

# Staging Gorgo

by Jasna Jakšić

*In turn she gazes at herself in the bronze of night, in the silver of dawn, in the copper of dusk;  
In the gold of midday, she stares at herself.  
- Kali Beheaded (M. Yourcenar)*

Gorgona – a mythical monster and an ancient victim. A head, a spoil of battle, a merciless weapon that petrifies the enemy. Medusa,<sup>1</sup> as the severed head of the only mortal among the three Gorgon sisters, has been warding off evil spirits for centuries, forewarning of potential fate. The allure of a human face fringed with snake tresses metaphorically turns the gazer into stone: the severed head radiates with deadly life. In the history of visual arts Medusa's head, the Gorgoneion, occupies a unique place – as a distinct element of architectural ornamentation, sculpture, or coinage, as a scene on a Grecian vase, or an accidentally preserved Pompeian fresco. She slumbers in the waters of the Basilica Cistern of late classical Constantinople, stares at us as a lonely, ancient emblem from the Greek temple in Sicilian Syracuse, and with a monstrous grimace and theatrical, ornamental body posture receives the final blow on the architrave of the Selinunte temple. The archaic depiction of Medusa's terrifying and tragic figure was a dreadful form of indeterminate gender, with bared teeth and a mighty beard. Centuries later, she had metamorphosized from monster into androgynous victim of dignified beauty, like the famous Medusa Rondanini. This trunkless head serves not only to avert spells or menace adversaries – as an aestheticized evil eye or severed enemy head mounted as trophy – but also testifies to the extreme violence that is normalized into culture through myth.

Craig Owens writes about the “Medusa effect” as of the force that, in the terrifying use of the image as a weapon, stages the unity of the seer and the seen.<sup>2</sup> It is one way to describe the visual appeal and abhorrence caused by violence, captured in the image of Medusa's harmonious, youthfully androgynous face, in contrast to the snake hair that surrounds it, and the naturalistic portrayal of the cut veins at her neck. This attraction and repulsion is death itself: violence as the subject of every story and myth, especially origin and foundation myths. Although the Medusa story has been told in numerous versions, among the ancient literary sources Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is probably the most famous. *Metamorphoses* is an epic poem in which myths intertwine with the animal and vegetal world, in which the bodies of heroes and heroines, driven by blind desire as well as merciless fate, are turned into plants, beasts, rivers, and lakes, testifying to the generative power of violence.

As a monster who dies twice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medusa shares the destiny with Kali in *Kali Beheaded* from a story by Marguerite Yourcenar, a free interpretation of the Indian myth. Due to the envy and jealousy of gods, they both became objects of violence, initially placed in the position of passive victims. Their hybrid and monstrous nature is revealed after the transformation – but whereas Kali haunts cemeteries and obscure back alleys, seeking the company of the humiliated and the spurned in her corporal adventures, Medusa petrifies all life around her, capturing the moment of visual fascination for eternity. One of the three

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<sup>1</sup> Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters who ruled the remote islet, and the only mortal among them. She was known for being able to turn her victims into stone by her gaze. There are numerous versions of the Medusa myth, which would later become the myth of Perseus. The Gorgoneion is an ornament shaped as Medusa's head, but is also associated with red coral, which, according to Ovid's version of the myth, sprang out of her petrified blood after her second killing.

<sup>2</sup> Owens, Craig, from “The Medusa Effect, or the Specular Ruse”, in *The Medusa Reader*, eds. Marjorie Garber, Nancy J. Vickers, (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 203-209.

Gorgon daughters of Phorcys and Ceto, born from the intricate and incestuous union of primordial divine powers, Medusa only threatens those who venture into her remote and solitary abode. In a later version of the myth, before becoming a monster, Medusa was known for her beauty, especially the beauty of her hair. Having been raped by Poseidon as a guardian of Athena's temple, she was punished by the very goddess in whose sanctuary the act of violence had become a sacrilege: Athena transformed Medusa's curls into snakes. Thus, it was the victim who was punished for the act of violence. Nor did her suffering end there.

