

A photograph of a white, crumpled fabric bag, possibly a mesh or gauze, lying on a sandy surface. A small, round, metallic coin is visible on the sand near the bottom edge of the bag. The background is a light, sandy color with some dark specks. The text is overlaid in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The exhibition *Through the Looking Glass*, curated by Alba Baeza, presents works by Victoria Verseau at hangmenProjects for the first time. For this site-specific project, the artist's studio is recreated in the exhibition space, together with a selection of artworks.

Victoria Verseau works in a variety of media - including film, photography, sculpture and installation - through which she explores the mechanisms of gender construction and questions the limits between public exposure and private experience.

Focusing on Verseau's own background as transgender, the curator and the artist have engaged in a dialogue around the process of transition, with the aim of raising awareness and opening a discussion about the challenges it presents.

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Ever since the slogan 'The Personal Is Political' was coined in the effervescent context of American feminisms of the late nineteen sixties, the formulation has been used and reappropriated countless times. Today, its use transcends feminist interpretations because it points towards a critical reflection on how our everyday acts are shaped by the sociopolitical structures that determine what is possible and acceptable in specific cultural contexts. Our personal choices depend on systems such as language, education or moral values that we may accept, reject or attempt to transform. In fact, it is individual experiences that bring diverse sensibilities to light and can question the hegemony of prevailing discourses. Sharing personal experiences, exposing one's own intimacy and questioning its meanings are still forms of political action. Thus, existing structures can be challenged from the field of micropolitics, from our everyday acts.

In the realm of artistic practices, many female artists have used the personal as a platform from which to discuss the ideological conditions that establish the framework where life experiences and ways of being are generated. The visibilisation of the female body and sexual organs in the work of artists such as Carolee Schneemann or Judy Chicago calls into question the hegemony of the masculine gaze in the history of representation. Louise Bourgeois's *Cells* exemplify the spaces inhabited by the body, and how the rooms and objects that surround us, be they tapestries, clothes or items of domestic furniture, are charged with memories of traumas and emotions, whereas Doris Salcedo takes wardrobes, chairs, tables and personal objects from different sources to evoke scenes of violence and power abuse.

Auto-representations in the form of self-portraits, whether they be pictorial, photographic or literary, have historically been instruments of self-recognition. Nowadays, means and channels of public communication are used as tools for

self-fictionalisation, for the construction and projection of one's own identity. In the age of social media, the obtaining of visibility and recognition also serves large corporations that gather, store and use our personal data to prepare consumer profiles that increase their profits. As pointed out by theoreticians of post-Fordism such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, information is the most valuable asset in cognitive capitalism.¹ The panopticon prefigured by Foucault is a system of political and above all economic surveillance.² These issues are also addressed by filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl, whose video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) presents an ironic manual of invisibility detailing possible strategies to avoid the surveillance systems of this 'world made of pictures'.³

Philosopher and contemporary curator Paul B. Preciado speaks of the *pharmaco-pornographic* era to refer to the present stage of a post-Fordist capitalism whose structures of control have moved from the social to the private and have penetrated the body: 'We are being confronted with a new kind of hot, psychotropic, punk capitalism. Such recent transformations are imposing an ensemble of new micro-prosthetic mechanisms of control of subjectivity by means of biomolecular and multimedia technical protocols.'⁴

Preciado identifies this set of 'microprosthetic mechanisms' in connection with the two aspects of the 'pharmaco-pornographic era': pharmacopoeia and pornography. The industry linked to the administration of medicines is a business that expands by developing new fields of control of bodily states. Antibiotics, antidepressants, hormones and drugs treat illnesses and alter emotional states; they control reproduction (contraceptives), stimulate sexual performance (Viagra), and generate psychotropic experiences.

The second aspect, pornography, is understood literally as a reference to the industry of sexually explicit products, but also in a broader sense. As a sociological practice, pornography embraces the commercialisation of desire, the

coding of pleasure through channels of mass diffusion and the resulting sexualisation of forms of social interaction. In fact, it contributes to the recoding of boundaries between public and private, for it demands being displayed, showing everything.

Pharmacopoeia and pornography are the two pillars of an economy based on the management of the satisfaction–frustration of desire. While this mechanism isn't new (advertising operates on this very basis), Preciado holds that the object of desire is no longer material — it is the permanent recreation of the subject, the invention or choice of one's own identity, and its reproduction and expansion through cognitive and communicational mechanisms. Satisfaction is attained through a series of operations related to the management of the subject by the subject himself, by the body itself.

