

Contents

Studi della Bibliotheca Hertziana 18

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Silvia Giambrone, *Eredità*, still image  
from HD video, 2008, 10 min.  
Private collection, courtesy of the author

7 “We have been looking for 4000 years:  
now we have seen!”  
*Giorgia Gastaldon*

Public: Exhibitions  
15 Exhibiting in a Revisionist Mode: All-Women  
Shows in 1970s Italy  
*Maria Bremer*

Private: Home  
35 The Home in Feminist Art and Visual Culture  
in 1970s Italy: Refusal and Reappropriation  
*Silvia Bottinelli*

Representation  
57 Double Presence: Women's Role in Italian  
Feminist Photography in the 1970s  
*Raffaella Perna*

Processes-Processuality  
77 A Geographical and Processual  
Constellation: Feminist Attitudes  
in Sculpture in 1970s Italy  
*Lara Conte*

Abstraction  
101 Female and Feminist Practices in Italian  
Abstract Art in the 1970s  
*Giorgia Gastaldon*

“We have been looking for 4000 years:  
now we have seen!”

Giorgia Gastaldon

“ABBIAMO  
GUARDATO  
PER 4.000 ANNI:  
ADESSO  
ABBIAMO  
VISTO!”

In one of Italian feminism's fundamental texts, the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* written in 1970 by visual artist Carla Accardi, journalist and activist Elvira Banotti, and former art critic Carla Lonzi, one sentence conveys the sense of revelation which the feminist experience represented for many Italian women in the following years and decades: “we have been looking for 4000 years: now we have seen!”.<sup>1</sup> These few but powerful words express the empowerment of an atavistic disadvantaged female condition. The necessity for a systematic revolution is asserted in verbs which revolve around the visual: ‘to look’, indicating a primitive, passive condition; and ‘to see’, referring to a subsequent moment of revelation. This use of the visual is very interesting to me because, in the context of the many feminisms in Italy, a particular link can be traced between the gender demands made during the period and its visual art. The research project *Now we have seen. Women and Art in the Seventies in Italy* revolves around that link, and this book is its final outcome. By adopting an approach that is not activist but rather historical and critical, this volume aims to investigate female emancipation in the 1970s in light of its privileged relationship with the visual arts.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of chronological frame is not accidental. The 1970s were a crucial decade for the history of women and a watershed moment as far as ideas about gender roles are concerned. And while it was a period animated by many waves devoted to change – student activism, extra-parliamentary politics, growing union activism – it is unquestionable that, of all the protest movements of the time, it was feminism that would determine the most important and long-lasting consequences. The multiplicity of Italian feminisms was often characterized by a high degree of radicalism and utopianism, by the rejection of compromises with the political system of the day, and by the desire to be autonomous organizations, decentralized and non-hierarchical – a

1 Carla Lonzi later wrote in 1974 about this document: “Our Manifesto includes the most significative sentences that the general idea of feminism had brought to our conscience during the first approaches to it among us. The feminist key was operating within us as a revelation. We welcomed the need to express ourselves as a synonym for liberation itself” (“Il nostro Manifesto contiene le frasi più significative che l'idea generale del femminismo ci aveva portato alla coscienza durante i primi approcci tra noi. La chiave femminista operava come una rivelazione. Il bisogno di esprimersi è stato da noi accolto come sinonimo stesso di liberazione”), in Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Milan 1974, p. 8.

2 The time period here analyzed is antecedent to the birth and spread of Gender Studies, and thus constitutes a moment in which gender issues were addressed within the man-woman dichotomy, which has been completely overcome today. For this reason, the fact that this volume focuses on women and on women's art reflects the historical reality here analyzed.

