



Viviana Druga



Ritualista



The Dreams of an East European Ritualist. On Viviana Druga's artistic practice

Punk and Politics

In her early performative interventions in Bucharest, which have the character of happenings and flash mobs, Viviana Druga implemented the camera as a political weapon. In *Passive Guerilla* (2006), the artist disguised herself as a “harmless figure” in a handmade balaclava, similar to the kind the activists of Pussy Riot wear, and posed with Romanian President Traian Băsescu during a national celebration. The artist then managed to publish this photo on the official website of a mainstream Romanian newspaper. Through this action, she questioned the reality of the presumed terrorist threat, suggesting that it may, in fact, have been a media product designed to serve a political agenda. On another occasion, Viviana staged the creation of a new “banana republic” by photographing a group of half-naked people on Bucharest’s Revolution Square. Populist city politicians had ordered the planting of palm trees in the city center in the hope of winning the upcoming elections. The term “banana republic” grew out of the colonial relationship between the United States and Latin America. Since the 1990s, it has often been used in the context of the East European region to indicate its economic dependence and sense of inferiority in relation to Russia and Western Europe.

The artist continued her political actionism in other geographical contexts and in dictatorships such as China. The performance *Art and Control* (2017) in Beijing is worth mentioning here, which was Viviana’s direct intervention in response to the act of censorship and state violence against the OPEN International Performance Art Festival. She performed here with her back to the viewers, hiding in a provisional brick structure built with the audience’s help. When ART and CONTROL was painted in Mandarin on her buttocks, the artist smashed the structure with her own head in an attempt to free herself from these physical constraints.

Tarot Meets Rave Culture

After moving to Berlin, Viviana Druga became increasingly immersed in the mysteries and knowledge derived from occult and pagan practices, as well as the art of tarot. She launched the projects *Urban Witches* and *Tarot de Berlin*, in which she invited her new surroundings to take part in magical rituals; she then transformed these encounters into visual works that combine popular culture and Christian iconography. Like Silvia Federici in her *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Viviana Druga is interested in witches, their rehabilitation in European culture, and their recognition as historical symbols of resistance. In *Urban Witches Not Bitches* (2017), Viviana portrayed herself and other women and queer artists as icons on a par with images of saints.

An important aspect of this form of imagery is not only to capture women’s sacredness, but above all to unleash their wild, dark, primal nature, which is reflected in the natural cycles between birth, death, and rebirth. The phenomenon of the revival of the wild, animalistic woman was described by authors such as Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1989). Estés searches for the instinctual and wildish nature of women in myths, fairytales, and stories, many of them from Eastern Europe and North and South America. Here, the key to female emancipation seems to be a self-introspection and connection with nature. Many of Viviana’s works embody the East European archetype of the “wild woman” and fairytale characters like Muma Pădurii and Baba Yaga, witches who live in the forest and take care of the animals and plants.



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Living in the reality of a “disenchanted West,” Viviana Druga seeks the sphere of the sacred in everyday life through rituals. In a sense, having observed and studied spiritual traditions around the world, and following the writings of the Romanian religious scholar Mircea Eliade, she confirms the inextricable link between the sacred and the profane. The artist takes on the role of a ritualista and performs rituals derived from her individual mythology and the local traditions of the places she visits. In her performances in France, Mexico, China, Morocco, the Netherlands, and the USA, the artist marks moments of transformation, drawing on her own near-death experiences from the past as well as her pregnancy and the birth of her first child. She conducts rituals including processes of burning objects, burying herself underground, and communicating with the spirit of a deceased person, as in the performative work *Burn Mother Burn* (2017). Viviana’s ritual work is greatly inspired by the life and work of Alejandro Jodorowsky, a surrealist artist and mystic. Jodorowsky has developed his own spiritualist system based on alchemy, tarot, Buddhism, and shamanism, which he calls “psychomagic” or “psychoshamanism.” His method entails procedures of healing psychological wounds by performing certain acts or situations to influence the unconscious.