Some ancient writers, such as Pausanias, already speculated that Medusa may have been a queen of Libya or of some unknown Amazonian tribe, killed by Perseus in her sleep. Fascinated by the beauty of the head, Perseus decided to keep it, more as a beautiful object than a trophy. Psychoanalysis and art history, as Julia Kristeva has observed,<sup>3</sup> have long recognized the form of female genitalia in Medusa's shape, in all their repulsive attraction – and the violence against the mythical figure is a response to the fear of castration, but also the drive to separate from the mother's body. But whether she is a forgotten historical personality, a prefiguration of bodily maturation, or an incarnation of the ancient matriarchal powers, in the bloody orgies of ancient myths every contact with Medusa brings about the horror of petrification, even in the interaction with herself. Many later interpretations of the triad of Medusa, Perseus, and Andromeda have sought for a harmonious, conciliatory explanation, but this harmony has always implied a transformation of the female figure – partly divine, partly human, and partly animal – into a meek, mild, modest, and grateful bride by the act of extreme violence.<sup>4</sup>

Medusa's figure has entered the work of Lala Raščić through the latest series of artworks in which the artist has used the medium of video performance to offer a new reading of ancient myths and stories that form the foundation of Western culture, primarily of visual arts and literature. These stories, which contain overt elements of misogyny, and whose function has often been to tame women's freedom, desire, or merely their right to speak up, have prompted new reading through Raščić's scripts and staging, in which anger and rebellion are the result of the expressive possibilities of the embodied heroines. Raščić's video works are often combined with physical objects and documentation that relate to the creative process itself. This methodology of staging was present in the artist's previous work as well, such as the installation *Sorry, Wrong Number* from 2006, in which she combined radiophony with elements of film noir – a genre that built suspense by introducing the femme fatale, shaped on the cusp of appeal and abhorrence, and who almost always ended as a lifeless body woven into the pulse of these noir scenarios, based on violence and sexual attraction. The heroine of *Sorry, Wrong Number* is a victim who desperately resists her physical, forced passivity, and her murder happens not only in the physical, but also in the technological sphere. A later performance staged by Raščić combined a contemporary mythical narrative about the general panic caused by the broadcasting of the radio drama *Catastrophe* in the post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina – comparable to the legendary panic that Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* caused in America in the 1950s – with the announcement of an ecological as well as human disaster, introducing the topic of rebelling nature and its prefiguration. This primarily refers to Raščić's work *The Damned Dam*, but later on, giving voice and visibility to the silenced and despised, the artist increasingly introduced the emancipatory element of anger in her performances. This was particularly the case with her *Evil Earth*, which indirectly pointed to the rebellion of the Earth (according to Hesiod's *Theogony* of Medusa's grandmother Gaea) against the human yoke.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *The Severed Head*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Leeming, David, *Medusa in the Mirror of Time*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p. 112.

*The Eumenides*, Raščić's first work in a series that suggests new readings of ancient myths and stories, in the vein of novels by Christa Wolf dealing with the fates of Cassandra and Medea, was written in collaboration with the Sarajevo-based poet, artist, and activist Andreja Dugandžić. An imaginary fourth act of Sartre's *Flies* includes a monologue of Electra, who crowns herself queen of Argos after the bloody vengeance of her brother Orestes and his departure. The script is based on Sartre's existentialist drama that reinterprets events in Nazi-occupied France through characters taken from the *Oresteia*. In an accentuated performance, Electra expresses the angst and bitterness of a heroine in a world and system based on and feeding off brutality, and she eventually undermines the very core of society from her newly acquired position of power. The Eumenides, goddesses of revenge also known as *merciful*, leave Orestes in Sartre and turn to Electra's figure. The feminist construction of a role that would have been played exclusively by men had it been written at the time of the *Oresteia*, finally offers a new reading of this existentialist drama that deals with the relationship between the individual and the collective, between personal morality and the law, in which Electra is an angry and labile helper, and as such an emotional counterbalance to the rational and Apollonian Orestes. Of the series of video performances by Raščić, *The Eumenides* comes closest to the classical theatre, with costume design based on classical Greek drapery and masks that bring theatre back to the era of ritual enactments.

