

GIOVANNA ZAPPERI

“We Communicate only with Women”:

Italian Feminism, Women Artists and the Politics of Separatism

Woman is the other in relation to man.
Man is the other in relation to woman.
Equality is an ideological attempt to subject women even further. [...]
Liberation for woman does not mean accepting the life man leads,
because it is unliveable; on the contrary,
it means expressing her own sense of existence.¹

One of the most salient features of the 1970s Italian feminist movement is its radical critique of equality and the ensuing separatism that characterizes most of the groups that emerged at the beginning of the decade. Women’s collectives spread throughout the country in the wake of 1968, when it became clear that the various political organizations involved in the protests were unwilling to challenge traditional gender hierarchies and relations. Italian feminism is structurally bound to this radical attempt to claim its autonomy from the male dominated (and mostly Marxist oriented) organizations, in a time of unprecedented political unrest.² By the early 1970s, separatist spaces and practices became the centre of women’s experiments with a different kind of politics, one that would allow for the elaboration of a new autonomous vocabulary, in which women could find ways to express their “own sense of existence”. The closing remarks of the Manifesto of Rivolta Femminile made this point clear: in stating that “we communicate only with women”³, the collective indicates the importance of moving away from the arena of male politics in the path towards liberation.

The birth of Rivolta Femminile is marked by the inaugural Manifesto, collectively written by art critic Carla Lonzi, artist Carla Accardi, and African-Italian journalist Elvira Banotti, among others, and hung in the streets of Rome and Milan. The collective denounced the false promises of equality, as these were based on women’s assimilation to an order which made them structurally subordinate. As Carla Lonzi will develop in her subsequent text *Let’s spit on Hegel*, also written in 1970, equality inevitably leads to alienation, as it posits inclusion in a “world planned by others”.⁴ For Lonzi, women can be paternalistically assimilated in the arena of politics only in so far as they are

recognized as equals by men. Equality, she argues, is the basic principle upon which hegemonic culture imposes its rule on its others: it therefore comprises legalized subjugation and unidimensionality. The crux of Lonzi's argument is a critique of power as structurally embedded in historically determined gender dynamics. Since equality is nothing but yet another patriarchal misconception aiming at securing women's subjugation, instead of surrendering to its false promises of inclusion, women need to collectively withdraw from the structures of social and cultural validation and thus abandon the power dynamics in which they will inevitably be trapped.

How do we address this claim for autonomy, the critique of equality and the collective withdrawal from male institutions and organizations, when we turn to women's art in 1970s Italy? As it happened in other contexts, women artists who were involved in the feminist movement found themselves in a paradoxical position. The male-dominated art world was hardly a welcoming space for women, and those who engaged in a career as professional artists, no matter whether they were feminists or not, had to face a number of mechanisms of marginalization. At the same time, feminist thinking and practices in Italy tended to emphasize the importance of moving away from male institutions and to encourage autonomous forms of expression that were mostly based on the exchanges that took place among women. All-women spaces could therefore potentially become places where new forms of artistic expression could unfold, however in some groups, such as Rivolta Femminile, whose members had direct experience of the art world, art was a contested field [fig. 1]. Indeed, Carla Lonzi considered art to be too compromised by patriarchal systems of value to be of any use for feminist purposes, and this despite Rivolta's original connection with the art world. Women artists participating in these groups were therefore in the uneasy situation of being marginalized in the art world, while at the same time having to struggle to find their own voice within the feminist movement.

Rivolta Femminile was among the women's groups that, from the early 1970s on, oriented their political practice towards *autocoscienza* and therefore separatism, which was its indispensable precondition. *Autocoscienza* (Italian for consciousness raising) was in fact adopted by the majority of women's groups in 1970s Italy and became the means through which women forged new alliances and relations. Despite the structural heterogeneity in the ways in which this practice was developed by the various existing groups, it can be said that it had a decisive impact in defining Italian feminism's aims and politics. Even though the practice of consciousness raising was originally imported from the United States, where it had developed throughout the 1960s across black liberation groups and women's collectives, it took a specific

configuration in Italy. Here, the main question concerned the problem of women's autonomy with respect to a society that structurally rendered them invisible, as opposed to the American model that fostered inclusion, equal opportunities and affirmative actions.⁵ In other words, feminists in Italy were more interested in building autonomous spaces that could potentially challenge a model of society based on women's oppression.

