

Unexpected Artists. The Cooperativa Beato Angelico in the Context of 1970s Feminism

Abstract

On April 8, 1976, a women's cooperative comprising eleven members variously active in the field of art inaugurated a self-run art gallery in Rome's city center, at Via Beato Angelico 18. Surprisingly, instead of showing works from the members' own production, the inaugural exhibition of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico (CBA) brought a baroque artist before the public: Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Aurora* (ca. 1627) was installed on an easel and accompanied by a leaflet featuring archival and bibliographical references. Starting from this remarkable opening, this essay explores the CBA's expository and archival practices, which were specifically directed at works by female artists past *and* present. Building on previous research on the cooperative and re-engaging with archival sources and oral memory, I newly focus on the temporal dimensions of the initiative's activities. First, I unravel the ways in which the CBA participated in countering the structural imbalance of the art-historical canon – a concerted effort effected by the increasing popularization of feminist ideas in the art field at the time. Second, and more importantly, I argue that the cooperative's distinctive handling of the temporary exhibition and the archive translated into a rejection of conventional models of history-writing. If read in relation to the questioning of chronological and dialectical notions of progress conceptualized in the ambit of 1970s separatist feminism, the CBA's historiographical tactic – based on a non-linear interweaving of past and present positions – loses its apparent contingency and can instead be reassessed as a focused disruption of the continuum of men's history. I conclude that women artists from different times, 'presentified' and re-signified in the CBA's exhibitions and archive, thus came to embody feminist thinker Carla Lonzi's idea of woman as the "unexpected subject".