

Alien Presences and Writing in the Work of Chiara Fumai

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*I'd like to show everybody that
all I have done in the last ten years has been
to defend a space against oppression.*

Chiara Fumai¹

Foreword

The group exhibition that preceded Chiara Fumai's first retrospective at the Centre d'Art Contemporain was *Writing by Drawing: When Language Seeks Its Other*². A show, as one can deduce from the subtitle, that focused not just on the question of "writing" but on what we described as its "shadow," a sort of afterlife of the written word. Our goal was to explore a tension that has always existed within "script": the way it oscillates between a strictly semantic dimension and the mysterious realm of automatic writing, asemic signs, mere arabesques and scribbles.

This sweeping survey of the theme of writing's "elsewhere," its link to the unseeable and unsayable, was in my view the best possible introduction to the work of Chiara Fumai for our viewers. Indeed, I believe this Italian artist's entire oeuvre is closely tied to the question of writing, of language. In a wide range of forms and on different supports, the written word is the common denominator of her varied practice, the medium through which even her performance work eventually crystallized into an enduring form. As we shall see, for Chiara Fumai it became a genuine tool of investigation, used to explore the deepest impulses driving a female universe in revolt.

1. Women's language

The exhibition *Writing by Drawing*, which itself included several major works by Chiara Fumai, highlighted the close historical relationship³ between writing and power, on the one hand, and the fundamental gender issues underlying the theme of language, on the other. Perusing the list of more than one hundred figures in the show, one begins to see the clear red line that has traditionally separated male language from female language.⁴

Men's language, as the language of the dominant gender, positions itself as rational, analytical, logical, a code aimed at imparting political order to chaos. Women's language, the language of the subordinated gender, is presented in patriarchal societies as being instinctual, hysterical, unstable, akin to the language of children and the insane.

This is a preconception molded by and for a world⁵ ruled by men, who have always assigned women the task of interacting with the sphere of the irrational, the occult, and the magical. Men dominate writing and invent new languages; women, who were generally denied an education—at least in the West—until the twentieth century,⁶ are restricted to using only their natural, native language, the one learned from their parents. And so, over the course of history, the 400-some inventors of artificial languages all seem to have been men, perhaps with the sole exception of Hildegard of Bingen, whose *Lingua Ignota* is more like a kind of glossolalia. And indeed, the cases of glossolalia and pseudo-languages, or languages of the devil, almost always involve women.

These gender differences surrounding the question of language directly reflect the ancient division of gender roles in Western patriarchal cultures: political activity, abstract thought, and philosophy are the province of men; women are relegated to the purely emotional and irrational sphere, interacting with the dark side of the world.

I believe that all of Chiara Fumai's work unfolds in reference to this picture: in other words, around the distinctly political question of women's language. The artist seems to have sensed from the outset that women can and must take as their starting point the linguistic ghetto into which men have historically confined them. The many female figures Fumai looked to for inspiration in her ten years of work are people who used writing and the voice, even when they remained private, as their preferred tool for radical, uncompromising rebellion. To reclaim an autonomous existence, one must first and foremost reclaim one's own body and voice.

The spirit medium's body, a theme that interested Fumai from the start, becomes the special "carrier" of an alien voice: it is a body that does not speak, but which gains social recognition from

being “spoken through” by someone else: by the dead, by supernatural entities, even by extraterrestrials, as in the case of Hélène Smith.

The distinctly political nature of Fumai’s work suggests that her interest in mediums should be seen as something more complex than simple esoteric or neo-Gothic curiosity. The artist seems to think of the medium’s body as an emblematic “place,” whose significance goes far beyond nineteenth-century folklore surrounding the paranormal. Underlying the image of the medium, of her body as the channel for an “alien” presence, is a question that may historically concern all women. Fumai’s insight is that the female body, subjected to the pressure of patriarchal society, has been turned, ipso facto, into the carrier of an alien presence.⁷ The foreign entity that has slipped into women’s psyches is the male imaginary: a vision of the female body, female language, and female sexuality that values them only in terms of how they can be used by patriarchal society. Over the centuries, women have been forced to internalize and embrace, as if it were their own, a “self” prefabricated for them by men. Their identity, their social behavior, their very dreams are a male construction.

As Chiara Fumai herself said in various interviews, she did not necessary agree with Valerie Solanas’s vague, inflammatory political program, which even called for the physical elimination of the male sex, but rather her anti-bourgeois aversion for the stereotyped role of daddy’s girl. The latter, with her good manners, acceptance of her place as a wife and mother, and complete embrace of bourgeois patriarchal stereotypes, merely lends her own body to a world imagined by men, for men. So in patriarchal society, *all* women’s bodies have been invaded by an alien presence: in this sense it is not just the medium who is possessed and spoken through, but historically, woman herself.

