

Living with contradictions: Chiara Fumai reads Carla Lonzi.

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*I am my own adventure*

*One day of depression one year of depression one hundred years of depression*

*I discard ideology and I no longer know anything*

*Losing my way is my proof*

Rivolta femminile, *Io dico io*, Roma, marzo 1977 (as translated by Chiara Fumai).

I met Chiara Fumai in 2013, when her work was gaining international attention thanks to the multi media installation and performance she had recently presented at the Documenta 13, which was partly based on her reading of Italian art critic and radical feminist Carla Lonzi (1931-1982). At that time, I was myself starting to work on Lonzi's legacy within the field of the visual arts, and I was struggling with her argument that art and feminism were incompatible. I was therefore particularly interested in the topicality of her thinking from the perspective of contemporary women's art, and this is how I became aware of Fumai's work. I wanted to understand how Lonzi's writings were read outside of the feminist circles in which they had circulated so far, especially because they had just started to gain some momentum in the art world. This was indeed a challenging topic. Lonzi, who had worked as an art critic during the 1960s, took an overtly polemical stance against women artists after she decided to withdraw from the art world in order to fully engage in feminism with the founding of the group Rivolta femminile in 1970. In my own scholarly work I was trying to come to terms with this contradiction and excavate its meaning within art historical accounts of the changing relations between gender, art and feminism in Italy and beyond. Lonzi's position seemed not just contradictory in itself (an art critic-turned-feminist that opposes women artists), it was also ad odds with the narrative of progress and redemption that

pervades both art history and the history of the feminist movement. In 2012, I had just edited the French translation of Lonzi's book *Autoritratto* (1969) and I was planning to organize a study day to discuss the significance of this book for feminist practices in the field of art, and this is how the idea came to invite Chiara Fumai as one of the speakers.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to convey the intensity, radicality and irresistible wit of Fumai's presence on stage. Anyone who has had the chance to attend one of her performances knows what I am talking about. Her public appearances were mostly based on her impersonating an array of radical female figures that had fought to find a voice in a male-dominated world. Chiara Fumai has redefined the terms of the performative lecture with her unique combination of humor and solemnity, in addition to the sense of urgency that surrounded her artistic persona. Fumai's ability to oscillate between farce and gravity is perhaps one of the most striking traits of her trailblazing interpretation of a number of texts connecting her practice to early 1970s radical thinking. Her performative actions bring to mind the emancipatory potential of laughter that defines much of women's art from the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase Jo Anna Isaac's discussion of *jouissance* in women's art, one could argue that Fumai's wit introduces a sense of playfulness, enabling her to disrupt fixed meanings and destabilize normative assumptions by emphasizing contradictions, non-sense, and disturbances.<sup>3</sup>

Fumai's performances draw inspiration from the tradition of the female medium in a way that conveys possession more than impersonation. Generally speaking, they are marked by a number of interferences and abrupt deviations that suggest a conflict taking place in the course of the speech. During her presentation in Paris, for instance, Fumai started by carefully describing her work at the Documenta 13, before suddenly changing tone and behavior, as if she was fully possessed by Carla Lonzi's spirit. At this point, Fumai provocatively addressed the audience with the questions and comments contained in Rivolta femminile's second manifesto, entitled "I say I", written in 1977 by

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<sup>1</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Autoportrait*, (1969), trans. Marie-Ange Maire-Vigueur, Paris, JRP|Ringier 2012. The conference *Carla Lonzi, art critic and feminist* was organized by Maison Rouge and Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris. Speakers included art historians and critics Lucia Aspesi, Elisabeth Lebovici, Griselda Pollock, Dora Siefelmeier, Francesco Ventrella, and myself. See the videos here: <https://www.dailymotion.com/playlist/x2lbfk> (last accessed on 15 June 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and contemporary art. The revolutionary power of women's laughter*, London, Routledge 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 2-5.

