



HOLD THAT TONGUE OF YOURS A BIT, NO ONE WOULD HAVE YOU

Among the most interesting phenomena in the animal world is the shedding of snake skin, which occurs throughout the reptile's life. Having in mind this one, as well as other characteristics of a snake (poison secretion, unpredictable moves, hissing), an unprecedented status of this animal in mythology is not unexpected. In the history of civilisation, this reptile has been recognised as the ultimate representation of space's cyclical nature, that is, of the entirety of existence. However, the ambivalence of snake (creation/destruction, uterus/phallus) is what permeated different polytheistic communities.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, snake has been tied to the female principle, due to the myth of the Original Sin. Through her interaction with the serpent¹, woman became perceived as someone to be tamed, silenced and made entirely subjugated to the male principle. Thus the archetypal optics resulted in the social organisation that, in the majority of global communities, have for centuries been unimaginable without the patriarchal matrix. Despite multiple changes in the light of equal rights and alleged gender equality, the tradition refuses to subside. On the contrary, in the local context, it is not uncommon for a woman to be characterised as a snake, so as to emphasise her duplicity and evil intentions. Any kind of step into the public limelight, especially if reflecting some kind of addressing of a personal or collective experience, may be subjected to public condemnation.

However, the naked truth should by no means be hidden, and this is suggested by the practice of Ivana Ranisavljević, an artist well-known in the local art scene for her radical body performances. By using the vocabulary typical of the 1960s and

1970s² body art, she persistently reminds that female experience in the local context is still shaped by patriarchal myths.

With her solo show *Foreign Skins*, Ivana Ranisavljević presents fragments of the works she made in the last four years, during her PhD studies at the Department of New Media of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade. This is an ambiental installation consisting of photographic and video materials of bodily gestures and actions³ primarily reduced to auto-violent actions and resilience acts. The constellation of roots suspended from the ceiling of the gallery space, into which threads of gold are interwoven, having the names of the living and the dead family members hanging from their ends; pistol of the German manufacturer of Luger stuck in a tree stub; video projections; a doll dressed in a robe composed of table covers made by female ancestors are the constituent elements that are complemented by the sound recording which paints the atmosphere of the entire gallery space.

This hypnotic mix of sentences (*when are you giving birth to your second baby?; what are you waiting for?; if a man hit you, you're not hit by him but by your own tongue; female children are no children!; hold that tongue of yours a bit, no one would have you; grass widow, spinster, windbag, floozy, old maid*) pronounced by a single voice or a group of voices, summarise accumulated female experiences, functioning as a kind of a mantra. This is supported by the ever-present thread or rope as a reference to knitting, a media traditionally associated with women's spaces⁴, which Ranisavljević uses to write different sentences across her own body, or tightly knits them in the form of aforementioned installations.

1 Women and dragons share destiny of the snake Ophion (of the Pelasgian creation-of-the-world myth) which dancing with Eurydice, influenced by the movement and inspiration, incited the process of creation. Ever since, woman and snake (and dragon as its variation) have been sharing the community of overthrown deities, so they are sometimes represented in union, as for example Gorgon (a snake-haired maiden), Erinyes (ugly old women, with red eyes and snakes for hair), Echidna (half a woman, half a snake), or as in the Old Testament myth of the expulsion from Eden. Snake with all its variations (one-hundred-headed, three-headed, dragon) becomes a demonized character, unreal, as it originates from some other time, yet still convenient as the target of a trial for heroes; a priori horrific, and since it was defeated long time ago, also a priori defeatable. – taken from: Jasenka Kodrnja, *Žene zmije – rodna dekonstrukcija* (Women Snakes – A Gender Deconstruction), Institut za društvena istraživanja, Zagreb, 2008

2 The feminist version of body art developed as a direct reaction to the repressive social apparatus based on patriarchy. Inspired by sexual revolution and provoked by militarism, as well as by specific characteristics of individual contexts, many artists across the world (Gina Pane, Ana Mendieta, Katalin Ladik, Marina Abramović, etc.) used their own bodies to address political, identity and other positions of women – author's note.

3 The *Foreign Skins* exhibition involves photo and video sequences from the following works by Ivana Ranisavljević: *Antitelo klana* (Clan's Antibody, 2020), *Tragovi mekog pisma* (Traces of Soft Letter, 2021), *Moje sećanje na budućnost* (My Memory of the Future, 2023), *Shared Skin* (2024), *U tišini susreta* (In the Silence of an Encounter, 2024) - AN.

