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**ART AS A COLLECTIVE ACTION:  
THE COLLECTIVE WORK OF FEMINIST  
ARTISTS AND THE CRITIQUE TO THE  
INDIVIDUAL (MALE) GENIUS:  
THE CASE OF CLAIRE FONTAINE**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of feminist artistic collectives. It explores the reasons that led to feminist art as a collective activity, especially from the second wave of feminism. The thesis confronts the typical modalities of male presence in the art world, the myth of the exceptional individual and the solitary approach to the artistic work. My perspective focuses on critical reviews that thematize artistic work as a collective activity, and include case studies analysis and an interview.

The first chapter analyzes the figure of the “genius” artist in the Western tradition of Art History. It discusses how social systems disadvantage women artists, discussing the sociological theory of Howard S. Becker and the sociological perspective of Natalie Heinich.

The second chapter investigates through an historical excursus how feminism theorized the visual arts, their idea of the professional women artists and the outcomes of the feminist activist demonstrations in United States, Great Britain and Italy.

The third chapter analyzes the origins of the feminist collective work and the reason that led women artist to create collective groups for working as artists. I focused especially on three different cases, the Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro *Womanhouse* project, that took place in the US; *The Hayward Annual Exhibition II* in UK; the exhibition *La materializzazione del linguaggio*, at the Venice Biennale, in Italy.

The fourth chapter eventually examines the case studies of the feminist artistic collective Claire Fontaine and her relation with Carla Lonzi, one of the pioneering Italian feminist theorists and art critics.

## Introduction

In the traditional narrative of the Western History of Art, women artists have always had a minor role compared to men artists: this controversial phenomenon is due to several systemic socio-historical factors, the codes, imposed norms and rules that certainly do not regard biological reasons. Social institutions and attitudes have always wanted to control women, limiting their voices, their free expression and their possibilities to access fundamental forms of art training, binding them instead to chores in the domestic environment, assigning more manageable roles to them.

The aim of this research is to focus on the reasons which led women artists, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly when the second wave of feminism emerged, to work collectively in order to get out of the obscurity where they have been relegated for decades in the context of the art world as well as in many other social fields. I thus investigate the phenomenon of feminist artistic collectives, thanks to which women could experience the collective dimension of art, without having to give up their individuality as women artists.

I provide here an introduction to the study first by discussing the background and the context of my research, followed by the research question and eventually its limitations. After the Second World War, theories of identity increased and spread rapidly. The publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 were crucial moments for the development of feminist theory. The spread of the second feminist wave in the Western world brought new issues to light. During the 1970s the nature of women's identity was seen as something still unknown, so private and public experiences began to be investigated for their role in the formation of gender identity and the analysis of individual identity that was hidden behind the critique of the dominant culture.

Starting from their position of disadvantage and invisibility in society, women organised in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, challenged political power by demanding equal rights with men, claiming rights such as the right to vote, abortion and divorce. Among the women who joined together for the common cause of feminist action, differences of age, race, class, sexual identity or geography could be overcome. These women found themselves to be part of a larger network, something like a family,

but they were connected for a purpose, shared a vision and were convinced that the past and even the world could be changed and reformed. Feminist artists wanted to rewrite a male-dominated art history, challenging the contemporary, mainstream art canon, and intervening to establish their own position in the field.

The issue about the invisibility of women artists in the Western discipline of Art History has been a very discussed topic, since the beginning of the spreading of feminist art. Many art historians since the 1970s have wondered and tried to understand why women artists have always been excluded from the institutionalized narrative of the discipline, with the exception of a few rare cases. The American art historian Linda Nochlin in 1971 for example opened the public debate, with her essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, questioning the fact that it is not true that there were no women artists in history as it is commonly assumed, but instead that institutions and social attitudes had limited women by denying them access to fundamental forms of art training, shaping for them domesticated life-worlds. Since then, the issue became widespread in the art field, bringing to light the context of discrimination in which women artists have always operated.

The starting point of my dissertation is the analysis of the myth according to which the individual genius artist has always been considered the male artist. This myth, which began to emerge in early Western modernity, produced the idea that only the genius, with his eccentric personality, could be a true artist. In light of this, the artist, in order to be considered as such, must have a gift, an extraordinary talent, which allows him to stand out from others as a superior being. During the Renaissance, this idea reinforced the idea of the artist considered as a singular individual and the idea of art as an individual activity, the product of the creation, commitment and inspiration of the gifted one.

