

The Invisible Medusa

A Site of Power for Artworks and Depictions of Otherness

Maisea Bailey

Dartmouth College

The site of a nervous breakdown. The *sight* of a nervous breakdown. This is what Tracey Emin creates in her installation titled *My Bed* [Fig. 1]. The bed, which Emin actually slept in for nearly four days while she was experiencing a nervous breakdown, is the site of that event.¹ When Emin emerged from the bed, she turned around to look at what had become a work of art. Linens stained by bodily fluids, used condoms, glass bottles of alcohol half drunk, a cemetery of cigarette butts, those specifically female items of lingerie and nylon tights, and the belt that fit around her slim waist at the time are all present in the site of this nervous breakdown. Emin allows the viewer to enter the space of one of her most intimate moments, a moment of “female madness.” It is the invisible Medusa, as I will define in this essay, on full display.

That which is other, that which goes against the societal norms as defined by the phallogocentric patriarchy defined by white cisgender males, becomes identified with madness. In her essay titled “The Laugh of the Medusa,” feminist theorist Helene Cixous’s writes:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard of songs. Time and again, I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst [...] I was ashamed, I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! [...] Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of

¹ Turner Contemporary, “Tracy Emin talks about My Bed at Turner Contemporary,” YouTube Video, 3:08. Posted 17 Oct. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg7wQWN23fo>.

her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?²



Figure 1. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, installation of box frame, mattress, linens, pillows, and various objects, 1998. First exhibited at Tate Gallery, 1999.

Although the definition of madness changes according to culture and history, it remains to be that which stands in the margins of society, in the dark space that lacks order, where monsters prevail. But the 'other' is only as monstrous as it is defined by that patriarchy, the symbolic order that pervades our consciousness.

Throughout history, that patriarchy has depicted madness as being a trait predominantly of women. In her

iconic text, *The Female Malady*, literary critic Elaine Showalter writes:

Women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind [...] While the name of the symbolic female disorder may change from one historical period to the next, the gender asymmetry of the representational tradition remains constant.³

"Woman" has been defined as other within the patriarchy.⁴ She has been made to believe that her difference is madness. She has been

² Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Feminism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, Vol. IV, edited by Mary Evans, from Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms*, Brighton, Harvester (1981), Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 112.

³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 3–4.

⁴ This essay refers to "woman" and "women" as a metaphor. Not in the sense of woman as subject, but in the sense of woman as metaphorical object for an 'other.' This is not identity politics; it is strictly a theorization

silenced. She has repressed her own voice into her unconscious to abide by the rules of society. Cixous writes, “the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive.”⁵ Woman must find entry into that unconscious to find her voice; she must find entry into the space where she can redefine herself. She must find the monster who is, in fact, not a monster at all. As Cixous states, “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.”⁶

In the present essay, I explore Cixous’s challenge to the typical characterization of Medusa as a means to redefine and redepict the otherness of women, specifically in relation to definitions of madness. While bringing in art historical theory, I examine postmodern feminist artworks as a site of praxis for Cixous’s challenge. I argue that the challenge is accomplished through what I refer to as an *invisible medusa*, defined in this essay as an affective artistic mode that allows feminist artists to reclaim representations of a woman’s psychological lived experience without objectifying the female body in material means.

We are conditioned to see woman, here our example being Medusa, as constructed by man. Art historian Hal Foster, in response to Cixous’s motif of the laughing Medusa states: “I don’t see laughter in most representations of Medusa (but then most representations are made by men).”⁷ We must escape the white cis-male patriarchy, that ruling symbolic order, so that we can change the order itself. So that we can *laugh*. Cixous writes:

of what the gender binary has to offer as a metaphor in terms of woman vs. man, madness vs. sanity, what is considered inside vs. outside, what is accepted vs. what is not. I take this specific position precisely because of the paradox that it creates—how can one argue for a stretching of the boundary while staying in the gender binary itself? It is because of this question that the heart of the issue becomes clear: the boundary itself. Boundary, as if there is a clear-cut line between what is and what is not. This position is meant to reclaim intersectional subjecthood by critiquing the game of blank, cis, nonracialized, heteronormative objectification from the inside out. To speak from within the system that it critiques to tear that system open, fold it inside out, so that everything within that was being disavowed is rediscovered as illuminated and buoyant.

