

# Biographical Poetics of the Explanted Body: Notes on Three Brazilian Visual Essays

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This text proposes a reflection about the images of the female body through the visual essays of three Brazilian artists: Karka Keiko, Fiamma Viola and Maria Luísa Andrade. Three main annotations were made to the images under analysis: the first discusses the themes of the female body that figure in the media, artistic and cultural contexts that make up a specifically feminist research agenda; the second observes how the artists lend their explanted bodies, submitted to surgical procedures, to build a work of creative and narrative elaboration of themselves through the images; and the third, traces the aesthetic-political breaking points caused by the essayistic images indicating the poetic resource as a gesture of resistance in a society flooded with selfies. In developing the discussion, we can observe that this content travels both in visual and artistic elaborations, at galleries and museums, and in the form of postings, through renowned digital platforms and social networks to expand the reach of the public gaze. They can create an enunciative scene on the screens, and the bodies of women who have undergone breast explantation suggest a reflection on the new forms of linking the gaze on the female body.

**Keywords:** body, biography, feminism, image

## **Poéticas Biográficas do Corpo Explantado: Notas Sobre Três Ensaio Visuais Brasileiros**

O presente texto propõe uma reflexão sobre as imagens do corpo feminino através dos ensaios visuais de três artistas brasileiras contemporâneas: Karka Keiko, Fiamma Viola e Maria Luísa Andrade. Os apontamentos tecidos às imagens estão interligados por três notas principais: a primeira discute as tematizações do corpo feminino que figuram nos contextos midiáticos, artísticos e culturais compondo uma agenda de pesquisa propriamente feminista; a segunda observa como as artistas emprestam seus corpos explantados, submetidos aos procedimentos cirúrgicos, para a construção de um trabalho de elaboração criativa e narrativa de si através das imagens; e a terceira traça os pontos de ruptura estético-políticos provocados pelas imagens ensaísticas indicando o recurso poético como um gesto de resistência em uma sociedade inundada por selfies. Ao desenvolver a discussão, é possível observar como este tipo de conteúdo circula tanto nas elaborações visuais e artísticas das galerias e museus, quanto na forma de postagens, através de conhecidos sites de redes sociais, de modo a adquirir maior alcance do olhar público. Capazes de instaurar a criação de uma cena enunciativa voltada para as telas, os corpos das mulheres submetidos ao explante mamário propõem refletir acerca das novas formas de vínculos do olhar sobre o corpo feminino.

**Palavras-chave:** corpo, biografia, feminismo, imagem

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## Topicalization of the Self-Body in a Feminist Research Agenda

In her most recent socio-historiographical research, Margareth Rago (2011) notes that in the early 1980s, several feminine themes made a strong comeback to the Brazilian research agenda. There were numerous and differentiated approaches dealing with aspects ranging from "the presence of women in strikes, workers' demonstrations and other forms of social struggle to witchcraft, prostitution, madness, abortion, maternity and childbirth, health, sexuality" (Rago, 2011, p. 2). In the arts scene, the woman's body was featured in different formats such as happenings, performances, body art exhibitions, among other modalities widespread in other Western countries, and promoted in Brazil. Thus, according to Rago (2011), the female body has always been the focus in different fields, studies and discourses.

As the target of disputes, confrontations, and appropriations, the cisgender female body also served the interests of an aesthetic market that grew exponentially with the country's opening to foreign consumer products in the same period. A large segment of the beauty industry saw the emergence of a Brazilian consumer market, which quickly assimilated both the standards and the products it received. Hence, the search for female body perfection has gained huge importance. According to the global survey on aesthetic/cosmetic procedures performed in 2019 (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2020), Brazil ranked first in the number of procedures, reaching 1,493,673, followed in second place by the United States.

Liposuction ranked first among the surgical procedures women sought most, followed by breast augmentation with silicone implants. Still, according to the research (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2020), the well-known combo "tummy tuck and breast augmentation"<sup>1</sup> dictates the most desired female body enhancement procedures. Compared to the number of aesthetic surgeries in men, these data also show that Brazilian women are the ones who pay the most for surgical procedures, besides investing in other body beautification products.

Promoting an incessant search for the beauty myth, according to Naomi Wolf (1990/1992), is also a kind of social control. Such control is achieved through a visual policy of the body favouring a simultaneously economic, ideological and cultural system that submits the feminine body to the public gaze and the cisheteropatriarchal values naturalised as hegemonic discourse, constantly reproduced and legitimated. According to the researcher, the beauty ideal is underpinned by the technological development of aesthetic medicine and the advances of the cosmetic industry and the mass dissemination of images that overvalue a female body standard, making it desirable, an object of consumption.

