

(In)visible Blood: menstrual performances and body art

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Abstract

Although the symbolic potential of menstrual blood has been widely explored in the context of ritual practices, this article focuses on the notion of performance and the experiential dimension of symbolic action associated with menstruation and menstrual blood. The term menstrual performance refers to various ways in which menstrual blood is used as an aesthetic and political expression. These uses are often related to artistic settings, but they also occur in more mundane contexts such as social networks in the Internet. The argument stresses two aspects of these performances: the emotional resonance of certain physical experiences and bodily substances, such as menstruation and menstrual blood; and the material devices, such as the menstrual cup and the internet, that allow these performances involving menstrual blood to grow in number and frequency.

Keywords: blood, menstruation, performance, body art.

Sangue (in)visível: performances menstruais e arte corporal

Resumo

Embora o potencial simbólico do sangue menstrual venha sendo amplamente explorado no contexto de práticas rituais, esse artigo foca na noção de performance e na dimensão experiencial da ação simbólica associada à menstruação e ao sangue menstrual. O termo *performance menstrual* refere-se às várias formas pelas quais o sangue menstrual vem sendo empregado como uma expressão estético-política. Esses usos ligam-se frequentemente à esfera da arte, mas também ocorrem em contextos mais mundanos como as redes sociais na Internet. O argumento se estrutura em torno de dois aspectos gerais dessas performances – a ressonância emocional de certas experiências físicas e substâncias corporais, tais como a menstruação e o sangue menstrual; e os dispositivos materiais, tais como o coletor menstrual e a própria Internet, que possibilitam que essas performances envolvendo o sangue menstrual cresçam em número e frequência.

Palavras-chave: sangue, menstruação, performance, arte corporal.

Introduction

While the symbolic potential of menstrual blood has been widely explored in the context of ritual practices (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Turner 1967), in this article we would like to take a step away from the rules that “frame” the ritual process (Turner 1982: 79) and the sociocultural contexts in which they emerge, to focus on the notion of performance and the experiential dimension of symbolic action. By so doing we set the ground for a closer examination of what we call *menstrual performance*, which broadly refers to various ways in which women are currently using their menstrual blood to express themselves through art (performances, paintings and photographs). Although these uses are often related to artistic settings, they also occur in more mundane contexts such as social networks in the Internet.¹

Our argument is structured around two general aspects of these performances. The first relates to the links between the emotional resonance of certain physical experiences and bodily substances, such as menstruation and menstrual blood (Turner 1967; Douglas 1984 [1966]). The other refers to material devices, such as the menstrual cup² and the cyberspace, that make it possible for aesthetical and political experiences involving menstrual blood to grow in number and frequency. We argue that these two aspects converge to make the experience of menstruation individually and collectively relevant in new and creative ways, most notably in artistic performances that rely on making menstrual blood visible.

In that sense, instead of simply interpreting the symbolism associated to menstrual blood in specific ritual practices, we focus on the very conditions that make it possible for these performances to emerge. Departing from the exceptional emotional force behind idioms of blood (Carsten 2013), we would also like to highlight some of the processes that are helping to re-frame menstrual blood as a potent aesthetic and political agent.

Menstrual taboos, symbolic pollution and the symbolic power of blood

The symbolic potency attributed to menstrual blood has been often explored in anthropological studies of ‘taboo’ and of symbolic ‘pollution.’ In their introduction to a whole volume on the anthropology of menstruation, Buckley and Gottlieb observe that the comparative study of menstruation points to the widespread existence of ‘menstrual taboos’ (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Such prevalence has usually been interpreted as a sign of female oppression, but a closer examination of the ethnographic data shows that the meanings associated to ‘menstrual taboos’ are often ambiguous and multivalent.

According to Steiner the meaning of the word ‘taboo’ should not be restricted to a set of injunctions and prohibitions, but goes back to the Polynesian term *tapu* (translated as *tabu*), where the root *ta* means “to mark” and *pu* is an adverb of intensity, which led him to translate it as “marked thoroughly” (Steiner 1956 apud Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 8). In that sense, there is not necessarily a negative, nor positive, connotation in the etymology of this word. Rather than a polarity of meaning, Steiner suggests that “concepts of ‘holy’ and ‘forbidden’ are inseparable in the many Polynesian languages” (Steiner 1956 apud Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 8).

Seen from that perspective, menstrual taboos are not simply practical rules with utilitarian origins and rational purposes, but instead point to the spiritual and mystical foundation of these injunctions and prohibitions. The notion of ‘pollution’ for example, another central concept in symbolic analysis of

¹ We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewer’s critics and suggestions to improve this article. We are also thankful to the interlocution with many colleagues, especially Luiz Costa, Soraya Fleischer, Luisa Elvira Belaunde, Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti, Pedro Ferreira, the participants of LEIC-UFRJ (Laboratório de Etnografia e Interfaces do Conhecimento) and the undergraduate students of the “Bodily Fluids and Techniques” course, held by Daniela Manica at IFCS/UFRJ, in 2015.¹

² The menstrual cup is a silicon cup, flexible and shaped like a bell. It is worn inside the vagina during menstruation to catch menstrual blood. It substitutes tampons and pads, but the cup collects menstrual fluid rather than absorbing it.

menstrual taboos, is also associated with the boundary work that keeps sacred and profane dimensions apart from each other. In her best-known work, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1984 [1966]) traces the notion of pollution back to threats to a general symbolic and social order. According to her, substances like menstrual blood are coded as pollutant because they breach bodily (and symbolic) boundaries and become “matter out of place”. Following Durkheim, she argues that the social relations between men offer the prototype for the logical and symbolic relations between things, and that symbolic systems have functional goals in the maintenance of society. More specifically, Douglas argues that the body, as an organic bounded system, provides a powerful analogy of the social system³. Thus, substances that breach the natural bounds of the body, such as menstrual blood, are symbolically coded as pollutants and perceived as possible threats to social order.

In a follow-up article to *Purity and Danger*, Douglas revised her initial argument, and admits that “although all pollutants are anomalous in terms of a given symbolic order, not all symbolic anomalies must be coded as polluting. Rather, anomalies are simply ‘powerful’, according to Douglas, their power being granted a negative or positive valence to be determined through specific cultural analysis rather than being attributed cross-culturally” (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 27). Regardless of denoting ‘pollution’ or simply ‘power’, boundary-crossing still remains a religious matter in Douglas’s schema (Douglas 1996 [1970]), and as such it is closely related to Durkheim’s theory of the relationship between religion and society.

Although Douglas’s approach to the body as a model of society is paradigmatic for the study of menstrual taboo and pollution, it is interesting to note, after A. Strathern (1996), that Douglas is more concerned with margins than with total sets of ideas about the body. Yet, as Sanabria (2011) points out, Douglas’s focus on the breaching of boundaries also emphasizes bodily or social integrity. In her work on menstruation and gynecological examinations and surgeries in Salvador, Brazil, Sanabria departs from Douglas by not considering bodily boundaries as either given or fixed, and instead proposes to investigate the process of their making.

More than taking bodily boundaries for granted, Douglas “has her eyes uncompromisingly fixed on ‘society’ as such” (Strathern 1996: 16). Following Durkheim’s preference for social facts, Douglas is troubled for example by the fact that he based his theory of the sacred on psychological factors such as the notion of ‘emotional effervescence’ (Douglas 1996: XV). She grapples with this issue by framing the problem of sacred contagion in terms of a “moral theory of connections and causes” (Douglas 1996: XVI). By doing that, she can put forward her grid-group theory as a way to “transpose Durkheim’s theory of ritual from psychology to social fact” (Douglas 1996: XVI) and to account for various levels of emotional engagement in rituals across different cultures. But since her theory is based on a standardized ‘social body’ her analysis is restricted to macro-social dimensions, disregarding the negotiations of social and bodily boundaries at the micro level.