⁵ Cixous, 116.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷ Hal Foster, “Medusa and the Real,” in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 44 (Autumn, 2003): footnote 25, page 185.

If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.⁸

A full literary background on the myth of Medusa would take pages to accomplish. For the purpose of the present essay I am interested in these specific aspects of the myth: Medusa is a Gorgon with hair of snakes whose gaze turns men to stone through petrification. Medusa was originally beautiful but, after being raped by Poseidon, was turned monstrous by Athena as punishment for being a sexually desirable female. Medusa was beheaded by Perseus, who was able to slay her by looking at her reflection in a mirrored shield. However, her gaze maintained its potency even after she was slayed.

A Penetrating Gaze

Art historian Hal Foster uses the Medusa myth as a metaphor for a stylistic trend that he refers to as an “obliterated image-screen” identified in the abject artworks being created at the end of the twentieth century.⁹ He outlines this process of the gaze in his 1996 essay, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” and then again, more specifically, in his 2003 essay, “Medusa and the Real.” Foster uses the Lacanian discussion of the gaze from *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* to ground his theory [Fig. 2].

The classic cone of vision that comes from Renaissance treatises asserts that an image is made of an object that is seen from a singular geometric point in simple one-point perspective. The gaze emanates from this point upon the object. However, the reality of our

⁸ Cixous, 122–123.

⁹ I have elsewhere used Hal Foster’s theory of an “obliterated image-screen” to demonstrate how an artwork can demand that a spectator become personally invested in a scene and take on the role of witness: Maisea Bailey, “Demanding Empathy through Depictions of Crisis: Activist Artists React to the Trump Administration’s Family Separation Policies,” *Clamantis: The MALS Journal* 1 no. 9 (2020): <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/clamantis/vol1/iss9/1>.

existence allows for multiple points of perspective. The second cone places the object in the world, from a point of light, with a return gaze upon the subject. To superimpose the two cones is to capture “this double status of the subject as seer and seen in one.”¹⁰ It creates a double and reciprocal gaze. This superimposed cone holds the object and point of light merging at what is now called *the gaze* and the geometric point and picture merging at *the subject of representation*. Foster’s theory positions the *image-screen* between these two points.

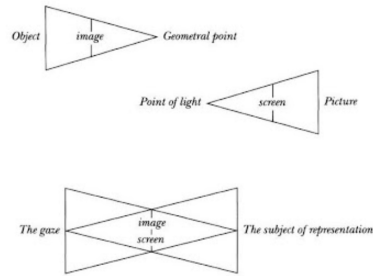


Figure 2. Lacanian diagram, taken from Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” in *October* Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 106-124

Foster defines the *image-screen* as “the cultural reserve of which every image is one instance [...] the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject. But it also *protects* the subject from the object-gaze, for it captures the gaze [...] and tames it in an image.”¹¹ For Lacan, the goal of art becomes *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze. This need for protection comes from Lacan’s sense of the gaze as a violent “force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first.”¹² Foster argues that abject artworks have lost this sense of disarming the gaze and have allowed it to “not only attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn.”¹³

The *image-screen* stands for cultural communication, or the symbolic order. It is the illusion of a controlled existence between *the gaze* and *the subject of representation*. Foster writes: “a fall outside of the image screen has the same dire consequences as a fall outside of language: our status as social beings is cast in doubt; we risk the outsider condition of the psychotic.”¹⁴ A breaking of the *image-screen* threatens a fall into the darkness of the margins, into

¹⁰ Foster, 186.

¹¹ Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October*, Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109–110.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴ Foster (2003), 187.

madness, outside the symbolic order. Foster states, “for to see without the image screen would be to be touched by the real, blinded by its radiation, petrified by its gaze.”¹⁵ Here, Foster uses imagery from the Medusa myth: petrification.

