

# EUMENIDES

## Inscribing body and language

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Visual arts, literature, theatre or film have often dealt with mythology, making it the subject of different approaches and interests. On one hand, the artistic and cultural production approached mythology as a type of topic or motif that is reproduced again and transferred from one (literary) work to another, or focused its interest on archetypal categories that persist as driving constellations of fabular patterns, characters and their relationships. In fact, Cassirer in his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* defines "mythical thought" as a specific process of objectivation of the world, while Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Savage Mind (La Pensée sauvage)* places elements of mythical thought half way between (sensory) perceptions and (scientific) notions. In such a constellation myth is given the role of operator in the reorganization of the two fields, the binary opposition. As the central mechanism of the "savage mind", it is mainly an instrument for Levi-Strauss, a tool used to conceptualize the sensory perception and which, in some kind of hierarchical semiotic upgrade, serves as a mediator between the changing or shifting sharp contradictions in the life of a community.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Marxist critique introduced myth in the field of ideology for demythologizing well-coordinated mechanisms framing social layers, while feminist critique provided tools for deconstruction of consolidated patterns.

(...) *beyond the myth there is, forever, but another, myth...*<sup>2</sup>

In her interdisciplinary and transmedial artistic practice, Lala Raščić brings together various positions and strategies, media and languages, and most often starts from a narrative text she develops and with elements of dramaturgy and theatricalization, she interprets it further in a symbiotic mix of artistic media such as audio drama, live epic storytelling, installation, video, performances, drawings. By superimposing media and playing with genres, codes and conventions, Lala Raščić creates impressive, suggestive environments on the verge between reality and fiction.

Lala Raščić's artistic practice develops at the crossroads of

performance, video, speech, language and text, with the artist almost regularly appearing in the first person, as the carrier of speech, of narrative performance, as someone who tells stories, claims Jelena Vesić.<sup>3</sup> Lala Raščić also takes over the various roles of actress/performer, dramaturg, director, and artist in her works.

*Through its opposition to pure movement, the act, Mallarme suggests, is what leaves traces. Now there are no traces without language.*<sup>4</sup>

According to the theory of speech acts, *How to do things with words?* as Austin would ask, is one of the questions in the focus of Lala Raščić's artistic re- search, whose analyses develop through an intriguing, almost dramatic tension between the fields of textuality and narration.<sup>5</sup> There is no act of speech without the body, points out Judith Butler in the afterword of the American edition of Shoshana Felman's book *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*.<sup>6</sup> It was the body that was missing in the title of the first English translation of the book, however it is exactly in the talking of performatives where the body occupies a central position. The relationship between the speech and the body is inseparable. This was simultaneously discovered by psychoanalysis and linguistics, says Felman.<sup>7</sup> The mysterious and controversial product of the body, the act of speech, sheds

light on the metaphysical dichotomy of body and spirit, matter and language. The body, points out Lacan, spawns from speech as such.<sup>8</sup> Lala Raščić skillfully balances between language and performance. Whether we speak about *The Eumenides*, *The Damn Dam*, *Sorry Wrong Number* or *The Invisibles*, the most common starting point of her artistic research is the text itself, starting the processes of its own unfolding and layering. A similar attitude to text and performatives can also be found in her new work *The Eumenides*, which in Lala's interpretation becomes a reconceptualization of text and theatricality, as well as a specific visual language.

*The Eumenides* is a single-channel video work that stems from the appropriation of Jean Paul Sartre's drama *The Flies* and an inscription of new meanings. The drama is developed on the background of Greek mythology, myths of Orestes and Electra and was written in 1941 during the Nazi occupation of France. *The Flies* is a three-act drama, while in her *The Eumenides* Lala Raščić deconstructs the existing text and brings a new textual segment by adding a (non-existent) fourth act.

We learn about the structure of the work in the introduction sentences of a male voice over. The first act of *The Eumenides* in which Orestes speaks is based on the last monologue in the third act of Sartre's *The Flies*, while the second act functions as a point of interruption/cohesion or commentary, as some kind of experimental vignette in which the Furies/Erinyes, goddesses of vengeance, speak, alluding to the role of the chorus in Greek theatre.