Generally speaking, *autocoscienza* took place in small groups, where women gathered in order to experiment non-hierarchical relations in which moral judgements and other systems of value were held in suspension. To paraphrase Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, *autocoscienza* marked the invention of a relational space where women were able to give an account of themselves and to promote a political practice based on self-narration.⁶ During the meetings there were no pre-established rules, no leader, no control, but an integral openness towards the other. As it has been underlined, the experience of *autocoscienza* is difficult to convey or transmit, especially via textual accounts. Its temporality was the present, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why there are very few theorizations, or even narratives that chronicle *autocoscienza*, inasmuch as it promoted mutual presence and the immediacy of the encounter in ways that resisted the temporalities of the written text.⁷ Within this configuration, separatism was a political necessity inasmuch as it facilitated a process in which patriarchal habits could be interrupted and questioned collectively. According to Rivolta Femminile, *autocoscienza* cannot be recuperated outside of the women's group, because it does not turn to men. On the contrary, it originates in what Lonzi calls a "void", where an autonomous sense of the self can grow and exist: *autocoscienza* is how women collectively challenge patriarchal notions of subjectivity.⁸ Most importantly, *autocoscienza* operated as a process in which self-affirmation, collective knowledge and mutual recognition were bound together through the constitution of a different community: a "utopia of the articulation between the individual and the collective",⁹ allowing for the constitution of a new political subject.

Notwithstanding the significance of separatism for Italian feminism, few attempts have been made to look at its impact on women's art. In what follows, I will consider the works produced around 1975 by Carla Accardi, Suzanne Santoro and Marcella Campagnano in relation to their participation in women's groups such as Rivolta Femminile in Rome and Collettivo di via Cherubini in Milan. The works I am interested in originated from within the experiences of the feminist movement and provide a unique opportunity to look at how a new set of creative practices could grow as part of a collective political project. For these artists, the women's movement allowed for an

understanding of the political implications of their exclusion from the art world, and for an active search for separate spaces to conduct their creative practices. However, separatism was not an easy choice, and for some of them it could also translate into a set of ambivalent strategies with respect to the mainstream art world. While based on different formats and media (installation, photography, artist book), these works substantiate the importance of the collective that was central to feminist politics. More specifically, they make direct or indirect reference to the practice of *autocoscienza*.

Whereas the work of influential figures such as Carla Accardi or Marisa Merz has recently been assessed in the framework of the Italian feminist movement, women artists active in Italy in the 1970s are still surprisingly marginalized in the numerous international accounts of the relation between art and feminism during that decade.¹⁰ This marginalization is reinforced by their invisibility within the Italian post-war art historical canon, as it has been formulated both in Italy and elsewhere. As Emanuela De Cecco and others have underlined, women artists in Italy have suffered from the ways in which post-war Italian art has been defined and historicized through a series of established categories that refer to all-male groups and movements, such as Informale, Arte Povera, and perhaps most infamously, Transavanguardia.¹¹ The art historical canon in Italy has a strong tendency to emphasize the heroic rhetoric of *genio creatore* in tandem with a number of supposedly local features, such as the *Genius Loci*, most notably conceptualized by Italian art curator and critic Achille Bonito Oliva.¹² Moreover, such accounts assume the existence of one homogeneous national identity, which leaves aside the complex migratory and transnational histories that are constitutive of contemporary Italy in general, and its art scene in particular, a fact that has remained unaddressed so far.¹³ As a matter of fact, among the women artists and critics active in 1970s Italy, whose activity had direct or indirect connection with the feminist movement, we find American-born artists Stephanie Oursler and Suzanne Santoro, Brazilian Iole de Freitas and Argentinian Verita Monselles, Romanian-born Marion Baruch, and French art critic Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, to name just a few. This is to say that looking at women's creative practices in 1970s Italy means disrupting the overarching art historical narratives which endure to this day, and which have played a crucial role in women's on-going marginalization.

Referring to the writings of Carla Lonzi, Lea Vergine and Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, three art critics working in Italy, Judith Russi Kirshner has argued that their marginalization in the histories of 1970s art has to do with Italian feminism's emphasis on difference as opposed to gender equality, which

prompted artists and critics to experiment with a process of "self-reflection to fashion their own subjective space from lived experience", instead of promoting inclusive policies within the art world.¹⁴ Lonzi and Sauzeau-Boetti in particular believed in women's self-expression as a path towards liberation, and were more interested in the idea of creativity as a transformative process, rather than in the art object *per se*, because the art work would inevitably end up in the circuits of patriarchal systems of evaluation. Moreover, the specific articulation of feminist thinking and practice in the Italian context has been rendered illegible by established historical accounts of the relation between art and feminism, which are strongly based on Anglo-American experiences, and on the new category of "feminist art".¹⁵ It is important to underline that already in the 1970s, both Carla Lonzi and Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti warned against the validity of such a categorization which they considered as a mere attempt to integrate women's radical practices within patriarchal institutions.

