality. The painting of Michaël Borremans is regarded by the artist as photography, as he organized studio photo sessions in which he creates carefully directed scenes that he later paints. His figurative preoccupation explores in essence the recognisable reality, whose limits he traces in minimalist compositions, as film scenes wrapped in mystery, seemingly part of an unfinished film. His final works recall a metaphysical universe, with absurd elements, sometimes describing ritual actions in which the identity of the figures remains uncertain. Borremans materialises a descriptive painting in the technical sense of the term, only less narrative, insisting that the mystery and the „silence” of the people's actions are in fact the key to the visual world he configures. His style varies under the influences of the baroque and impressionist painting, revealing his admiration for the strokes of the great masters, but the manner in which he conceives his compositions and the angle from which he represents the human figures shape a minimalist, contemporary approach to reality. Borremans' paintings are possible existential scenarios, recalling the past and insinuating the future through an undefined present, meant to

raise questions but not necessarily to offer palpable answers. The atmosphere of the paintings suggests an almost timeless world, in which the artist inserts here and there elements or details that offer subtle social and human information. In the artist's works, life, death, transcendence, presence and absence become the main coordinates around which a formal and conceptual universe is built, in which the meaning of the image is left almost entirely to the viewer, the artists presenting only subtle insinuations. For Borremans, painting is transcendental and at the same time a ritual, configuring an approach strongly inspired by humanity but with a transgressive stake.

The section *Carnality and sensuality: Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville* presents side by side two of the most important painters of the flesh of the 20th and 21st centuries. For Lucian Freud, the body is a laboratory set for exploration, in which carnality becomes a subject and at the same time an interface harbouring pure life: a sum of experiences, feelings, wishes, and repressions. The seduction that the body represents for the artist is transposed in compositions of great strength, sometimes of a natural size, in which he organically and psychologically X-rays human nature in all its honesty. Lucian Freud's models were people from the artist's intimate entourage, who spent a lot of time posing for him, as he only worked with models and not photos. The artist was essentially a voyeur, he wanted to see flesh, the live body, to feel it – only that way could he render its materiality and consistence authentically. Freud confessed that the subject of his work and the chosen model had autobiographical and self-referential characteristics (finding fragments of himself in each identity), and the process of painting was filled with hope, remembrance, sensuality and involvement. Through the corporality of his works, he configures a body-reality, describing the authentic substance of life and sincerely betraying all the artist's obsessions and pleasures, only to reveal a very particular perspective on human nature and its darkness.

Jenny Saville questions the female body from different perspectives: overweight, plastic surgery alterations, mutilation – all being configured as interventions on its morphology. The artist paints female bodies on huge canvases, which do not fit into socially imposed beauty standards and are provocatively grotesque. The artist deconstructs female beauty and erotic standards conceived by the opposite sex and instituted during art history by male artists, experimenting with images that show obese women or women who has undergone plastic surgery, in some cases sex change operations. She also uses her own body for aesthetic and

conceptual research in order to reflect over the status of the female body and the aesthetic and social perception that society manifests towards it. She reveals the natural, individual beauty of the women she shows, presenting an authentic, crude reality. Through the flesh, the artist expresses sensitive states that shape contemporary man's existence, like anxiety, anguish, sorrow, physical pain. Saville's bodies celebrate existence in all its diversity, offering an augmented perspective over some profoundly human details and aspects which are passed by due to stereotypes. The artist shapes a universe of artistic preoccupations that essentially wishes to sensitise the viewers and offer them a wider perspective over humanity and its contemporary existence.

The section *Berlinde de Bruyckere and visceral sculpture* analyses the impressive work of a figurative contemporary Belgian sculptor, offering an existential perspective on corporality in sculpture. The artist explores the visceral shape of the human and animal body in medium and large size works, conceptualizing the interdependence between life and death and the tragic existentialist condition. Bruyckere's sculpture are extremely realistic, being made from wax and faithfully rendering the materiality of skin, fabrics, fur and natural structures, like branches and trees. Her mimetic virtuosity aims for the materialisation on a medium and large scale of anonymous, suffering bodies and visceral natural structures, dramatically oversized which seem to have come from the entrails of the human body. The artist explores suffering's deepest dimensions, the torment of life and the inevitable death through expressive sculptures that recall both the living and the cadaverous. For Berlinde de Bruyckere everything is about life and human existence and all lead to death, to dematerialization through suffering. The tensioned bodies, the expressivity of the fabrics, the organic configurations and her installations like curiosity cabinets shape a unique approach in contemporary sculpture, with a profound vision on the body and the spirit.

