

## **“My story is written on my flesh”: Dempsey & *Mary Medusa* Act Out**

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The body is one of the major texts of identity and is open to multiple oppressive forces, which can have violent consequences. Elizabeth Grosz identifies the body as a “sociocultural artifact” (115) and introduces the metaphor of the body as a book page “ready to receive” and transmit meanings (117). Grosz states that the “textual traces” created are capable of being written over and “written in contradictory ways” (117). In this paper I address performance artist Shawna Dempsey’s acts of self-invention and social critique, focussing on her performative body as a site of literal and symbolic violence written in “contradictory ways.”

Emphasizing the impact of societal norms on the body, Dempsey’s satiric performance exemplifies Grosz’s analysis of the “spiral of power-knowledge-pleasure,” in which she argues that the “body is that materiality, almost a medium, on which power operates and through which it functions” (146). In her performance piece *Mary Medusa*, Dempsey foregrounds her body as text; she attempts to rewrite patriarchal scripts while performing in the spaces circumscribed by Greek mythology, Freudian theory and Christian iconography. Dempsey and her collaborator, Lori Millan, describe their work as “Feminist, Costume-based Performance Art.” They state the “costume becomes a metaphor for the paradox we find ourselves in politically” (Bennett and Patience 9).

Performance art visually foregrounds connections between dress and behaviour in cultural frameworks. *Mary Medusa* begins with Dempsey in a white wedding dress – “I’m so white, it’s painful, see? Hose, garter, gown, and pumps co-ordinate immaculately, impeccably, forever more” (47). The white dress and the virginal “immaculate” painfully appropriate role for the innocent bride are immediately shattered. Evoking woman as commodity, the bride takes a slab of raw meat out of a jewellery box and tenderizes it with the heel of her shoe. Scripts of beauty/fashion, marriageability, and cooking interweave in a hysterical out-of-control (or too-much-in-control?) body that performs the unexpected. Immaculately dressed, smiling docilely, Dempsey changes into

a woman capable of savage and unpredictable behaviour. Desire, sexuality and murder are conflated: "Cooking is a lot like murder.... Murder is also a lot like sex. It's a kind of cliché, that cumming is a *petite morte*" (47). She parodies the "original" image and "norms" of virginal bride and nurturing cook; a woman aggressively articulates her own desires in terms of "having the power to push someone into oblivion" (48).

Remarking on the present political climate, Dempsey states, "it's time we get sexy and get murderous.... That we force the hand of change, using our appetite for pleasure and for justice. Maybe we have to lose control. Undoubtedly we have to act. Out. Like bad girls" ("On Becoming Fatale" 119). Assuming the "bad girl" stance through acting "out" and acting up, Dempsey's voice and body speak lesbian desire outside of heterosexual prescriptions. Looking back historically, Dempsey identifies the negative mythology that circumscribes the roles within which women can currently act out desires: "There is the nymphomaniacal *femme fatale*.... castrating bitch/dyke. And ... the conniving housewife" ("On Becoming Fatale" 118). Creating a counter-mythology, Dempsey employs and parodies such stereotypes. Provoking the reclamation of a proliferation of "bad girl" roles, Dempsey queries, "But are these icons really that bad? One centres on an infinite drive and capacity for sex. One on having the power to move, and remove the central patriarchal symbol, the phallus" (118). In her performances she excessively re-writes, re-vises, and re-members patriarchal myths and scripts, demanding cultural representational space for women's integrated sexuality and power.

Dempsey irreverently reappropriates and reclaims cultural icons. She brings into view violent historical, cultural constrictions and definitions which are literally and symbolically inscribed on the female body and opens them to interrogation and re-vision. The *Mary Medusa Artists' Statement* speaks to this project, and provokes appetite for another economy of power:

work with the Medusa myth/icon began as an exploration of women with power (who has power? do we have power? where can we get some?) Medusa was attractive to us because of her ability to turn men into stone. The ways we control and are controlled are essential tools in the maintenance of our consumptive machine. This machine feeds on opposition: male/female, black/white, homo/normo, have/have not. This machine's appetite is seem-

ingly without bounds. But what of our appetite? What if we no longer control, or worse yet, lose control of ourselves? What if we 'lose it' and turn our heads and our snakey locks against *status quo* economics, sexual politics, and morality? (42)

Dempsey and Millan identify the controlling machinery which constructs heterosexuality as normal and sane. They perform and explore different possibilities for "women with power" who in fact take control through "losing control." They reconfigure myths and history in a strategic embodied effort to be at home in the skin.