At the centre of this illegibility stands the figure of Carla Lonzi, a prominent art critic whose writings soon became emblematic of Italian 1970s feminism, and whose trajectory is marked by her radical refusal of art. Lonzi had worked as an art critic throughout the 1960s, an activity that she abandoned in 1970, when she participated in the founding of Rivolta Femminile.¹⁶ Carla Lonzi's writings on art fostered dialogues and encounters, as emerged from her 1969 book *Autoritratto*, based on a number of recorded conversations with artists, all male except for Carla Accardi, which she published shortly before leaving the art world and the professional activity that she had carried on for over a decade.¹⁷ In her art criticism, Lonzi sought to generate a process of mutual recognition in which a new subjectivity could unfold, in opposition to the notion of the subject as an autonomous and universal individual inherited from the modernist tradition. However, Lonzi later refused to articulate her feminism within the boundaries of the art world, as she ended up considering that art was inseparable from the processes of validation and valorisation promoted by art institutions and systems of knowledge, which she understood as obstacles to women's self-expression, which could only emerge via *autocoscienza*.¹⁸ She therefore refused to act as "the Lucy Lippard of the situation",¹⁹ which means actively engaging in supporting women artists, choosing instead to abandon the arena of art altogether. However, while moving away from the art world, during the 1970s Lonzi provided a sustained critique of the male myth of art from the separatist space of feminism, a critique that keeps on resonating when we look at women artists' production in 1970s Italy.

The problem of separatism in relation to art was discussed within Rivolta Femminile as early as 1971, with the publication of a short manifesto-text

written collectively and entitled “On woman’s absence from celebratory manifestations of male creativity”. Given the fact that several artists participated in the group,²⁰ it comes as no surprise if the question of art versus creative expression was one of topics addressed during the group’s meetings. The short text elaborates on the political significance of withdrawing from the male arena of art, while at the same time expressing a collective search for a different type of creativity, one that could be set apart from patriarchal relations. The art world, the manifesto explains, is structured around the male artists’ *protagonismo* that excludes women, confining them to the role of mute and passive beholders. The notion of *protagonismo*, a recurring keyword in Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile’s texts, refers to modernist ideas about the artist as a unique and coherent individual exemplified by historically determined notions such as genius and originality. Carla Lonzi’s idea of male protagonism encapsulates a critique of the mythical apparatus surrounding the artist’s figure that strongly resonates with contemporary theorizations in the Anglo-American context that aimed at deconstructing the artist’s masculinity.²¹

The manifesto transposes Lonzi’s critique of equality in the field of art and warns against equality’s putative benefits for women artists. The text advocates for the possibility of an autonomous creativity, not one intrinsic to womanhood, but one that could unfold as a consequence of the new awareness of art’s patriarchal fallacies. The act of withdrawal from art implies therefore a form of unmasking: once women refuse to participate in the celebration of male creativity, the whole system sustaining art collapses: “By being absent from the celebration of male creativity [...] we put a strain on the male concept of art as beneficial and administrable grace. By ceasing to believe in this reflexive liberation, creativity is free to escape patriarchal relations”.²² The stake here is to dismantle a notion of creativity based on a gendered distribution of roles: creative labour, competition and social prestige on one side, passivity, helpless acquiescence and affective labour on the other. The overcoming of these dichotomies also implies the possibility to imagine a form of creativity able to rupture male *protagonismo*, inasmuch as it is implicitly built upon the new type of relations that women were experiencing through *autocoscienza*. This different creativity aims at overcoming the divide between the protagonist and his others, while concentrating instead on self-expression, mutual listening, sharing and participating in a process of liberation.

Carla Accardi was among the initiators of Rivolta Femminile with her close friend Carla Lonzi. Throughout the 1960s, Lonzi and Accardi had shared their

experience in a male-dominated art world and their relationship would play a pivotal role in defining both the significance of *autocoscienza* and Lonzi's critique of art from a feminist standpoint. During the years that preceded and coincided with the birth of Rivolta Femminile, Accardi was working on a series of environments that were the object of intense discussions with Lonzi. In 1966, as Accardi was working at her *Tenda* [fig. 2], the two women recorded a conversation in which they discussed women's creativity and the role of the woman artist, while proposing a shared feminist reading of this work.²³ The *Tenda* is reduced in dimensions, but its door is open and two persons can easily enter and stay inside; roof and walls are composed of transparent sicofoil panels – a type of plastic that became Accardi's trademark for decades – painted with decorative motives in red and green. The tent's transparency and intimacy suggest the idea of a space that is both separate and open towards the outside. It establishes a relation between the inside and the outside, while conveying a provisional, nomadic and intimate space, which contradicts the domestic space's traditional closure. In a text written for Accardi's first exhibition of her *Tenda* at Galleria Notizie in Torino, Lonzi explains that transparency is one of the work's crucial features because it enables a bodily experience of the art work, which she described as a "tangible situation".²⁴ Transparency allows to see the inside and the outside at the same time, thus enabling a new relation between subject and object that contradicts the mere contemplation of the work of art: the subject has now become part of the experience itself.