If the screen is that which protects from the gaze by capturing the gaze, then without the screen, when we are in the presence of an obliterated screen, we are no longer protected from the gaze; rather we are consumed by the gaze, even penetrated by it. Lacan writes: “I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture.” Thus, I must ask, if *I* am in the picture, and the picture is in my eye, am *I*, as referenced here, in my eye? Do *I* become caught in my own gaze?

This is the power of a penetrating gaze, as metaphorically represented by Medusa. In describing the power of Medusa’s gaze, art historian Rainer Mack writes: “we are drawn to look upon that one part of the face that refuses to be seen, that is able, as if by magic, to return our gaze and to look at us looking.”¹⁶ But with an obliterated screen that returned gaze is simply our own. Historian Jean-Pierre Vernant writes: “it is your gaze that is captured in the mask [...] what the mask of Gorgo lets you see, when you are bewitched by it, is yourself, yourself in the world beyond, the head clothed in night, the masked face of the invisible that, in the eye of Gorgo, is revealed as the truth about your own face.”¹⁷ For without the screen’s protection, a mirror is produced, in which the gaze penetrates the image so deeply that it hits the subject of representation, only to bounce back and realize, as if in a moment of petrification, that the subject was always simultaneously object. The gaze was always both from and upon itself. The power of our gaze and her returned gaze become an ambiguous mess when the screen can no longer tame either gaze. And without that taming, the order can become undone, as boundaries become blurred between this place and “the world beyond.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹⁶ Rainer Mack, “Facing Down Medusa (An aetiology of the gaze),” *Art History*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (November 2002): 573.

¹⁷ J.-P. Vernant, “Death in the Eyes: Gorgo, Figure of the *Other*,” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by F. Zeitlin (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1991, 137–138.

The evolution seen within the oeuvre of photographer Cindy Sherman offers a timeline keenly in tune with the movement toward the obliterated screen, as well as the myth of Medusa. In reading Sherman's oeuvre, Foster divides the photographer's works into three main positions: subject captured by the gaze, invaded by the gaze, and finally obliterated by the gaze.¹⁸ Of this final position, the obliterated screen, Foster writes: "Such images tend toward a representation of the body turned inside out, of the subject literally abjected, thrown out. But this is also the condition of the outside turned in, of the invasion of the subject-as-picture by the object-gaze."¹⁹

Film theorist Laura Mulvey also offers an interpretation of the evolution of Cindy Sherman's work during the period from 1977 through 1987 in an essay titled "Cosmetics and Abjection." Mulvey reads the culture of appearance that Sherman references in her earliest works of *Untitled Film Stills*, including her 1977 *Untitled Film Still #2* [Fig. 3], as "the feminine struggle to conform to a façade of desirability."²⁰ This is similar to the original state of Medusa, according to the myth, as beautiful, or sexualized. Sherman uses cosmetics literally as a mask or masquerade. On the surface it appears to be a homogeneity of look, which Mulvey reads as a nostalgia for white femininity of "fifties-ness," but the illusion becomes broken by a shifting subject that breaks the frame of the photograph and the nostalgic image of the erotic, contained female. Sherman's 1977 *Untitled Film Still #2* [Fig. 3] shows the sexualized female viewing herself in the mirror. However, the active gaze in this image is not that of the figure looking at herself,



Figure 3. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #2*, 1977.

¹⁸ Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 110–113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abject: Cindy Sherman, 1977–1987," in *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism & Cultural Studies*, edited by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 322.

but rather the gaze of a voyeur. The female figure becomes a victimized object of the outside gaze. She is caught in Lacan's example of the first vision cone. The 'to-be-looked-at-ness,' as Mulvey refers to it, becomes a parody of the nostalgic image when the viewer becomes aware of the illusion. The sexualized female is fully fetishized in these early works.