I analyze how, in art literature, the association between art and creative genius is symbolically masculinized, because it is common to associate a genius with men and also because the common idea of the artist is based on the mechanisms of perception that the observer implements (the public, critics, art historians), and even these are gender oriented in favour of the male figure. This causes an evaluation of women artists as less competent than men in the art world and, consequently, a devaluation of them as artists and professionals, because of the condition itself of being women, a condition

which has been largely misunderstood and underrated. The discipline of (Western) Art History, pervaded by a structural, exclusionary and discriminatory sexism contributed to the production and perpetuation of the stereotyped gender hierarchy, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1970s, ignored and removed women artists from the narrative, and completely obscured their presence in previous centuries: art history has actively and structurally excluded women from being considered capable of taking part in the realm of art, and from being considered artists. This has generated its own ideological effect and we can see how a huge number of women artists of the past have never been mentioned in Art History books.

Thus, the initial idea of artists as geniuses led to an almost total marginalization of women in the art field that has gone on through the centuries and still lasts to this day.

The spreading of the second wave of feminism and the emerging of a feminist art during the 1970s, represented a refusal at the heart of the traditional art historical establishment and a urge to embrace the larger intellectual and political revolutions of the 20th century. The new perspective that emerged with feminism critiqued the ideal of autonomous, self-determined artists as genius and the notion of the autonomy of art free from all social and historical constraints. Feminist artists bravely challenged the romantic construction of the artist as individual genius, emphasizing not only the collective dimension of artistic production, but also their capability of making a new kind of art with its own dignity and artistic and social value.

My study intends to analyze and provide the motivations which led women artists to work collectively to become visible in the art field which has always considered them irrelevant or less able than their male peers. Feminism, both in practice and theory, has exposed new areas of social conflict and has thus generated new kinds of analysis. Feminist artists wanted to rewrite a male-dominated history of art, challenging the contemporary and mainstream art canon and the limits they had been associated with, intervening to establish also their position and their art. Women artists wanted, on the one hand, to be included in the official narrative, on the other they did not want to be seen as just a supplement to fix the mistakes made by history. Feminism have been fighting to make understand that art history itself, as both a symbolic and material system, had to change, making it contradictory and differentiated through the deconstruction of the existing structures, in order to reach out a true understanding and

rewriting of the history of women and art. For this reason, in the wake of the feminist movement, women artists began to enact collective practices in their artistic work, founding groups to fight together to claim their rights as artists in a male-dominated art world where they were considered invisible. Collective work, for women artists, has been a strength from which they could claim their visibility, their values as women and feminists and also as artists, fighting together with the main purpose of taking back their place in history.

In their collectives, the artists wanted to give life to a new way of making art, through inclusive spaces, where people, women first and foremost, could work, make art and be together in an environment that guaranteed access to everybody without discrimination. They wanted to create a new language, free from the stereotypical impositions of the institutional artistic world.

This study contributes to highlight the reasons why it is not possible anymore to think of the artist as an isolated genius, because art, socially considered, is never a solitary activity, but always the result of cooperation at multiple levels. Consequently, it is not possible to talk anymore about the tradition of history of art without considering how exclusive of women artists it has been. Western art history has cut off hundreds of artists just for their gender (or for other discriminated categories such as race). Feminism showed the fundamental need to rewrite a new narrative for Art History, from a new perspective.

However, the limitations of this research are related to the geographical area and the delimited period of time: it is mainly focused on the Western art history and the period that starts approximately from 1970, taking into consideration especially the experiences, the innovations, the struggles and the outcomes of activism and collective art in the United States, United Kingdom and Italy. I wanted to consider in a critical analysis and with noteworthy examples the development of the brand new possibilities for women's artistic career and freedom against all the social limitations justified by a backward culture, which caused discriminations not only in the art field and institutions, but also in many other contexts, up until that moment of huge relevance and revolution. To conclude, I briefly illustrate the structure of the dissertation.