Building on this insight and awareness, Fumai decided to fight against female alienation, as Valerie Solanas did before her, not by wielding the theoretical, abstract principles of scholarly feminism, but rather the subversive, liberating power of a rebellious, radical, fundamentally punk attitude. Her debut work, from 2007, is prototypical in this sense, so much so that in hindsight it looks almost like a political and artistic manifesto. In this first video, the artist performs a lip-synch rendition of Roza Eskenazi’s song *Eimai Prezakias (I’m a Junkie)*, a carefree ode to the pleasures of opium. Starting with Eskenazi, all of the women who enter Fumai’s pantheon are rebels and non-conformists, and thus—in the Italian artist’s view—harbingers of the world to come. One should keep in mind that traditionally, even in ancient Jewish communities, the figure of the rebel overlaps with that of the prophet, who lives in contrast with the dominant narrative.⁸ The young Italian

philosopher Federico Campagna makes an interesting point: in his view, prophets never fully belong to their own world or to their own era.⁹ In some sense—Campagna says—prophets are never completely themselves: they perceive that self as a something that goes beyond the limits of any defined identity, sense of belonging, or individual ego.

Becoming non-contemporary and not oneself is the prerequisite for glimpsing and heralding a new cosmogony. In this sense, the female body—a traditional channel for multiple identities, a body alienated from the person—is predisposed to announce the world to come: it is a prophetic body.

As we shall see, Fumai's female Olympus is made up of very different figures, but what they all share is a tendency to reject the female identity that has been constructed over the centuries by the patriarchy. Alongside illiterate women like Eusapia Palladino, we find sophisticated intellectuals like Carla Lonzi; passive women like Zulumma Agra, exploited as a carnival attraction, are juxtaposed with terrorists like Ulrike Mainhof; women from the top tier of the Venetian aristocracy, like the Dogaressa Elisabetta Querini, counterbalance women forced to sell sex just to eat, like Valerie Solanas. For all of them, the quest for freedom and autonomy comes at the cost—and this is another aspect they have in common—of incomprehension and solitude. And as if mirroring her heroines, Fumai, too, walked a path that led her to feel increasingly alone and isolated, to the point of sharing those women's tragic fate. In this sense, the epilogue of her existence was perhaps already there in its prologue.

2. A metahistorical alliance: language and revolt

After getting her degree in architecture and working as a DJ, Chiara Fumai decided in 2007 to turn her attention entirely to art, and set out to rescue an extraordinary group of female outlaws from oblivion. One should perhaps note that in those days, feminism was not at all in fashion, not yet. The art world was, if not exactly misogynistic, fundamentally indifferent to the question. Chiara Fumai's explosive debut on the scene thus introduced, with some vehemence, a series of themes that would become common currency only several years later.¹⁰ I believe this is the Italian artist's achievement, even in a political sense, and the true significance of Fumai's metahistorical alliance with her unconventional women. The words quoted at the beginning of this essay thus come to sound like a true political testament: "all I have done in the last ten years has been to defend a space against oppression." Through her cycle of performances and incarnations, the artist built a

diachronic alliance with a series of elusive women, of weary women driven not just to defend a space of freedom but to build one from scratch.

This metahistorical alliance with a pantheon of slippery, idiosyncratic female figures is basically forged through words and writing. Chiara Fumai's linguistic undertaking consists in critically exploring a female language gone mad, which perennially teeters between high and low culture, political demands and psychosis, revolution and reaction; her use of texts by Carla Lonzi, Valerie Solanas and Ulrike Mainhof is emblematic of this.

While it is true that she carried out this investigation through her voice and body, it is also true that today, the performative side of her work no longer exists. Fumai's reincarnations were not meant to be a form of theater or codifiable action; they could not be restaged at whim. The artist used her own body to explore an inaccessible, invisible, secret dimension of being, but did not bother to create guidelines for her performances, as Marina Abramović did, for example, so that they could be faithfully reenacted in her absence. The refusal to create such a score can mean only one thing: for Chiara Fumai, her work was meant to exist as and crystallize into something other than performance. When the artist returned from these intense, risky¹¹ reconnaissance missions into the minds of rebel women, she brought back a complex system of signs, clues, and fragments of things. Today, her works exist as constellations of objects, videos, talismans, and charms, in short, a collection of signifiers held together—not just conceptually, but physically—by writing. Together, these fragments make up a nebula of traces, in which writing serves to guide the audience through Fumai's feverish journey across identities.

3. Modes and forms of a counter-language

The practice of automatic writing, which caught on in Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century through séances, is a recurring element in almost all of this Italian artist's collages, and is central to at least four works: *Free like the speech of a Socialist* (2011); *The return of the invisible woman* (2011); *I did not say or mean "warning"* (2013) and *Der Hexenhammer* (2015). Following the example of several famous mediums, Fumai never lifts her pen from the page, so the writing becomes a continuous, unmediated stream, a river of words linked together.

