

## CREATING IDENTITY AND ITS CONNECTION WITH CORPOREALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK ART

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### ABSTRACT

In the text, the authors deal with the processes of identity formation in the contemporary Slovak art. They explain that issues of identity as well as formation of male, female or even authorial identity are getting into the centre of artistic attention nowadays. They focus on various evolution variations and transformations of identity. The issue of identity comes from the postmodern feeling of ambivalent existence, its manipulability, fragmentations, abbreviative character and infiniteness of all the forms and it has been discussed by a few theorists ( K. Jaspers, W. Welsh, J.P. Sartre, P. Ricoeur). The authors use their ideas to explain and interpret several methods of identity formation. They provide examples of contemporary artistic solutions from foreign as well as from Slovak artistic production that reflexes the aforementioned phenomenon (M. Murin, R. Fajnor, G. Binder, E. Vargova and others). These artists either cross borders of privacy or gender borders in their performative creations.

**Keywords:** *human body, corporeality, creating identity, Slovak art*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary interest of the social and human sciences in the human body and corporeality is significantly influenced by social changes that appeared in the western societies with their conversion to post-industrialism. The changes and social transformations of that period are reflexed in the birth of "somatic society". Somatic society and its obsession with the body is characterized by means of certain symptoms. [1] Due to its rapid technological progress the amount of free time is growing immensely as well as the extent of consumer behaviour. In this available time and space, the body can become a commercial object. The body, which is beautiful and healthy, indicates a good life. Such a body is an outcome of consumer behaviour and creates an illusion of coveted quality of life, pleasure is legitimized as well as bodily hedonism. In this post-industrial society and its very loose moral rules, the body is incorporated in fantasies about collective debauchery as its liberation from everyday physical effort grows. The ageing body is clearly refused in cultural representations, its adoration is based on the principle of cultural selection because the majority of aspects of the human body is expelled from cultural representations. And thus not only the borders of possible manipulations with the human body were moved forward but also the generally accepted concept of what is natural. [2]

## UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY

In the contemporary Slovak art, questions of identity are being foregrounded along with conjoint reflexions of methods how male, female and authorial identities at a variety of their evolutionary stages and transformations are created. In postmodernism, the issue of identity comes from the feeling of ambivalent existence, from its manipulative quality, from the feeling of the infiniteness of all the forms that were accepted and also from the fact that in this time the choice becomes necessity and freedom is human destiny. Both this issues became topics of several discussions (Simmel, Welsch, Ricoeur ao.). Forming one's identity is connected with the quest for answers to the epistemological questions about an individual's understanding of himself and his own life. (Who am I and where I go?) Philosophic reflexions about a man who is looking for his own identity come from a dual opinion: the first is based on the existence of "human essence" (Descartes, Kant, and the French Enlightenment) and the second is supported by the idea that the identity is formed by an individual during his life (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and etc.)

Traditionally, the identity was regarded as fixed and consistent and the change was admitted only on the level of its accidental attributes. Such approach to the human being is so-called substantial, its essence is formed by detection of invariant features and characteristics, so-called anthropological constants. It is believed that human existence is definitive, constant and unchangeable and the human core is not historical. B. Malik speaks about two kinds of substantialism: naturalistic (this seeks invariants in natural elements of human existence) and idealistic (which absolutizes spiritual components).

Modernism questioned the idea of substantialism and accented that the man is a being that is not given and as such he has to build his identity, look for it and form it. The man becomes his own creator, the man is a creature that is performing his own self in history. K. Jaspers regards history as a place „ where it appears what the man is, what he can be and what he is capable. [3] The most evincible feature of the human being is his "eternal unboundedness" - openness to new opportunities.

Playing with one's own (and also with an artist's ) identity turned into its concrete form 23 years ago, in the second half of the 90s. Constitution of a new authorial identity was then performed via mutual exchange of artists' names (the strategy of artistic pseudonyms) or via the phenomenon of double life. The artist Orlan (Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte) appears as an expert in altering her identity and exposition of her body as the "ready-made". In 1990 she started her project of reincarnation (the reincarnation of "Saint Orlan") that involved a lot of cosmetic surgery changing her face so that it resembled several chosen models. Orlan had her face reconstructed and transformed into Diana, Europe, Psyche, Venus and Mona Lisa, the women she admired due to their exceptional lives. Each operation was presented as a performance and she documented them with pictures and objects like triptychs of photographs containing catoptric pictures from the video,

performances of successful surgeries accomplished with ironic and mocking pictures of Orlan after the operation, with relics and texts. [4]

Forming and testing of one's own body can be found in the body-art of A. Swarkobler, who is obsessed with his own corporeality, examines the issues of borders of life and death, in works of A. Abramovich, who was exposing her body to enormous psycho-physical exertion and experimented with her own life, in Acconci's artistic works that show sadomasochist character (*Trademarks*), in activities of V. Burden who asked his friend to shoot him up, or he had himself crucified to a car (*Transfixed*). [4] These actions were performed in an intimate environment of the artist's studio as well as outside and are documented by photographs and videos.