It is worth noting that in the race for the ideal female body, advertising has long been a field for the affirmation of norms and desires that will come true (always as a promise) from a consumption model that associates happiness, success, youth and beauty, consolidating it as merchandise that feeds back on such inseparable pseudo-necessities. Consuming an ideal of beauty would be equivalent to obtaining happiness, success and youth; the desirable female body is still the one that holds the highest value of attention and, supposedly, libido.

Therefore, desire and consumption are driven by a producing model, regulating a female body that is asserted by meeting the standards, now increasingly accessible, and by the constant affirmation of the public gaze. It is not enough to sculpt the body to achieve an idealised mould but to maintain it as a desirable body to look at, so being seen becomes the ultimate factor of this model.

However, according to Paula Sibilia (2015, 2016), in contemporary society, we can no longer address a simple stage of judgement based on image or criticism of unbridled consumerism of image, as once addressed by certain sociological strands, such as the culture as spectacle in Guy Debord (since the 1940s). Nor a culture of the self exhibition as a formative identity of the self, as

in Charles Taylor (in the 1990s). Instead, one must reflect on a culture of visibility that increasingly requires an exhibition of the subject linked to aesthetic rigour and narrative ability. According to the author (Sibilia, 2015, 2016), the current investment in the female body image body is as important, or even more important, than the investment in the improvement of the body itself over the decades.

Although images circulate in different contexts, which still value the female body for complying with conventional beauty standards, there is a profusion of images promoting the female body for its potential of deconstruction or inadequacy to these same standards (Nead, 1998). However, a performed exhibition of the female body prevails in both cases.

Over the last few decades, the boundaries around what kinds of images can be legitimately shown in public have been redrawn, particularly where sexuality and women's naked bodies are concerned. Increasingly distant from the typical 19th and 20th centuries forms of modesty and including fields that range from advertising and video clips to the visual and performing arts and the self-portraits that multiply through the web's social networks, showing naked bodies seems to be the latest fashion. Even adhering to certain new-generation activism, women of all classes exhibit their nudity in the name of a multiplicity of "noble" causes, whether ecology, reproductive rights, freedom of expression or respect for cultural difference. Famous actresses and models, and many "anonymous" women who posted their selfies on the internet and organised collectivities such as Femen, Marcha das Vadias, Free the Nipple and Pedalada Pelada are a part of this trend. (Sibilia, 2015, p. 172)

For Sibilia (2016), this focus on the exposure of the body relates to a new "turn of the self", shifting from intimacy to extimacy, whose dialectics forges a subjectivity today directed to the exterior remodelling the status of the image, as it "inscribes the images in another regime of truth and raises another horizon of expectations" (p. 30).

Thus, the experience of the self as a *self* derives from the subject's condition of narrator: someone who can articulate their experience in the first person singular. However, this self does not translate itself unequivocally and linearly through its words, rendering into text some entity that would precede the account and be 'more real' than mere narration. Instead, subjectivity becomes a part of the vertigo of this discursive stream; it is in it that the self does come into being. Using words and images is to act: thanks to them, we can create universes, and with them, we build our subjectivities, nourishing the world with a rich collection of meanings. (Sibilia, 2016, p. 31)

The combination of personal testimonies with images of daily life fragments, according to Sibilia (2016), seems to reaffirm both the visible dimension of the subject and shape a subjectivity built for/by the public gaze. Hence, it is currently possible to note an increasing number of accounts from women who show the moments of surgery and other aesthetic procedures and the adverse reactions, rejections, diseases, prosthesis removal, scars and marks as the reverse side of this same body experience. They make it essential to maintain the exposure of the self, of their body, as the main image. Once classified by the derogatory nickname of "siliconed or turbinated", many women who sought to meet the standard of the desirable female body have revealed their experience of procedures to increase and shape their breasts (Sant'Anna, 2014), that they chose to revert for various reasons to restore the body as a mediator of new experiences, properly aesthetic and subjective.

In this article, we identify the visual works of three Brazilian women. They used both the art and media space to turn their experiences of explantation into a new process of writing through the body, composing a type of content related to what the researcher Margareth Rago (2013) classifies as "writing of the self" (p. 42). We can observe that this content travels both in visual and artistic

elaborations, at galleries and art spaces, and in the form of postings, through digital platforms and social networks. These become increasingly far-reaching through replications, sharing, and views that create a declarative scene on the screens, allowing new forms of adding links to the gaze on the exposed female body.