In keeping with Lonzi's remarks, Leslie Cozzi has proposed to read the *Tenda* in relation to *autocoscienza* and therefore separatism. This work, she argues, establishes a new articulation between the individual and the collective, proposing to read it as a space of encounter that can be understood as a prefiguration of the subsequent practice of *autocoscienza*.²⁵ The reconfiguration between the public and the private in Accardi's *Tenda* was equally crucial in Rivolta Femminile's separatism. The group's meetings took place in private homes, which became spaces where the boundaries between the private and the public spheres were renegotiated, and where new relations among women could be invented. *Autocoscienza* was based on self-narration and active listening, in a collective effort to withhold judgment and suspend conventional thinking, fostering a horizontal, non-hierarchical approach. For Carla Lonzi, *autocoscienza* marked the beginning of a collective withdrawal from the structures of social and cultural validation, as a way to access female subjectivity. A text on *autocoscienza* explains that separatist groups "operate to bring about women's leap into subjecthood, as women mutually recognize themselves as complete human beings, and are no longer in need of approval from men".²⁶

Notwithstanding Accardi's essential contribution to the birth of Rivolta Femminile, her trajectory within the women's movement shows that, for a professionally successful artist, separatism could become a contested choice. Lonzi's critique of equality and Rivolta Femminile's call for a collective withdrawal from the celebration of male creativity implied the need to rethink the structures of cultural validation. Working as a professional artist could therefore turn into a dilemma for those who, like Accardi, were interested in expressing themselves through art. Despite the fact that their discussions had been instrumental in conceptualizing a series of ideas that were to be translated into their feminist commitment, Accardi and Lonzi ended their friendship around 1973. Their conflict concerned the problem of how to imagine a feminist creativity and its relation to the art world, as well as Accardi's refusal to put aside her career (she was actually one of the few successful women artists in post-war Italy).²⁷ Carla Lonzi privileged written expression because of its structural bond with language and thus its purported ability to translate *autocoscienza's* transformative experience into enduring testimonies. On the contrary, she considered that art making was inextricable from institutional practices and meanings, which were already formatted within a series of male habits and discourses. However, Carla Accardi and other women participating in Rivolta Femminile were unwilling or unable to express themselves with writing and considered visual expression as a valuable alternative. Moreover, they formulated a critique of the idea that *autocoscienza's* immediacy could be elaborated exclusively through writing, which, in their view, entailed intellectual speculation and labour, as opposed to the spontaneous emotional dimension of the lived experience during the meetings.

In the aftermath of her irreconcilable break with Lonzi, Accardi engaged in a different feminist project with the establishment of the Cooperativa del Beato Angelico, an all-women cooperative that opened in Rome in 1976 in the street with the same name. This was a different kind of separatist space involving artists and critics, this time directly connected to art making and exhibiting.²⁸ In this context, Accardi produced *Origine*, a 1976 exhibition and installation that makes reference to her experience of *autocoscienza* and women's relations across generations. *Origine* (1976) consisted in a sicofoil painting hung on the wall, while opposite to it, a series of transparent sicofoil strips were hung side by side with a series of black and white photographs depicting the artist with her mother [fig. 3]. Another picture, portraying Accardi's grandmother, is hung nearby. This work stands apart in Accardi's oeuvre, most notably because of her use of photographs taken from her own family album,

in a way that is reminiscent of Lonzi's dissemination of family pictures in the book *Autoritratto*.

It is significant that for her solo show in a separatist space, Accardi experimented with a visual language suggesting a provisional withdrawal from the practice of painting that had defined her activity so far. The juxtaposition of the transparent sicofoil strips with archival photographs indicates that she was looking at conceptual art practices that were developing during the 1970s, more specifically in the work of a younger generation of women artists. Even more striking is the fact that *Origine* defines a separatist space that resonates with the one in which it is shown, namely the all-women cooperative. The installation provides a reframing of the patriarchal family through a female lineage, which resonates with Accardi's speculation on marriage and the family as an "apartheid" for women, an institution aiming at sustaining men and excluding women, "an inauthentic place that needs to be overhauled".²⁹ In her examination of women's relations within the patriarchal family, Accardi also proposes a meditation on motherhood from the perspective of being both mother and daughter (Accardi herself had a daughter). The work therefore foregrounds the significance of the feminine genealogy for the woman artist and destabilizes her implicit identification within a "patrilineal" line of the history of art, questioning therefore the way historical categories and genealogies are framed by gender.

Among the artists involved in both Rivolta Femminile and the Cooperativa Beato Angelico [fig. 4], Suzanne Santoro represents a case in point when looking at how separatism could find its way into artmaking. When she met Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile in Rome around 1971, Santoro had not yet started a career as a professional artist. She had recently graduated from the School of visual arts in New York and had decided to travel to Rome, where she ended up staying for the following decades and where she developed her distinctive visual vocabulary. Santoro's understanding of art and creativity was strongly informed by her encounter with the feminist movement in Italy, and above all with Carla Lonzi's ideas. For Santoro, separatism was not an obstacle, but rather a unique opportunity on her path to becoming an artist, as it allowed her to understand the importance of her activity with respect to the experience of being a woman. However, as opposed to Accardi, she was not interested in identifying as a professional artist, nor in having a career in the mainstream art world, and her work mostly circulated in women's and feminist art networks.