Lonzi and her associates.<sup>4</sup> In a crescendo of tension and fury, Fumai intermittently paused in order to spit on the floor in a direct quotation of Lonzi's most famous pamphlet, entitled *Let's spit on Hegel* (1970)<sup>5</sup>, thus provoking a mixture of amazement, amusement and enthrallment in the audience.

Fumai's Paris performance was an extension of her multi media installation *Moral Exhibition House* presented at Kassel's Documenta 13, in the Summer of 2012, which comprised a performance in the space adjacent to the small house she had built on that occasion. This work summarized her interest for the relation between sound, the body and language, as well as her attraction for spiritism, folklore, and early 1970s radical feminism. The house's entrance room was literally haunted by Carla Lonzi's spirit by way of an audio recording of the artist's voice reading excerpts from Lonzi's *Let's spit on Hegel*. Interestingly, Lonzi's presence was conveyed via tape-recording, a technique she had herself used, most notably in *Autoritratto*, a book based on the editing of a number of tape recorded conversation with artists. Her use of technology was intended as a way to introduce the immediacy of the lived experience within the fabric of the written text. In addition to the audio based on Lonzi's text, Fumai also performed *Shut up, actually talk*, which, in her own words, took the form of a freak show based on Rivolta femminile's manifesto *I say I*.<sup>6</sup> The performance directly refers to the title of Carla Lonzi's private journal, published in 1978, in which the author discusses the conflicts that were constitutive of her everyday life as a woman and as a feminist.<sup>7</sup>

Fumai's exercise in feminist ventriloquism powerfully reactivated Lonzi's radical redefinition of the "I" and the "we" as part of the collective transformative process outlined by the concept of "deculturation" (*deculturizzazione*) she developed in the early 1970s. This term makes reference to the possibility of undoing the ways in which culture determines women's gestures, social

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<sup>4</sup> Rivolta femminile, "Secondo manifesto di Rivolta Femminile: 'Io dico io'", in: Marta Lonzi, Anna Jaquinta, Carla Lonzi, *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo*, Milan, Scritti di Rivolta femminile 1978, p. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> Carla Lonzi, "Sputiamo su Hegel" (1970), in: Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Milano, Scritti di Rivolta femminile 1974.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the *Moral Exhibition House*, during the opening and closing days, Fumai organized the performance *Shut up, actually talk (the world will not explode)* on the roof of the Fridericianum, featuring the 19th century human oddity Zalumma Agra and other female freaks who screamed words from *I say I* and *Let's Spit on Hegel*.

<sup>7</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, Milano, Scritti di Rivolta femminile 1978.

interactions and self-perception. It refers to an ongoing process of becoming a subject in which women dare to abandon what they thought they knew about themselves. Lonzi's practice of deculturation thus suggests that the self is a contradictory entity where women's struggle for liberation inevitably takes place. Rivolta femminile's feminism was predicated upon the practice of *autocoscienza* (Italian for consciousness raising) which enabled the process of undoing oneself, as women gathered in small groups in order to foster mutual recognition, collective change and revolt against the norms defining their role in culture and society.

Even though Fumai never made explicit reference to it, the idea of undoing oneself developed by Lonzi strongly resonates with the artist's confrontational practice, which was also inspired by other figures who took similarly radical stances at the turn of the 1970s. For example, when she discussed about her work, Fumai used the term "unwork", hence deliberately alluding to Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto*, another important reference in her practice.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike Solanas' radical contestation of capitalist work ethics, in Fumai's interpretation the term primarily indicates the overthrowing of the mechanisms of artistic production and consumption, thus echoing Lonzi's fundamental critique of art's (and the artist's) seizure within these same mechanisms. Fumai's other quote from Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto*, "A male artist is a contradiction in terms", similarly echoes Lonzi's ultimate assessment of the artist's masculinity as a myth. Moreover, her reference to her activity in terms of "unwork" suggests the uncompromising radicalism that marked her art as well as her artistic persona.

