

New Gaze

Ingvild Langgård & Signe Becker

**in conversation with
Elin Amundsen Grinaker.
Photo: Alette Schei Rørvik**

New Gaze started as a conversation between Signe Becker, Ingvild Langgård and Elin Amundsen Grinaker about the inspirations in Becker and Langgård's collaborative works. The conversation centered around how archaeological finds have been interpreted by Victorian men, who left a fray of goddesses – who were of great importance in prehistoric times – out of history. Langgård and Becker present tales, research and anecdotes, and this text is a collection of these different voices. The photos are by Alette Schei Rørvik, illustrating the work of Signe Becker.

Signe Becker is a freelance scenographer and artist educated at the Norwegian Theatre Academy in Fredrikstad and Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Her artistic projects include theatre and dance productions, as well as personal art projects; mainly textile works, sculptures and video. She has worked on a number of productions, and since 2006 been a permanent scenographer at Verk Produksjoner. *Skeleton Woman* is part of Becker's PhD studies at Oslo Academy of the Arts.

Ingvild Langgård is a composer, musician and sound artist, educated at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Langgård composes and performs sound and music in different media, such as live performance, sound installations, and music for stage, ensemble and film, and has released two albums under the name Phaedra. Her artistic works and live performances are shown in museums, galleries and venues such as The Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Kunstnerforbundet, Lydgalleriet, The Munch Museum and Henie Onstad Art Centre.

Alette Schei Rørvik is a visual artist and freelance photographer, educated from the Bergen National Academy of the Arts with a BFA in Photography and an MFA in Art. She has been exhibited at Bergen Kunsthall, Fotogalleriet, UKS, Podium, USF Verftet, amongst other places. She works mainly with photography, in combination with other media such as video, text, installation and performance. Her projects are seemingly documentary, yet bordering towards fiction, the self-exploratory starting point gives a subtle backdrop for more universal themes.

Elin Amundsen Grinaker has a master in Dramaturgy from Aarhus universitet. She works as program dramaturge at Black Box teater, and is freelancing widely in the performing arts field where she has worked with Lisa Lie, Martin Forsberg, Demian Vitanza, Jenny Hval, Cornerstone, Det Norske Teatret, Lene Therese Teigen among others. She is co-editor and writer in the feminist fanzine Blazer.

This text was originally written in Norwegian and translated to English by Ingeborg Husbyn Aarsand and Josephine Kylén-Collins.

“We all have a right to a history that is meaningful, useful, and liberatory.”
– Max Dashú¹

1 – www.suppressedhistories.net/presentations/womenshistory.html

In 2017, Signe Becker and Ingvild Langgård created the piece *New Skin*. The notion behind the performance was the word or action *prosopopoeia*, meaning giving inanimate objects human traits, like feelings, emotions; a soul. The thought behind *New Skin* was giving inanimate objects life through a ritually charged theatrical space, built by visual and auditory elements. I noticed Signe and Ingvild were talking about prehistoric times and the possibility of a different system than patriarchy. I believe I even heard them saying “maybe the patriarchy is only a parenthesis in history” – and this made me curious. I met the two artists for a chat about the sources of inspiration they have created from and will continue to develop in their new work, *Skeleton Woman*, presented at Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020.

Our conversation was like a cornucopia of anecdotes and words, suggestions of new readings of history, archeological findings, Goddesses, monotheistic religions, how the Christian calendar and the year 0 is arbitrary, myths, and the world's first poet, who – surprise! – was a woman! Our conversation was lively; a myriad of voices, and the rendering is an interconnected conversation without a direct sender.

*To run, to escape, to quiet and to pacify are yours, Inana.
To rove around, to rush, to rise up, to fall down and to a companion are yours, Inana. To open up roads and paths, a place of peace for the journey, a companion for the weak, are yours, Inana.
To keep paths and ways in good order, to shatter earth and to make it firm are yours, Inana.
To destroy, to build up, to tear out and to settle are yours, Inana.
To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours, Inana.²*

2 – The world's first author known by name, High Priestess Enheduanna (2285-2250 f.v.t), wrote hymns and poems to celebrate the Goddess Inanna.