Such an approach to female characters, which in like forms of pathos inhabit the world of Western culture, opens up the space for another character from the complex formal and narrative structure of *Metamorphoses* – the self-confident and proud weaver Arachne. She does not owe her social reputation to origin or family, but solely to her own skill, her *techné*. Arachne even dared to challenge Athena, the same Athena who had already relegated the raped Medusa into the world of monsters, allowed her to be decapitated, and had the head triumphantly displayed on her shield after Perseus' final victory. Furthermore, Athena's rage was caused by the fact that at some stage Medusa had challenged the virgin goddess-warrior in beauty, according to one of the versions of the Medusa myth. In the light of this, Arachne is the main character of the video *EE-0*, whose script Raščić developed and wrote together with Dugandžić and theorist Jelena Petrović, while the performance was filmed at the Lumbardhi Cinema in Prizren, Kosovo.<sup>5</sup>

Arachne, subsequently transformed into a spider by Athena, does not radiate Medusa's terrible attraction of horror, and has no origin in old apotropaic customs. She had but provoked Athena and thus became involved in the acts of injustice of Olympic over mortals and other beings. Arachne's weaving (the connection between weaving and text is not only in the narrative, illustrative potential of the tapestry, but also in the etymology itself: *texere* is Latin for to weave) is not hierarchical: the stories string along in an associative sequence and she challenges the principles of deduction and linear narration, apart from delivering a

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<sup>5</sup> *EE-0* is a site-specific video produced for Lumbardhi Cinema commissioned by KADIST and Lumbardhi Foundations, as a part of the three-year project *Not Fully Human, Not Human at All*. In *EE-0*, the Greek myth of Arachne is re-contextualized in a poetic script, taking an imaginative leap from antiquity into science fiction. Skewed and subverted storylines from classic mythology are combined with anecdotal episodes found through field research in and around Prizren. Ideas of repressed ancient female knowledge and power are probed by story-ing of local urban myths, customs, and current sociological, ecological, and cultural phenomena. The video is carried by the performer, who is seen enacting text in a theatrical setting, and her gradual transformation into the spider-character of Arachne. Reacting to the specific site of production of *EE-0*: Kosovo, Europe's youngest nation-state, the idea of *becoming* is explored through the idea of genesis, transformation, metamorphosis. *EE-0* is the first episode of the *Europa Enterprise* project and is based on the project's methodologies and concepts of research and new feminist readings of established myths and reconsiderations of the meaning of cultural heritage and the production of artifacts for the future. *EE-0* is ground zero for the further development of the *Europa Enterprise* project founded Dugandžić, Petrović, and Raščić. *Europa Enterprise* is a base for artistic research in which performative, discursive, narrative and audio-visual formats are created based on new readings of Eurocentric myths and regional legends and legacies.

blasphemous account of godly misbehavior. Transformed into a spider, Arachne returned to the animal world to create netlike structures whose forms resisted all patriarchal and militarist formations. In her introduction to a book dedicated to women's art in Yugoslavian cultural space between the two world wars, Petrović used the term "Arachne method" to describe a strategy of deconstruction that uses negative gender bias, thus degrading women's script, and the reconstruction of female authorship by creating new inter-textual networks.<sup>6</sup> Both Arachne and Medusa feature in the *City of Women* by the 15<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and writer Christine de Pizan,<sup>7</sup> one of the first feminist utopias written in the Western world. Through Arachne's character performed by Raščić, the artist merges the wedding masks of Kosovar brides that, in their web-like patterns, look inherited from some archaic ornaments from Thrace (the homeland of the gender-ambivalent god Dionysus), with the splendid mask of Agamemnon, a funerary mask from ancient Mycenae, on which the plasticity of the human face is flattened into a linear weave. This imaginary mask of Electra's father, almost mythical in its uncertain origins, merges with the ritual net and also becomes the basis for one of the masks through which Medusa, the Gorgon – Gorgo, returns to life in the performance of Raščić.