In Rome, Santoro began to explore the ways in which women's bodies were represented and concealed historically. Her work conveys her wanderings

around the city's museums, churches and archaeological sites in search of the visual signs of a hidden female presence. Her on-going interest in the entwined questions of sexual difference, art-making and history developed through an excavation of past representations of femininity. Seeking out the hidden histories of female expression became a way for her to conceptualize her practice in feminist terms. Working with photography and text Santoro produced an artist book, *Towards new expression* (1974), based on the juxtaposition of a number of photographic images, ranging from contemporary graffiti to ancient sculptures and paintings, flowers and female genitalia [fig. 5]. This work aimed at unravelling a visual tradition based on the repression of women's agency and autonomy via an array of established iconographic conventions. Santoro's work from the 1970s takes as its starting point the notion of the feminine as a negative sign within patriarchal culture, but instead of proposing a new, positive representation of women's bodies, she delves into this negativity in order to open up a more structural alternative.

Santoro's works from the 1970s are marked by her experience of *autocoscienza*, which she attempted to convert into a search for new forms of expression, as the title of her book suggests. Feminism thus provided a meaningful context for her art-making, enabling her to move away from the art world's patriarchal practices and turn her withdrawal from the male arena of art into a potential for liberation. In a text on Suzanne Santoro's work, art critic Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti describes how the artist violated the boundaries of male expression by focusing not on establishing a new iconography that would give voice to oppressed women, but rather on highlighting the unseen and the unexpressed [fig. 6].³⁰ She was referring to the 1976 exhibition at the Cooperativa Beato Angelico, where Santoro presented a group of works that related to her experience as a member of Rivolta Femminile, and built on her previous project *Towards new expression*. With reference to the artist's observation of ancient sculptures in Rome, Sauzeau-Boetti considers the relationship between the body and fabric drapery. Santoro had photographed a series of sculptures representing draped female figures and then circled some of the details in order to highlight the bodily presence that was hidden beneath the surface. Her gesture referenced the concealment of the female sex in the history of art and the way it re-emerges through the folds of the drapery. As Sauzeau-Boetti writes, dwelling in the historical representation of the female sex means "descending into the shadow", the ambivalent, yet unseen presence of female sexuality, mostly reduced to a simple negation epitomized by the "Y" –

a graphic sign of its absence. The work of revealing the shadows concealed in the rumpled pleats represents in her view a creative female venture. Yet, according to Sauzeau-Boetti, this shadow-presence cannot be signified in terms of the "feminine", because this category is already present, embedded in the patriarchal understandings of sexual difference. Therefore, its subversive element lies in the complex process of uncovering what is hidden and challenging the established order. For Sauzeau-Boetti, this was one of the distinctive features of the women's art scene in Italy, which did not set out merely to challenge the oppression of women, but rather to "betray the expressive mechanisms of culture", as she explains in her influential text "Negative capability as practice in women's art".³¹ As Connie Butler has suggested, this text appropriates for women the productive space of the margins, while developing a further critique of equality in the realm of art.³² Sauzeau-Boetti's art criticism, which was strongly informed by contemporary feminist thought, especially from France, emphasizes the significance of separatism for women's art in Italy. Drawing from the fact that women artists in Italy seemed less involved in moving "towards self-vindication and promotion"³³ (as opposed to US American artists), she argues against what she perceived as a self-conscious and identifiable "feminist art". Ideology, she writes, is reassuring because it inscribes women's struggles within the legible cultural space of activism: turning to ideology simply means surrendering to male habits and languages. Therefore, she is not calling for the invention of an alternative language or a "feminist avant-garde", but rather for a "process of differentiation": a struggle in which the expressive mechanisms of culture are sabotaged from within. Accordingly, her insistence on the liberating potential of negation, which she observes in Santoro's and other women artists' ambivalent relation with established artistic formats and languages, can be understood in the framework of Italian feminism's tendency to emphasise withdrawal, separatism and difference, rather than searching for equal opportunities within an art world that was fundamentally biased against them. In her texts, she avoids providing any definition of womanhood outside of this negative space, which she subsequently describes as "shadow-culture", "negative capability" or "subject in the negative", and which strongly resonates with Lonzi's ideas about the importance of withdrawing from the arena of male culture. But while Lonzi had refused to recognize the legitimacy and meaning of Santoro's work,³⁴ Sauzeau-Boetti was able to provide a theoretical framework for some of the ideas that had been formulated within Rivolta Femminile (in which Sauzeau-Boetti herself had not taken part).

In keeping with Sauzeau-Boetti's remarks, it is possible to consider the specific strategies adopted by women artists in Italy who were interested in

expressing feminism's transformative potential through their creative practices. In most cases, these experiences took place at the margins of the art world, partly because, as we have seen, women tended to be excluded, but also because their works eluded established languages, spaces and systems of value in a way that challenged conventional notions of art. The legacy of *autocoscienza* was particularly important when artists wanted to confront the social roles and the oppressive ideals of femininity in which women's lives were trapped. Marcella Campagnano's photographic series *The invention of femininity: Roles* (1974-1980), for example, was developed in conjunction with the artist's involvement in feminist collectives. Campagnano had been in touch with Carla Lonzi in Milan and after an attempt to join Rivolta Femminile, she turned to other groups, such as the Collettivo di Via Cherubini, that later converged in the Milan Women's Bookstore, one of the most significant platforms for the practice and theory of sexual difference in Italy [fig. 7].³⁵ In this context, Campagnano started to practice *autocoscienza*, which prompted the idea of experimenting with a series of photographic performances in which she and some of her friends would chart a range of social roles assigned to women.