Victor Turner, on the other hand, while also carrying forward Durkheim’s understanding of ritual as an efficacious socio-religious phenomenon, was not as troubled by its psycho-physiological dimension. Instead, in an early work on ritual among the Ndembu, he argues that ritual symbols have a ‘bipolar’ (sensory and ideological) character (St John 2008: 3), in other words, two distinctive poles of meaning. While the ideological pole refers to an aggregate of meanings closely related to moral and social order, the sensorial pole evokes “desires and feelings” and usually refers to “natural and physiological phenomena and

³ Although Douglas’s work on the human body symbolism and pollution is of paramount importance, she was not the first author to relate ideas about the body social to the body physical in the study of menstruation. Other than Durkheim himself (1897 apud Buckley and Gottlieb 1988), Mervyn Meggitt also connects notions of menstrual pollution to the socio-symbolic logic among the people he studied (1964 apud Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).

processes” (Turner 1967: 59). Although for Turner, symbols are always social facts, he is less committed than Douglas to the idea that systems of beliefs and values can be analyzed apart from how symbolic processes are actually lived by individuals.

That comes up more clearly at the end of an essay on color symbolism in Ndembu ritual (Turner 1967), where he openly disagrees with Durkheim and Mauss’s argument that social relations of mankind provide the prototype for logical relations between things (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). Instead, Turner inverts this argument and postulates that “the human organism and its crucial experiences are the *fons et origo* of all classifications” (Turner 1967: 132). Such crucial experiences refer to human biology and its demands for intense experiences of relationship:

If men and women are to beget and bear, suckle, and dispose of physical wastes they must enter into relationships – relationships which are suffused with the affective glow of the experiences. (...) The color triad white-red-black represents the archetypal man as a pleasure-pain process. The perception of these colors and of the triadic and dyadic relations in the cosmos and in society, either directly or metaphorically, is a derivative of primordial psychobiological experience – experience that can be fully attained only in human mutuality (Turner 1967: 132).

In other words, to the extent which the color triad white-red-black

stand[s] for basic human experiences of the body (associated with the gratification of libido, hunger, aggressive and excretory drives, and with fear, anxiety, and submissiveness), [it] also provide[s] a kind of primordial classification of reality (Turner 1967: 131).

In that sense, the sacred quality associated with this color triad in ritual contexts is directly related to the strong affective overtones of these experiences, which, though immanent in our body, appear to transcend our consciousness. According to this interpretive scheme, blood is a powerful ritual symbol with deep emotional resonance because it is associated both with the physical experience of the color red and to inherently relational experiences such as maternity, war, hunting, kinship etc. (for a more detailed analysis see Turner 1967).

In an introduction to a special journal issue on blood and relationality, Carsten (2013) also connects the material properties of blood with its symbolic potential and emotional resonance, as she sketches out a ‘theory of blood’. In her discussion, she stresses the interpenetration of the metaphorical and literal meanings of blood, observing that blood has some special material qualities (besides just color) such as liquidity and fungibility, that lend it an “unusual capacity for accruing layers of symbolic resonance” (Carsten 2013: S1).

According to Carsten, some of blood’s particular qualities “are closely tied to its material attributes and its bodily manifestations, others involve symbolic or metaphoric elaboration, but often the distinctions between physical stuff and metaphorical allusion seem porous and difficult to disentangle” (Carsten 2013: S4). Although the meanings attributed to blood are far from self-evident and stable across different cultural contexts, many authors associate the special qualities of blood and its range of resonances with “a heightened propensity to evoke emotional responses” (Carsten 2013: S13).

Many works have examined the mobilization of the emotional resonance of blood in artistic and political contexts. Copeman (2013), for instance, in this same issue, explores the use of human blood in paintings of portraits of Indian martyrs for Independence in a Museum in Delhi.

He stresses the uncommonness of this choice (“the use of human blood for purposes of ‘art’, and mass political communication”). The restrictions frequently applied to the flow of bodily substances reinforce their “marked expressive force” (Copeman 2013: S150). As Carsten argues, commenting on Copeman’s article,

the interpenetration of metaphorical and literal meanings of blood is especially dense, and the emotional resonance of these pictures rests on the complex entanglement of historical, national, medical, and bodily perceptions of sacrifice (Carsten 2013: 6).

Copeman shows how, in spite of the appeal of the color red and blood’s fluidity and tangibility, the portraits started to fade with the passage of time. This material inadequacy of blood as an ink evoked then a creative solution: after being previously made from the artist’s own blood, in a second moment, a campaign was launched to collect “blood for use in re-touching the portraits”. According to Copeman, the recreation was made with “multiple mingled bloods” coming from 125 Indians from various castes, religions and geographic provenance. (Copeman 2013: S157).

Blood, then, may not be good ink, but that does not diminish the impact on viewers when they learn that the portraits were made from such a bodily substance. And in this case, this “technical problem” (and the irony of memory-fading on the portraits) was solved by convoking the population of India to contribute by donating blood and hence by “re-temporalizing” the sacrifice previously made by the “many citizens who died fighting for freedom” (Copeman 2013: S153).

Copeman notes that this actualizes the problematic of ‘representation’ and ‘presence’ in body art (see Jay 2002). The portraits had to be constantly re-touched, which made their composition a result of multiple and mixed blood, from the various donors, and also of the artist’s engagement in reinforcing the faded parts with new blood. In a way, they demand a continuous process of re-making, which made somehow all these donors, and the artist himself, bodily ‘present’ in the portraits.

From ritual to performance

The symbolic power and emotional resonance of blood does not totally explain the enormous attention menstrual blood has received. In recent years, it has become a central element of a number of aesthetic performances and body art. It has also been widely talked about and made visible in social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, inviting debates on various topics – from health, nature and environmental causes, to sexuality and gender relations. In fact, a general trend towards turning menstruation into a publicly shared experience is now considered to be part of a larger reconfiguration of the feminist movement (Bobel 2010). In order better to understand this widespread, and yet often unarticulated, exploration of the symbolic potential of menstrual blood in the context of art, contemporary feminism and broader political debates, we now turn to some internal intellectual developments in Turner’s theoretical interests, more specifically his growing focus on performance and in the experiential dimensions of symbolic action⁴.

In a famous article written in 1958 and that later became the first chapter of *Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner defined ‘ritual’ as a “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having preference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects” (Turner 1967: 19). Although throughout his career Turner moved away from an “earlier emersion in

⁴ For a review of Turner’s intellectual trajectory and central themes in his work see Cavalcanti (2013), and for his turn to an anthropology of experience, see Dawsey (2013). In this same issue of “Sociologia e Antropologia”, there is also an interview about Turner’s impact on Brazilian Anthropology (Cavalcanti, Sinder and Lage 2013).

the semantic complexity of ritual” (St John 2008: 3) and grew more and more interested in the experiential and processual aspects of social life in his later works, he still retained the religious component of this definition when trying to grapple with the notion of ritual, and performance, in complex societies. In an essay on the ‘the anthropology of performance’ for example, he differentiates his use of the term ‘ritual’ from those of Schechner and Goffman based on the traditional Durkheimian dichotomy ‘sacred’/ ‘profane’ (Turner 1987). According to Turner, these authors refer to ‘ritual’ simply as “a standardized unit act, which may be secular as well as sacred, while [he] mean[s] the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts.” (Turner 1987: 75).