The beheaded heroine, reduced to monstrosity, regains life through a copper armor wrought by Bosnia's sole female coppersmith, Nermina Alić. Copper, which has been used for centuries to produce weapons (the arrival of Doric tribes to the territory of today's Greece coincided with the transition from the bronze to iron ages, and probably brought the destruction of old matriarchal cults, according to Joseph Campbell and Robert Graves), but also for household objects. Now the new Medusa has been made of the same material. Her invisible figure gains shape through the armor, just as the figure of a hero in the Greek epic is inscribed, indirectly and metaphorically, into the decoration of his shield. Embodied and exposed through the armor, Gorgo hovers on the border between a theatrical situation and museum setting, the same as the other complex and multilayered works by Raščić. Elements of theatre, film, anthropology, and archaeology merge into an open exhibition format that includes documentation and a final video with sound and choreography. Her head, however, is not protected by a helmet, but by a mask: Agamemnon's mask, the mask of a female warrior, or – an actress.

Unlike in *The Eumenides* or *EE-0*, the script here is not textual or pronounced. The audio component of this work is the amplified soundtrack of clashing armor: microphones inside the armor are placed against the musculature of the artist herself, a cyborg in the making. The narrative is read from the accompanying glass objects which, like relics, indicate the magical power of the body and its parts. Stylized by in the technique of gold foil on glass, elements of Medusa's physiognomy indicate the ancient origins of the myth and Medusa's role as a guardian, which is the function of all gargoyles on the façades and gables of temples and town houses. Invoking both linear, painterly elements and sculptural stylization in their execution, the glass objects and the copper armor on display construct an imaginary tomb of an unknown ancient heroine. But she returns to life loudly, without a word, rattling her weapons and with

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<sup>6</sup> The Arachne method which was inspired by this extensive research is thus based on the concept of the transformed (inter)textuality to which the ancient Greek myth on Arachne was not implemented straightforwardly, as merely anthropological matrix of the text, but also as the embodiment of the women's authorship in the continuous process of *becoming-woman*. Petrović, Jelena, *Women's Authorship in Interwar Yugoslavia: The Politics of Love and Struggle*, (Basel: Springer Nature, 2019), p. 302.

<sup>7</sup> de Pizan, Christine, from "*The Book of the City of Ladies*", trans. by Earl Jeffrey Richards "*Medusa's Beauty*", in *The Medusa Reader*, eds. Marjorie Garber, Nancy J. Vickers, (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 57.

mute laughter behind the mask. Medusa's laughter in the reading of Hélène Cixous<sup>8</sup> sees the acknowledgment of woman's desire in the acceptance of her gaze. It is a gaze that is not bashfully hidden or obstructed by the veil: it is a gaze beyond herself and at herself and her own femininity, without the constrictions or control of shame.

Drawing on the feminist prefiguration of the raging Medusa, and with a reading that is as open and multidirectional as Arachne's weaving of her web or text, in the exhibition Gorgo, Raščić has included the work of three artists she has met in New Orleans, with whom she shares the emancipatory or subversive reading of archetypal forms. Medusa's animal nature – manifested both in her snake hair and the absence of speech – is associated with the sketchy watercolors of cat motifs by Nina Schwanse. By depicting this endearing pet (and the ancient guardian of the household and food supplies) in a way that evokes both the softness of execution and decisive brush strokes, and at the same time frightens with some vague monstrosity, Schwanse has inscribed Medusa-like features onto this social media favorite. Christina Molina introduces her imaginary figures of *Matriarchs* using staged photography in which she combines flora and fauna, elements of nature, and non-human forms of the feminine, positioning her female characters in compositions borrowed from representations of female figures in the so-called fine arts. Searching for alternative and imaginative powers of matriarchy, she creates a diagram of female manifestations across art, almost in Jungian archetypes, starting from the mythical Great Mother. Finally, what Ryn Wilson shares with Raščić and with the other artists is the principle of re-mythization, creating, on the basis of existing templates, *a new mythology for the new age* of equality, introducing the notion of witchcraft through her characters.

