BOOK REVIEW

Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi

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Responding to specific contemporary challenges posed by ecological threat, decolonial movements, global capitalism, and the ensuing entanglement of gender, ethnicity and class, feminist perspectives have recently integrated notions of intersectionality and positionality, while revising materialist and semiotic trajectories and developing material culture approaches. The expanding spectrum of feminist concerns has concomitantly put the historiography of feminism to the test, leading to the uncovering of blind spots and biases. Under a self-reflexive lens, persisting anglophone and Western foci, as well as universalising presumptions of an undifferentiated gender experience across class, ethnic and national divides, have come to the fore. Against this backdrop, a renewed historiographical engagement with Western second-wave feminism requires a questioning, rather than a replication, of homogenising epistemic categories and comprehensive narratives. It is in this vein of thought that the volume Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi, edited by art historians Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi for an international readership, returns to a prominent historical figure in order to reconsider the unsettled relationship between feminism and art in 1970s Italy.

In 1969, in the foreword of her book Autoritratto, the established art critic Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) abruptly withdrew from her profession to devote herself entirely to feminism, with the subsequent funding of the collective Rivolta Femminile. A 1971 essay authored by the collective proceeded to vehemently reject the art field altogether, dismissing it as a place of competition between men that admitted women only in the subjected role of spectators. In the book’s introduction (pp 1–20), Ventrella and Zapperi contextualise this ‘spectatorial’ model of art within a broader refusal to assimilate specific to Italian separatist feminism.

1 See Victoria Horne and Lara Perry, Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice, I B Tauris, London and New York, 2017
2 Among Giovanna Zapperi’s extensive publications on Carla Lonzi, see especially her monography Carla Lonzi: un’arte della vita, Derive Approdi, Rome, 2017
Indeed, Rivolta Femminile argued that forcibly equating women with men in the fields of politics, culture and art was not a viable option as it meant leaving unquestioned, and conforming to, the dominant – masculine – order. The editors observe that Lonzi’s abandonment of art criticism and her hostile stance towards art has led art historians to the assumption of a missed encounter between feminism and art in postwar Italy. Yet despite Lonzi’s radical positioning played a polarising role, numerous women artists, critics and gallerists have contributed to reinventing and consolidating feminism in elementary ways. Beyond encouraging a historio-graphical recovery of these long illegible connections, the editors advocate for reconsidering Lonzi’s feminist perspective on art in order to ‘question the topicality of her thinking for a feminism to come’ (p 2). In so doing, Ventrella and Zapperi distance themselves from a primarily philological perspective on Lonzi’s oeuvre,3 to inscribe their volume into a different conversation, one that revolves around the potential use of second-wave feminism for our current rewriting of art history in both content and method. This compelling framing renders the publication a valuable resource even beyond the scope of Italian studies.

Some of the featured essays in the book originated in the conference ‘Carla Lonzi, Critique d’art et féministe’, convened by Zapperi together with the research collective Travelling féministe4 at the Maison Rouge in Paris in 2013. The eleven contributions are organised into four sections, each of which illuminates key themes and concepts derived from Lonzi’s proto-feminist and feminist thinking. ‘Art Writing Against Art’ (pp 21–86) tackles Lonzi’s increasing discomfort with conventional art criticism and her development of different approaches to art-critical writing. ‘Creativity and the Feminist Subject’ (pp 87–156) further focuses on her recasting of creativity – beyond its modernist codification – within feminism. ‘Art as Relation’ (pp 157–230) delves into Lonzi’s phenomenologically grounded insistence on relationality. Finally, ‘Genealogies and Resonances’ (pp 231–274) scrutinises the legacies of Italian separatist feminism across spatial and temporal borders. Taken as a constellation, the essays constitute the first ample, multilayered discussion of Lonzi’s position and impact in the English language, thus manifesting the challenging balancing act – revendicated in the introduction – of bridging the conventional divides of historical and theoretical, national and transnational analysis.

While the essays cover a wide range of approaches, those grounded in a firm knowledge of Lonzi’s writings appear especially cogent. Ventrella, Zapperi and Teresa Kittler focus mainly on Lonzi’s book Autoritratto (1969), a text-photo collage based on artist interviews. For this singular publication, Lonzi pulled apart the recordings of conversations she had conducted with prominent artists at different points in time, to then intermix and reassemble


4 See www.travellingfeministe.org/site/
selected transcriptions from them as a fictitious, polyvocal and erratic dialogue interspersed with public and private photographs. Central to Ventrella’s, Zapperi’s and Kittler’s respective discussions of Autoritratto is the notion of ‘authenticity’, whose understanding, as Zapperi reveals, changes around 1970 (pp 89–110). From a quality Lonzi first emphatically ascribes to the artist, authenticity later becomes the defining feature of feminist subjectivity – under the premise, however, of a collective refusal to identify with the existing structures of society, and a withdrawal into the separate space of the collective. Such possibilities of dis-identification, Ventrella suggests, are already contained in Lonzi’s singular use of recorded speech in Autoritratto (pp 45–74). Destabilising the ties between voice, speaker and text, in Ventrella’s reading Lonzi’s practice implicitly undermines the modernist desire to capture the artists’ intimate sphere on tape. Kittler’s essay furthermore explores the authenticity effects of the private photographs included in Autoritratto – resonating with the book’s oral genesis – as a means to at once highlight and blur the staged dimension of the conversation, and to visually articulate Lonzi’s longing for an authentic group experience (pp 181–208). Leslie Cozzi’s essay focuses instead on Lonzi’s later books Taci, anzi parla and Vai pure, retracing the author’s progressive dismissal of the artist’s self-centredness (‘protagonismo’) and the concomitant quest for ‘mutual recognition’ (pp 159–180). In Cozzi’s reading, Lonzi’s disillusionment with artists, especially with her former friend Carla Accardi and her long-term partner Pietro Consagra, is inextricably connected with her view of art as an impediment to social interaction. In contrast, the feminist collective, and the practices of consciousness-raising underpinning it, allowed Lonzi to conceive of alternative concepts of solidarity and intersubjectivity. In illuminating Lonzi’s questioning or recoding of modernist tropes, all of these essays implicitly confront the reader with the necessity, articulated within separatist feminism, to relentlessly contest the art field’s structures and power relations.