Yet, as Turner turns his ethnographic focus from small, non-literate societies, where social cohesion fits Durkheim’s classification of ‘mechanical solidarity’, to complex, organic-solidarity societies, he also had to deal with a different dynamic as far as the ‘sacred’/ ‘profane’ dichotomy is concerned. From a context where symbols and rituals were an obligation, where social solidarity was based “on a *homogeneity* of values and behavior, strong social constraint, and loyalty to tradition and kinship” (Turner 1982: 73), he turns his analytical gaze to a context where symbolic and ritual activity became a matter of individual choice, leading to the emergence of aesthetic, fragmentary and liminoid genres (Turner 1982, 1985). But if much of the ‘emotional effervescence’ associated with sacred rituals stemmed from the strong moral obligations and collectivity of simple societies, how to account for sacred phenomena in the context of contemporary symbolic and ritual activity?

Turner’s answer to this question is partly articulated in his seminal article “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual” (Turner 1982), where he introduced the concept of ‘liminoid’. This concept refers to *leisure* settings and is usually associated with marginality and social critique, but it still retains some of the numinosity (even if in a residual form) inherent to the concept of ‘liminality’ in Turner’s former conceptual scheme. Turner sees liminoid genres both as residues of past sacred ritual forms, and as a resurgence of these forms. As St John points out, the historical exegesis articulated by Turner in this essay⁵ represents an attempt to grapple with contradictory dispositions – “[t]he first disposition involves the loss, or attenuation, and the second the resilience, or rebirth, of *the sacred*.” (St John 2008: 9).

Rather than simply a contradiction, it is important to understand this theoretical development as a general tendency in Turner’s work towards deemphasizing the normative aspect of ritual, and a greater attention to the processual quality of social life. Overall, Turner becomes more and more interested in the ‘flow’ of action and interaction within the ritual frame and its capacity to produce new insights and meanings among participants (Turner 1982). The sacred dimension of ritual in this case, can be understood in terms of its ability to engage the performers in a self-transcending flow, capable of convincing the “performers that the ritual situation is indeed informed with powers both transcendental and immanent” (Turner 1982: 80). In this context, a focus on performance is never simply about evaluating compliance with or deviation from normative models; but instead it should offer a glimpse into the very process of actualizing norms and rules and making them socially as well as personally relevant.

All in all, Turner’s mature work expresses “a fascination with the way sociocultural ‘structures’ are produced or reproduced – the formed, performed” (St John 2008: 3), which also led him to a growing concern with the experiential dimension of symbolic action as a critical dimension of the (re)production of culture. Since the beginning of his career, Turner had proposed the ‘social drama analysis’ as a way to go past the tendency within anthropology to “represent social reality as stable and immutable, a harmonious configuration governed by mutually compatible and logically interrelated principles” (Turner 1987: 73). As he transitioned into an ‘anthropology of experience’, Turner becomes more concerned with how social

5 And some other essays published around this time (see for example Turner 1982: 83, 1985: 166).

actors “assign meaning to their transactions and interactions” (Turner 1985: 155). He also turns to the work of Sally Moore (1976) to argue that social reality is ‘fluid and indeterminate’, depending on regularizing processes to continually produce the patterned aspects that make it seemingly fixed. According to Throop, such closer examination of the processes of meaning assignment in social life led Turner to outline a model of experience “that rests on the assumption that its temporal structure creates an ever-present tension between its coherence, order and fixity and its fluidity, flux and indeterminacy.” (Throop 2003: 224).

Turner’s increased emphasis on processual analysis can also be understood as a response to the challenges posed by the growing complexity of contemporary society, with its numerous and ever-shifting set of contexts in which people act and interact. Rather than well-defined, obligatory ritual action, he now refers to “a multiplicity of desacralized performative genres” assuming “the task of plural cultural reflexivity” (Turner 1985: 166).

This multiplicity led him to make a distinction between ‘social’ performances (which include social dramas) and ‘cultural’ performances (which aesthetic or stage dramas), and yet all these performative genres retained the ability to offer a “reflexive metacommentary on society and history as they concern the natural and constructed needs of humankind under given conditions of time and place” (Turner 1985: 166). The situated and temporal nature of such reflexive metacommentary made Turner seek in the ‘structure of experience’ a way to grapple both with the fluid and transient nature of postmodern social contexts, and with the search for coherence, order and fixity in social life. He borrows the notion of ‘structure of experience’ from Dilthey (1976: 210), who bases it on the distinction between ‘mere experience’ and ‘an experience’:

Mere experience is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events. *An* experience, like a rock in a Zen sand garden, stands out from the evenness of passing hours and years and forms what Dilthey called a ‘structure of experience.’ In other words, it does not have an *arbitrary* beginning and ending, cut out of the stream of chronological temporality, but has what Dewey called ‘an initiation and a consummation’ (Turner 1986: 35, emphasis in original).

The idea of ‘*an* experience’ as something that stands out and has a structure also incorporates the transformative and reflexive potential of liminal experiences engendered by ritual processes and contemporary performances. According to Turner, “man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself” (Turner 1987: 81). Yet, experience is never a totally personal matter. Instead it is acquired by “participation immediately or vicariously through the performance genres in sociocultural dramas” (Turner 1987: 84).

In the sections that follow we expand the notion of ‘structure of experience’, moving beyond the traditional sociocultural elements associated with it, to incorporate the sensorial and material affordances that also contribute to making one experience stand out from others. On the one hand, that means going back to Turner’s ideas about the sensorial pole of meaning in ritual symbols, to explore what Luhrmann called the “phenomenological immediacy” of visual symbolism (1989)⁶. In the case of menstrual performances discussed below that means attending to the strong affective overtones associated both with the physical experience of the color red and to the primordial psychobiological experiences (Turner 1967) associated with (menstrual) blood.

⁶ In an ethnography about ritual magic in contemporary England, Luhrmann identifies a general tendency “to interpret symbolism by means of an analogy with language, and in particular, to stress its semantic, organizational character.” (1989: 238) Without denying the semantic quality of visual symbolism, she argues that “there is [also] a phenomenological immediacy to the mental image of a symbol which is not part of our ordinary language understanding of the use of words.” (1989: 238)

On the other hand, that also means expanding our understandings around what constitutes a “stage” for an experience to stand out from others. Rather than restricting it to the spaces of social seclusion in traditional rites of passage, or to the actual stage of a theatrical drama, we argue that certain technical devices, such as the menstrual cup, the Internet and digital social networks, act as powerful material affordances in the constitution of a “stage” in contemporary society.

An experience-centered approach to performance

The centrality of experience in performances was also pointed out by Langdon, who argues that one of the central characteristics of performance is that it brings experience to the fore - an intensified, public, momentary and spontaneous kind of experience (Langdon 2006: 175). Langdon’s discussion and, most importantly, Victor Turner’s theoretical trajectory, shifting from a focus on ritual and a more functionalist approach concerning social order to an anthropology of experience, inspired us to investigate what we are calling ‘menstrual performances’ and the ways in which they bring experience to the fore. We use the expression ‘menstrual performances’, rather than rituals, to emphasize the diffuse and fragmented nature of these menstrual related events.