In addition, Fumai's proclivity for multiple personality and ventriloquism equally stresses a notion of the self as a contradictory space that needs to be unraveled. However Fumai adds a distinctive playful twist to Carla Lonzi's existential understanding of feminism, which finds itself enmeshed in a constellation of radical positions that are mostly heterogeneous to Rivolta femminile's history and practice. Fumai's numerous installations, videos, drawings, collages and, above all, performances were in fact inhabited by an array of eccentric other women. Next to Lonzi and Solanas, a third central figure in her all-female pantheon is German revolutionary thinker and member of the RAF (Red Army Faction) Ulrike Meinhof, who made several appearances in Fumai's performances, most notably during her 2015 exhibition *Der Hexenhammer* at Bolzano's Museion. Along the wall painting conceived for this occasion, Fumai also staged a fake guided tour of another artist's exhibition that was taking place in the same museum. She proposed to walk the

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<sup>8</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), London, Verso 2016.

audience through Rossella Biscotti's artistic meditation on Italy's political history, which became literally haunted by Meinhof's radical spirit that emerged intermittently through Fumai's speech.

Whereas Lonzi explicitly wrote about the proximity she felt with Solanas, and was briefly in touch with her, it can be assumed that she must have had no sympathy for Meinhof's ideological choices. However Fumai's interest in these three women points to the fundamental features they have in common despite the radical differences in their personal circumstances, and especially their choices with respect to violence, politics and terrorism. Indeed Carla Lonzi, Valerie Solanas and Ulrike Meinhof share a similar position of cultural resistance in a time marked by unprecedented revolutionary perspectives for women. At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, Lonzi withdraw from the art world and abandoned a successful career as a curator and critic in order to focus exclusively on her feminist agenda, which encompassed an overall critique of culture as male ideology. The publication of the *SCUM Manifesto* in 1967 and the failed attempt to kill Andy Warhol the following year marked Solanas' own withdrawal and contestation of the masculinist avant-garde conventions she had experienced in New York. Solanas' radical negativity towards normative notions of art, politics, culture, and even feminism, positions her as a figure of uncompromising resistance against cultural integration. As for Ulrike Meinhof, the years 1969-1970 are marked by her decision to go underground and join the RAF, thus becoming the state's "public enemy nr. 1", after more than a decade spent at the forefront of West Germany's political life. Interestingly, just before embracing terrorism as a political choice, and despite her extraneousness to the women's movement, Meinhof had devoted much of her energy inquiring in the life conditions of outlaw girls in reform school in West Berlin.<sup>9</sup> Meinhof's status as absolute "outlaw", her violent choices and ultimate death equally position her at the margins of the structures of cultural recognition. I believe Chiara Fumai was not primarily interested in how these women articulated their ideas about politics, feminism or culture. I think she was mostly interested in the non-conformist, irredeemable positions they embodied and in their stubborn refusal to be assimilated as cultural figures.

As I am remembering my encounter with Chiara Fumai and the conversations that unfolded between us in the years that preceded her tragic death in 2017, I can't help thinking of her acute awareness of the challenges of being a feminist artist in today's art world. This was particularly true for a place like Italy, where there is still an urgent need to open up a straightforward conversation about the structural biases and privileges pervading the local art scene. Her choice to

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<sup>9</sup> See Ulrike Meinhof, *Bambule. Fürsorge – Sorge für wen?*, (1974) Berlin, Wagenbach 2009.

focus on Rivolta femminile's less known second manifesto can perhaps be understood as a way to address this challenge, considering the text's provocative discussion of the way mainstream culture's recuperation of feminism inevitably hinders its potential for structural change. Chiara's desire to be the artist she wanted to be required great determination, but it also caused the kind of disorientation described in the manifesto. As she had fully grasped in her reading of Lonzi, losing the way can be painful, but it can also be transformative, if we accept the turmoil that it brings in our lives.