Medusa has been referenced as a metaphor for the castrating female, a motif which comes from Freud's theory of the fear of castration.²¹ Freud argues that Medusa's head, with snakes as hair, becomes a symbol of castrated female genitalia. Medusa's decapitation by Perseus again confirms the terror of castration. The representation of Medusa as female genitalia is twofold for Freud, as he acknowledges both the horrifying and pleasurable effects of female genitalia. Freud reads the effect of Medusa's gaze, to turn men to stone, as a metaphorical erection. He writes: "however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror [...] For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact."²² Cixous also references this conflict when she writes, "men say there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity associated with death; it's the jitters that gives them a hard-on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us."²³

According to Freud's reading, Medusa's head becomes a fetish object. Fetishism refers to the masculine fear of castration. The male psyche "perceives the mark of sexual difference on the female body as an absence or castration."²⁴ The fetish produces a replacement for the fear through an object that displaces the male psyche's sense of a woman lacking. The object of the fetish becomes a screen, or veil, against the male anxiety. Fetishism demonstrates that the psyche can sustain incompatible ideas at the same time through the process of disavowal. For example, fetishistic disavowal acknowledges the woman's castration and simultaneously constructs a substitute to deny and replace the missing object. The fetish simultaneously allows the knowledge, what they know to be true, and belief, what

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in P. Rieff, ed., *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 212–213.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cixous, 121.

²⁴ Mulvey, 327.

they disavow. For Freud, Medusa is both that which confirms the fear, the lacking, while also offering the comfort of a reminder of the phallic presence. As Sherman's works move to a more interior setting in 1981, Mulvey reads the artist as referencing female emotion within these



Figure 4. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #96*, 1981.

private spaces. As shown in *Untitled #96* [Fig. 4], the emotion that is captured is ambiguous with “eyes gazing into the distance.”²⁵ Mulvey sees the affect and gaze carrying a quality of daydreaming, or perhaps enforced passivity. I read this as woman escaping into her unconscious, as Cixous defines, “that other limitless country.”²⁶ The characters' bodies, in erotic and suggestive poses, become more revealed than their emotion, and they exude a vulnerability as they are directed toward the camera and thus the spectator. Such vulnerability mimics a raped Medusa. These female figures are not only passive but they are also *acted upon* by the viewer's gaze, as our perspective is placed literally on top of the figure, a bird's-eye view of the female body as landscape.

In 1983, Sherman's photographs began to exude what Mulvey calls a “darkness of mood,” as shown in her *Untitled #122* [Fig. 5].²⁷ Sherman begins a grotesque parody of the erotic female image that her previous works referenced with their ironic nostalgia. Mulvey sees these images verging on the exhibitionist, where the fetish



Figure 5. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #122*, 1983.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁶ Cixous, 116.

²⁷ Mulvey, 324.

itself begins to become disavowed. There is a sense of madness that emanates from Sherman's figures during this stage. *Untitled #122* shows clenched fists and only a fragment of the female face. The only feature shown is a single eye, as if to reference the evil eye, swollen and red. The rest of the face is covered by a tangled mess of hair, pieces curling out toward the front and side, a visual reminder of what could be Medusa's hair of snakes.

Mulvey highlights the contrast from the earlier photographs when she writes, "from this perspective the surface of the body, so carefully conveyed in the early photographs, seems to be dissolving to reveal a monstrous otherness behind the cosmetic façade."²⁸ As the figure is dissolving it is becoming uncontained, unmasked, or unveiled, and thus, defetishized. I read the *dissolving* form to mimic a disappearing Medusa. The female body, the figure itself, is no longer the focus and thus less necessary. The importance becomes something from *within* the female, not the body itself.

The photographs in Sherman's *Untitled 1984* series are no longer of a passive nostalgic female form; instead, they become both active and threatening, like the Medusa turned monster with her threatening gaze. This set of Sherman's photographs shows an



Figure 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #132*, 1984.

embodiment of the unconscious itself, which Mulvey refers to as "materializations of anxiety and dread."²⁹ *Untitled #132* [Fig. 6] shows the shifting perspective that takes place for Sherman's figures. The figure is no longer laying down, being viewed upon; rather, she is standing up, hovering toward the spectator, as if she is about to break the frame.