The human body cumulates some very specific characteristics in the Belgian sculptor's approach, being in fact, the synthesis between the perishable flesh and the dramatic Christ like feeling that resides in the tensioned bodies. The human figure that she gives shape to has no identity and lacks any cranial area, being a carnal expression of both life and death. De Bruyckere's bodies recall emotion, pain, clenching, anger, interiority, loneliness, resignation, liberation. All the sculpture's elements lead to a dissection and recall humanity, creating an impressive corpus of works in terms of their making and their message.

Berlinde de Bruyckere manages to confront the viewers, through her fascination for the relation between life and death, with an aesthetically seductive artistic vision and a disturbing atmosphere that provokes reflection and questions the human essence and the meaning of existence.

The subchapter *Images of the human body in video and digital art* is an introduction to the specifics of the digital imaging of the human body. It explores the expressivity of the human body in video and digital art, including virtual reality, as it becomes an instrument in obtaining a new type of image, ephemeral in character and reliant on the limits of the technological means. The recognition of the image of the human presence in these new visual means transforms the work of art in an experimental artistic project, with a social character meant to appositely reflect the paradigm of contemporary society in all its complexity. The substance of the digital image is dynamic and relative: apparently illustrative, sometimes documentary but most times interpreted and distorted as a metaphor of a critical commentary on an eclectic and cynical reality. The artists experiment with the moving image in the century of speed (the 20th century) and in the new millennium (the 21st century) as a natural consequence of the new technological and artistic means, creating a provocative and reflexive body of works.

In the section *Video art as a consequence of the appearance of television. The human body in video art* are presented the social and technological premises in which video art appeared as a new way of expression and the most important video artists of the 20th and 21st centuries: : Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Pipilotti Rist. Video art was generated by experimentation and by hijacking the conventional usage of the instrument, through visual and sonorous jamming applied to television and the disturbance of the television channel. The pioneers of video art were Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik and they set the premises of what would later be called „video art” in the 1960s.

In the context of the emergence of new technologies, the TV and the computer become two distinct forms of generating art, along with another way of artistic expression: virtual, interactive worlds. These simulate images and scraps of reality and facilitate the participation of the viewer in artificial universes, with the potential of competing and even substituting the old types of human perception. Both the body and the human mind become connected to the digital installations especially created to give them a multi-sensory, organic and conceptual experience. The status of the image thus suffers transformations, fuelling an uncertainty between the feeling of reality and the literally perceived world.

The human body becomes a way to experiment with perceptions of images and interpretations of reality, the artists using this to trace new ways of perceiving matter. The image of the human body in video art becomes a way of reporting to the recognizable reality, yet suffering visual deformations with an aesthetic purpose. Through video, the body and the image of the body become a vehicle for communication and existential questioning of the relation body-time-space. The human identities are juxtaposed, dissolved in this continuous movement and this game with the perception of reality and its image. The identity in video art reflect a split, existential assertion and an exploration meant to dissolve the perceptual barriers and to trace new ways of connecting to the contemporary world and its multiple projections.

The section *Identity aspects in the art of Bill Viola: The fluid Body* presents the corpus of video works and influences over digital art of one of the most important contemporary artists: Bill Viola. The main themes in his creation are strongly connected to experiences and existential stages, like: love, birth, death, sacrifice, emotion, conscience and spirituality. In his vision, the video recording „captured souls”, recording moments from a man’s life that can be seen again even after his death, his soul and personality remaining thus immortalized. One of the recurring themes that he explores is the duality as a necessary condition in understanding existence in all its complexity: body/ mind, matter/ spirit, life/ death, light/ darkness, noise/ silence. Man is, in his perception, the meeting point between the material and immaterial worlds, an ephemeral corporal presence that can transcend his condition through the spiritual dimension. Viola’s installations are drenched in an enigmatic obscurity that confronts the viewer in an experience similar to diving into an aquarium, revealing a transcendental light. In Viola’s works, the body is a mostly symbolic instrument, the eye being enchanted by the moving images so that it may later decipher the symbolic, existential valences of the works. For the artist, the key towards the exploration and understanding of this world lies in the archetypal existential conditions, in the secrets of a newborn (*Silent Life*, 1979), in the fearful crying (*Anthem*), in the mystery of sleep (*The Sleepers*, 1992), in the silence of death and waiting for life (*Nantes Triptych*, 1992). He X-rays life in all its complex shapes and ideas through videos based on minimalist but striking images, marked by a solemn atmosphere.