peculiarity which did not, however, prevent the fight for fundamental legislative reforms. Between 1974 and 1976 in particular, when feminism turned into a truly mass movement, the various groups which constituted it participated in widespread demonstrations and different practical ventures. The actions of feminist groups were especially focused in those years on changes within the private sphere – sexuality, health, gender roles within the family, contraception, autonomy over one's body, maternity and violence against women – because, although much had already been achieved in terms of women's rights within the public sphere by the Italian Constitution, gender equality in everyday, private life was still a distant goal in 1970s Italy. Under the slogan “il personale è politico” (the personal is political), Italian feminists addressed the right to fight for a long list of issues which had until then been painfully neglected, even by the country's political left. The decade thus opened with the promulgation of the law which made divorce legal, a progressive move consolidated in 1974 when the abrogative referendum promoted by Democrazia Cristiana was stopped by the Italian people. Things continued with the long-awaited reformation of the Codice Civile in 1975, which finally removed the remaining gender inequalities within family law, establishing equality among men and women within marriage with the abolition – at least in legislative terms – of the father as head of the household (*capofamiglia*). Women were thus liberated from obligations which limited their existence, such as the necessity of obtaining permission from their husbands to get a passport or the obligation of assuming their spouse's surname, thus altering their ultimate identity. In 1977, the need to adapt to European guidelines ending gender-based discrimination in the workplace extended some legal protection around parenthood to fathers, such as the right to take leave when their children were sick. In 1978, after years of demonstrations with hundreds of women taking to the streets, the law regulating abortion was approved, making the procedure free to access within the Italian public healthcare system – though with conditions that, according to many, were still too strict. Around the same time, the public debate on gender-based violence intensified following the so-called Circeo massacre of 1975, a criminal case involving three men who kidnapped and raped two young women, killing one of them. This culminated in a huge feminist upheaval that led to the framing of a law aimed at redefining rape as a crime against the person, rather than against public morality, and which defined rape in the domestic environment as an act of sexual violence. Although many years had to pass before Italy was finally equipped with a proper law regulating violence against women, in 1981 the huge feminist mobilization achieved the goal of repealing both the consideration of ‘honor’ as an extenuating circumstance within condemnations for violent acts and also the barbarous practice of rehabilitating marriage (*matrimonio riparatore*), which allowed a rapist to be absolved of their crime if they married their victim.

The 1970s thus represented for Italy, and for Italian women in particular, a decade of great cultural and legislative transformations. The impact of feminist ideas and actions extended beyond the life of single activists, touching and altering the whole of Italian society. These changes also strongly impacted contemporary art, whose systemic structures were brought into question, as they were in many other places in which institutional power was managed. In their turn, women contemporary artists were actively participating in feminist groups and, more generally, the great changes brought about inspired their research and actions. Often, these artists' works went hand-in-hand with actions of feminist awareness: not only documenting debates and demonstrations – although this happened often – but also, and more importantly, by addressing and highlighting situations and mechanisms that were discriminatory toward the female gender, and by demonstrating that these differences had no justification whatsoever. In various ways and for various reasons, Italian artists contributed to make visible what had been evident for centuries: that society was founded on a clear distinction of roles based on gender, which had subjugated women to male authority for millennia and which had to be dismantled for a new system to take its place. Women had long remained watching, but the 1970s represented for them the time

when they had seen: they had gained consciousness of their discriminated condition and they had chosen to unite and stop it.

An in-depth analysis of the relationship between feminism and art in Italy in the 1970s is certainly not something new. A number of excellent initiatives have already been brought to life, among which the following can be mentioned: *Arte, fotografia e femminismo in Italia negli anni Settanta* by Raffaella Perna, and *Arte e femminismo a Roma negli anni Settanta* by Marta Serravalli, both published in 2013; more recently, *La storia dell'arte dopo l'autocoscienza a partire dal diario di Carla Lonzi* by Carla Subrizi (2020), the collective volume *Artiste italiane e immagini in movimento* edited by Lara Conte and Francesca Gallo in 2021, and *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy. The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, edited by Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi in 2022. More broadly, there have also been many exhibitions on women's art organized in Italy, such as the 2022 Biennale di Venezia, curated by Cecilia Alemani; *Astratte*, an exhibition curated in the same year by Elena Di Raddo in Como; the collective exhibition *Io dico io*, curated in 2021 by Cecilia Canziani, Lara Conte, and Paola Ugolini at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome; *Doing Deculturalization*, an exhibition commissioned by Ilse Lafer for the Museion in Bolzano in 2019; and in the same year, *The Unexpected Subject*, at Frigoriferi Milanesi, organized by Marco Scotini and Raffaella Perna.