As far as methodology is concerned, rather than focusing on the structure of specific artistic or ritual events taking place in bounded and well-defined sociocultural environments, we chose to direct our analytical lens to menstrual and blood-related experiences as described by those involved in creating these performances, and to the material and technical transformations that somehow bring blood and menstrual related experiences to the fore. In that sense, we approach blood mostly as a substance made visible as such in/through these menstrual performances, and intentionally leave aside the complex cultural meanings and social relationships interwoven with bodily practices and menstrual experiences. While that certainly keeps us from making broad social and cultural comparisons among the menstrual performances that follow, it allows us to focus on what they have in common – i.e. the sensuous dimension of symbolic practices, the technical and material affordances that contribute to making an experience relevant and, more specifically, the reflexive and transformative possibilities evoked by making (menstrual) blood visible.

Given the nature of the material examined here – mostly descriptions of artwork and performances (including those offered by artists themselves) – the notion of ‘experience’ must be qualified. We are not dealing with deeply personal experiences shared with or lived by an ethnographer in his/her fieldwork, but rather with carefully elaborated performances designed to evoke insights and reactions from the public. In a way, we are more concerned with how artists attempt to elicit ‘an experience’ in their potential audience by making menstrual blood visible in their performances, than with the specific meanings that this experience might acquire for the public and artists alike. Our argument is that playing with the (in) visibility of menstrual blood in public, these menstrual performances affect the perceptions related to blood, menstruation, and gender issues.

The discussion that follows incorporates insights from art theory to the classical anthropological themes presented in the first part of the article. The empirical material we bring to this discussion was gathered mainly from websites and social networks, and is part of a larger research project about the agency of menstrual blood. In this article, we discuss different techniques used by artists to make menstrual blood visible in their work, be it an artistic performance or a digital photograph posted on a social network. We used different strategies to select the images and artists presented below: some were found through bibliographic research about the theme in anthropological and women’s studies publications, and others were found through internet searches on the theme in social networks and online video websites. More often than not, these works gained visibility due to the controversies they raised among internet users.

The (in)visibility of menstrual blood

Although blood is widely considered a fundamental part of the body, associated with life itself (Carsten 2013: 18), it is expected to be mostly contained within the body's frontiers. Blood's circulation from the inside out (in situations like injuries, surgeries or blood donation) is a focus of special attention and frequently calls for medical monitoring.

Some bodies bleed, though, with a certain regularity. The ones that have organs classified by western medicine as "ovarian", "uterus", and "vaginas". These bleedings are considered to be related to fertility and reproduction (Martin 1987).⁷ Part of these episodes of bleeding is simply called "menstruation". This classification can be less consensual in situations that also involve bleeding like abortion, the postpartum period, the bleedings that occur with the use of contraceptive hormones, or the not so regular bleedings during the first years of menopause.

Aside from this multiplicity of situations in which (female) bodies may bleed (menstruate), and following Kristeva (1982), Sanabria argues that bodily frontiers should not be taken as given. According to her, the vagina and uterus cannot be easily considered as being either inside or outside the body. The dirtiness/cleanliness of menstrual blood's appearance outside the body should, then, be interpreted according to the context:

The point is that menstrual blood is not in itself dirty or clean. The analytical focus should therefore be on the relations that are produced by the dirt or on the manner in which, within particular relationships, menstrual blood is considered dirty (Sanabria 2011: 99).

Within a medical dispositive such as a gynecological exam, for example, the appearance of menstrual blood does not characterize disgust, as it does if found exposed in the wastebasket or toilet seat. Sanabria argues that it is the place this blood occupies, and its provenance, "that carries the potential to disgust or not" (Sanabria 2011: 99).

According to Sanabria, concerns with menstrual leakage in clothes are associated with the idea that menstrual blood is seen as "dirty" in Brazil (as it probably is in many other cultural contexts as well). She argues that these concerns should be seen "from the perspective of the complex relationship between that which forms part of the body and that which is detached from it" (Sanabria 2011: 100). Sanabria upholds that many women she interviewed used to refer to menstrual blood as "repugnant, reeking, or unhygienic" (Sanabria 2011: 100).

The similarity between menstrual blood and other bodily fluids and parts characterized as "excrements" could justify its association to a primarily sanitary/hygienic issue, that calls for the use of specific body techniques (Mauss 2003 [1934]). Menstrual blood must be concealed, creating a demand for sanitary products that make menstrual blood 'disappear' as it is absorbed by devices made of cotton. Public exposure of menstrual blood (even if by accident, as a stain) can then be interpreted as an undesirable and somehow shocking display.

The aesthetic possibilities of making (menstrual) blood visible has been the focus of different kinds of artistic expressions, ranging from drawings, paintings and photographs to live performances and body art. In the next section we examine 'menstrual performances' as aesthetic experiments that explore the transition of menstrual blood from its expected public invisibility to a state in which it is not only turned

⁷ Oudshoorn (1994), for instance, argues that this idea of regularity was reified by western medicine, with the creation of a stable regime of use for the contraceptive pill (21 days of hormones plus 7 days of pause). It was supposedly inspired in the lunar cycle, but the author defends that before the pill, women were believed to experience a more diverse arrange of periodic bleeding episodes than the 28-day regime.

visible, as an image, but also made part of an aesthetico-political statement. To accomplish that, it is important to consider first the ways in which body art and performances include corporeal and visceral experiences in their repertoire.

Revising Dewey's "Art as experience" (2005 [1934]), Jay enumerates three changes necessary for "the full potential of aesthetic experience and of its political counterpart" to be realized: to leave the elite world of museums and galleries; to wean itself from the notion of being inherently contemplative and spectatorial; and to involve the whole body – not only mind and imagination (Jay 2002: 56).

Jay resorts to the notion of "somaesthetics", proposed by Richard Shusterman (1997), to describe the most well-known interventions of body art and performances from the last quarter of the twentieth century. Such interventions are contemporary to the discussion of the "politics of the body" and/or biopolitics, and are especially focused on gender and sexuality issues:

Take, for example, the trajectory that led from Pollock's hyper-masculinist action paintings with their unavoidable evocation of ejaculatory frenzy to the Fluxus artist Shigeko Kubota's 1965 "Vagina Painting," in which she used a brush tacked on to her panties to smear red, menstrual-like paint on a canvas, to Rachel Lachowicz's "Red Not Blue" of 1992, in which men rather than Klein's women applied the color red, the color of menstrual blood, instead of his signature blue to a canvas via paint on their bodies and lipstick affixed to their penises, and finally to Keith Boadwee's 1995 "Untitled (Purple Squirt)," in which the artist somehow contrived to expel purple paint from his anus while lying on his back, in a gesture that mixed homo-erotic anal-eroticism with excremental aggression (Jay 2002: 60).

As Jay also shows, "these works were meant to shock their audiences out of the anesthetic complacency into which they had fallen", and as such they mobilize aesthetics not through "the sublimated body, the beautiful body, the body of grace and proportion, but rather [through] the abject body, the body of base materiality, the body invaded by technology, ravaged by disease, and unable to maintain its normal boundaries" (Jay 2002: 62).⁸ If "corporeal, sensorial and emotional engagement" (Langdon 2006: 175) is a general characteristic of performances, here the exploration of body abjection and corruption should work towards pushing the limits of such engagement, and drive the artist and audience into radical experiences.