The section *Cindy Sherman and the conceptual self-portrait* reveals the vision on the identity of contemporary man of an emblematic photographer and the versatility with which she develops the self-portrait in her work. Within the analysis of the identity aspects in contemporary

art, the body of work by Cindy Sherman must be explored, due to its visionary character, its complexity and the consistence of the subjects that she approaches. Taking the roles of model, make-up artist, dressmaker and photographer, she became, at the start of the 80s, one of the most influential photographers of her generation, finding inspiration in pop culture, fashion, film and television, questioning subjects like the objectification of the female sexuality and the woman's social status. For Cindy Sherman, the body becomes an instrument in conceiving some representative situations of the feminine identity aspects at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. The artist presents in great details women who could be part of different social categories, with various preoccupations and personal traits typical for today's society and its customs. The image of her own body is used to materialize identity situations that challenge the viewer to analyzing aspects of their surroundings which in other contexts he would not question at all. Like a carefully constructed architecture, Cindy Sherman conceives images of contemporary women, using self-portraits as the main means of directing the frames. Long before the idea of a *selfie*, she understood the power of the narcissistic image in projecting multiple personalities created to fit specific contexts.

The section *Hybrid images and multimedia art: The digital body* analyses the process of hybridisation of the image that produces the so called „synthesis” image, in which decomposing and recomposing are visual procedures, along with manipulation, digital cut outs and collage. Multimedia art will lead to reconsidering and re-evaluating through a contemporary filter past images. This process will be seen as a visual and conceptual „recycling” of art history or some actual historical elements. At the end of the 20th century, collage and image and conceptual hybridization, along with different means of expression becomes a frequent practice to elaborate a relevant discourse on the nature of contemporary society. The internet also plays a significant role in taking over and remaking images, some artists using this practice artistically.

In the section *Interactive ambient and virtual worlds: The virtual body* I analyse the relationship between virtual reality (VR) and contemporary art. The artistic projects that explore virtual reality project a virtual body with a virtual identity, which in some cases can be generated or selected from a variety of options by the viewer. These interactive and immersive installations are conceived to offer alternative realities to the existing one, simulating new ambient and contexts that generate new identities. Exploring a new ambient offer first of all visual and sensitive experiences, the virtual body being generated according to digital parameters and

inspired by a recognisable reality. The need for virtual worlds, ambient and bodies is generated by the desire to experiment with new technologies (currently under development) and to test their limits in various areas. In the visual arts, these explorations aim for perceptive experiences. The virtual body becomes a *persona*, a sometimes improved version of the own self, looking for different existential variants, with different scenarios and a different aesthetics. Body functions are variable, can be chosen, and the virtual experience can be controlled. With a controllable existential scenario, virtual identity can also be designed according to the wishes of the player, with access to multiple options for simulating identity. Virtual reality takes the shape of a complex experience, both human and dehumanizing, depending on how it's used.

The section *Trans-humanism and post-humanism in contemporary art* explains the influence that these ways of thinking have had over the artistic production at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Trans-humanism is an intellectual movement that supports the use of new technologies for improving the capacities of the human body, both physical and mental and erasing its weaknesses, like disease, involuntary death, suffering and aging. Trans-humanism supports the idea that as a result of such technological interventions of biological and mental development, people will become post-human beings, with more extended abilities than at the present.

This way of thinking could not have been possible without the legacy of existentialism, as it is a continuation of it: man, taking central stage as Supreme Being, creating its own world and artificially perfecting its body. Trans-humanism and post-humanism in contemporary art are visually and conceptually rendered as interdisciplinary approaches, trying to fuse the organic and the inorganic, the natural and the artificial, to synthesize the substance of contemporary society and its possible projections in the future. In Post-humanism, man, plants, animals, robots, androids are all symbiotic and become components of a complex universe.