In Postmodernism, W. Welsch identifies the process of change from the artist's bilateral and variable identity to the dissolution of identity or the loss of identity. Similarly, Z Bauman speaks about the dissolution of "the life project" into a kaleidoscope of independent episodes, which are neither causally or logically connected, and therefore it is possible to start again or try something different. A new beginning means, according to Bauman, a clear manifestation of an absence of precisely defined identity. [6]

### **Manifold and variable identity**

The contemporary artist G. Binderova demonstrates her diversified identity of mother, wife, daughter and also artist. In several of her works, she thematizes the family and within this frame also her own position of a woman and mother (*East Side Story*, *The Body Milk*, *Domestic Chores*, *Personal Fetiches*, *Nightmare* and other). Along with this she also deals with problems of personal. In her video *East Side Story*, she records her train journey from the capitol (Bratislava) to the East Slovakia, where she spent Christmas time with her relatives. That is how she becomes both the subject and the object of her own exploration. She presents profane elements from her life and her multilayer identity. Along with this, she desacralizes the space around herself including the nearest places. In her presentation, profane activities and desires are gaining sense, and useful, accessible, present and actual elements are being foregrounded.

At the turn of 20th century, still, more and more artistic works dealing with the formation of gender identity were appearing in Slovak visual art. Gender identity is built on binary oppositions like man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, culture/nature, whereby each category is supposed to possess its principal otherness that differs it from another one, and which contributes to its specific meaning. Binary categories were historically specified as hierarchic, one of them is understood as normative and another one as subordinate. The second category is also perceived as otherness, inequality or deviation that has to be controlled and suppressed.

Feminist post-structuralism is critical about the language of the dichotomy because it limits our world and prevents us from seeing manifoldness and variability of the reality. That is why it is necessary to change gender relations by

destabilisation of binary oppositions, which create conditions for inequalities. The authors look for new means of language and imagination, new metaphors and strategies of thinking that would enable to avoid a stereotyped perception of gender. They also want to show how the female identity is changing and reveal its manifoldness.

In her artistic work (*Seven Words of the Woman*) E. Filova is thematizing the process of a woman's evolution from a child to her senescence and simultaneously is defining her social status, or manifold identity (a bride, wife, widow, a.o.). Her work includes used bed sheets (ready made), whereby each of them represents one female stage (a child, girl, virgin, bride, wife, mother, widow). The sheets are stitched together into a wholeness. Contrary to E. Filova, E. Vargova works with woman underclothes – with bras. *Medusa* (2012) is created from tens of bras that evoke the shape of jellyfish that is the fact an operating light hanging from the ceiling. In general, the bra usually creates erotic connotations but E. Vargova uses oversize bras that due to their size and shape make rather asexual impression and thus she ironizes gender stereotypes. She created this object for the part of Samorin synagogue, where only women could come to pray.

In 2003, The Medium Gallery in Bratislava introduced exposition *Room on Their Own – Woman Issues* that was balancing between authorial exhibitionism and public demonstration of most private situations and things (knickers, menstrual pads, used tampons, a.o.). Z. Takacova and M. Chisa, the authors of the exhibition, created a wall made of knickers that were donated by various women, to represent their stories of secretaries, students and pensioners. It was their concept how to show the formation of female identity.

### **New identity – body transformation**

The transformation from a male to female body as a process of identity formation can be found in the works of V. Kalamus, M. Murin and R. Fajnor. Their works are a reaction and continuation of transformations that can be found in works of M. Duchamp. [4] Michal Murin posed wearing a woman dress and hat in a shop window of the boutique Zoe in Nitra, during the exhibition *Art in Windows* (2006). He was the author and also his own model ZOE MUROE MODEL, 2000. Richard Fajnor was exhibiting at that event, where he was hanging upside down wearing a white bridal dress (*Register your partnership, 2000*). His performance was a reaction to the actual social-political problem in Slovakia –registered partnership, which is still an unsolved issue in the country. In their works, both these authors shift from their male identity to female despite their heterosexual orientation.

All these changes that are connected with construction of one's own identity or with the change of identity mean an artistic application of J.P.Sartre's idea that "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is, therefore, nothing else but the sum of his

actions, nothing else but what his life is.” [7] And here we could add that existence anticipates essence that means the man is not unchanging, constant, eternal entity. The Man is being formed during his life.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary visual art deals with the human body in a variety of contexts. The body is incorporated into a multicultural society where it undergoes a process of adjustment with its own cultural tradition as well as with elements from other cultures that enter its original cultural space. Artists gradually wipe borders between “my“ and “ foreign“, between the intimate and public and let us look into their private lives and participate although indirectly in it. The traditional picture of a woman, which is an outcome of the western phallogocentric thinking is changing, the woman is becoming active, creative and different than ever before. Artists construct their identity and by this process they disrupt idea about its unchangeability. They stylize themselves to various roles, cross-gender borders (the cross-gender strategy) and the like. In our era of global aestheticisation, they re-evaluate traditional concepts of beauty/ugliness, symmetry/ asymmetry and effects of this effort can be perceived in the strategy of anesthetisation that we can identify in works of many contemporary artists. As W. Welsh says, one of three defaults of global aestheticisation is that aesthetic indifference is changing to a reasonable and almost necessary approach, which makes us escape from the intrusion of ever-present embellishing.

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