4 Feminist art practices of the 1970s involved revaluing crafts such as knitting and weaving, thus addressing women's autonomy outside the framework of patriarchy. A good example is the opus of American Artist Eva Hesse.

Therefore, the artist's critically charged engagement is highlighted by the exhibition's title, adaptation and contrasting of individual segments, as well as the entire atmosphere tinted with the repetitive soundscape, and the interplay of shadow and light. By presenting what happens behind the scene, once the performer's body is no longer present, the poetic potential reflected in the documentation and props used in the performances is emphasised. Metaphorically speaking, the gallery space functions as a site where new nets of meaning are created, in which the concepts of myth, gender stereotypes and patriarchy are changed, i.e. transgressed.

It therefore may be said that, just like a snake, Ivana Ranisavljević sheds her own and dons on skins of others, meaning the layers of transgenerational memory⁵. This is a strategy of transgression of and mutiny against the patriarchal system, which aims at critically reviewing the socially constructed role of woman. The transgression⁶ reflected in the mental perseverance and transcendence of physical pain present in her work, suggest self-empowerment, emancipation and an impetus to affirm her own, as well as the collective women's autonomy. The artist uses shock tactics⁷ to confront the public with what unfortunately largely marks contemporary Serbian society – the violence against women as a consequence of the deeply rooted misogyny and systemic gender discrimination.

With her work *In the Name of the Mother and the Daughter* performed at the exhibition's opening, Ranisavljević reflects on not only the everyday life of women in Serbia, but also the current students'

protests. In recent years, the local context has been marked by femicide, often committed in public spaces, before the eyes of the community (e.g. in front of centres for social work). The utter negligence and absence of adequate legislation horrifically culminated with the death of fifteen people caused by the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, and the subsequent intentional car hitting of Sonja Ponjavić, student of the Faculty of Law from Kraljevo, which took place just one day before the opening of the *Foreign Skins* exhibition.

By sewing up her own mouth⁸ Ranisavljević emphasises the silence of women exposed to violence, but also the social silence evident after every threat and every punch. In a protest tone, the artist reads a reworked version of the declaration on human rights addressed to her daughter and thus enters into a direct dialogue with the contemporary moment. Therefore, it can be said that the fifteen minutes of silence to commemorate the casualties of the canopy collapse practiced during the current protests could in the context of this performance also be interpreted as a commemorative gesture intended for all those women who were permanently damaged, or lost their lives due to gender-based violence. This analogy is made to criticize the current social and political climate, i.e. the culture of violence in which anyone who raises a voice must face the consequences, women before anyone else.

Addressing gender-based harassment and abuse in recent years (firstly in the cases of Marija Lukić and Milena Radulović), attempts to introduce gender-sensitive language in the local context, a horrific femicide rates⁹, as well as frequent media

5 By uncovering the psychological heritage in one's family tree, addressing negative behavioural patterns and conditions, and overcoming taboos, one could, according to (Alejandro) Jodorowsky, positively influence their own life and personal development. This positivist attitude to genealogy is shared by Foucault, who believes that it can serve to achieve construction of self as a subject of cognition, a subject that influences others when it comes to the field of power, and finally, as a subject in terms of moral – ethical agent. Taken from: Ivana Ranisavljević, *Transgression prostori ženskosti* - multimedijalna izložba fotografija, videa i umetničkog performansa (Transgressive Spaces of Femininity – multimedia exhibition of photographs, videos and art performance), Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 2024

6 So what does it mean to use your own body as site of exploration? The work of artists who use their own bodies as a site of spectacle, as a medium of art, has several interesting implications. By its very nature, such an act is transgressive. It blurs the boundaries between artwork and artist. This creates an interesting tension between self and other and, indeed, arguably explores the notion of self as other. – taken from: Tracy Fahey, *A Taste for the Transgressive: Pushing Body Limits in Contemporary Performance Art*, <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/781>

7 Perhaps unsurprisingly, artists working with self-harm risk being labelled as damaged people working through trauma publicly in lieu of therapy, or shock-jocks incapable of creating aesthetic experiences other than horror and disgust. – taken from: <https://hyperallergic.com/493380/from-marina-abramovic-to-carlos-martiel-a-tradition-of-self-harm-in-performance-art/>

8 Russian artist Piotr Pavlenski, famous for his radical corporeal and politically engaged actions, sewn his own mouth as a protest against the arrest of the members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot. – NA.