Viviana Druga’s performative and ritualistic work continued through the design of art installations in which “magick,” performance, photography, sculpture, and painting combined to form a *gesamtkunstwerk*, giving the viewer a sense of a self-contained universe in which the artist moves. In her first solo exhibition “CONFESSIOALE” (2019) at Galerie im Turm in Berlin, Viviana created an installation that filled the entire exhibition space, transforming the gallery interior into an Orthodox chapel. A traditional confessional took the central spot, where the artist invited visitors to make their own confessions or hear somebody else’s stories. On the walls and in the windows, Viviana recreated an iconostasis with images of saints, transgressing the Christian canon by inserting images, photographs, and objects from other religious orders to alter and complement it and to create an alternative queer-feminist vision of spirituality. The sacrament of confession, associated with violence in a hierarchy of sins, punishment, guilt, and atonement, was adapted and redefined into an empathetic act of sharing, listening, and healing of personal and collective traumas.

There Will Be Milk, There Will Be Hay

In many agricultural countries around the world, including present-day Romania, hay and hay harvesting continue to play an important role in shaping a balanced eco-system. The Transylvanian hills and fields where Viviana Druga grew up are adorned to this day with haystacks of all shapes and sizes. These mysterious hay creatures inspired the wearable sculpture *Haymonster* (2017), which the artist activated on various occasions. In another performative work *Choice* (2019), shown at the Grace Exhibition Space in New York, Viviana submitted herself to the judgment of the gallery audience, who were called upon to decide the fate of her pregnancy. She performed sitting on a haystack and stuffing her costume with hay, a foreshadowing of the pregnancy developing in her body. In *There will be milk, there will be hay* (2020) at Galerie im Körnerpark in Berlin, together with Dafna Maimon, Viviana created an installation with hay figures and quotes from their written correspondence, in which they meditated on emotional and bodily intelligence and explored themes of reproduction, love, and fertility.

This installation developed into an exhibition in collaboration with Tiberiu Bleoancă at the Galerie im Saalbau in Berlin. *SAUNA CONFESSIOALE* (2022) was dedicated to the rite of baptism in the Orthodox Church, which traditionally consists of an exorcism and blessing. This time, Viviana’s installation transformed the exhibition space into a shamanistic sauna constructed primarily of natural materials such as hay and clay. Through the act of perspiration, visitors were encouraged to shed aspects weighing down their psyche and to purify themselves. In addition to self-cleansing, the installation was also intended to encourage reflection on one’s own actions and personal relationship to the Earth and the environment.

This turn towards ecology accompanies Viviana’s new work *afloat* (2023). In the Spreewald, Viviana has created a platform with a scaled-down model of a child’s head made of recycled materials that drifts on the water and perhaps becomes a haven for local animals, birds, plants, and people. The figure of the child made of branches and hay symbolizes hope for the future, but also poses the question of whether we can stay afloat in these turbulent times or are in danger of sinking into the abyss. We can only hope that the Earth, the nourishing Mother, will be able to sustain us for some time to come.