The Book of Genesis has had a strong influence on how we interpret the world we live in. Being a woman in the year 2020, reading about the shaming of Eve, how she shall give birth in pain, how Eve is Adams property, no wonder you want to pick up a different book, and look at history, or rather, herstory, with a new and more uplifting view. Signe and Ingvild discovered Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman*, a book which through archeological findings and interpretations suggests a quite different historical position for women.

– Stone deals with the disputes or discrepancy within the field of archeology between what has been described for us and what has been found. Meaningful objects have not always made sense to those who found them. Archeological findings have been interpreted from the point of view of those with the right to define, such as men in the Victorian age, members of the noble class in England or Germany, societies where women had a very limited role. History is interpreted and told by those who can write and those who are in a position to have their voices heard.

– Reading de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* made us really depressed, and that's how it all started. Reading feminist literature which deals with 2000 years of fucked up conditions for women can really bum you out. It was refreshing to find archeologists presenting other theories about history.

– It does not make sense that we base our calendar on the arbitrarily decided Christian year 0. An artificially placed number as if you woke up one day and decided: “time begins now!” But what actually happened at that time? And what is year 0 really? Is it when humans started walking? Is it the first sign of life on planet Earth? Is it the Big Bang? What is this 0? Everything that happened before Abraham and the Bible is actually defined as *prehistory*. *Before history*. Our calendar system even goes backwards from the year 0, and that’s pretty crazy because it creates a mindset suggesting that whatever happened before year 0 doesn’t count or isn’t relevant. Archeologists have found traces of human cultural activity from 20–40.000 years ago. That’s a lot of years compared to the mere 2000 years we are preoccupied with in our society. There are so many Goddesses to be found during that prehistoric period, and this points out that it is not at all certain that it “has always been this way”, as the history has been read and conveyed. These Goddesses aren’t part of our canons, they haven’t been talked about much. We are not proposing that matriarchy dominated the 40.000 years before the year 0, but it is likely that women had a bigger role than we have been taught. And that is a much more hopeful scenario.

– Speaking about feminism in our time often results in women ending up as a victim. In the making of *New Skin* we were trying to find a different energy and held on to the positive thought about a different herstory. The perspective you tell the story from is a choice. Women have always been present, no matter where you find yourself in a system, in a culture, your point of view will always be valid. The storyteller holds the narrative, she defines “how it really is.” This was our time to suggest the point of view.

















Somewhere along the line, someone decided to call the investigation of women's history "passé". Hardly: we've only just begun! A few decades of research has barely scratched the surface of this undertaking which has colossal implications for understanding women's status – and for dislodging the stereotypes about who women are or can be.³

3 – Max Dashú <http://www.suppressedhistories.net/presentations/womenshistory.html>

– The male gaze is still very present in today's narratives. The Oseberg Ship is one of the largest findings from the Viking era and the grave of two women, one old and one younger. There have been a lot of speculations around which king these two women were sisters of. But findings of ritual objects in the burial site indicate that they most probably were shamans, fortune tellers or medicine women. During the Viking era, the shamans were the most respected interpreters of religion and therefore would have had great authority in the society at the time – independent women who had a nomadic lifestyle, and may have lived outside the traditional family constellations existing in the Viking age's Norse clan systems.

– Much has been lost or given no value through history because those interpreting it haven't understood its meaning. For instance, the distaffs found amongst the artifacts on the Oseberg Ship. Made in such an expensive material, ornate and so heavy that they couldn't have been used to spin with, in its traditional sense. So, what were they? Most likely ritual objects used in magical practice called *seidr*, a practice related to shamanistic practices that were commonly used in the north at the time, mainly performed by women. If you were a man and executed these practices, you were most likely gay or transgendered. Also, in many shamanistic cultures, the shaman would cross-dress; moving across the lines of categories, such as inner-outer, life-death, animal-human, and in between the physical and spiritual worlds. These objects and practices had no meaning seen with the eyes of a Victorian historian. But today, having more sources of information, we can anticipate the outlines of what kind of practice these objects could be part of.