The third chapter, called *The body as instrument in contemporary art* contains three subchapters that include eight sections and analyze the performance and trans-disciplinary works where the body is used *per se* in art.

The first subchapter, *The body as subject and object in performance arts* presents a general view of the social and cultural context in which body art appeared, together with its main artists: Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Chris Burden, Vanessa Beecroft, Orlan, Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Valie Export. The body as instrument

in contemporary art becomes visible in body art, which appeared in the 70's as a reaction to abstractionism in an attempt to create a new aesthetics and to reintroduce the object in art. The following means of expression have developed around the body: the happening, the performance, the intervention and the action, where the body is challenged to test its sensitive and physical limits to the extreme, as part of the "show" and the show itself. Body art was concentrated around sex (gender) and identity, the major subject being the relation between mind and body, explored in ritual works.

The section *Body dynamics and its metaphorical function in performance visual arts* analyses, like a case study, three representative performances for body art: Gina Pane: *Sentimental Action*, Marina Abramović: *Rhythm 0*, Chris Burden: *Shoot*. *Sentimental Action* is configured as a self-flagellation performance, in which the body becomes the material to test physical and mental endurance. Gina Pane makes a metaphorical performance, with a feminist tempt, as the audience is completely feminine and the main theme regards feminine identity. In *Rhythm 0*, Marina Abramović passively abandons her body to the viewers, giving them the power of life and death over her. For six hours, the artist let her body be manipulated by the viewers, with the goal of testing the boundaries of the human behaviour when there are no social repercussions. In *Shoot*, Chris Burden allows himself to be shot during a performance inside a white cube. The artist experiments with the limits of the human body and physical and visual endurance that can be sustained during an artistic act. In an unstable social and political context, he has exposed the limits of his body in a shocking performance that questioned the human condition and the frailness of existence.

The section *Performance and its stakes: Marina Abramović, Gina Pane, Valie Export* presents the artistic activity of three of the most important artists of body art. Marina Abramović gave new meanings to materiality in art, offering an immaterial experience, limited and ephemeral and documented through video and photos. Her feelings during the performance are metaphysical, creating a context for a reception that questions the limits of the body, its endurance, physical and mental pain - coordinates that configure the human condition. The artist uses self-flagellation as an almost ritual act in confronting man with his own perishable nature in order to have a spiritual experience. Suffering becomes the founding stone and an essential condition on which she builds her artistic act: physical suffering that the body feels for hours, in



which its limits are tested and the mental suffering as an artist and a viewer in front of the explored subjects, presented as an immersive act.

Gina Pane also emerged as one of the emblematic figures of 20th century body art, her exploration testing the limits of the body through acts of extreme self-flagellation, like using razors in self-mutilating acts. By working with her own body and blood artistically, she experimented with the frailty of the human body by submitting it to undressing, kicking, dirt and hurt, in acts that question human nature. For Gina Pane, the body becomes a way to transmit ideas about feminism, women's status in society, man's status in the society he created and his connection to the environment.

Through a profoundly existentialist approach, Valie Export exposes her own body for reception and consummation in public interventions meant to awaken the conscience of the viewer. Being faced with a woman who accepts and exhibits her sexual and human status, the viewer experiments confusing feelings of curiosity, absurd, embarrassment, shame and self-interrogation on social stereotypes brought about in a new light. Valie Export explores new boundaries of bodily perceptions with the opposite sex, with his social perception, with his social role and last but not least, with himself. The female identity meant for voyeurism and mass sexual consummation is exposed by the artist in public interventions with the purpose of shocking and questioning the consequences of a late 20th century female existence.

The second subchapter, *Interferences of performance with tradition visual techniques* shapes a synthesis of the interdisciplinarity of contemporary art that involves body art in fusion with traditional techniques (painting, sculpting, graphics). Visual art in the second half of the 20th century had as a premise interdisciplinarity, which opened new horizons for experiments and dissolved the boundaries of the body in the artistic process, giving it a new perspective over the creative and transgressive potential.