The blood-related shock effect described by Jay is also present in many second-wave feminist performances that made use of menstrual blood, or a reference to bodily fluids and parts, bringing experiences like menstruation to the fore. As Bobel reminds us,

In 1971 feminist art pioneer Judy Chicago dramatically articulated resistance to menstrual shame and secrecy in the shocking photolithograph *Red Flag*, a close-up shot of Chicago removing a bloody tampon from her vagina. The artist later remarked that many people, in a stunning display of menstrual denial, did not know what the red object was; some thought it was a bloody penis. Chicago interpreted this ignorance "as a testament to the damage done to our perceptual powers by the absence of female reality." A year later in the installation and performance space Womanhouse, Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and their collaborators explored gendered domesticity using the medium of a seventeen-room mansion in Hollywood, California. Womanhouse included Chicago's controversial and visceral "Menstruation Bathroom," a room liberally strewn with myriad used and yet-to-be used menstrual products (Bobel 2010: 46-47).

⁸ An example of this kind of shocking impact can be seen on health campaigns, such as "O Cartaz HIV Positivo" (HIV Positive Poster), launched in 2015 by the Brazilian NGO called "Grupo de Incentivo à Vida", dedicated to HIV related issues. Using blood donated by HIV positive volunteers, posters were printed with headlines like "I am an HIV-Positive Poster" and affixed on the streets of cities like São Paulo. The texts printed with blood questioned the prejudice HIV-positive people are subjected to, and claimed for the necessity of humanizing the issue. If, in one hand, the consciousness of the literal presence of HIV-positive blood in the poster's paper caused an emotional reaction and a certain preoccupation with its potential hazard through contamination; on the other, the poster, predicting this kind of reaction, stressed its innocuousness and defended that this very fear of proximity should not be driven to HIV-positive people as well (GIV 2015).

The strength and appeal of menstrual blood mark diverse rituals of puberty and procedures of social interdictions (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Turner 1967; Douglas 1984 [1966]). Experiences that involve the appearance, and occurrence, of menstrual bleedings are, as we have argued before, an important focus of anthropological inquiry, in ritual studies, ethnology, or science and gender studies.⁹ Menstrual blood is also related to gender, either as a stable category to discriminate gender identity, or as a problematic one (Martin 1987; Bobel 2010). Its centrality to Amazonians' shamanic rituals and cosmologies has been underlined, as the potential of menstrual blood for acting as a "psychoactive" (Belaunde 2006: 229).

Although puberty and fertility rituals are not as central in contemporary complex societies, a broad range of events that engender liminoid experiences revolve around menstrual blood: from well-defined body art performances to more spontaneous and fragmented menstrual-related events that are made public through digital social networks and commercials.

Menstrual performances and body art

Recent art history is marked by a shift in artist's perceptions of the body: from a previous interest in depicting the body in drawings, sculptures and paintings, that is, an interest in the body as the "content" of the work, artists are currently using the body as "canvas, brush, frame and platform" (Warr 2000: 11). The artist's body, as presence, becomes not only relevant, but is part of the imagistic language, the artistic statement.¹⁰

The set of menstrual performances we describe here make use of this type of artistic expression, inspired by the convergence of the presence of the (artist's) body and the agency of menstrual blood. At the same time, although they were (and can still be) performed alive, within a specific frame of space and time, their audiovisual record, and availability on the internet, amplified their potential audience. According to Jones,

artists, through their bodies, have encouraged the rest of us to be more conscious of ours – ours as flesh of the world, as thoroughly part of the social arena we may fantasize as the 'public realm'. In the 1990s, as artists seem to have recognized, the deepest recesses of our bodies/selves are already inhabited by the 'gaze' of technology's new world picture. The 'private' is the 'public' and the artist's body is always and never ours to keep (Jones 2000: 43).

In "Sangro, pero no muero" (I bleed, but do not die), the Spanish artist Isa Sanz brings the experience of menstruation to the center of a collective performance. The synopsis describes the performance as follows:

It is a performance of alchemy through menstrual blood perceived here as the essence of femininity, as a cyclic element that contains life-death-life in itself. Organic instrumental live sounds, 7 women, earth and a sacred circle that will make the audience to connect to the beauty and power of female energies. In the world we live in, subversion now is Love. Length: 15 minutes (Sanz 2010).

At the sound of a cello, played by one of the seven women, five women in red dresses form a circle around the last one, who, completely naked, lies inside a circle of sand placed at the center of the stage. The scene takes place at a public square (Campo Grande, Valladolid). As she falls asleep over the sand, all other women dance and uncover their breasts. They all lie down around her in a circle, after celebrating with rose petals what seems to be the arrival of her menstruation. She awakes, notices the blood between

⁹ For a specific discussion about menstruation in Brazilian urban contexts, see Leal (1994), Sardenberg (1994), Amaral (2003), Manica (2003), Sanabria (2016), among others.

¹⁰ For a long and detailed compilation of XXth century art focusing on the theme of the body, see Warr and Jones (2000).

her legs, and stands up, saying a few words about the universality of the uterus and its infinite circle of life-death-life, after which the other women repeat - “sangro, pero no muero”. Finally, with blood flowing down her legs, she leaves the stage, walking through the audience to paint, with red paint on her fingers that resembles or evokes menstrual blood, the word “Amor” (love) in a large white poster.

The performance was presented in Valladolid, Spain, at the Theater and Street Art International Festival in 2010 (Festival Internacional de Teatro y Artes de Calle TAC 2010).¹¹ The artist also put together a photography exhibition with this title and theme at Teatro Calderón, in the same city. In this case, snapshots of the performance were taken and exhibited, as well as a video installation of this performance and another one, “Vida-Muerte-Vida” (“Life-Death-Life”). The latter also revolves around the theme of a menstruating woman’s body - a body that breaths and bleeds in an inverted perspective, placed upside down on the video (Sanz 2010b).

Many other of her interventions evoke experiences related to the female body, fertility and maternity.¹² In her website, she defines her work as follows:

I explore my place in the world, as a woman, as a human being. I am interested in the body, nudity, impermanence, love, communion between the corporal and the intangible, the sacred, the ritual, woman, man, unity after duality, the infinite outside and inside ourselves, the connection with the Earth that holds us. I have already explored many of these ideas and others are still to be explored (Sanz, 2016).

Isa Sanz (2010b) - Sangro, pero no muero



In 2009, the Brazilian artist Maria Eugenia Matricardi also brought menstrual blood out of its public invisibility as she performed “Pintura Corporal de Guerra” (War Body Paint) at Galeria Espaço Piloto (Brasília DF, Brazil). According to the description from her website,

Naked, I enter the gallery. I spend a few minutes concentrating. I remove, from inside the vagina, a menstrual cup. I dip the middle and annular fingers in the blood, trace a horizontal line beneath the eyes. I paint the face, and then trace a vertical line through the torso, another horizontal one through the breasts. I use the fingers to stamp drops of blood that flow through the right and left side of the chest. I put the rest of menstruation in the mouth, I taste the endometrium and let the blood flow from the mouth to the torso until it reaches the vagina and drips onto the floor. Length: 20 minutes (Matricardi 2009).¹³

¹¹ Part of the performance can be seen at: <https://youtu.be/l4PlJo4-6y4>

¹² See, for example, “Alma Mater”, with photographs of women breastfeeding, or “Koinonía”, with photographs of a naked women with a red piece of fabric in Ibiza.