The via Cherubini collective usually held meetings on Saturdays, but discussions could continue for the entire week-end, especially for a smaller group of women, that included artists Silvia Truppi and Diane Bond, and activist Daniela Pellegrini, who shared the same apartment with Campagnano on such occasions. On Sundays, the private space turned into a sort of theatre of women's everyday lives that the four women collectively and playfully addressed and deconstructed via a photographic practice that Campagnano describes as *teatro dell'esperienza* [theatre of experience].³⁶ Here, the women redistributed their own wardrobe with makeup and gestures that imitate what each of them would perform or observe on a daily basis. While recalling these early experimentations, the artist underlines the domestic setting in which they took place: the petty bourgeois apartment turned into a photographic set, where all sorts of objects (a lamp, a table, etc.) were casually used as props in the absence of a proper studio.³⁷ Despite the relation to *autocoscienza*, or perhaps because of it, Campagnano and her friends were not interested in self-analysis or introspection, but rather in framing women's experience within social relations. They were interested in looking at the ways in which oppressive social interactions were interiorized in women's endless repetition of the same behaviours, appearances and gestures, that Campagnano defines as *coazione a ripetere* [repetition compulsion]. Their intention was not to depict "extraordinary figures", but rather, to give an account of the fundamental instability of women's identity.³⁸

This is how the photographic series started in 1974, before evolving into a number of informal events where other women joined in impersonating a range of female roles [fig. 8; fig. 9]. The photographs produced within this collective practice relate to enduring "female archetypes", as Campagnano herself defines them. In each photograph, we see a woman posing while staring at the camera, in a potentially endless sequence of "images of femininity". Each image depicts a woman, often the artist herself, standing before a neutral background, performing a series of available female roles: the housewife, the mother, the sex worker, the social worker, the nurse, the bride, and so on. Needless to say, these images participate in a widespread practice in 1970s art, as women artists were simultaneously examining the visual production of femininity via photographic performances. However, what seems to be specific to Campagnano's inquiry is the collaborative work and the fact that the process of producing the image was more important than the final picture.³⁹ *The Invention of femininity* is structured around the relations between the women participating in the process of deconstructing a series of stereotypes, while inhabiting them through their gestures, make up and attire. The images therefore capture a collective research into female subjectivity that takes as its starting point the ambivalences between looking and being looked at, between the need to conform to socially sanctioned roles and their desire for emancipation.⁴⁰ Most importantly, the series proposes the consideration of gender identity in its contingency and instability, as inevitably caught between the social, the historical and the individual.

In discussing her *Ruoli*, Campagnano also underlines the double marginality in which her photographic experiments took place. Because they articulated the experience of separatism, her photographs were virtually invisible within the mainstream art world and Campagnano was not interested in framing her work as "art". But on the other hand, her work had little legitimacy within the feminist movement either, because of the general penchant for the text over the image. In the context of the Milan bookstore, language was in fact strongly favoured over image-making, thus reinstating the fundamental divide in which women artists involved in feminist groups seemed to be trapped.⁴¹ However, despite this lack of legitimacy and attention, Campagnano claims that the collective image-making leading to *The Invention of Femininity* allowed her to "*fare il femminismo*", as she puts it, as much as it prompted a collective process of undoing femininity itself.⁴² The photographic series thus provides an unprecedented account of the new awareness of the performative dimension of femininity prompted by *autocoscienza*. The collective turn to image-making following the meetings, where women shared

their experiences via self-narration and mutual listening, involved women as embodied subjects, as opposed to the disembodied practice of writing.

In refusing written language as a unique emancipatory form of expression, Accardi, Santoro and Campagnano challenged the notion that women's separatism was incompatible with art. On the contrary, their contributions demonstrate that it was possible to turn the movement's claim for autonomy into a productive space in which to articulate a new set of creative practices. Their works also show that the strategies they adopted in order to pursue their creative practices, both within the women's group and with respect to the mainstream art system, were indeed ambivalent. While they generally avoided conceptualizing their work as "art", these artists were deeply aware of the obstacles they had to face in both contexts and acted therefore from a paradoxical position. Accardi, Santoro and Campagnano's works resist easy definitions and can hardly be summarized under the banner of a single style or artistic movement. However, what they share is indeed far more relevant: all three of them tried to forge a new artistic language that was able to translate the transformations that the women's movement had prompted in both their lives and in their understanding of art. This involved a new awareness of themselves as acting subjects in a world in which women tended to be objectified via an array of social roles and representations. Most importantly, their works are predicated on a relational dimension that was key to women's separatism in Italy, thus suggesting that the new alliances that were made possible thanks to *autocoscienza* could find their way into art.