In the final phase, the figure has disappeared completely from Sherman's work as the photographs move entirely into the abject. Mulvey states that "nothing is left but disgust."³⁰ These photographs, such as

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

Untitled #175 from 1987 [Fig. 7], show such things as “the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, or hair.”³¹ All that remains of the figure is a reflected face of terror in the glass lens. The camera angle has shifted to looking down on the ground at a body disintegrating into a texture of its own materiality. Sherman has completely stripped away the disavowal that the fetish presents. Mulvey sees Sherman tracing a “defetishized body, de-prived of the fetish’s semiotic,” as it has become completely unveiled.³²

This is where our invisible Medusa presents herself. Sherman’s work follows a trajectory of disintegration of the figure, a narrative of the female body as unveiled or defetishized. There is a gradual collapse of surface and a return to the literal, or the abject.



Figure 7. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #175*, 1987.

Emerging from the Obliterated Screen

I argue that Medusa, the monstrous-feminine, she who is other, is what emerges from Foster’s concept of an obliterated screen within the penetrating gaze—but *she emerges as laughing*. Perhaps a better metaphor than *to emerge* is *to escape* from her hiding place, the unconscious, the home of the repressed. The moment the screen becomes obliterated is the moment Medusa finds her laughter. I use ‘laughter’ here as a metaphor for an affective mode of feeling; an eerie ‘sound’ that can haunt as a primordial threat. Medusa’s laughter comes as a means of “being in on the joke.” She understands the masculine fear she can cause and has realized her power to embody her own ‘lacking.’ The laughter emanates from outside of the symbolic order, from the boundaries that now challenge the patriarchy; the world *beyond*.

As we enter that “world beyond, the head clothed in night,” we enter a state of disorder, of *madness*.³³ Foster compares this

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 329.

³³ Vernant, 137-138.

space to a state of schizophrenia, although he also calls it “the real.”³⁴ Foster’s sense of “the real” here is a state of truth, of that which is beyond the symbolic order and its ruling patriarchy. To undo the screen is to challenge the norms, to make the illusion of their control known. The boundaries of the norms only exist in so far as we can measure them against ourselves, as we exist and understand ourselves to be whole, within the symbolic order. It is a measurability that keeps us within the symbolic order by not letting us un-know the boundaries of ourselves, not allowing us to lose individuation. We enter a primordial order that loses any sense of boundaries.

As boundaries become blurred, we enter the space of the abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva. We enter the abject the moment the screen is broken and our gaze as subject encapsulates us also as object at the same time. The abject is “neither object nor subject.”³⁵ It is the moment that the containment of body and screen all break open. It is the eruption of the real. It is a reminder of human materiality and mortality. And Medusa is that only mortal Gorgon. Once we lose individuation and fall entirely into the abject we lose all measurability. It is in this space that madness is not madness, where monster is not monster, because of the inability to measure such otherness. However, there is a paradox of the abject. For as long as we are horrified, we know we can still measure, and thus we know we are still within the symbolic order. Thus, the illusion itself—the horror—undoes the illusion simply by being present and recognized. However, this knowledge presents a new horror: a horror of truth.

The one thing we cannot escape is ourselves and, thus, our own penetrating gaze. A gaze that knows the truth when recognizing the boundaries of ourselves, the truth of our existence: that we are only trapped in this symbolic order for so long, that the patriarchal symbolic order has a limit, that power and control are only an illusion. Medusa gives us that truth. She gives it through her gaze, and even more so with her laugh as a primordial threat to the symbolic order. But how can one depict that which is always already outside of the symbolic order? In his 1996 essay, Foster asks,

³⁴ Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” 188.

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.