'Pharmacopornographic biocapitalism does not produce things. It produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions, and conditions of the soul. In biotechnology and in pornocommunication there is no object to be produced. The pharmacopornographic business is the invention of a subject and then its global reproduction.'⁵

The invention of the subject and its global reproduction are closely linked to the consumption and management of identities, though not understood as a vital and immutable characteristic but as stages that can be accessed through performative acts. The notion of performativity employed by Judith Butler to scrutinise the mechanisms of gender construction can also be applied to identity: 'Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure...'⁶

Like gender, subjectivity oscillates, identities are unders-

tood as ongoing processes and, as such, can be destabilised, reinvented, transformed. In these processes, visibility is a double-edged sword, as it can also prove useful to express possibilities of disrupting established categories, to defend ways of being and to create support communities outside the normative establishment.

The work of Victoria Verseau (born in Mariestad, Sweden, 1988) lies at the crossroads of these lines of thought and explores the stages of transition as a permanent or ongoing condition. As with Doris Salcedo and Louise Bourgeois, her oeuvre is an act of reconciliation with the world and with herself. It also connects with artists like Nan Goldin, who photographically documented her everyday life and that of her immediate surroundings in the now legendary work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985-1986). Goldin's images show a generation that in the nineteen eighties enjoyed great freedom but would also be devastated by drug abuse and HIV contagion.

In her filmmaking practice, Victoria Verseau addresses autobiographical events that she redevelops and represents using the film codes of fictional narrative. Such is the case, for instance, of the short film *Exercise One* (2016) that describes the loneliness of the leading player, Juli, after her gender reassignment surgery, and the support she finds in online trans communities. The transfer to fictional characters grants the author a certain distance from the facts, a distance necessary in order to examine and give meaning to her own life experience. In Verseau's artistic practice, this distance is achieved through other strategies, also linked to representation and yet removed from literal accounts, like the public display of personal items whose meaning cannot be grasped at first sight.

Such is the case of the three photographs that open the exhibition, and that show objects photographed by the artist on white grounds, neutral, clinical, forensic almost. *The Gown* (2015) presents an irregular mass made up of a porous and translucent bluish cloth covering a number of

unidentified objects. A coin, an empty blister pack, a dry branch and traces of soil are partially shown around the edges, and a cord also emerges from the cloth, offering a clue as to its function; we realise that it is a hospital gown such as those given to patients receiving surgical treatment. *The Hair Cap* (2015), in turn, shows a disposable cap with a turquoise wave pattern, a cap perhaps made of paper and crumpled by the elastic ribbon of its edges; we also infer that it is hospital material.

The Blue Strap (2015) is, perhaps, the most cryptic photograph of the three. On a spotless ground rests a deep blue ribbon, whose curves and folds reflect the white light that illuminates it. It is very difficult for an observer, however vigilant, to discover the meaning of the blue ribbon. As the artist explains, the strap is used after gender reassignment surgery to assist with the dilation exercises needed to make sure the newly opened vagina remains open, since the flesh grows back together if we don't prevent it from doing so. The vaginal dilation exercises will continue, with variable regularity, throughout a whole lifetime.

The three images present objects the artist has kept since 2012, when she travelled to Thailand to undergo the gender reassignment surgery in a specialised clinic. The last two images are slightly overexposed — the objects they depict hold no more secrets. In the first one, on the other hand, the light is more balanced, as the gown designed to cover the body of the patient has somehow still managed to conceal some of the unidentified objects it shrouds.

For the artist, the three objects are signs of a complex process that often takes place without witnesses. This is also conveyed by the work entitled *The Remnants* (2010-2016). In the exhibition we see a self-standing mirror wall, slightly tilted with regard to the walls of the exhibition space. The reflective side faces the wall, inverting the usual process of visibilisation: the spectator first discovers the back of a wooden structure, a kind of wall that resembles the back of a set design. Enclosing this structure, the wall appears