The section *The dynamic body and action painting: Jackson Pollock* analyses the visionary work of Abstract Expressionism from an interdisciplinary perspective. Jackson Pollock was one of the first artists of the 20th century to involve his own body in creating a painting, breaking the connection to the overreaching rhetoric of his first works. His body becomes an instrument in the traditional act of painting, creating a state akin to a trance – with the help of a long brush drenched in paint – networks of drops and colour leak on the surface of the bi-dimensional canvas (techniques called *dripping* and *pouring*). Through *dripping*, he executes

materialising movement, recorded in the fabric, registering the visible time's movement. The artist doesn't position himself in front of the painting, but inside it, mastering through gesture the material, the composition, the chromatic and the space in works that give the impression of tri-dimensionality by the setting of the colour planes in space.

The section *The spiritualised body: Yves Klein's Anthropometries* analyses the artistic approach of one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, Yves Klein. The bodies that the artist uses in *Anthropometries* become picturale instruments, paving the way towards interdisciplinarity in contemporary visual art. The body and the picturale matter are distinct entities, but in Klein's performances they fusion organically, having both a temporary result -the performance itself and a definitive one – the result of his performances: canvases painted by the bodies of the models used by the artist. The identity of the body that Yves Klein suggests is a spiritual one. The artist wishes to touch the absolute through a spiritualised body, which takes part in an almost ritualistic artistic act.

The section *The conceptual body in the performance of Joseph Beuys* presents the artistic activity of the visionary artist Joseph Beuys. At the basis of his research laid humanistic ideas and social philosophy, together with the „extended definition” of art and the concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* as a social sculpture shaping society and politics, his activity also comprising of conferences and public debates related to these subjects.

In *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), the artist's body becomes a concept itself, more precisely the concept of art and spirituality, confronted with the amorphous, in an absurd interaction meant to shock in the viewer and at the same time to question art, the meaning of the spirit in society and contemporary existence and the evolution or more likely the involution of the human. Joseph Beuys was one of the most philosophical artists of the 20th century, giving the performance art and the body's symbolic potential a new perspective. The process of the artistic approach was one of the essential characteristics of his work, configuring a cryptic material universe in shape and metaphysical in conceptual goal.

The third subchapter, *Corporality in interdisciplinary projects* makes an introduction in presenting the works of contemporary artists whose approach is by definition trans-disciplinary: Matthew Barney, Stelarc and Alexandra Pirici. They experiment with new ways of using the body in art, offering a perceptive challenge through an aesthetic, conceptual and social experience. Barney breaks the boundaries of video, sculpture and performance through shock-

narrations, Stelarc tests the biological limits of his own body and the visual endurance of the viewer. Alexandra Pirici merges the choreographic gesture with artistic intervention performances in private and public spaces, actively involving the viewers in her works.

The section *Matthew Barney and the theatrical body* analyses the corpus of works of the artist Matthew Barney, one of the most complex personalities of contemporary art. Barney's narrations and sub-narrations from his most important video series *Cremaster* (1999-2002) create a world that seems to be born right now, but that has a past and insinuates a possible future. Mythological inspired characters meet machines and robot devices, in an ambient and sculptural fantasy conceived by the artist, that seems to recall an ambiguous present, but which can just as well be a world of the future.

The bodies cumulate a theatrical characteristic, through the way in which they are coordinated in narrations and group scenes (as in *The Order*), some inspired by American musicals and Broadway shows. Matthew Barney orchestrates true dystopian and futuristic epics, in which he invents characters in strange situations doing absurd acts. The body is used as a morphed instrument, masked, reconfigured, his role is to coagulate an image conceived by the artist with a specific conceptual purpose, which he projects to the viewer. The main theme behind Barney's videos is the metaphor of developing the artist's identity, both publically and privately, with its strong points being the spectacular, the impeccable special effects and the mis-en-scene of the performances and the grandiose effect generated by the imagined personal reality.

The section *Stelarc and post-humanism* describes and questions the Australian artist Stelarc's approach, one of the most spectacular and extreme contemporary artists, whose activity stretches for more than five decades and who focuses on the extension of the human body's physical capacities. His performances varie from biological modification operations that he undergoes voluntarily to attaching robotic prosthetics (like a third arm), to suspending the body in the air through hooks. One of the most radical interventions on his own body is implanting an ear on the inside of his arm, calling it *The Ear on Arm*. The belief of the artist is that our bodies represent more than just 'biological organisms interacting with the world', becoming in fact augmented bodies through the new transplant and body prosthetics technologies. For Stelarc, the body becomes an experimental space, based on action and interaction, a hybrid and extended operational system, performing beyond the organic and material boundaries. The physical

presence can be projected and a performance can be mechanically realised by a body attached to a machine and vice versa. *Fractal Flesh* was constituted from the idea of the multiplication of the bodies, separated specially but connected electronically, generating interactive actions on various levels.