Can the abject be represented at all? If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture? If it is unconscious, can it be made conscious and remain abject? In other words, can there be a *conscientious abjection*, or is this all there can be? Indeed, can abject art ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic, use of the abject?³⁶

Perhaps the abject cannot be depicted within art, it can only be made to be felt. To represent or depict the abject would be to symbolize it, placing it back within the symbolic order. We can only ever have a reminder of “the world beyond,” a feeling. This is why Medusa must be invisible in order to make us *feel* the abject. Tracey Emin states, “art isn’t for looking at. Art is for feeling.”³⁷ It is an affective mode of feeling something that exceeds the visual itself. And the laughing Medusa is always heard, and thus felt. For the process of hearing is in fact a feeling of vibrations.

To Become Invisible

The invisibility of the figure as female object is specific to late twentieth century feminist art because of the social politics in place following second-wave feminism. When using the female body in art, it is important to be aware of the tradition that has accompanied the history of art and how male artists have predominantly used the female body as object. In a 1976 article, art critic and activist Lucy Lippard warns women against self-exploitation with use of their own body in artwork by stating,

When women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism [...] Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful.³⁸

Film theorist Laura Mulvey also references this dilemma of representation when she writes,

³⁶ Foster, “Medusa and the Real,” 114.

³⁷ Turner Contemporary.

³⁸ Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art,” *Art In America* (1976): 75.

The initial idea that images contributed to women's alienation from their bodies and from their sexuality, with an attendant hope of liberation and recuperation, gave way to theories of representation as symptom and signifier of the way that problems posed by sexual difference under patriarchy could be displaced upon the feminine. [...] Women artists and film-makers, while rejecting this wholesale banishment, were extremely wary about the investment of "dominant meanings" in images of women and while feminist theorists turned to popular culture to analyse these meanings, artists turned to theory, juxtaposing images and ideas, to negate dominant meanings and, slowly and polemically, to invent different ones.³⁹

This refers back to Elaine Showalter's take on female madness and the traditions of representation. It is the binary division between female madness and masculine rationality as made conventional through *man*-made institutions.

The invisible Medusa has her roots in the feminist theory presented by Gilbert and Gubar in their iconic text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they challenge these notions of representation by rereading those texts written by women that had been canonized through a reading by the white cis-male patriarchy. Gilbert and Gubar argue that female authors create a madwoman or monster as their double. They write:

Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women [...] female authors dramatize their own self division, their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in

³⁹ Mulvey, 67.

some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage.⁴⁰

Gilbert and Gubar saw the potential for this act of what they call “schizophrenic authorship” to act as a revision of the “self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them.”⁴¹ They conclude: “it allows her to express her ambiguous relationship to a culture that has not only defined her gender but shaped her mind.”⁴²

In a similar practice, the invisible Medusa is a representation of the female condition meant to challenge the patriarchy’s canonization of the monster and now released from within the feminist artist by utilizing the condition of an artwork with an obliterated screen.

A Double Castration

An invisible Medusa is specific to the cis-female because it is a further site of lacking. The object, the figure, has been removed, castrated from the site of the work of art. It is a reminder of female castration that causes unease. It is mocking the fear of castration by taking the female away completely.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, media studies scholar Barbara Creed gets in conversation with Freud when she writes, “Freud argued that woman terrifies because she is castrated. I will argue that woman also terrifies because man endows her with imaginary powers of castration.”⁴³ I argue, even further, that woman has the potential for terror when she takes hold of this knowledge of the endowed imaginary powers and acts them out directly by turning them into a joke by embodying her own lacking. Woman has the potential for terror when she allows herself *to laugh*. When referring to the participation of the female spectator, Barbara Creed asks:

Does she recognize herself in the monstrous-feminine? To what extent might the female spectator feel empowered when identifying with the female castrator? Does she derive a form of

⁴⁰ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87.

sadistic pleasure in seeing her sexual other humiliated and punished? [...] identificatory processes are extremely fluid and allow the spectator to switch identification between victim and monster depending on the degree to which the spectator wishes to be terrified and/or terrifying.⁴⁴