Yet a further investigation on these topics appeared necessary – not to say urgent – to our research group, even more so in times like ours, that are witness to the undermining of rights and practices of emancipation which we thought had been set in stone. From this point of view, and on a strictly methodological level, the idea of proceeding by focusing on operative modalities and contextual paradigms seemed like a useful strategy to further study the relationship between art and feminism. For this reason, each chapter of the present volume analyzes macro themes – exhibitions, the house, representation, matter, abstraction – in relation to possible links with the more or less explicit and/or conscious practices of female emancipation. They do so in light of a critical perspective which identifies and unveils feminist practices, here analyzed by taking into account even their problematic aspects or incoherencies. Adopting this approach seemed the best way to overcome the tendency of analyzing or rediscovering the work of individual artists, and the habit of reconstructing specific episodes or events in order to go beyond a simple additive approach, today considered outdated. From this standpoint, the work of putting together the group of female authors for this volume was equally crucial: the work of art historians with different educational backgrounds and who work in different academic contexts, whose research converges here for the first time in a shared project, in its turn also becoming a place where different scientific approaches come together and dialog with one another.

Moreover, in this volume the relationship between art and feminism is consciously used as a tool of investigation and interpretation of phenomena which stand apart from any actual feminist activism. The works analyzed here are not necessarily overtly feminist in their intentions and the women artists presented do not necessarily need to have actively participated in feminist groups or movements, or to have explicitly declared a feminist attitude. These elements did not inform the decisions made about the objects and subjects included in the present book. Indeed, to our research group it seems evident that women artists in the 1970s should be judged according to the same criteria by which any other art-historical phenomenon would be analyzed. These include the influence, even indirect, of the historical, geographic, philosophical, cultural, and political context upon their works; the relationship with the works of other artists, critics, and curators; the importance that a certain practice or work might assume regardless of the intentions of the female artist in the shaping of a political thought; and, last but not least, the point of view and the methods used by the interpreters – in this case a group of women art historians – doing the analyses. All these elements must never and under any circumstances be considered neutral. This is especially true in the

context discussed in the book, since even the women artists of 1970s Italy who were far from the world and ideas of feminism found themselves unavoidably involved in what happened during those years. On the one hand, they ended up working in a context – the system of contemporary art – that was highly male in its dynamics as well as discriminatory and patriarchal, and which therefore mostly excluded them. However, on the other hand, women artists found themselves experimenting at a time in which the system of patriarchal society was finally being subverted, having until then been dominant in every context, including culture. These were the conditions which, for example, pushed some women artists to accept the invitation to participate in women-only exhibitions, even when they were not activists or did not consider themselves feminists. These elements seem more than sufficient to justify a historical interpretation of these phenomena in a feminist light, because they show that feminism itself was such a crucial part of the development of Italy as a country in the 1970s.

The first chapter of this volume is dedicated to the public and display-related aspects of the work of women artists. Maria Bremer investigates women-only exhibitions in relation to feminism and to the practice of rediscovering forgotten or neglected artists. She contextualizes the exhibitions within the canonical history of art and the history of exhibitions, and also reflects on the age-old issue of marginalization, which women-only shows risked encouraging, and which some of the participants in those shows suffered (a well-known process called minorities ghettoization). To avoid such issues, Bremer suggests we stop studying female or feminist exhibitions as something different, something separate from the rest of the history of exhibitions. Instead, she argues, we should consider them – especially those from the 1970s onward – as conceptual contributions to artistic historiography, which in many cases unveiled the unbalanced narratives and parameters characterizing the traditional history of art. Women-only exhibitions represent, in light of Bremer's suggested approach, an important instrument for revision. With this goal in mind she identifies five useful concepts for the operation of unmasking – assimilation, difference, discontinuity, genealogy, and orality – which were central to the organization of many women-only exhibitions in Italy in the 1970s. Bremer's analysis of her various case studies demonstrates how these categories were useful to both artists and curators in dismantling the canonical narrative that was typical of the modernist model of art history, widely adopted in Italy after World War II and which represented, evidently, a way of studying and making art and culture which excluded every form of creativity developed by minorities.