## The Explanted Body as a Writing of the Self

Although it is still a little-discussed topic in Brazil, some press<sup>2</sup> and other media vehicles, especially those linked to the medical and specialised universe, have dedicated spaces to inform about a new disease associated with the use of silicone prostheses. The adjuvant-induced autoimmune syndrome, more widely known as breast implant illness and ASIA syndrome. According to the medical literature, the physical sickness process may start soon after the silicone prosthesis implantation and includes complications related to using this material, such as joint pain, hair loss, altered bowel function, excessive tiredness, and insomnia, anxiety and other disorders.

However, although increasingly diagnosed among people who had implants, the disease is still little known to the general public and even less publicised in the country's media. Thus, many women who had their breast prostheses explanted because they developed the syndrome have sought other spaces to give visibility to their experiences.

The ongoing research makes it possible to note several cases of women who reported their experiences with the disease and explantation through personal web pages, profiles on social networks, visual essays, and artwork, among others. Seeking different and often complementary spaces of expression to expose the various personal accounts of the entire illness and explantation process emerges as an expressive, subjective and political resource for these women. In the testimonies posted on social networks, even more explicitly, women sometimes emphasise the illness and toxicity of silicone and sometimes question the uncritical consumption of beauty standards that objectify and alienate.

They claim that adhering to the ideal of the body ended up enclosing their subjectivities in impossible models, causing losses in the acceptance and appreciation of themselves. Hence the need for those who have undergone illness and explantation surgery to decide to expose their marked bodies, in art and the media, as a means of elaborating another way of writing about themselves, making their own bodies an important element in claiming another visibility policy for the female body.

Karla Keiko is a Brazilian artist who relates her experience of medical violence related to silicone prostheses and disrespect for autonomy in decisions about her body. Her artistic productions and speeches express a critical position towards the reasons behind the women's choice to use prostheses, also reporting the social delegitimisation of psychological distress incarcerated in a body regarded as beautiful.

The artist exhibits two videographic works, whose performances use her own body in choreographed movements. The work titled *Pendências* (Pendencies, 2017) features the breast plastic surgery performed on Karla, which was planned during her artistic residency, and recorded before the explantation. *Pendências* was exhibited at the Curitiba Biennial, in the Itaú Cultural venue, in 2017, but her photographs are also available on her Flickr profile.

In the images, she is undressed and with shaved hair, manipulating her breasts in movements that summon a certain strangeness to the gaze since they emphasise the plasticity of the breasts as a mere biological organ. Her body is displayed in a kind of rhythm interspersed with other images of torn and broken round fruit and food, carelessly manipulated, evoking a certain association between these organic materials also modified and modelled by human action.

From the contrasting images, it is also possible to observe that the artist used the repercussion of this work to give visibility to the psychological hardships experienced by other women who seek to meet an unattainable standard of beauty. One of the images of the essay shows Karla's profile in a red, nostalgic lighting environment, showing only her bust, her arms hidden. Her breasts are exposed under a ripped shirt whose inscription "em exibição" (on display) seems to reiterate that the female body is limited to the centrality of the naked breasts. The drawings tattooed on the bust are attempts to recreate her body altered by surgery, a way of rewriting, with illustrations, over the surgical marks.

Karla's explanted body is also featured in [La Danza de Su Hijo Dentro Suyo](#) (The Dance of Her Son Within; 2017). In this work, she is wearing a white and transparent nightgown, a few months after the explantation, showing her first pregnancy. These images show the surgery scars on Karla's body, both from the implant and the replacement of the silicone prosthesis she had undergone. Karla's explanted nude breast is captured in two moments as if it sewed, through the images, a before and an after.

Fiamma Viola is a Brazilian resident in Italy who gained some repercussion and notoriety after intense activity on Instagram when she reported, in her profile, the process of physical and psychological illness experienced by the use of silicone prostheses. In one of her visual works, she used her blood pooled from the post-surgical drain to make stencil pictures from the removed silicone prostheses. The images produced formed the series [Despeitos](#) (Contempts, 2019).

Unlike Keiko, Viola chooses not to expose her explanted body in photographs, except for pictures showing her scars still bearing the silicone prostheses, published in articles about her surgical and artistic process. However, in the images produced, she emphasises the use of the remnants of her painful experience, using her prostheses and her blood to create new images that seek to dialogue with the viewer's gaze and draw attention to what is left, after all, of this process.

Invited to look inside out, the viewer of Viola's images pays attention to the other form of writing of the female body that maximises the breasts repainted with blood. Fragmented and superimposed, the visible parts of the breasts drip tears of blood, display scars and marks from splits like seams that cannot close completely. There is intentional discomfort in the stencil produced by Viola.

Maria Luísa Andrade, a Brazilian artist, is trying to transform her experience of illness into a subsidy for visual art. She has created a website called [Relato em Carne Crua](#) (Account in Raw; 2019), where she exposes her illness through texts and photographs that record her explanted body. It is subdivided into five sessions: "Deslumbre" (dazzle), "Veneno" (poison), "Loucura" (madness), "Liberdade" (freedom) and "Cura" (healing), the visual narrative created by Maria Luísa recounts the painful experience she had, from the breast implant to the breast removal.