Developing as the fourth act of *The Flies*, *The Eumenides* present a dis- course on freedom. The result is a new dramatic text written by Lala Raščić and Andreja Dugandžić. The construction of the new text, combining a number of references from Sartre, Greek mythology, tragedy and existentialism, enables the creation of a new narrative. *The Eumenides* thus become a text that expands and reproduces within itself. It keeps traces of past (hi)stories that continue to be inscribed and dissolved in new contexts and break in a series of moments, collective and individual, visible and invisible histories written on the margins, in footnotes. It deals with forms of transposition and translation, rereading, composition and the process of the production of meaning, showing how meaning is transferred and transformed and how the circumstances of the discourse change from one context to another, through recognition or repetition. The newly developed situation imagines Electra on the throne, addressing her subjects after Agamemnon's death and Orestes' departure. *What does it mean to be free?* - asks the crowd after decades of subjugation. Speaking about the possibility of freedom, emancipation and the utopian potential, the search for meaning, the protagonists face the burden of freedom and the (im)possibility of change.

*The Eumenides*, a performative video, is structured in three acts, i.e. three parts, placing in the center the artist herself playing two characters - Orestes in the first act and Electra in the third part. By doing so, it becomes obvious that playing with gender identity and the concept of gender is not strange or unknown in the works of Lala Raščić, and the multitude of roles and positions speaks more than only about the techniques of theatrical costuming and the expenditure of identity typical for the ideology of theatre.<sup>9</sup>

The central dramaturgic, visual and conceptual place is taken by Electra as the only protagonist, the empowered female figure and a focus around which the plot of the new dramatic text is structured. The third act of the *The Eumenides* is developed as a

dialogue between Electra and the invisible crowd (people whose collective voice reaches us from the off space, the invisible space outside the frame). The scene is theatrical. Alone on stage, the figure of the artist in a costume repeating the model of the antique drapery emerges from darkness, lit only by the dramatic chiaroscuro of the spotlights. The stage lighting and other props are reduced to a functional minimum. On a relatively empty, stripped scene, almost without props, there is just the figure of the performer, alone. Lala Raščić presents her narrative performance as a form of political speech and a kind of one-man, or better, a one-woman show, directing her attention to the observer, addressing the public with gaze, movement, voice and gesture.

The solo exhibition by Lala Raščić at the Lapidarium Museum includes the projection of her recent performative video *The Eumenides* framed by various architectural fragments - from fragments of early medieval stone monuments, artefacts belonging to the permanent display of Lapidarium collection, to the existing contemporary museum architecture of geometrical black surfaces, cubes and volumes in the interior of the museum, reminding us of a black box and functioning together as elements of a new scenography of the exhibition display, creating the specific environment by intertwining with the video projection and *Electra's Costume*, both a prop and an independent sculptural element, a carrier of meaning. The exhibition is arranged around the video installation, which is its central point, and is structured as a series of elements - video, text and object as a prop of some possible setting, create the impression of a specific staging oscillating between theatricalization of the exhibition space and the museum architecture, developing as a dialogue with the existing collection display of the Lapidarium, as a form of intervention. The attention is directed to the atmosphere and the experience of the work itself, to the ways of its exhibiting and reception, as well as to the complex relations of the contemporary subject in the media-saturated space and time. In that way *The Eumenides* by Lala Raščić - a video work based on antique mythology in the interpretation of the artist - engages the space of the museum. The museum becomes a stage framing the artist's staging and the dramaturgy of the exhibition creates the idea of a site specific installation, as a constellation of fragments, projected images and objects meeting in the space of the exhibition, connecting old and new, contemporary artistic production that is temporarily inscribed in the museum display, reactivates it through new narratives of representation and exhibition, pointing out their context and

projecting myth and fiction, creating a new space of unclear boundaries and a specific atmosphere.

1\_ V. Biti: *Pojmovnik suvremene književne teorije*, Matica Hrvatska, 1997.

2\_ Shoshana Felman, quoted in: V. Biti: *Pojmovnik suvremene književne teorije*, Matica Hrvatska, 1997.

3\_ Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić - Vlidi: A Story as "The Truth is Disguise" - *On the Passion of the Speaker; Lala's Reader, Parasite*, Ljubljana, 2014.

4\_ Shoshana Felman: *Skandal tijela u govoru (The Scandal of the Speaking Body)*; Naklada MD, Zagreb, 1993.

5\_ Vladimir Vidmar: *How to do things with words*, exhibition catalogue for Lala Raščić: *How to Do Things with Words? / Kako činiti stvari riječima?* Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, 2014, curator: Vladimir Vidmar.

6\_ The first translation of Shoshana Felman's *Le Scandale du corps parlant* (1980) in English from 1984 was entitled *The Literary Speech Act*. 7\_ Shoshana Felman: *Skandal tijela u govoru (The Scandal of the Speaking Body)*; Naklada MD, Zagreb, 1993.

8\_ idem.

9\_ Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić - Vlidi: A Story as "The Truth is Disguise" - *On the Passion of The Speaker; Lala's Reader, Parasite*, Ljubljana, 2014.