She is thrown off a cliff, out into the sea by her father, and there she lies as a skeleton on the bottom of the ocean. One day a fisherman drifts too far on the ocean and his fishing net gets caught in the ribcage of the skeleton woman. She fights to get loose, but the harder she struggles, the more entangled she gets.

The fisherman pulls her up, she hangs on to his kayak by her front teeth. He tries to kick her off, and with all his strength row to get her off of the kayak, but still she hangs on. By the time he gets ashore he's entangled in the same fishing net as her, yet he tries to run away from her. When he arrives at his cabin he discovers she is right behind him. Suddenly he softens, speaking to her tenderly and untangles her from the net. He puts the pieces of her skeleton back into their right position and wraps her in a fur before going to bed. While sleeping, a tear escapes the corner of the fisherman's eye which the skeleton woman drinks. She carves out the heart of the sleeping fisherman, pounds on it and sings: "flesh, flesh, flesh", while her skeleton body fills with flesh. She sings muscles, hair, sex organ, breasts and hands onto

her bones. Her body is at last sung into place. She sings the fisherman's clothes off and lies down next to him, bare skin to bare skin. She puts his heart back into his chest, and they wake in an embrace.

In the epic poem Sigurðarkviða, a heroic lay from the poetic Edda, we meet valkyrjer or Valkyries, meaning chooser of the slain. Valr refers to the dead, and kyrjer comes from the verb kjosa or choose. One of the Valkyries, Sigdrifa, is sentenced to a long night's sleep after appointing another victor than the one Odin wants. She sleeps surrounded by flames until Sigurð comes and wakes her. She arises by greeting day and night.

– Sigdrifa's greeting is a peek into another possible cosmology that does not shine through in other, often completely male-oriented, war-related myths. This is another example on things we don't know about the total cosmology from the pre-Christian Norse community. "Hail, day! Hail, sons of day! Hail night and her daughters! Hail abundant earth! Hail to the Gods! Hail Goddesses – everything!" She asks for victory, for wisdom, for the gift of being well-spoken, and for healing hands.

*Oh brightest Day
Oh darkest Night
Children of Day
Night and Her kind
Look upon us
with loving eyes
and grant to us
the best of luck*

*Oh praise Divinity
Outside and in me
Abundant Earth
Oh Endless Sky
Grant us with words
May we be wise
And grant us healing
hands
while alive⁴*

4 – From *New Skin*, Ingvild Langgård's rendition of Sigdrífumál.

Marija Gimbutas was a Lithuanian-American archeologist whose theories were dismissed during large parts of her career. But with the help of modern DNA-research, her research has now gained credibility. Gimbutas argues that we have to look at archeological findings, not only from the perspective of the texts written about these prehistorical cultures by Christian priests. Like Merlin Stone, Gimbutas notes that these priests have written about ‘the others’; those who were regarded as less than the Christians, and that the interpretations done by them use a minimizing language for which does not fit in to their take on religion and society. While the priests write about “heathen icons” or “female figurines”, Stone and Gimbutas write about Goddesses.

– How we use language, the words we choose to describe something, affects how we read and consider each other as humans. When we write god with a capital G and Goddess with a small g – a use of language still practiced today – it affects what we as readers give value.

– Since the 1970s, a new direction in the field of archeology has developed, referring to herstory instead of history. Gimbutas asks; what do we see if we let go of the perspective history has been told from, and instead look directly at the artifacts that has been unearthed? How do we interpret them differently? The idea of the Great Goddess might be a 1970s dream. But what we do know is that there were great many Goddesses in prehistoric time. There hasn’t always been one single god as the Christian, Jewish, Muslim monotheistic narratives argue. We have enough knowledge to break with that existing narrative of how it might have been.

*You may not remember,
but let me tell you this,
someone in some future
time will think of us.⁵*

5 – Sappho, Greek poet, composer, musician, teacher, priestesses of the goddess Aphrodite, 630 – c. 570 BC.