The author of the second chapter, Silvia Bottinelli, considers domesticity in Italian visual arts, focusing on the house as an object of interest for a number of feminist artists active in Italy in the 1970s. The house – a place that saw great social transformations between the end of World War II and the 1970s – lies at the core of Italian feminist thought and consequently of the work of many women artists who, to varying extents, shared similar beliefs and developed a feminist perspective. Through the analysis of a set of 1970s works, Bottinelli aims to demonstrate the two-sided attitude women artists had toward domesticity. Where at first, during the initial stages of feminist activism, women artists almost totally rejected the house and the domestic environment in their theory and practice, years later many would attempt to reclaim those same home environments. This desire to repossess the house was acted out through the practice of new, female strategies which were no longer patriarchal in their premises, and demonstrated how the simple rejection of the domestic dimension did not sufficiently meet women's needs and their will for autonomy.

In the third chapter, Raffaella Perna focuses on the methods of female representation used by a series of women photographers who were active in Italy in the 1970s, and situates them in relation to the categories of domestic and extra-domestic tasks. Perna introduces the concept of 'double presence', defined in 1977 by Laura Balbo, founder of the Gruppo di ricerca sulla famiglia e la condizione femminile (GRIFF), as a reflection on advanced capitalism's institutionalization of the woman's

presence in both the family and extra-domestic work, thus determining the birth of a historical and unprecedented figure originating from the combination of these two partial presences. The author uses this sociological category to analyze a series of works dedicated to the topic of female work, created by women photographers and female collective groups who were active within the ranks of feminism or who sympathized, to various extents, with feminist ideas, and who thus experimented with new models of photographic representation that could testify to the complexity and contradictions of the existential and working conditions of Italian women in the 1970s. Interestingly, what emerges from Perna's analysis is that many of these reflections on women's double presence explicitly concerned photography, a profession that was certainly known to the authors of these works for its notoriously harsh gender-based prejudices and stereotypes and the limits and difficulties it therefore presented.

The fourth chapter, written by Lara Conte, focuses on the processuality and in particular on its relevance for the constellation of female experiences within Italian sculpture between the 1960s and 1970s. Her approach favors an analysis of experimental perspectives that aimed to subvert the linear and modernist order of development of the history of art, and which questioned the dominant categories of investigation adopted in the 20th century, such as the relationship between abstraction and representation and the categories of development typical of the avant-gardes. The contribution thus opens up a series of geographical drifts from the mainstream, introducing instead conditions of marginality. These conditions are conceived as territorial collocations, but also – and perhaps more importantly – as explorations of creative situations that are alternatives to the great narratives of the canonical history of art. Conte analyzes the works of various artists who tried, in their separate practices, to subvert certain codified and codifying roles internal to the art world. By rejecting the place ascribed to them, these artists sought, found, or created spaces of self-affirmation of their subjectivity; personal spaces that were not labeled from above, and which therefore did not need to be validated by an external authority. Identifying a series of common strategies – such as the artists' decision to place more emphasis on creative practices than on the final work, the predilection for practices which exalt the temporality of existence, the reflection on the categories of body, sexuality, life, and death – the author presents sculpture as an autobiographical experience directed at the demolition of dominant narratives.

The fifth and final chapter is my personal contribution to the volume, and offers a feminist re-reading of abstract art created by several visual artists who were active in Italy in the 1970s. Taking as starting point Carla Accardi's suggestion that an art devoid of historical images and narratives – and thus less influenced by patriarchy – could represent a place for greater comfort for female experimentation, I have tried to identify a series of strategies adopted by a number of women abstract artists who can be associated, either in terms of attitude or intention, with the actions and ideas of the Italian feminisms of those years. Reductionism, the condemnation of silence as a condition to which women had been consigned for thousands of years, the rediscovery of female working traditions, the passing of time and the repetition of gestures, are all therefore interpreted, in this chapter, not only and not much in relation to the conceptual tendencies of the time, but rather in relation to the will – more or less conscious and more or less explicitly political – of these women artists to suggest alternative ways of being creative. These were ways that sought to break with the modernist precepts of the avant-gardes, with their mythologies linked to the concepts of genius, exceptionality and originality.