If we allow for the metaphor of Medusa as representation of the pleasurable aspects of female genitalia, as Freud argues, by making that sexually desirable female—the fetish object—visible, then we allow for the double knowledge to withstand. As stated, for Freud, the potential to “turn stiff” is comforting. To make Medusa—the fetish object—invisible is to disallow this comforting aspect of the fetish. The fetish has been taken away entirely, only to leave the fear it was meant to disavow: an empty site. The invisibility mocks the trauma that the male experiences from the knowledge of the female condition as lacking. The fetish itself has been castrated. Philosopher Luce Irigaray asks, “for without the exploitation of the body-matter of women, what would become of the symbolic process that governs society?”⁴⁵ If man has nothing left to control, nothing left by which to measure his power, what power does he in fact have?

As mentioned at the start of the present essay, Tracey Emin’s installation titled *My Bed* [Fig. 1] offers this invisible Medusa through the site of a nervous breakdown. Through the scene, the viewer enters the space of female madness and, in essence, participates in it. The bed is that thing that carried her (Emin) while she existed within the margins, defined at the start of the essay as *the dark space that lacks order, where monsters prevail*. Cixous writes, “now women return from afar, from always: from ‘without,’ from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture.’”⁴⁶ And we, as the spectator, exist there with the female presence for a moment, as we are now able to enter into it because of the fact that the image screen has been fully obliterated. And as we enter, we *feel* the presence of the invisible Medusa, that primordial affect being placed back upon us.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁵ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 85.

⁴⁶ Cixous, 114.

In artist Nan Goldin's 1980 photograph titled *Self-Portrait in Blue Bathroom, London* [Fig. 8], the invisible Medusa enters with a unique use of reflection as gaze. The viewer literally stands in for the figure, who is viewing her own reflection.



Figure 8. Nan Goldin, *Self-Portrait in Blue Bathroom, London*, from the series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1980.

The spectator has become the actual figure viewing herself. For we do not see the figure, only the reflection. We are let into the knowledge of what it *feels* like to see yourself as this reflection and to be gazed at as a stranger. The tone is dark, the overall atmosphere is blue, and there is a blurring, as if in a haze or dream. It has the quality of a memory of a dream—a coming in touch with the unconscious.

Further, we are placed within the intimate space of the bathroom, a space that should always be experienced from behind a closed door—separate, cast out from the social order. It is the most private space where abject bodily fluids are welcome. It is the place where we leave those bodily fluids. The bathroom is a space for the mere purpose of the abject. But what we see is a bathtub, a tool to wash away, to cleanse one's self of the abject.

The line of molding along the wall literally guides our penetrating gaze inward, and then back out again when the gaze becomes reversed upon itself as a reflection at the point of the mirror. This horizontal molding stands in contrast to the stiff bottles standing erect along the outside of the bathtub. From what we can see, the bathtub is empty, like the sight of a woman's lacking. Or further, the bathtub stands in as a symbol of the womb, the most abject space, and perhaps we are standing inside of the bathtub to gain this unique perspective of the space. The womb is that space from which we literally emerge in defining our individuation as we enter the symbolic order. Bathtub and womb are both spaces where our abjectness is left behind so that we may re-emerge into the symbolic order.

* * *

In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous called upon woman to write herself.⁴⁷ Cixous proclaims: “it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.”⁴⁸

What would such a reading feel like? Allow me to offer a re-reading of the Medusa myth as metaphor for the site of power. We must refer back to those key aspects of the Medusa myth as previously outlined.

Medusa was originally beautiful. In her original state, Medusa is the sexualized female, the fetish object. She is the original vision cone: one-point perspective, an image of an object as gazed at by man. She is what Cixous refers to as “the well-adjusted normal woman [having] divine composure.”⁴⁹ She is the fully “tamed,” alluding to a fully intact image screen, an unquestioned symbolic order of the patriarchy.

Medusa was raped by Poseidon. One might be quick to read the penetrating gaze as the rape. However, I read the penetrating gaze not as that action upon Medusa but rather her own agency that emerges. The rape, rather, happens at the moment of the superimposition of the second cone upon the first cone as outlined by Foster. For if the *beautiful Medusa* is the first cone (fully tamed female), then the second cone, that which “places the object within the world,” stands for the patriarchy itself, the object placed within the world as understood under that specific symbolic order. The rape happens at the point of superimposition.