The Gown, 2015
Colour photograph
65 x 98,5 cm



The Hair Cap, 2015
Colour photograph
42 x 61,5 cm



The Blue Strap, 2015
Colour photograph
42 x 61,5 cm

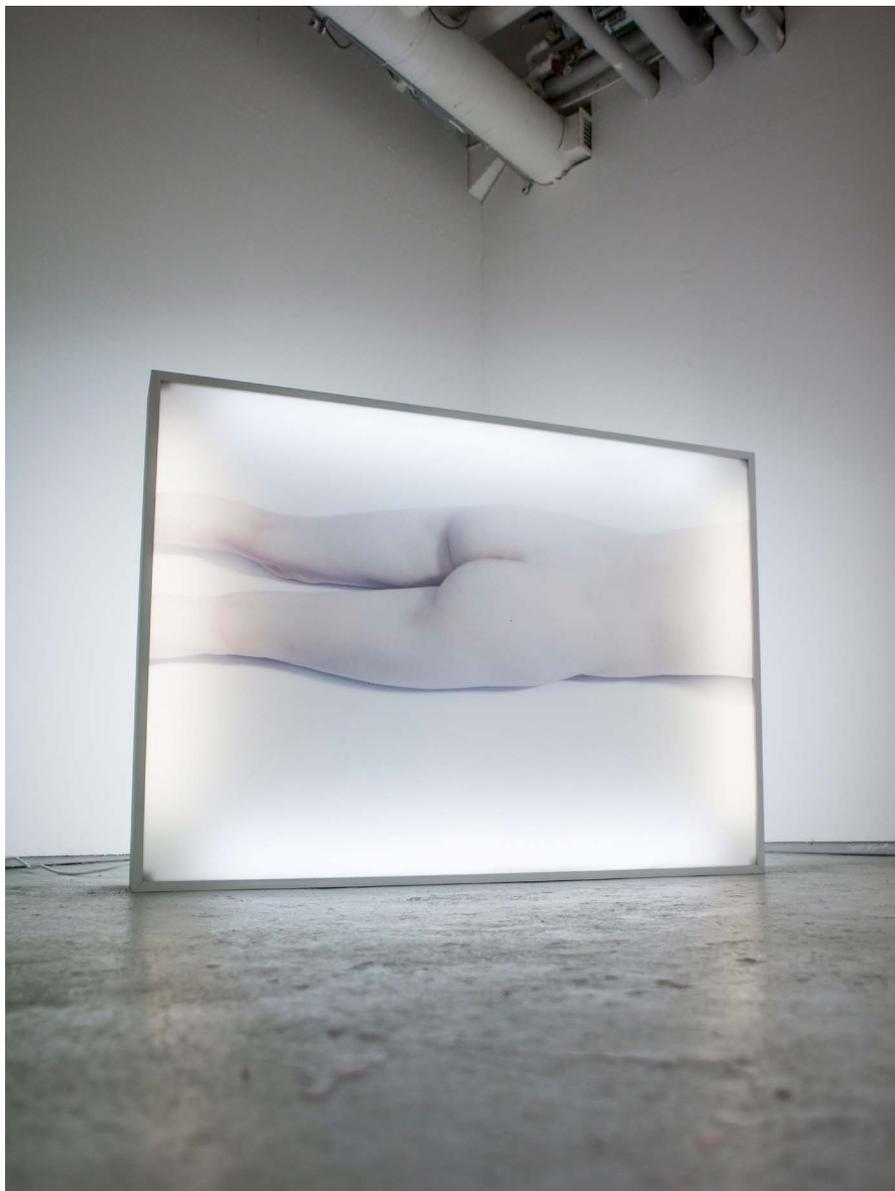
as a flat and polished reflective surface that throws back the viewer's reflection. Scattered on the floor are a range of objects and items: blister packs of used hormones, empty boxes of tranquillisers and antidepressants, chemists' prescriptions, plastic hospital bracelets for patient identification, dilators and other post-operative items, self-defence safety sprays, legal documents connected with sex changes, etc. This ever-growing collection of remnants form a part of the artist's background and indicates an ongoing process of transition.

The mirror is *par excellence* the support through which we all learn to recognise our own image. It is also the tool we turn to when we want to alter it, when we want to change the way we appear before the world. Displayed behind the looking glass, the remnants leave proof of the effort required in seeking the desired reflection. This spatial position of the display brings visibility to what is usually invisible, the indicators of the transition, confronting viewers with the complexity of an experience they cannot quite apprehend, although they can empathise with its essence — the courage required in order to construct oneself as one wishes, and the resolve for others to perceive and accept this.

Another work displayed beside the mirror connects with the glass and the remnants, and with the earlier triptych. *The Body* (2015-2016) presents a large light box showing a part of a naked body lying face downwards. *The Body* stems from the same impulse that leads us to seek our reflection in a mirror. By photographing her own body and exposing it to the scrutiny of light – the choice of this medium reveals yet another crossover between medical and artistic connotations – the artist externalises her self-image, fixing it in time and making it more manageable. We know that representations are translations of the subject's self-perception and that this perception is usually unreliable, variable. This instability triggers the desire of projecting oneself outwards through fixed forms, seeking stable expressions of the self.