¹³ Free translation

Matricardi's "Pintura corporal de guerra" brings a narrative less focused on menstruation's sacred aspects or even its connection to gender or femininity, themes that were much more explored on Sanz's work. The whole act is completely silent, and centered on the body¹⁴ – as a provider of the blood/ink, and as the performer who displaces the blood from the vagina to the skin, made canvas. She ends the performance with her face completely painted, and traces of menstrual blood in her neck, chest, belly and pubis, and dripping from her arms and legs.

Maria Eugênia Matricardi – Pintura Corporal de Guerra (2009)



Foto: Ana C.

As part of her undergraduate work at UnB, National University of Brasília, at the Institute of Visual Arts, Matricardi discusses the theme of performance and defines it as “the use of body in art as place and means of expression” (Matricardi 2013: 7). Based on Rancière's (2004) concept of “the distribution of the sensible” (*la partage du sensible*), she emphasizes the importance of the artist's body and presence in the process of affecting the community, which is made possible by the dispositive of the performance:

Performance presents an aesthetical and political potency, it is accomplished by anyone to anyone. It institutes a community permeated by commonplace that can compose, interfere, confront, affect itself and embrace the artwork that is not surrounded by a mystifying aura. Body not only presents itself as a surface, but also as a form of distributing the sensible. In that sense, the relation is not about informing and inscribing signification, but to launch meaning, doubt, difference (Matricardi 2013: 12).¹⁵

According to Rancière, “[a]rtistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.” (Rancière 2004: 13). Matricardi borrows this idea, arguing that a relation between aesthetics, body and politics is made possible at the space commonly shared by the performances.

Her performances rely on exploring the (im)possibilities and (im)probabilities of the social expectations regarding body's mundane actions.¹⁶ In an interview to a newspaper from Brasília she explains that “the action creates a fissure in cultural conditioning. It is political, but not explicitly so” (Maciel 2013). In all these performances, extreme situations are used as means to arouse affects, distribute sensations and

¹⁴ Interestingly, in her description of the performance she addresses the body in the third person.

¹⁵ Free translation.

¹⁶ In “Composição Residual – pintura em processo” (Residual Composition – painting in process), she drags herself through the bus station's floor in Brasília, all dressed in white, “to aggregate to the clothes (pictorial support) the dirt (pigment, memoir)” (Matricardi 2011). And in “Luxo, elegância e sofisticação” (Luxury, elegance and sophistication), she and Luara Learth, dressed in gala, eat rotten food from the trashes at the same bus station (Matricardi 2010).

trigger reflexivity. The “fissure”, in which we could situate the public exposure of menstrual blood, becomes political through aesthetics, since it represents a rupture with culture and symbolic conventions of keeping menstrual blood as a private, invisible and untouchable matter.

Aside from the power of the image of Matricardi’s face covered with menstrual blood, her performance also embraces a provocative challenge to women made by second wave feminist Germaine Greer. In “The Female Eunuch”, Greer argues that menstruation is usually experienced as something negative, that women should resist that and try to have a closer relation with their bodies, a relation of knowledge and acceptance: “If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood—if it makes you sick, you’ve a long way to go, baby” (Greer 2006: 57). By sipping the blood contained in the menstrual cup, and making it flow down the neck and belly, until it reached the ground, Matricardi exploited the limits of this abjection.

Her performance also calls attention to an interesting and important device that has contributed enormously towards increasing the visibility of menstrual blood: the silicon cup she removes from the vagina, usually referred as “menstrual cup”. We argue that this device has played a key role in bringing the menstrual experience to the fore (even if unintentionally) and as such it is central to the aesthetico-political mobilization of menstrual blood. Instead of mixing menstrual blood with cotton, as the absorbents usually do, the silicon cup allows the blood to remain liquid and palpable, providing women a new ‘affordance’ (Latour 2005: 72) in their experience with menstruation: a plastic experience with its color, texture and smell.

As needles and syringes do with the blood that runs through the veins (Copeman 2013), it is precisely this device’s agency as an efficient collector that invites women to access the materiality of their menstrual blood. Felitti (2016) argues that the menstrual cup presents itself nowadays as a better alternative to tampons, which were considered during the 1970s as a “liberation device” as far as menstruation is concerned. The menstrual cup is now presented as a tool to enhance feminine knowledge and power, in tune with premises of care, both of the body and of the environment, since the cup is not disposable (Felitti 2016: 180).

Using material collected in websites, blogs, Facebook profiles and workshops about the menstrual cycle in Argentina, Felitti explores interesting aspects related to contemporary body techniques to deal with menstrual bleedings. Not only do these techniques vary between the absorbance and collection of menstrual blood through the (hygienic) devices available, but there are also claims for “freeing the flow”, that is, using no element at all to contain the menstrual blood. The movement that advises the “free flow” invites women into the apprenticeship of bodily signals, such as muscular contractions of the vagina to retain or liberate the flux.

The possibility of efficiently collecting menstrual blood is not made explicit, but somehow presupposed in “Beco do Encarnado” (Alley Incarnate). In this performance, Carol Azevedo (2016) also explores the (in) visibility of naked feminine body and menstrual blood. Presented at the Espaço Experimental CEM, “Centro em Movimento” (Experimental Space Movement Center), in Lisbon 2016, the performance resembles the previous two described above, also bringing menstruation as a central theme.

Wearing a long white dress, the performer slowly walks across the empty white room and stops in front of the big screen that projects a video of a person in a bathtub. At first, we can only see this person’s two feet and, between them, a large portion of menstrual blood. Her leaking vagina appears in a short movement of the camera, while the woman on stage places a transparent recipient full of (menstrual) blood on the floor and slowly undresses. She then proceeds to caressing her body and blood-painting it with her hands. In the meantime, the bathtub is filled with water and we can see it diluting the menstrual blood, altering the color intensity of the liquid contained in the tub. As this mixture of water and blood is drained, and the bathtub

emptied, the women painted in blood stands with her arms up and opened. The video ends going back to the image of the bathtub filled with water/blood and the performer carefully places the thin straps of her white dress through her arms, wearing it in the back, like a cloak. She slowly crosses the room, walking through the audience, naked and with menstrual blood painted in her front, and finally leaves the room fully undressed.

The Brazilian artist describes her performance “Beco do Encarnado” on Facebook as a “stitching that verses about the presence of a body and an interrogation about the feminine chromatic, a crop of gestures and non-gestures and their possible landscapes within the same color”.¹⁷ This plastic experience of menstrual blood becoming palpable and its conjunction with the politics of turning visible the invisible, making debatable what used to be confined to the sphere of the intimate and personal, turn these ‘menstrual performances’ into powerful polysemic statements.

Picturing blood: photographs, paintings and social networks

So far we have focused on menstrual performances in artistic settings, inspired by Turner’s conception of performance (1986), which articulates an experience made relevant and the social structures it mobilizes. The idea that there is a ‘structure of experience’ presupposes these performances are somehow detached from regular mundane activities, and demarcated on space and time, with what Dewey (2005) called ‘an initiation and a consummation’. If it is true that in postmodern societies art, as well as science, play the role of religious practices and concepts, then these menstrual performances can be seen as providing a suspension of the regular social order to elicit a special kind of aesthetic experience.

Such experience is definitely more evident in artistic settings (even in the less traditional scenarios of contemporary body art), and yet we argue that a similar structure can also be identified in the way menstrual blood appears in drawings and photographs. The ‘structure of experience’ subjacent to menstrual performances involve, as we have tried to delineate, an exploration of menstrual blood’s plasticity: its color red, its palpability and texture; its ‘psychotropic’ agency that assembles aspects connected to fertility, femininity, life and death; the political impact caused by giving the menstrual blood, which would otherwise be discarded as an excrement, an aesthetic expression.