Dempsey's performances link the material body with experience of self presence, foregrounding the autobiographical foundation: "this is a secret./My body holds my autobiography. All that I have suffered and longed for is stored beneath the skin, written down carefully on my back and thighs and hands. My story is written on my flesh./ And yet my flesh is a stranger to me.... My self is missing" (*Mary Medusa* 48). Inability to read her own "story" results in an alienating division from self. A slide image of "Medusa's head on a platter, mouth stuffed with an apple" symbolizes the violence inherent in woman's sexual appetite controlled within patriarchal domesticity, served and ready to be consumed. With her mouth full she is silenced; with her severed head, mind and body are completely divided. *Mary Medusa* speaks desire and suffering in the "flesh," provoking a reexamination of heterosexist social inscriptions of gender and sexualities.

In *Mary Medusa* videos and slides are used to broaden the time-frame and space of the performance and to address history and myths which impact violently upon the present. Illuminating a wide range of patriarchally oppressive scenarios, the snakey Medusa headdress evokes the weight of history. While Dempsey is onstage, images of her are projected in various ways, suggesting the plural positions she occupies and the many selves she tries to integrate. Tricks of lighting produce the effect of a head without a body, and a head superimposed on a Greek column, reappropriating the Petrarchan fragmented body. Medusa's dialogue, while her severed head is superimposed on a pillar at Delphi, displays patriarchal culture's conscription of women's desire and the objectification of the female body in myth, in history, in psychoanalytic theory, and in present cultural scripts. Dempsey provokes a re-vision. I would suggest she identifies Medusa's bloody decapitation as a patriarchal strategy to disavow or eliminate the castration threat, and relates that

motivation to women's frequent mutilation throughout mythology and history. *Mary Medusa* physically illustrates and inveighs the fact that threatening bodies are controlled violently. The body as spectacle, then, literally and symbolically displays and exposes oppressive cultural scripts which confine and restrict experience.

*Mary Medusa* uses irony to expose restrictive roles allowed women by powerfully re-telling the Medusa story from her point of view. New images of presence, desire and power (from woman's perspective) radically disrupt and displace women's fixed paradigmatic inferior position as other, silent, and passive object. Dempsey performs Medusa as a Bride, Mother, and Business Woman, fore-grounding the signifying capacities of the body itself, a body which is distinctly cultural, and caught up in representation. In one scene of *Mary Medusa* "Medusa's disembodied head [is] superimposed on a wall of Greek text" (48). This slide image combines ancient writing, art, and mythology to emphasize the destructive influence which past Greek and Roman cultures hold over women's current sense of selves and desires. Here, Dempsey's body is literally and symbolically inscribed by powerful patriarchal forces. Producing the effect of a palimpsest, we see the effect of layers of cultural inscriptions on the female body.

The *vagina dentata* appears during the performance as a slide of a "woman's mouth, her teeth wired shut, projected on bride's skirt" (48). The bride's white outspread skirt with the metalized mouth superimposed over the genital area suggests the *vagina dentata*. Since the work opens with a video of two brides dancing together, the slide of the steel braces and shiny silver replacement teeth represent woman as so dangerous that she must be literally bridled – from speaking words of lesbian desire and actually engaging in sexuality: "Steel braces lock her jaws shut. Lock jawed. Once a week the wires are loosened so that she can brush her teeth. Oh, so simple isn't it? And yet so effective. Never before has controlling what goes into your mouth been so easy" (48). The impossibility of policing what goes into a woman's mouth, or restraining lesbian articulations of desire, is clear. Sexual appetites which cannot be controlled by traditional patriarchal scripts and myths are literally wired shut, but controlling appetites is not so easy.

These last scenes embody my thesis that feminist performance art can take many forms to powerfully interrogate pervasive violent heterosexual norms and male control of women's bodies and desires. To conclude, I contend that Shawna Dempsey's embodied performances are poten-

tially transgressive and transformative by explicitly imaging the relationships between desire, power, gender, and sex.

### Works Cited

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