9 From 2011 to 2023, 406 women and girls were killed in Serbia in domestic violence, which is the size of an average school class each year. This mass killing occurs in a society which "advocates for gender equality" only declaratively, but indeed hypocritically, while it simultaneously demands with industrial coldness that women should give birth to more children, for the benefit of the nation threatened by extinction and the state that stumbles with "white plague". – taken from: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2024/12/9/kod-kuce-je-najopasnije-za-13-godina-u-srbiji-ubijeno-406-zena>

relativisation of the work done by women's associations and safe houses, all mark the domination of the right-wing paradigm based on patriarchy¹⁰.

Therefore, one may conclude that by performing self-violent acts Ivana Ranisavljević suggests that skin is still a battleground which must be liberated and emancipated using everything that is at our disposal¹¹. The critique of patriarchy becomes simultaneously a critique of capitalism which, by various means, including medical, cosmetic or fashion industry, indeed shapes the *skins of others*.

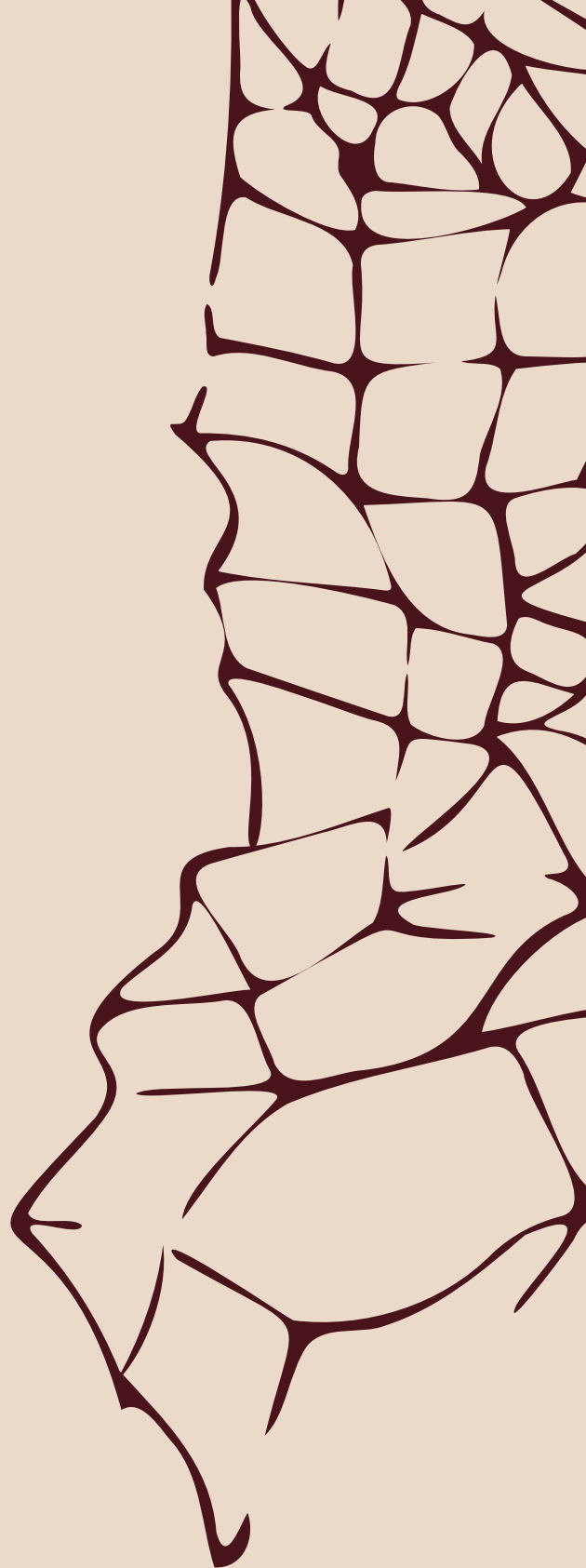
Revolution starts with language. We may call it newspeak or universal tongue, but the new manner of communication would need to involve use of redefined words and expressions that cover the entire range of cerebral and corporeal sensations. However, one of the key challenges in activating this process is bodily resistance, or resilience. Regardless of whether she embroiders her own flesh, sews her mouth, bleeds herself, or stands motionless with an object in her hand, gazing at the public¹², Ivana Ranisavljević demonstrates resistance to the existing system in the same manner as practiced by students who currently resiliently engage in endurance art. The inscription "*You bear witness to my will for my body to be burned after death and the ashes strewn over the trees that are about to grow here*" proves this masterfully. Taken out of context and written in gold on a gallery wall, this sentence of a manifest kind becomes the leitmotif of the artist's corporeal and poetic gesture in which she sums up the life cycle, as well as the essential function of ritual in the present moment which is imbued with fear for the bare life of woman, man and other inhuman species.