The Remnants, 2016
Mixed media, mirror
200 x 246 x 100 cm



The Body, 2015-2016
Light box, colour photograph
102,5 x 143 x 12 cm

Victoria Verseau exposes her intimacy in a subtle way, removed from exhibitionism, yet she does so without forgetting to state the need for self-recognition. This awareness doesn't only entail the analytical observation of the body by means of a still image, but also involves performance and essay, the stylised repetition of acts through which identities are constructed.

In the videos entitled *Rooftop* and *Carry You Home* (2016) the artist performs in two spaces of a hotel room. In *Rooftop* the camera is located in the bathroom and is pointed at the door. The artist enters the scene, pushes play and a nostalgic pop song is heard on her laptop. Standing in front of a mirror that remains out of view, she begins to move to the rhythm of the music and to do playback singing as soon as the voice of Swedish pop singer Zara Larsson is heard. Throughout the video, Verseau looks alternately at the camera and at the mirror: two lenses through which she can see, recognise and reinvent herself.

Carry You Home is filmed in the same hotel room. In this case, the artist is standing on the bed, the shot is wider and the song is slightly more broken. The impersonal setting of the hotel room appears as an ideal space in which to project the desired image of the self. The YouTube aesthetic – steady shots, scarce technical means and a minimum amount of editing – and the choice of medium-sized screens and headphones recreate a space of intimate emotional experience. These formal characteristics coexist with learnt gestures appropriated from pop video clips commercialised for teenage audiences.

The artist's performance is an exercise in reaffirmation that oscillates between the desire for normalisation and the need to draw attention to difference. It defends the right to a 'pop adolescence', free from the burden of growing up in between genders in a binary and heteronormative society. It also signals the difficulty for all women trans or cis to fit into the normative ideal of femininity defined by patriarchal rules.



Rooftop, 2015-16
Video, 2 channels
4'34"



Carry You Home, 2015-16
Video, 2 channels
5'10"

In both videos, the way in which she half smiles is touching, for the act of fantasising reveals her shyness at exposing herself to the camera lens, to a future potential audience.

The Mattress (2015) also relates to the artist's teenage years, for it evokes one of her first sexual experiences. The work is a plaster cast of an inflatable mattress, accompanied by a text that describes what took place on it. By fixing the mattress in plaster, the object from which the memory originates is transferred to a less flexible material, as if it were a question of fixing the emotional association between the event and its signifier in time. *The Dress* (2014-2016) is the result of the same kind of procedure. Here, a black and grey cotton dress hangs lies on a plinth, partially covered by a dark board placed near the ensemble. In the artist's words, the fixing transforms the object into 'A sculpture, a monument, a proxy for a memory, holding on to an occasion slowly executed by time'.⁷ The occasion, as we learn from the artist's text, is an instance of sexual assault.

The act of fixing these objects through photography, solidification or freezing recodes their meaning by connecting them with emotional impacts. They somehow act as fetishes that condense and update the meaning of past events. These memories declare wounds to be points from where we may continue to give meaning to the shaping of identity, to the path of self-transformation, to one's own development.

In this show the exhibition space can be travelled circularly, which produces inverted and complementary meanings. If visitors arrive at hangmenProjects and decide to enter the space on the right with its white walls, they will discover the work of an artist in an environment that, despite its distinction from the impersonal white cube (for it is charged with experiential traces, marks of earlier exhibitions on the walls and irregular floor, numerous tubes and conduits on the ceiling that reveal its former function as a workshop), is still recognisable as a *kunsthalle*.

“The summer got bigger and I disappeared into a vastness.

I lay on the inflatable mattress in silly childish colors. I was 15 in a small town and his name was Joni, secretly gay. He had a big cock and he didn’t want to meet again afterwards. He was my first great teenage-heartbreak.

My older and wiser friend later said I should watch out for people who want to “try out” something new. Being in between genders, undefined, was a vulnerable position, she stated.

I kept the mattress in storage for 11 years; only I knew what had once taken place on the rubbery plastic material.”



The Mattress, 2015
Plaster, text
Dimensions (unframed):
20 x 122 x 82 cm

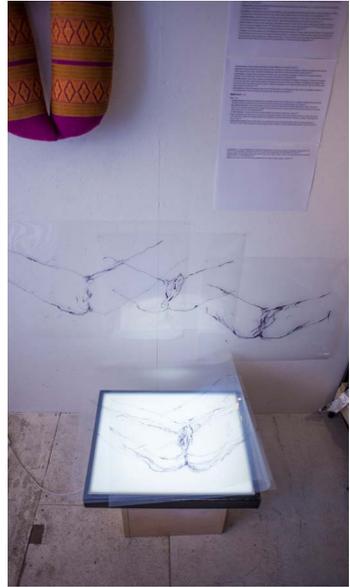
“The dress sat there in the faint light of my wardrobe for two years. It never crossed my mind to throw it away. A subconscious act of preserving a memory of the darker kind? This spring I decided to take the dress out of the wardrobe and hung it up on my studio wall. Was this the archiving of an event that had a strong influence on my life – the displaying of an object that had played an important role in one occasion of many that together made up who I am – or just a foolish act of self-torture?”