The section *Alexandra Pirici and performance from the perspective of contemporary dance* presents the performance art of one of the most challenging contemporary choreographers. Alexandra Pirici is a Romanian contemporary artist, who has had a fulminating ascension of the international art stage as a *performance artist* and who brought contemporary dance in the fine art gallery as a living sculpture, coming into direct contact with the viewer. The artist was formed as a dancer, studying classical and contemporary dance, her work being in fact a fusion between *performance*, *body art*, contemporary dance and sculpting.

Alexandra Pirici is interested in the significance of power that public monuments imply, one of her goals being capturing and encapsulating these mechanisms, underlining the structure of their construction and wanting to get it closer to the public. Although these confrontations can have a critical starting point, their goal isn't aggressive as it is transgressive, wishing to get closer to the viewers through humour and sometimes playful actions. The artist acts in visual art contexts, focusing on the physical character of her works, extracted from the practice of contemporary dance.

Alexandra Pirici's projects take place either in public spaces or in exhibition spaces, their goal being the transgression of what dance, body interaction, performance and visual art mean. The body becomes a mediating instrument for physicality and the concepts behind its dynamics, interacting with the space in which it takes place and establishing a connection with the public, who is often seated in its midst. For Alexandra Pirici, the body becomes a fluid matter that, depending on the context and the specifics of the space in which it acts, acts as a living sculpture, a miniature monument, presence, movement, existential affirmation. Her dynamic body constructs become a *site-specific* insertion that questions the relation between man and his history, his contemporary environment and himself.

The fourth chapter, *Personal project* presents our personal artistic addition accompanying this paper. Through the personal project developed during the PhD research, we have explored the expressive and conceptual potential of the human body in relation to various existential aspects relevant today, trying to capture the fluid identity of the 21st century man. Our

approaches aimed for a visual X-ray of the dehumanized individual of contemporary society, which is based on the inner conflicts created by the huge contrast between what man wants, feels and perceives as being true accomplishment and that which mass-media catalogues, accepts and integrates as a universally valid example of success, questioning the concept of *vanitas*.

Our artistic explorations aim for and conceptualise man in an increasingly technological and artificial society, focusing on the contrast between the organic and inorganic, the human body and the robot's metallic skeleton in a futurist, post-human universe. We have also explored the subject of the virtual identity in *social media*, the *persona* that man creates online to project an ideal life, our works becoming ironic commentaries to what a self-portrait is and the present *selfie*. The narcissistic type image that *social media* suggests and promotes virtually helps to build digitally configures human profiles in a fragmented and cliché manner, with the intent to projects a successful life, due to the constant pressure of social acceptance.

Eventually, our experiments also aim to understand individual identity starting from the past, history, personal quests around family photos, the latent universe behind the temporary trail between image and reality. The formal and conceptual understanding of the image is made through construction, deconstruction and distortion, looking for meaning behind the photo frame as an already historical document. Thus, the future cannot be projected without an understanding of the present filtered through the premises built in the past. This chapter also contains the section *Annexes* (the photographic documentation of our personal projects).

The chapter *Conclusions* finalises the research with a series of synthetic ideas, connected to the directions of the analysis of the paper. The main ideas converge towards the perspective that the development of art in the direction of the visual language marks some differences in approaching corporality, namely relating to its image and itself as instrument in contemporary art. The complexity of the identity stances created in the present visual language is determined by the human condition and its evolution, marked mainly by knowledge through suffering. We cannot speak about contemporary man's identity, questioned by the body image and its use as an instrument in performances without speaking about pain and suffering.

*The human body as image and instrument in contemporary art. Identity stages from existentialism to trans-humanism* makes a complex analysis of the facets of human nature transposed in contemporary visual art, following the red thread that connects concepts and the artistic means through which they are materialised. The subject of this research is definitely

about the human essence expressed in contemporary visual art, starting from the premises traced by modern art at the end of the 20th century.

The bibliography encapsulates 127 titles that we have considered relevant for our research, the interfering area being varied: philosophy, art theory, art history, art critic.

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