Athena turned Medusa monstrous. What has been represented as punishment, was actually an empowerment. It was the awakening of Medusa’s unconscious, as defined by Cixous—the place where the repressed survived—by Athena, who symbolizes feminism. When Medusa follows the orders of Cixous and embraces the otherness of her unconscious, men read her as monstrous and represent her as such. But Medusa is not monstrous, “she’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”⁵⁰ Medusa emerges as that penetrating gaze, that horrifying truth, that Lacan so wanted to be

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

tamed by the image screen, the cultural reserve. The snakes of hair are Medusa's voice, song, and laugh. The gaze is her assertion within the social order. For it is not a literal petrification, rather it is a stop factor of male domination in which Medusa can face the patriarchy head on—*gaze* on—and hold her own. Of a woman speaking, Cixous writes, "how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine."⁵¹ Medusa petrifies men with her voice, willing to speak out, and this time, be listened to. Her gaze is her agency as active female. For in her original state as sexualized object, she was only meant to be gazed upon. Now Medusa is able to gaze back.

Medusa's gaze maintained its potency after she was slayed. This reaffirms that the invisible Medusa maintains her potency even when not present. This also confirms the fact that the beheading is in fact a positive moment of empowerment for Medusa because she now is able to maintain the power of her gaze without the potential to fall back into her original state as sexualized object. She can only ever be the confronting gaze. Medusa is not gone, in that her agency has not been lost; rather, that thing that could get in the way of this agency—as sexual object to be gazed upon—is what has been lost. The beheading allowed Athena to embed the head of Medusa onto her shield. Barbara Creed outlines the significance of this act for us:

Athena's aim was simply to strike terror into the hearts of men as well as reminding them of their symbolic debt to the imaginary castrating mother. And no doubt she knew what she was doing. After all, Athena was the great Mother-Goddess of the ancient world and according to ancient legend—the daughter of Metis, the goddess of wisdom, also known as the Medusa.⁵²

This re-empowers Medusa's agency of a confronting gaze and allows her to become a symbol of female empowerment for Feminism. *And who is Medusa?*

⁵¹ Ibid., 117.

⁵² Creed, 166.

Medusa is simultaneously all of us and none of us at the same time. She is our reflected gaze made invisible—obliterated, castrated. Medusa is neither object nor subject, neither agent nor victim. She is “the world beyond”—that order which is ever present, while simultaneously unable to be touched—existing outside of those boundaries that we cannot lose: the boundaries of ourselves. However, Medusa allows us to re-measure our boundaries by consistently making us aware that the boundaries do exist. She makes us aware that our order—the symbolic order—that which defines society, has a limit. Medusa reminds us of our responsibility to continuously re-measure the boundaries of our order, to consistently imagine a stretching of what is allowed to enter.

To watch the evolution of the female figure in feminist art from a point of complete passivity through a point of threatening action, all the way to the point of invisibility, is to watch the female figure choose her own placement, to find her own space. Cixous writes: “woman must write herself.”⁵³ And so she has; she has written her invisibility. But, in this invisibility, she has not obliterated herself or made herself obsolete. Rather, she has made herself fully present through a primordial feeling within us, the spectator. She is rid of objecthood and only present as that reminder of the horrifying truth of the promise of the body to dissolve. Woman has become the agent of her fate, showing no fear in the face of this horrifying truth but rather taking hold of it for herself. She has mocked it. And so, we hear her laughing.

The invisible Medusa allows for sight of a site of the female condition, not as sexualized object but rather the truth as exposed from the margins of societal norms. It forces these truths to become a part of the symbolic order, thus obliterating the order from within. The laugh of the invisible Medusa is heard echoing from the margins, reverberating throughout our symbolic order, mandating a stretching of the boundaries.

⁵³ Cixous, 112.