It’s nothing special, the dress, not particularly sexy or extravagant, made out of an inexpensive cotton, grey and black. I got it from a photoshoot as payment, one of the many jobs I chose to do for free when looks still mattered. Hanging on the wall, I still couldn’t make myself do anything to it – however, my thoughts did. They wandered back to the sexual assault two and a half years ago when I wore it.

When I returned to Stockholm in the late summer of 2016 I “froze” the lower part of the dress; adding a material and making it into something else. A sculpture, a monument, a proxy for a memory, holding on to an occasion slowly executed by time.”



The Dress, 2014-2016
Textile, jesmonite, metal, board, text
248 x 79,5 x 67,5 cm



The Studio, 2016
Site-specific project

On the other hand, if they decide to begin by visiting the area of the artist's studio they will find themselves immersed in her creative process. First, the space of work, life, ideas and affections, basic needs: the kitchen/food; the bathroom/hygiene; the bed/rest; half-finished projects. Then, the transition towards the public display of the ideas and objects with which the artist has lived in close contact. Whichever route is chosen, the layout of the works in the space is closely and symbiotically related to the ordinary activity at hand. Projects: Victoria Verseau's recreated studio shares walls with the workshops and studios of the usual artists in residence at hand, who use the same kitchen and bathroom, who live, work and exhibit in the same rooms.

The two exhibition spaces, that of the studio and that of the finished works, are interdependent and strike up a dialogue that invites us to project new meanings once we have completed a tour. The meaning of the artist's oeuvre flourishes as we move through these two spaces that are not separated by borders: public and private, finished and in progress, work and process. The ensemble acts like a looking glass, reflecting the artist's life and work, which are inseparable.

The exhibition takes its name from Lewis Carroll's 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, published six years after *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The willpower that guides the main character along her archetypal journey of initiation is self-exploration, her belief in the possibility of tracing new vital paths. If in the first novel the fall into the rabbit hole can be interpreted as a journey into the subconscious, in the sequel Alice's journey begins through the looking glass and she enters into a dimension in which her identity is repeatedly questioned, appearing changeable. Significantly, the membrane that provides access to this dimension is a looking glass and the glass itself is a transitional space.

For Victoria, as for Alice, the mirror and the lens are tools

of recognition and projection that are necessary for both inner and outer transformation. The looking glass is an interstice where we may cross borders and challenge accepted truths, a place where we may continue to learn about ourselves, where we may examine the limits between public and private, between possibilities that are imagined and possibilities that are socially imposed.

Confronting the looking glass and exposing the intimate is a political act, an act of resistance, of assertion, of fighting back and defending oneself against invisibility, against silence and disrepute. Victoria Verseau's oeuvre shows us that being and doing are one and the same; that it is through them that we construct the meaning of life; and that it is often indispensable to pass through the looking glass to discover where we are and where we want to be.

Alba Baeza

Notes

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2009.
2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995.
3. Hito Steyerl: <http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/display/media-networks/hito-steyerl> (accessed 2 December 2016).
4. Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Feminist Press at the City University of New York, New York, p. 33.
5. Idem, pp. 35-36.
6. Judith Butler, 'Performance Acts And Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4., The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, December 1988, pp. 519-531, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=01922882%28198812%2940%3A4%3E519%3APAAGCA>2.0.CO%3B2-C> (accessed 2 December 2016).
7. Victoria Verseau, *The Dress*, 2014-2016. Excerpt from the printed text accompanying the work.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

The Gown

2015

Colour photograph

65 x 98,5 cm

The Blue Strap

2015

Colour photograph

42 x 61,5 cm

The Hair Cap

2015

Colour photograph

42 x 61,5 cm

The Body

2015-2016

Light box, colour photograph

102,5 x 143 x 12 cm

The Remnants

2010-2016

Mixed media, mirror

200 x 246 x 100

Rooftop / Carry You Home

2016

Video, 2 channels

4'34" / 5'10"

The Dress

2014-2016

Textile, jesmonite, metal, board, text

248 x 79,5 x 67,5 cm

The Mattress

2015

Plaster, text

Dimensions (unframed) (height x width x depth):

20 x 122 x 82

The Studio

2016

Site-specific project

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