Medusa, like her sisters, was considered a witch, and Perseus' persecution has also been interpreted as the first witch-hunt. The woman who rejects validation through marriage and a social reproduction that gives birth to a labor force or cannon fodder (a woman who collects and preserves communal knowledge by practicing herbal medicine, birth control, seed preservation, or any other activity outside the masculine anthropocentric matrix) and the extent of the threat that such a figure of poses to the patriarchal and economic order that arises from it (feudalism, capitalism, or the growing neo-feudalism of today) has been discussed by Silvia Federici in her seminal book *Caliban and the Witch*. The disenfranchisement of women, the attempts at breaking and disciplining through systemic violence, which escalated into the epidemic witch-craze in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, coincided, by no means accidentally, with the rise of capitalism and colonial expansion. As well as continued social reproduction providing an inexhaustible pool of free labor in the household and enough workers for the hardest jobs, women and members of other races were to be systematically dehumanized and turned into submissive slaves.<sup>9</sup>

Centuries before Europeans started their colonial trajectory across the Atlantic, Greeks colonized the Mediterranean Sea, deposing female cults of the Goddess. In her text dealing

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<sup>8</sup> "Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing." Cixous, Hélène, from "The Laugh of the Medusa", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 1, No. 4., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 875-893.

<sup>9</sup> "As we will see the devaluation and feminization of reproductive labor was a disaster also for male workers, for the devaluation of reproductive labor inevitably devalued its product: labor-power. But there is no doubt that in the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism' women suffered a unique process of social degradation that was fundamental to the accumulation of capital and has remained so ever since...the demonization of American indigenous people served to justify their enslavement and plunder of their resources. In Europe, the attack waged on women justified the appropriation of their labor by men and the criminalization of their control over reproduction. Always, the price of resistance was extermination." Federici, Silvia, *Caliban and the Witch*, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), p.74...102.

with the forces of representation in cinema and desire in narrative, philosopher and theoretician Teresa de Lauretis addresses the idea of myth as an ancient narrative structure. Myths frequency tell of a hero on a journey who attains heroic status by slaying as monster, which is usually a female-gendered being. The hero's feats are then rewarded and he is able to progress and flourish. These kinds of stories are the verbalization of initiation rituals. In her attempt to open the field for discussion of women's narrative film, de Lauretis asks: How did Medusa feel while observing her own death in the reflection of Perseus' shield?<sup>10</sup> What comes after she has understood her agony through the looking glass? Finally, de Lauretis asks: Who is the observed? and not only who do we identify with – but who do the characters in the narrative choose to be? Incarnated in Raščić's performance and display, Medusa, reviving her ancient and terrifying omni-gendered traits, takes over the mask of the king and the armor of the hero. Woman and beast, witch and victim, obscene in her appearance, an inhabitant of distant islands and bandits' plunder, both loud and mute, as well as dead and alive – Medusa – Gorgo steps onto the stage and performs.

p.s.

gorgona<sup>11</sup>  
someone was gorgona  
with an eye as distant as the past of crete  
and another from mycenae  
someone looked and turned into stone

*Ivan Mandelos, from the folder Eulalia, The Witch of Grič.*

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<sup>10</sup> de Lauretis, Teresa, *Alice Doesn't*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 119

<sup>11</sup> Gorgona was also the name of an informal group of artists active in Zagreb from 1959-1963. Working on the borderline between existentialism, neo-Dadaism, and neo-avant-garde, it gathered artists and critics whose discursive artistic activity is today considered as proto-conceptual. Gorgona is also the name of an islet in the Tuscan Archipelago, which, with two prefigurations of Medusa's head, is present in the visual self-legitimation of the art group. The group consisted solely of men – Josip Vaništa, Dimitrije Bašičević, Julije Knifer, Matko Meštrović, Radoslav Putar, Miljenko Horvat, Milan Steiner, Slobodan Vuličević, Ivan Kožarić, and Đuro Seder – who, primarily through artistic institutions, but also through their own artistic activity, heralded the institutionalization of experimental art practices in Croatia and Yugoslavia. The text in the first catalogue documenting the group's activity was written by art critic Nena Dimitirijević.