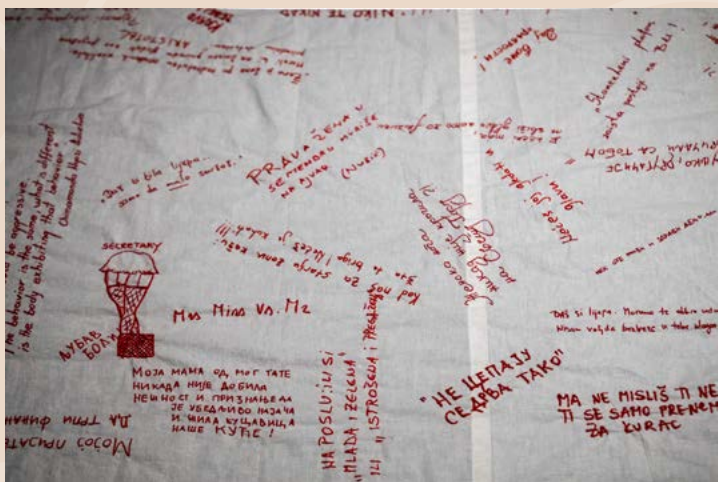
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Art historian

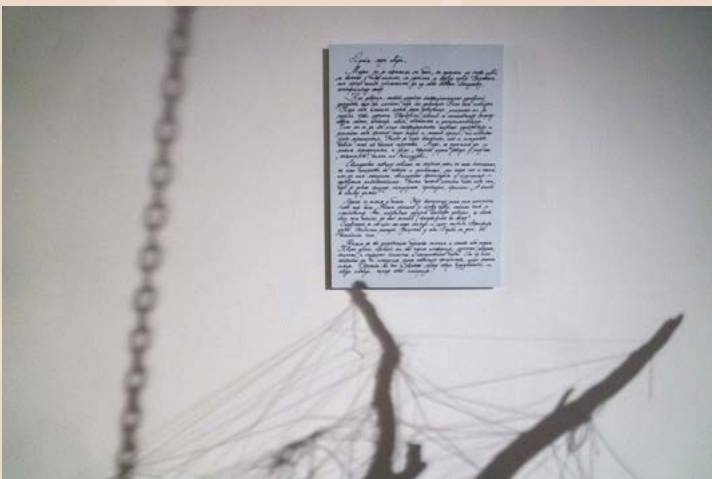
10 Patriarchy is a concept that varies in spatio-temporal and ideological continuum. Its time is more past than future (though some eras in ancient history were characterized by worshipping goddesses), images of its ideation are associated more with village than city (though such differences are fading nowadays), and it ideologically corresponds more with conservatism than liberalism (though liberalism, especially at the time of its origin, by using the term "man in general" overlooked the differences based on male domination). – taken from: Jasenka Kodrnja, *Žene zmije – rodna dekonstrukcija* (Women Snakes – A Gender Deconstruction), Institut za društvena istraživanja, Zagreb, 2008

11 This is quite close to the argument proposed by American artist Carolee Schneemann that "[t]he body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will" which is contained in the text that accompanied her pioneering performance *Eye Body* in 1963. – NA

12 Nevertheless, the proximity of performance, the immediacy of the artist's body as canvas, the feelings of horror, empathy, and even wonder occasioned by the manipulation and excesses of the body, continue to draw audiences. The artist's body as site of performance becomes a space in which the audience may inscribe their own narratives. The body is a locus of projection, almost ab-human, "a not-quite-human subject, characterised by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other". - taken from: Tracy Fahey, *A Taste for the Transgressive: Pushing Body Limits in Contemporary Performance Art*, <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/781>







Ivana Ranisavljević is a visual and performance artist from Serbia. She graduated from the painting department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, where she also received her doctorate from the Department of New Media, under the mentorship of Dr. Zoran Todorović.

The focus of her artistic practice in the last couple of years is primarily the female body as a symbol of strictly defined social codes. Using the vocabulary characteristic of the body art of the 60s and 70s of the last century, which includes auto-violent actions and interventions on the body, Ivana Ranisavljević reminds that the female experience in the local context is still shaped by patriarchal myths.





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