In addition to automatic writing, the artist often uses diagrams, graphs, mottoes and slogans, directly applied to the walls, as an integral part of her installations. Fumai pays enormous attention to the fonts, which are quite varied: some popular and familiar, others instead rather obscure. In any case, they are always chosen with maniacal care, in relation to their purpose within the work and the

meaning of that work. For instance, in *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas* (2013), where the passages she quotes contain a political, propagandistic message, the artist uses a very popular font by Swiss designer Adrian Frutiger,¹² which is known for its legibility and is therefore used for street signs and by the postal service in Switzerland. In *Der Hexenhammer* (2015), which also contains various examples of automatic writing, the central wall drawing is in Palatino. This font, designed by Hermann Zapf in 1949, was inspired by the proportions of Renaissance type and named after Giambattista Palatino, a master calligrapher active in sixteenth-century Rome. In the installation it looks like the letters have been scanned before being applied to the wall, as if they were taken from a pre-existing text. And indeed, this text is the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a treatise on witchcraft published in 1486 by the Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer.

For *The book of Evil Spirits* (2015), the artist chose Bookman Old, a highly legible typeface based on Modernised Old Style, which was created by Alexander Phemister in 1850 and has a clear, even structure.

Lastly, in works like *The girl with the blanket* (2008), *Astral Body* (2016) and *This last line cannot be translated* (2017-19), Fumai relies on a sort of freehand cursive similar to the anonymous graffiti found in prisons or on city walls; she also employs a sort of revivification of the runic alphabet, and of the esoteric script used for the *Mass of Chaos* invocation in *Liber Null & Psychonaut* (1987) by contemporary occultist Peter J. Carroll.

4. The City of Ladies

In the last few months of her life, before her tragic suicide, Fumai was collecting material on Christine de Pizan¹³ (c. 1365 – c. 1430), author of *The Book of the City of Ladies*¹⁴, written between 1404 and 1405. Venetian but raised in Paris, Christine was one of the most fascinating literary figures of fourteenth-century Europe. *The Book of the City of Ladies* describes a visionary fortified city inhabited only by women: warriors, soothsayers, poets, scientists, and martyrs. The very act of writing the book is compared to the construction of a citadel, and this architectural metaphor recurs in each chapter. To build her city of women, Christine must first deconstruct the male intellectual legacy, and establish female authority by rewriting tradition. With great literary and historical sophistication, she puts together an entire pantheon of women; though founded on the heroines of the past, it also includes contemporary figures. Indeed, her city is open to new inhabitants, to women who are bold and indomitable, and whose grandeur and nobility the writer defends from spiteful male criticism, rewriting their history.

Unfortunately we will never know what Fumai had in mind, or how she she was planning to use Christine de Pizan's story and work. We do know that Chiara, too, holds a place of honor in Christine's city, and that the political vision championed by both women is the exquisite fruit of a process that is as painful as it is necessary and irreversible.

¹ Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, "Chiara Fumai, la mujer poseída por los demonios," *Errata#*, no. 15 (January-June 2016): pp. 179-184.

² *Writing by Drawing: When Language Seeks Its Other*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by Andrea Bellini and Sarah Lombardi (Milan: Skira, 2020).

³ Although the exhibition primarily focused on the twentieth century, an extensive collection of documents examined the question of invented and imaginary languages across a long span of time, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century.

⁴ In this regard, see the seminal work by Marina Yaguello, *Les langues imaginaires* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2006).

⁵ We are referring here to the Western patriarchal world, and not to other contexts in which women had different and more complex roles.

⁶ It is difficult to speak of dates here, since in some countries women are still denied access to education.

⁷ In this regard, see Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁸ Federico Campagna, *Prophetic Culture: Recreation for Adolescents* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ I am obviously referring to the mainstream, majority art world, not to the entire art world. For instance, in the same year that Fumai began working as an artist, 2007, Cornelia Butler presented *WACK, Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles: a legendary group show examining the impact that feminism had on the visual arts in the 1960s and '70s. One should add that in Milan, the city where Fumai studied in the early 2000s, the figure of Lea Vergine was very influential in that period. Her book *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia* (The Other Half of the Avant-Garde) had just been republished (in 2005), and Emanuela De Cecco's *Contemporanee* (Contemporary Women, 2000) continued to be a touchstone, at the Accademia di Belle Arti and elsewhere. And so in that city, thanks to female curators, female art historians, and above all female artists, feminism had never ceased to be a vital current of thought, politics, and art, though in some ways relegated to the margins of the official art world.

¹¹ It is unquestionable that this practice, over time, had a harmful effect on Chiara Fumai's psyche and made it more fragile. In the last part of her life she said that she heard "voices," suggesting that she had lost psychological control of the situation.

¹² For this analysis of the various typefaces used by Chiara Fumai, I am indebted to graphic designer Robert Huber.

¹³ I owe this information to Milovan Farronato, a close friend of the artist's and co-curator of this retrospective.

¹⁴ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin, 1999).