

Girls Modelled in Plaster

or, Losing Your Head

May 2015

A colon's end is shit. Not transcendence, but waste. Beyond meaning. For the head is no longer the head; we live, perceive, and speak, in our bodies and through our bodies.¹

Kathy Acker

1. OFF WITH HER HEAD

As the blade is released, the head becomes separated from the body, condemning the victim to silence. The scream comes too late. But blood still shoots from the veins in her neck, purging visceral excess. The body speaking *through* decapitation.

2. SILENCED OBJECT

Skulls were first made into art objects in the Neolithic Jordan Valley, the region's inhabitants using gypsum in the absence of ceramics to embellish the remains of the decapitated head. Catalogued for posterity, *Skull of a Young Girl Modeled in Plaster*² is what we now call her, this anonymous plinth-bound thing, but once she would have had a name, an identity to *speak* of. Looking at her through the cropped walls of a black and white photograph, all that remains are the cracked lines of chalky mineral, a reminder of what this 'young girl' once did with her *face*: laugh, smile, cry, speak...

3. YOUNG GIRL GAZE

The severed, serpent head is the return of the *young girl*, Medusa. This monster myth mutates in books and objects, but let's say this gorgon girl is slayed by Perseus, and it is her grotesque head, with seductive penetrating gaze, that turns her victims to stone. In another version, as her blood coagulates into coral, it is her atavistic touch that kills. The closeness of coral to *coré*, which means young girl, reveals how Medusa is metonymic of the girl grotesque. Out for revenge, she talks through her aphonia, with a slimy vulva-head that moves for her body – making herSELF *heard*. Monstrous, hysterical girl-talk.

4. BODY TALK

The revolutionary power of laughter is greater when there is no wired instrument – from mind to mouth – to think, and then speak it. It results in a liquid language of excess, of physical return, as the beheaded monsters speak in disruptive, unrecognizable syntax. Following the flows of the body, rather than the neatly packed orders of the mind. As Hélène Cixous writes (headless) in 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives... hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.³

¹ Kathy Acker, 'Critical Languages' (1990) in *Bodies of Work: Essays by Kathy Acker*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), p.91.

² Found in: Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), appendix.

³ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', (1976), trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, p.876.

Constantly making trouble with the body below. The headless hysteric cuts herself free from logic, to lose herself in corporeal chaos, losing her head. Execution need not bring women's revolt to an abrupt end: it can release a language new, shift attention to the torso, legs and genitals. It can enable a language that listens to the visceral movements of the body.

In the essay 'Critical Languages', Kathy Acker attempts to theorize, through a babbling form of first-person fiction, this decapitated body-talk of disturbance. She wonders how the body might speak in art criticism, a form traditionally welded to the Cartesian mind-body split. She hopes for writing where reason is forgotten, and desire (that is located beyond the head) is unearthed. She looks to Bataille's *Acéphale* mag, and André Masson's visceral front-cover drawing of a headless creature with a skull for a penis, and writes (switching genders): 'Here is the place where the logos ought to be or is. In personal language, the head is ruled by the *cunt*.'⁴ She performs this promise of bodily language in 'From Psyche's Journal', a short fiction of mythic diary entries published as a Cathy de Monchaux catalogue essay in 1997, as Kathy (masquerading as young girl Psyche) and spurred on by the vulvic velvet wall-sculptures, writes: 'I remember all I had just seen, the redness and sharpness of flesh that is opening, because I am opening up completely as he goes into me and I into him...'⁵

5. HEADLESS PERFORMANCE, AND SOUNDING THE UNKNOWN

To travel, in language, from the linear logos to the unpredictable body involves a forgetting of oneself. It means performance, a switching of roles, a trying-on of heads – as you lose your own. Perhaps this is why Kathy writes as Psyche, or Hélène writes as Medusa: the decapitated's masquerade. And perhaps why Kate Lyddon's sculpture of a pink clay cranium is defaced with synthetic auburn hair in *Unfolding Aphrodite* (2015). When woman has been mapped out by myth to behave, to be neat, to not talk out of turn (or executed for doing so); we might as well experiment with the freedom of performance and revel in the artifice; we might as well cut off our own head out of choice, and speak, write, scream, sick, as another. Decapitation does not always equal death; it can also equal life – a different one from what has come before – on stage, page, plinth, wall, or in the imagination.