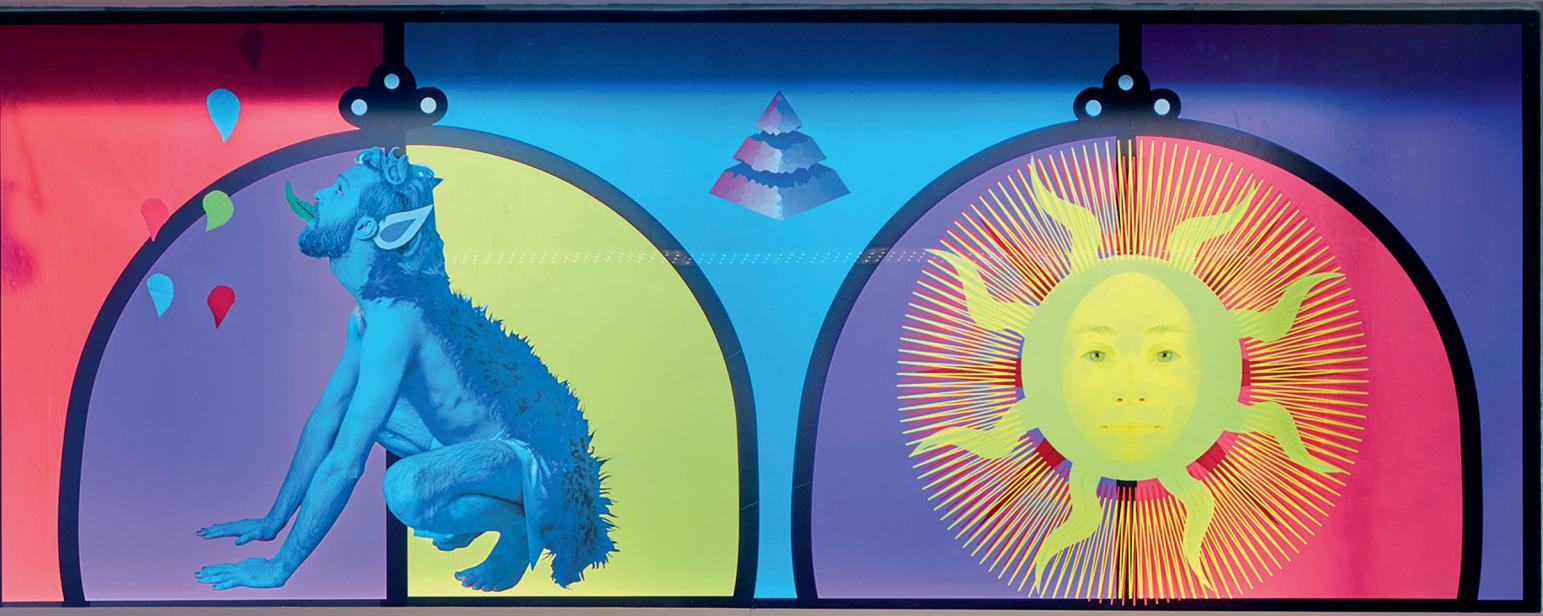
















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Project Director
Hannah Kruse

Course Coordination
Veronika Bartelt

Program & PR assistant
Katharina Faller

Administration & Finance
Lotta Bartoschewski, Ulrike Riebel

Text
Maja Smoszna

Design
Ipek Erdöl

Copy Editing
Andrea Scrima

Photography
Eric Tschernow, Nihad Nino Pusija,
John Rohrer, Viviana Druga

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Sauna Confessions
in collaboration with Tiberiu Bleoancă,
Exhibition view,
Galerie im Saalbau, 2022
Photo: Nihad Nino Pusija



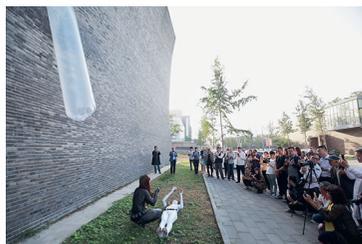
There Will Be Milk, There Will Be Hay
Installation und performance, 30 min.,
Galerie im Saalbau, 2020
Photo: Nihad Nino Pusija



Choice
Performance, 30 min.,
Grace Exhibition Space,
NY, 2019
Photo: John Rohrer



Confessionale
in collaboration with Tiberiu Bleoancă,
Exhibition view,
Galerie im Turm, 2019
Photo: Eric Tschernow



Tao Rebirth
Viviana Druga & Han Bing,
Performance, 40 min.,
Czech-Chinese Contemporary
Art Museum,
Beijing 2017



Square
Performance, 30 min.,
Open International Performance
Art Festival,
Beijing, 2017



Passive Guerilla
Action with Traian Băsescu,
President of Romania, 20 min.,
Bucharest, 2006

Viviana Druga (*Transylvania, Romania) is a performance and installation artist who studied at Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania. Her work has been shown in numerous group and solo exhibitions, most recently at the Aquamediale 15 Festival in Schlepzig, Galerie Saalbau (2022), Galerie in Körnerpark (2020), Galerie im Turm (2019), and the Grace Exhibition Space New York (2019). Her performances have been part of arts festivals in China (2017-2018), Mexico (2018), India (2017), and Europe (Poland, the Netherlands, France, Bulgaria, Portugal). She lives and works in Berlin.