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PLATES

1 Pietro Consagra, from the left: Marta Lonzi, Carla Accardi, Carla Lonzi and Suzanne Santoro in the garden of Pietro Consagra's studio in Milan, 1971, photo b/n. Archivio Pietro Consagra, Milan.

2 Carla Accardi, *Tenda*, 1965-66, acrylic on sicofoil, 215 x 220 x 240 cm, private collection. Courtesy Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.

3 Carla Accardi, *Origine* at Cooperativa Beato Angelico, Rome, 1976, installation view, photo. Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome.

4 From the left: Teresa Montemaggiori, Stephanie Oursler, Carla Accardi, Eva Menzio, Nedda Guidi, Suzanne Santoro, Leonilde Carabba, Anna Maria Colucci at the Cooperativa Beato Angelico in Rome, 1976, photo. Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome.

5 Reproduction of Suzanne Santoro, *Per una espressione nuova. Towards New Expression* (Rome: Rivolta Femminile, 1974), p. n. n.

6 Reproduction of Anne Marie Sauzeau Boetti, "Dalla culla alla barca", *Data*, May 1976, 39.

7 Marcella Campagnano, *Osservando il nostro lavoro (Gruppo San Martino)*, 1974, photo b/w, each 24 x 36 cm. Collection of the artist, Como.

8 Marcella Campagnano, *L'invenzione del femminile: Ruoli*, 1974, photo b/w, each 24 x 30 cm. Collection of the artist, Como.

9 Marcella Campagnano, *L'invenzione del femminile: Ruoli*, 1974, photo b/w, each 24 x 30 cm. Collection of the artist, Como.

- ¹ Rivolta Femminile, “Manifesto”, in *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader*, edited by Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 37. Originally published in 1970.
- ² For a history of the women’s movement in 1970s Italy see: Fiamma Lussana, *Il movimento femminista in Italia. Esperienze, storie, memorie* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); Maud Anne Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political. Feminism in Italy* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- ³ Rivolta Femminile, “Manifesto”, 40.
- ⁴ Carla Lonzi, “Let’s spit on Hegel”, in *Feminist Interpretations of G. F. W. Hegel*, edited by Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, trans. Giovanna Bellesia and Elaine Maclachlan (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), 276. Originally published as *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1970)
- ⁵ Liliana Ellena, “Carla Lonzi e il neo-femminismo radicale degli anni ’70: disfare la cultura, disfare la politica”, in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità*, edited by Lara Conte, Vinzia Fiorino, and Vanessa Martini (Pisa: ETS, 2011), 126-28; Lussana, *Il movimento femminista in Italia*, 32-36.
- ⁶ See Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), 80.
- ⁷ Paola di Cori, *Asincronie del femminismo. Scritti 1986-2011* (Pisa: ETS, 2012), 40-44.
- ⁸ Carla Lonzi, “Mito della proposta culturale”, in Carla Lonzi, Marta Lonzi, Anna Jaquinta, *La presenza dell’uomo nel femminismo*, (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 151.
- ⁹ Luisa Passerini, *Storie de donne e femministe* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991), 167.
- ¹⁰ See for example Lucia Re, “The Mark on the Wall. Marisa Merz and a History of Women in Italy”, in *Marisa Merz - The Sky is a Great Place*, curated by Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2017; New York: MET Breuer, 2017). Exh. Cat. (Los Angeles, Munich, New York: DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2017), 37-75.
- ¹¹ Emanuela De Cecco, “Trame. Per una mappa transitoria dell’arte italiana femminile negli anni novanta e dintorni”, in *Contemporanee. Percorsi, lavori e poetiche delle artiste dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, edited by Emanuela De Cecco and Gianni Romano (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 2000), 10.
- ¹² In recent years, a number of exhibitions are providing indispensable correctives of the mainstream, all-male, historical narratives. Among the most recent examples, see *The Unexpected Subject. 1978 Art and Feminism in Italy*, curated by Raffaella Perna and Marco Scotini at FM – Frigoriferi Milanesi, Milano 2019; *Doing Deculturalization*, curated by Ilse Lafer at Museion, Bolzano, 2019.
- ¹³ See *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (London: Palgrave, 2012).
- ¹⁴ Judith Russi Kirshner, “Voices and Images of Italian Feminism”, in *WACK. Art and the Feminist Revolution*, curated by Connie Butler (Los Angeles: MoCA, 2007). Exh. Cat. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 387. The art critics discussed in this text are Carla Lonzi, Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti and Lea Vergine.
- ¹⁵ See Francesco Ventrella, “Temporalities of Feminaissance”, in *Feminism and Art History Now. Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, edited by Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 207-13.
- ¹⁶ On Lonzi’s discontinuous trajectory, see Giovanna Zapperi, “Challenging Feminist Art History. Carla Lonzi’s Divergent Paths”, in Perry and Horne, *Feminism and Art History Now*, 104-123; Laura Iamurri, “On the Threshold. Carla Lonzi, the end of art criticism and the beginnings of feminism”, *n.paradoxa*, no. 40 (July 2017): 52-59.
- ¹⁷ Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato 1969).
- ¹⁸ On the specific understanding of autocoscienza in the context of Rivolta