Other, rather historically oriented contributions exemplify the extent to which, in taking Lonzi’s position as an entry point, as yet unrepresented aspects of the postwar Italian art scene can emerge. Judith Russi Kirshner, for instance, opens a different perspective on the well-researched field of the reception of US-American art in Italy (pp 23–44). In considering Lonzi’s seemingly uncritical embracing of the tropes of freedom, immediacy and self-realisation associated with Abstract Expressionism in her art-critical output, Russi Kirshner argues that US-American art and its mainstream discourse might have played a role in encouraging Lonzi (a former student of the prominent art historian Roberto Longhi) to progressively refuse academic traditions while undertaking her own political process of liberation. On another note, Katia Almerini’s contribution mobilises the thorny relationship between women artists and feminist separatism in 1970s Italy to uncover the case of an all-women artist co-operative long neglected in mainstream exhibition history – the Cooperativa Beato Angelico – whose significance as a fabric of horizontal creative relations emerges when shifting the parameters of canonical scholarship (pp 209–232). Of the Cooperativa’s eleven co-founders, some, especially Carla Accardi, had contributed to
Rivolta Femminile. While not all of them professed a radical position, they jointly managed an art space that was in relative autonomy from the art field. An interview conducted by Ventrella and Zapperi with a former member of the co-operative, artist Suzanne Santoro, further contributes striking firsthand insights into this episode and Santoro’s artistic practice (pp 137–156). The essays mentioned so far constitute the most intriguing pages of the volume, as their arguments channel focused feminist interventions into a field – that of Italian postwar art history – whose ‘master’ actors, concepts and narratives continue to demand critical reconsideration.

Additional contributions decidedly remove Lonzi from her historical context and connect her position with contemporary preoccupations. In this line of reasoning, rather than earnestly reconsidering Lonzi’s call to break with the art field – for example, in relation to current anti-work politics and practices of strike and withdrawal – the authors seem more inclined to mobilise her case for a reflection on ‘how to extend infiltration but fight incorporation’. In her anachronistic reading (pp 75–88), Sabeth Buchmann, for instance, argues that Lonzi’s ‘anti-hermeneutic refusal to analyse artworks’ (p 75), her search for a ‘non-binary relation between the subject and the object’ of art-writing (p 78) – as emerging in Autoritratto – resonates with current post-normative notions of critique. Then and now, Buchmann concludes, an awareness of one’s own involvement in the art field’s power relations constitutes the premise for transformative interventions of feminist art criticism. While referencing other famous cases of dropouts, such as Charlotte Posenenske, Lee Lozano and Cady Noland, Elisabeth Lebovici (pp 233–248) likewise sees at work in Autoritratto a ‘refusal of exteriority’ (p 235) and a conjuring of collective authorship, operations that from today’s perspective seem, as she suggests, potentially able to overcome the alternative between art and feminism postulated by Lonzi.

Also notable in the volume, although not centrally addressed, is a nuancing of second-wave feminism’s tenets from a current vantage point. In a self-reflexive mode, Griselda Pollock’s labyrinthine essay (pp 249–274) retraces the encounter between art and feminism in and beyond the 1970s, arguing for historicising, and thus destabilising, the meaning of central terms such as ‘women’, ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist art’. Lebovici, too, takes an evaluative perspective on Lonzi’s anti-egalitarian conceptualisation of sexual difference with a parallel look at the French context. Starting from Lonzi’s archive, Liliana Ellena (pp 111–136) furthermore hints at Rivolta Femminile’s missed opportunity to openly engage with imperial and colonial discriminations (despite Rivolta Femminile’s co-founder, Elvira Banotti, being biographically imbricated in Italy’s history of colonialism). Recollecting her personal experience with consciousness-raising, artist Suzanne Santoro further alludes, although cursorily, to Lonzi’s blindness towards questions of economic privilege or social class (‘she had some Fontanas’; ‘she would never teach or get involved in any of those proletarian sort of

things’, p 146). These more overtly critical or self-reflexive passages scattered throughout the book have a meaningful effect. They both highlight and circumvent the risk of substituting – when working historiographically – the ‘idealized Story of Great Men’ with a ‘longing for Heroised Women’,6 to use Griselda Pollock’s words.

In taking a kaleidoscopic stance on the founding figure and central stakes of Italian separatist feminism, while addressing a broader English-speaking readership, Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi is not only an impressive but also a timely editorial and research achievement. As feminism grows increasingly pervasive across the digital and physical networks of activism, curating and academia, alongside the burgeoning of gender studies and urgent debates around diversity and inclusion, the book provides an opportunity to revisit the potential value of radical second-wave feminism for contemporary art-historical interventions – both within and outside postwar Italy. In showing that feminist concepts can be made productive beyond the context and chronology of their emergence, Ventrella and Zapperi convincingly advocate for a non-developmental understanding of feminism, thereby encouraging further focused historiographical action.

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