Many women artists have mobilized this structure, making menstrual blood visible in art exhibits and public images in general. In “Red is the Colour”, the French-born artist and photographer Ingrid Berthon-Moine (2011) presents “a series of 12 portraits of women wearing their menstrual blood as lipstick”, exploring the blood’s agency to work as facial makeup. According to her:

The composition is uniform and carefully follows the guidelines of ID photographs for passports but blown up to human size. Similarly, a woman’s period is a passport which signals the most intimate individual journey towards feminine maturity. The photographs are taken at the subject’s eye level and they directly gaze at the viewer. They are mounted on MDF, full bleed for the viewer’s gaze to focus only on the face of the woman without distraction from a frame or separation by glass. The photographs are presented as two rows of six portraits, separated by 10 cm, allowing the viewer an intimate study of each portrait and at the same time, feeling the gaze of the other portraits. Putting the images on two rows reinforces the power these women have on the viewer and pose the question, whose turn is it to be embarrassed now? (Berthon-Moine 2011: 247-248).

¹⁷ Free translation.

Red is the Colour – Ingrid Berthon-Moine (2009)



Produced in 2009 as part of her MA thesis for the London College of Communication, Berthon-Moine's portraits highlight the shared redness of both menstrual blood and lipsticks, which is further emphasized by naming each photograph after typical in cosmetics' color codes, such as "Rouge Hollywood", "Merlot", "Red Taboo" or "La Femme on Rouge". The women's reaction to the artist's invitation to participate in the project by using their own menstrual blood as a lipstick is also notable – a mix of surprise, estrangement and, only after that, and for some of them, compliance.¹⁸

In an article published at a journal dedicated to discuss "menstruation matters" (Bobel and Kissling 2011), Berthon-Moine describes this set of photographs in a similar way to what we have seen in other performances:

"Red is The Colour" questions female identity through the photographic portrait: ideology, passion, and aesthetics collide and photography is used as a space for expression, for conflict, and hopefully evolution. (Berthon-Moine 2011: 248).

The use of menstrual blood in photographs like these is part of a larger academic and political movement, also known as "menstrual activism" (Bobel 2010; Bobel and Kissling 2011). Allocated under the academic umbrella of gender studies in the United States, scholar and activists in this movement articulate menstruation to feminist issues and the liberation of women's bodies from social constrictions. According to the organizers,

[...] more generally, a focus on menstruation is part of a complex and enduring feminist project of loosening the social control of women's bodies, of working to move women's bodies from object to subject status - something absolutely foundational to a host of contemporary issues, from human trafficking to eating disorders to sexual assault (Bobel and Kissling 2011: 123).

Menstrual activism actualizes demands made visible since the second wave of feminism, in the 1960's and 1970's, with a new 'third wave' gaze that also incorporates internet and the social networks, as well as discussions about intersections with ethnic-racial, LGBT and class related social movements, among many others (Bobel 2010).

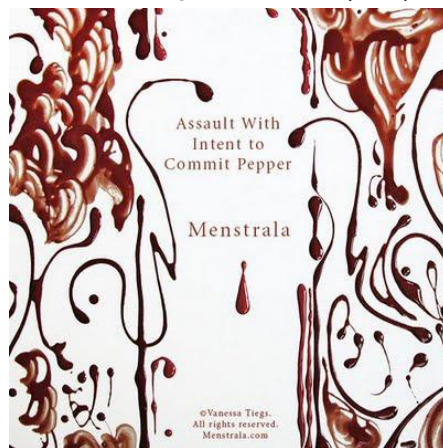
¹⁸ Some of these reactions can be seen at the second video available at: <http://www.reframingphotography.com/artists/ingrid-berthon-moine>

Up to now, as far as the menstrual performances previously presented showed, we can say human (female) body worked as an efficient support for menstrual body-painting,¹⁹ and the video and photographs as durable records of the images produced. But we can also include in this movement the attempt to explore menstrual blood's plastic agency as ink.

Vanessa Tiegs is one of the first contemporary artists who has explored this technique.²⁰ With the "Menstrala" project, she has created 88 paintings using her menstrual blood, "affirming the hidden forbidden bright red cycle of renewal" (Tiegs 2003).

The *Menstrala* paintings are statements about the monthly renewal cycle. I have chosen to address menstruation visually. It's too easy to joke about menstruation because it's hidden. I wanted to do something visually creative about this part of life we choose to forget. So I created these images of and about menstrual blood. My paintings serve as a reminder that menstruation can be addressed openly and that this time in the fertility cycle can be creative (Tiegs 2011: 222).

Vanessa Tiegs – Menstrala (2003)



As with the martyrs' portraits in India, paintings with menstrual blood tend to evanesce. Although the special impact of these paintings is connected to the use of a bodily part (menstrual blood) to paint the pictures, the 'ink' had to be mixed with an acrylic element in order to be efficiently fixed on the support.

The project "Beauty in Blood" on the other hand is more directly engaged with the experience of menstruating itself. The American artist Jen Lewis²¹ describes the project, and its connection to feminist issues:

There is more to my art than simply bleeding into the toilet each month. Each image is substantially more than a crass or vulgar image thrown up on a wall for mass shock appeal. Creating each piece of work is a four-step process bookended by concept and intellect: media collection, pouring/design layout, photographic capture, and finally photograph selection. Interestingly, this conceptual feminist art project is not an independent women's only project. While the subject matter and overall thrust of the project are feminist at their core, *Beauty in Blood* is a collective project executed by myself and my male partner, Rob Lewis. Feminism

19 The body provides an important surface for painting in body art in general, as well as in indigenous societies where the relations between body and person are different. For a good review of Amerindian experiences of body paint and decoration, and the important role played by skin and blood in body figurations and life itself, see Demarchi 2013.

20 In her website, Vanessa Tiegs defines herself as an artist, ballet mentor and consultant to other artists. She has lived between Paris, Amsterdam and San Francisco, and graduated from Smith College with a major in Architectural History and a minor in Music Theory. She also has a Master's Degree in "Women's Spirituality" from New College of California.

21 Jen Lewis received a Bachelor degree in the History of Art at the University of Michigan in 2001 and has been working with menstruation since she started using a menstrual cup in 2012. Her partner, Rob Lewis, is a skater, illustrator, videographer, photographer and designer, and works with Jen in the production of the images for the project Beauty in Blood.

is as much about men who promote women's rights as it is about the women who fight for the movement, so enlisting a male artist to move this project forward was a completely natural step. From start to finish, each creation ties together guiding principles from conceptual art, photography, and feminism in the contemporary United States (Lewis 2016).

Beauty in blood (Lewis 2016)



Her description reveals the menstrual cup as central to the body techniques involved in the creative process, and the plastic experience of removing it and watching the 'beauty' of blood mixing and diluting in the water of the toilet bowl.

When the time comes, Rob fires up the studio lights in our bathroom, gets into position with the camera, and I begin to dump, drizzle, and drip the bloody matter into a clean toilet bowl and other clear vessel. Some pours mimic a 'real life' dump, i.e. quick and unintentional, into the bowl while others are more carefully executed with particular attention paid to the height and pouring technique with specific intention to render 'beautiful' or 'interesting' designs. Composition is crucial to the final image and it is comprised of equal parts pouring and chance movement of the material in the water (Lewis 2016).