Lyddon's sculptures speak for the silenced *Skull of a Young Girl Modeled in Plaster*, as the decapitated head is re-appropriated as oppositional female grotesque. And in the *Exorcism of Burning Sentiment* (2015) video, a soundtrack of manically sung nursery rhyme interspersed with violent retching (akin to the splurting language of the hysteric), accompanies images of the artist's hairy executions and plagiarized images of non-hairy (similarly grotesque) airbrushed models. As Mary Russo explains in *The Female Grotesque*, while the classical body is 'monumental' and 'self-contained'; the grotesque body is 'open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing'.⁶ Lyddon's characters emBODY and fulfill this carnivalesque subjectivity.

Through drawing, film and mainly sculpture, the artist shows selfhood in a compartmentalised state, revolving, accreting *and* excreting: never static or whole: as the performance takes over. *Two Heads Good*, the subtitle of the exhibition, encapsulates this feminist tactic of decapitated,

⁴ Kathy Acker, 'Critical Languages' in *Bodies of Work*, p.90.

⁵ Kathy Acker, 'From Psyche's Journal' in *Cathy de Monchaux*, (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1997).

⁶ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.8.

multiplicitous masquerade. I imagine Kathy Acker would have fun here, in this alternate world, where heads are chopped from body. She liked riding *choppers*, too, black and inky – like the glazed ceramic head of Lyddon's *Automatic Spiral of Hate (Composition I)* (2015). She (the sculpture) has a lacerated skull with knotted tissue spilling from its centre, while her face looks as if it has been tarred, eyes blinded, all of her expression and affect painted over to 'smooth'.

But even if she cannot talk through the tar, her body can, insofar as it has become disconnected from the linear and lawful mind, and set free to wander. A plinth has been painted black, its front-facing sides bearing the visceral strokes of corporeal suggestion. Two fragments of painted ceramic, belonging to a separate head, become two nipples. Her hands are centred on her cunt – which is where the language would come from if these headless hysterics were to write their own histories. Forget Ovid, but remember Acker: when listing 'The Languages of the Body', at number four she wrote: 'The languages of this material body: laughter, silence, screaming'; and later: 'Let one of art criticism's languages be silence so that we can hear the sounds of the body: the winds and voices of far-off shores, the sounds of the unknown.'

In Lyddon's tribe of decapitated misfits, skulls are masked, cast and painted – layered with process and artifice. As identities become severed, vivisected and displaced, with the switching of heads and bodies, and the collaging of material, the unified subjectivity traditionally proffered by the classical head becomes a distant memory. And with these serial decapitations, the femininity produced by the patriarchal myth-makers is also forgotten, as we encounter the androgynous heads of lime-green creatures. Their glazed faces are lined with emotion, but these are not happy real life wrinkles. Instead, as decapitated Medusas, they bear the artificial inscriptions of anger, violence and vengeful laughter.

Untitled (drunk head) shows us her rotting teeth with a wayward smile, while *Untitled (Sick Head)* is spotted and smeared with red marks of blood or 'badly' applied lipstick. If the severed male head has historically been worshipped and made sacred in sculpture and art, then here we have Lyddon rebelliously mining that tradition, placing inside the vitrine a grotesque gorgon with a punctured basketball for a neck. She lies recumbent, offering herself, open and protruding on the floor. But look closely, and her skin burns red: the angry *young girl* out for revenge...

This is the Medusa head butchered from her body. What about the acephalous other-half? In *Automatic Spiral of Hate (Composition II)*, the oily black body of its earlier counterpart has been cut in two, sliced through its centre, leaving only the stomach, genitals and thighs in tact, her hairy insides leaking from the severed wound. Language originates in this black mass and finds its way out, through indiscriminate orifices, as verbal material. (Staying true to Kathy's promise: speaking is no longer ruled by the head, it's ruled by the body.) A shard of red ceramic is this creature's only remnant of face. It could be her mouth, with fangs out, smiling. Or it could be her vulva-head. Either way, Medusa's laughing... and let's laugh with her.

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