In the photographs of the essay, Maria Luísa is naked, in moments captured by the camera, where she wears only a gas mask and holds the silicone prosthesis removed from her body ([Figure 1](#)). She denounces the material's toxic potential by exposing the scars on her breasts and holding up the removed prostheses.



**Figure 1.** Maria Luísa Andrade. *Relato em Carne Crua*, 2019 Credits. Rafael Lira Ribeiro da Silva (From *Relato em Carne Crua*, Maria Luísa Andrade, 2019. Reprinted with permission of Maria Luísa Andrade)

In another image (Figure 2), a hand wearing a white surgical glove closes her mouth, and her naked bust has the chemical properties of the silicone prostheses written on it, mixed with the markings that identify the parts of the breasts subject to alteration. As a denunciation, the image draws attention to how difficult it is to access more precise information about the potential harm of the material to be grafted into the woman's body.



**Figure 2.** Maria Luísa Andrade. *Relato em Carne Crua*, 2019 Credits. Rafael Lira Ribeiro da Silva (From *Relato em Carne Crua*, Maria Luísa Andrade, 2019. Reprinted with permission of Maria Luísa Andrade)

All the photos included in Maria Luísa's account point to a speech intended to legitimate and question medical authority when it elides information about the harmful consequences of silicone to women's health. A victim of aesthetic idealisation and medical positions, the female body is thus kept subjugated. The denunciation of these procedures is exposed by the account of Maria Luísa, who tries to superimpose her voice by lending her own scarred and diseased body.

## Ruptures of Heteronormative Standards in Images of Art and Media

The images observed in the visual works of Karla Keiko, Fiamma Viola and Maria Luísa Andrade inscribe the three women artists in active participation. They are individuals who reflect and potentially alter bodily experiences by formulating new images that activate the writing of the self, as proposed by Rago (2013). Therefore, they do not only feature as characters in the visual works. They are also protagonists. The authors and characters present themselves inscribing their bodies as artistic, aesthetic, and political agents through a weaving that is both poetic and biographical.

We argue that the visual essays observed in this text do not intend to claim an autobiographical categorical classification. However, they start from the body as a source of an (auto)biographical writing and take the body as an element of reflexive and epistemological counterpoint.

According to Damião's (2020) considerations, we should regard this treatment of women's corporeality as an unfolded experience in constructing multiple subjectivities and artistic and political processes. In her view, it is about understanding "a corporeality related to a process of challenge in transposing places and (de)composing identities" (Damião, 2020, p. 159).

This visual writing mode that seeks the deconstruction of the feminine by mobilising the body itself can be found in the artworks of other women such as ORLAN, Anette Messenger, Cindy Sherman, Susanne Ohmann. For example, in ORLAN's photographs, one can notice a certain emphasis on the subversion of the signs of the female body as an object of consumption that is sexually reified. The artist also extends her criticism to the massive circulation of images and selfies that continually insist on repositioning the woman in the sacrificial place resumed by the rituals of martyrdom and pain in the name of sanctification or of ideal beauty and, for this, she uses her own body. The many figurations of herself are carefully recorded in self-portraits. She uses her own body as a surface of creation and reworking to "transform the surgical scene into a ritual; scene of self-immolation that makes the body aesthetic contrary to the aesthetics standard" (Damião, 2020, p. 162).

In the visual essays analysed in this text, the women who sought to model their bodies to meet body beauty standards by adhering to silicone implants are the same that today expose their bodies as images. They present them through other modes of writing, exploring new sensorialities, creating other visual interfaces potentially able to interrogate the gaze and the reflection on the social standards imposed on the female body. The big question provoked by the images would be: what body do you want for yourself?

The images brought by Karla Keiko, Fiamma Viola and Maria Luísa Andrade are only examples of so many other experiences of illness, pain and rejection experienced by many women who have decided to undo the standard, to displace the norm, to re-figure their bodies. They subvert the standardised images of the reified and radicalised female bodies through surgical interventions with new image propositions of their scarred, mutilated and diseased bodies and propose a resistance political gesture to the explanted body.

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## Notes

1. The expression popularized in Brazil with the emergence of the so-called low pressure fitness, which refers to a type of hypopressive abdominal gymnastics, aimed at removing abdominal fat to define an extremely slim silhouette.
2. Among the mainstream newspapers in Brazil, in 2019, only *A Folha de São Paulo* dedicated extensive reporting on adjuvant-induced autoimmune syndrome (Geraldo, 2019).

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