She also provides a relatively detailed description of the texture of the material collected with the menstrual cup, as she refers to the photographic capture. Her personal plastic experience with the use of the cup opened the possibility of exploring menstrual blood's aesthetic potential:

After just a few uses, it was evident to me that this blood closely mimicked the properties of paint. I quickly became entranced by the designs the poured blood made in the toilet: the stark contrast of bright crimson against the porcelain white bowl; the various plunging speeds at which the clots, fluid, and tissue travelled to the bottom; and the patterns made by the liquid upon its first impact with the water and the subsequent patterns made as it dispersed through the water. There was a captivating, unexpected yet undeniable attractiveness there in the bowl before me that I had never previously observed. The socially conditioned 'ew' response was instantly and wholly drowned out by the vibrant design (Lewis 2016).

If I bled blue – Jen Lewis (2016)



The picture above, “If I bled blue”, plays with the usual representation of menstruation on absorbent’s commercials, which have been criticized by feminists as a symptom of the public discomfort with menstrual blood’s visibility. We could then say one of the causes (and also effects) of ‘menstrual activism’ and menstrual performances is the concern with turning the experience of menstruation, and menstrual blood itself, more visible and/or positive.

The performances, photographs and paintings represent an attempt to make the experience of menstruation more visible and/or positive through an artistic display. But the symbolic potential of menstrual blood is also explored in other settings. A recent TV commercial addresses the critique that absorbent commercials never represent actual blood, but a hypothetical blue liquid. The commercial, called “Blood”, shows women running, boxing, dancing ballet, skating, surfing, playing football. The physical injuries women suffer in these different challenging situations make them bleed, but none of them gives up. The slogans accompanying these images - “No blood should hold us back” and “Live fearless” - suggest that facing menstruation upfront should also be an act of courage and force (Libresse 2016).

The experience with the use of menstrual cup, though, is being articulated in social networks as a revolution that will eventually substitute the use of disposable artifacts (Felitti 2016). Communities of Facebook and numerous blogs are addressing the issue, working as an important source of apprenticeship of body techniques and feminist empowerment. Yet menstruation is only one of subjects discussed through this medium. Other themes related to fertility and reproduction - such as pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and childcare - are also frequent topics in these communities.

We would like to suggest that there is, in this context, a more general process of making bodily experiences relevant, shared, narrated and debated, beyond an strictly biomedical framework. In these discussion groups, and on tutorial videos shared online, not only do women hear about the menstrual cup, but they also learn how to buy, the different brands available, to insert and take off, how to care for it, and what can be done with the menstrual blood collected by the cup. In this context, many women engage with the plastic experience of painting and drawing with their own blood, and share these images online.

On many occasions, social networks have blocked them (or had their posts/images censored). In 2015, after posting a picture that showed a sleeping woman with her pants stained by menstrual blood, part of a visual rhetoric university project called “Period”, the young Indian artist and writer Rupri Kaur received

a message from the social network Instagram saying her post was removed because it didn't follow [their] "Community Guidelines". Her answer and Instagram's apologies "went viral", turning her "menstrual activism" into a big controversy (Kaur 2016).

Rupi Kaur – Period (2016)



According to her website, the purpose of this photo series was to "challenge a taboo", to tell a story about menstruation without the use of words:

[...] we menstruate and they see it as dirty. attention seeking. sick. a burden. as if this process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful (Kaur 2016).

Final thoughts

In this article, we depart from a brief review of anthropological perspectives on the theme of (menstrual) blood, ritual and performance as a means to understand the emergence of *menstrual performances* in contemporary society. The classical literature on ritual symbolism was developed in reference to small-scale societies, based on the premise that social cohesion and well-defined social roles provided the context for rituals to be experienced as moments of emotional effervescence and social renewal.

In contemporary menstrual performances (and artwork), the very notion of context and its intrinsic relation to the meanings attributed to such performances can no longer be taken for granted. The artistic settings in which these performances are conceived and performed are certainly marked by social class. The specific structure and logic of these performances are only possible within a certain sociological context – the exhibits' seasonality, the politics behind the attribution of different levels of legitimacy and prestige to artistic centers and galleries, etc. (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1992). The artists presented here are mostly white well-educated women with a university degree, coming from a middle to upper-middle class background, who had access not only to an artistic education but also to debates on feminism and women's body liberation as a political issue. It is also true that these topics (body art, performance and feminism) are rather marginal in the world of fine arts and traditional art exhibits.

Yet, because these performances are associated with leisure and voluntary choices, the meanings derived from these performances are not as deeply connected to specific and well-established points in

social space and time as in small-scale societies²². Since these performances are quite often filmed and reproduced in cyberspace to quite diverse audiences and moments, it becomes even harder to anchor them in contexts of situated practices and cultural meanings. We are also interested, as we tried to point out, in how these performances and experiences “leak” into non-artistic settings, stimulating mundane experiences with the plasticity and beauty of menstrual blood by women in general.

With that in mind, we turned our attention to the structure of experience in menstrual performances, more specifically, the ways in which these performances bring (menstrual) blood related experiences to the fore, inducing moments of emotional effervescence, social transformation and reflexivity, in spite of the ever-shifting set of contexts in which people act and interact in contemporary society. Rather than denying the importance of context in the interpretation of performances, that meant attending to the metalinguistic and poetic functions of performances (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Bauman and Briggs use the concept of performance developed by linguistic anthropology, but their insights about verbal art as performance also apply to other forms of artistic expression, as the ones examined in this article. According to them, performance is:

a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood. Performance puts the act of speaking on display – objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. (...) By its very nature, then, performance potentiates decontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73).

Likewise, by using menstrual blood as a stylistic device and/or turning the body into canvas, the performances examined in this article put the female body and menstrual blood related experiences on display. And not as something that is talked about or referred to, but as the very medium of (artistic) expression. Thus, while some artists might use the menstrual blood to refer to experiences related to fertility and maternity, such as Isa Sanz, others simply explore the visual symbolism of the color red, as Berthon-Moine in “Red is the color”. In the latter’s work, the color red indexes not just menstrual blood but also lipstick, expanding ideas around the essence of female identity beyond the traditional references to fertility cycles. And Matricardi, in her “Pintura Corporal de Guerra”, highlights the very gesture of painting her own body with blood-ink, by linking it to body decoration practices allegedly performed by men in preparation for war. In a single performance, different contexts, practices and genders are brought together into a single experience, challenging traditional meanings associated to the different elements composing the performance.

Although the anthropological literature has shown that menstrual related experiences are symbolically marked in many cultures, more often than not the ritual practices and body techniques developed around these experiences aimed at concealing the blood, or restraining it to demarcated, and private, places. The menstrual performances we discuss here represent an important change in that regards since, by taking menstrual blood out of its invisibility, and to the center of artistic expressions with its color and plasticity, they work towards reconfiguring the experience of menstruation in new and creative ways.

Devices like the menstrual cup, the cyberspace and digital social networks also compose the aggregate that make it possible to exploit the aesthetical agency of menstrual blood, providing a new perspective for feminism, and art. Although the performances described here refer to carefully designed artwork, these devices also invite less articulated performances by menstrual cup users in general. In doing that, they orchestrate a slow but deep reconfiguration of the symbolic uses of bodily processes.

²² Which is not to say that in small-scale societies, unforeseen new meanings do not emerge. As Victor Turner pointed out, liminal states might serve not only to reinforce the status quo but also to enable social transformation.

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