- Femminile see Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'io in rivolta. Vissuto e pensiero di Carla Lonzi* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990), 191-96.
- ¹⁹ As reported by Suzanne Santoro in an interview: Suzanne Santoro, "Rewind. Suzanne Santoro all'Alveare di Milano è l'occasione per riparare. Intervista", interview with Manuela De Leonardis, *Art a part of Culture*, 27 ottobre 2013, online: <https://www.artapartofculture.net/2013/10/27/rewind-suzanne-santoro-ad-alveare-milano-e-loccasione-per-riparare-intervista/>. Last accessed on February 4, 2020.
- ²⁰ Carla Accardi, Anna Maria Colucci, Suzanne Santoro, and Silvia Truppi were some of the artists participating in the meetings of Rivolta Femminile around 1970-1971.
- ²¹ Although Lonzi was not interested in uncovering the work of women artists, her analysis of the structural gender bias within the field of art can be read in parallel with the arguments developed by Linda Nochlin in her groundbreaking article "Why have there been no great women artists?" (published on ARTnews, January 1971), now available in *Women, Art and Power* (London: Routledge, 1988), 145-178.
- ²² Rivolta Femminile, "On women's absence from celebratory manifestations of male creativity", trans. Carla Zipoli, in *Why are we 'Artists'? 100 World Art Manifestos*, edited by Jessica Lack (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 161. Originally published as "Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile" (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1971).
- ²³ Carla Lonzi, "Discorsi: Carla Lonzi e Carla Accardi", in *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2012), 471-83. Originally published in *Marcstré*, June 1966, 193-197.
- ²⁴ Carla Lonzi, *Carla Accardi*, in *Scritti sull'arte*, 194. Originally the text was published for Accardi's solo exhibition at Notizie gallery in Turin (1966).
- ²⁵ Leslie Cozzi, "Spaces of self-consciousness. Carla Accardi's Environments and the Rise of Italian Feminism", *Women & Performance. A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2011): 67-88.
- ²⁶ Rivolta Femminile, "Significato dell'autocoscienza nei gruppi femministi", in Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel e altri scritti* (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 119. Translation by the author. Originally published by Rivolta Femminile in 1972.
- ²⁷ For a more detailed account of Accardi's break with Lonzi see Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'arte della vita*, (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2017), 178-88.
- ²⁸ On the Coopertiva Beato Angelico see Katia Almerini, "The Cooperativa Beato Angelico. A Feminist Art Space in Rome", in *Art and Feminism in Postwar Italy. The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, edited by Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming in 2020).
- ²⁹ Carla Accardi's statement in: *Il complesso di Michelangelo. Ricerca sul contributo dato dalla donna all'arte italiana del Novecento*, edited by Simone Weller (Pollenza, Macerata: La Nuova foglio, 1976), 87.
- ³⁰ Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, "Dalla culla alla barca", *Data*, May 1976, 38-39.
- ³¹ Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, "Negative capability as practice in women's art", *Studio International*, January-February 1976, 25.
- ³² Cornelia Butler, "The Feminist Present: Women Artists at MoMA", in *Modern Women. Women Artists at Museum of Modern Art*, curated by Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwarz (New York: MoMA, 2010). Exh. Cat. (New York: MoMA, 2010), 13.
- ³³ Sauzeau-Boetti, "Negative capability as practice in women's art", 24.
- ³⁴ See the page on January 24, 1974: Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 540.
- ³⁵ See The Milan's Women Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference. A Theory of*

Social-Symbolic Practice (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

- ³⁶ Marcella Campagnano in conversation with the author, Como, April 26, 2018.
- ³⁷ Marcella Campagnano, “Con le immagini e la mia consapevolezza, ho fatto femminismo. Intervista con Marcella Campagnano”, interview with Marco Scotini, *Flash Art*, May 27, 2019, online, <https://flash-art.it/article/marcella-campagnano/>. Last accessed on February 10, 2020.
- ³⁸ “Le mie sequenze non illustrano figure straordinarie, registrano il migrare possibile, latente di un’identità quotidianamente agita” (Campagnano, “Con le immagini e la mia consapevolezza, ho fatto femminismo”).
- ³⁹ Daniela Hahn, “Marcella Campagnano. The invention of femininity”, in *Feminist Avant-garde. Art of the 1970: The Sammlung Verbund Collection*, edited by Gabriele Schor (Wien, Munich: Prestel, 2018), 217.
- ⁴⁰ See Lidia Campagnano’s introductory text published in Marcella Campagnano, *Donne. Immagini* (Milan: Moizzi editore, 1976), p. n. n.
- ⁴¹ Like Accardi and others, Campagnano was not at ease with language, and even less so with writing, which could also be viewed as indicators of class differences and hierarchies. Marcella Campagnano in conversation with the author, Como, April 26, 2018.
- ⁴² Campagnano, “Con le immagini e la mia consapevolezza, ho fatto femminismo”.