Reading the chapters of this volume one after the other shows how a nucleus of theoretical, methodological, content-related issues recurs in the reflections developed and presented by each author. Various topics, events, documents, and figures are analyzed here for various reasons and from different points of view across the chapters of this book. This is in itself a further demonstration of how, despite the difficulties, even for

the art of women a new canon of works, names, and places is now in the making. Some of these difficulties certainly stem from the problem of accessibility to the archives of the artists and of female and feminist institutions – and thus to the original materials, to the works of art, and to documents. These are objects and realities which still suffer from that peculiar oblivion reserved for the creative production of minorities. Investigating women's art is made even more complex and difficult by the continuous missed acquisition of artworks created by women, which are almost completely absent from Italian museums of contemporary art bar a few rare exceptions. This is a lack matched by scientific monographs (only very few of which are dedicated to historical women artists) and compounded by the enduring preference in academic and non-academic magazines for male artists. Even teaching – and not only within universities – is not always immune from these phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, it seems evident that the repetition of certain topics occurs in the research and reflection of many women artists and critics who were active in the 1970s, echoing the feminist philosophies which were developing and spreading across Europe and the United States during that decade.<sup>4</sup> These themes include the experimentation of certain practices or the choice of novel artistic materials; the reference to the categories of domesticity and childhood as contexts of privileged – if not exclusive to the female dimension – care and learning; and the topic of language, with the evident reference to the praxis according to which it is the mother who teaches children to speak, so they learn and express themselves in their ‘mother-tongue’. These topics and these practices seem to constitute a cultural and personal substrate shared by women artists, which becomes evident even in the creative practice of artists who are very distant from one another in terms of education, age, and geographical origin. This further demonstrates the possible existence of a relationship between gender and creativity which does not, obviously, arise from an essentialist or biological sharing, but rather from collective experience and shared issues of identity, which should be extended beyond the binary reductive gender terms male and female.

These are the foundations upon which I hope the present volume might represent a new contribution, and one that is useful to the cause of the knowledge of Italian women’s art, always bearing in mind that the study of history, even the most recent, can represent one of the best instruments to understand our times and to guide us in a more conscious way along the different possible interpretations of the moment we live in.

This volume represents the final outcome of the eponymous research project developed at Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome, within the context of the Italian Council 11, undertaken with the support and sponsorship of the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity within the Italian Ministry of Culture.

Over the course of this highly collective and multivocal project, various scientific activities took place that were fundamental to the research presented in this volume. One clear example is the international workshop which took place in June 2023 at Bibliotheca Hertziana with the active participation of the authors of this book. The lively and fruitful discussion that developed on that occasion is at the core of many of the ideas and considerations which found a permanent home in these pages. Likewise,

3 On these topics see, for example, Maura Reilly, “Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes”, *Art News*, June 2015, pp. 38–47; Ruba Katrib, “Listing Women”, *Art News*, June 2015, pp. 68–69; Katrin Hassler, “Genere e arte. Statistiche e posizioni al vertice nel campo internazionale”, in *Donne artiste in Italia. Presenza e rappresentazione*, ed. Silvia Simoncelli, Caterina laquinta, and Elvira Vannini, Milan 2018, pp. 24–43. On female representation in the Italian contemporary art world, see *Donne artiste in Italia. Presenza e rappresentazione*, ed. Silvia Simoncelli, Caterina laquinta, and Elvira Vannini, Milan 2018. A quick glance at textbooks on contemporary art history published in recent years demonstrates an almost total absence of discussion of women, a circumstance perpetrating the lack of knowledge of these artists among students.

4 Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe*, Milan 2002.

the final results of this research were presented at a one-day conference in May 2024 at Magazzino Italian Art (Cold Spring, NY), one of the initiative's international partners. Around the same time, some of the project's core principles about the importance of carrying on with the study of feminist and women's art in Italy found form in a short video documentary, commissioned as part of the Hertziana Insights series, a format recently established by the Bibliotheca Hertziana to communicate its various and varied research projects and broaden its audience.

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