In the first chapter *The artist archetype and art as a collective action: sociological theories* I introduce the concept of "genius" artist and all the biases which led to the formation of the stereotyped idea of the artist archetype, who has to be exclusively a

man, going through the gender inequalities that have always shaped the artistic careers of women artists and analyzing the social reasons that have disadvantaged them. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze the sociological theories which conceive art as a collective action and the artistic world as a cooperative network of people who work together to reach the same purpose. First of all, I go through Howard Becker's theory of the art worlds, considering the entire field of social relations that occur inside the art world. Then, I analyze the theory of the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich according to which the myth of the “genius” artist has its roots in the modern representation of the artists, since the Romantic age.

In the second chapter, *Feminist art theory, practices and institutions*, I trace a historical excursus about feminist art, institutions and themes with a focus on the development of feminist art and the outcomes of the feminist activist demonstrations in United States, Great Britain and Italy.

The third chapter, *Feminist artistic work as collective work*, analyzes the origins of the feminist collective work and the reason who led women artist to create collective groups for working as artists. I focused especially on three different cases, which have been a turning point for feminist art: the Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro *Womanhouse* project, that took place in 1972 in California, US; *The Hayward Annual Exhibition II* set up in 1978 in London, UK; the exhibition *La materializzazione del linguaggio*, 1978, which took place at the Venice Biennale, in Italy, and was curated by Mirella Bentivoglio.

*Womanhouse* can be considered a unique event, especially in the years in which it developed, because it brought to the art world new methodologies and new ways of working together. Its feminist component, which is perceived in the artists who worked together and in art creations, was fundamental to the development of the project. Its impact was enormous, because it was the first time that women's issues were openly expressed in art forms, just as its legacy is invaluable in the history of feminist art.

The *Hayward Exhibition* in England, despite the many critiques it received, has been a turning point in which the expertise of women artists has been shown to the institutional art world, demonstrating that they could be exhibited alongside their male peers. The peculiarity of this exhibition and its paramount value is that, even if it hasn't explicitly been defined as a feminist one, it nonetheless represented a noticeable example of collective work because for the first time five women managed to organise an art and



cultural event in which the space of representation given to women artists and their artworks was more relevant than the space given to men artists.

In regards to *La materializzazione del linguaggio*, the Italian exhibition which took place in Venice in 1978, it is important to say that even if it was not explicitly feminist either, the space in which it was arranged, the Biennale, has historically been a male-dominated art space and that means that this exhibition has been truly important because of the significant presence of women artists all together for the first time in that specific place. In that exhibition it was possible to find both individual artists and the two overtly feminist artistic collectives Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese and Donne/Immagine/Creatività from Naples. Moreover, this was the first time in which feminist collectives had the chance to take part in an exhibition at the Biennale.

In the fourth chapter I analyze the case of the collective feminist artist Claire Fontaine, through her artworks, her ideologies, her artistic and also political commitment in contemporary society. I also included an original conversation that took place via email between us during the months of January and February 2022. I decided and deeply wanted to include her in my research and interview her because, when I discovered her art, I was impressed by her thoughts, feminist inspiration and political commitment which permeates her conceptual collective art. This is why I thought it would be interesting to report through an interview the point of view and the actual explanation of the attempts of a contemporary collective which tries to modernise and bring back to the current debate themes that were conceived during the 1970's and that have not been solved yet. I wanted to know more about the captivating idea of the human strike and their Marxist inspiration, I wanted to delve into their social commitment as artists, about inequalities and discrimination, consumerism and the exploitation of humanity and Earth. I wanted to report the voice of an artist who criticises the individuality regarded as the only way of social identification and who paves the way for a new inclusive feminism.

The work of Claire Fontaine, as we will see, is based on the legacy of Carla Lonzi, one of the most important exponent of the Italian feminism of the 1970s and in the fourth chapter I also wanted to dedicate a relevant space to Carla Lonzi, her role of note and her contribution to the feminist development. She founded Rivolta Femminile in 1970 with the artists Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti. With the publishing of the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* in 1970, Lonzi became a pillar the national and also international

feminist movement. She withdrew from her art critique job to completely commit herself to feminism.

In their attempt to rewrite art history from a female perspective, women artists have managed to make space for themselves in a world that has always tried to shut them out. This research's goal lies in the intention to shed a light on how society and patriarchy-derived social constructions have been effective in keeping non-predominant categories marginalised. Since such system cannot be expected to work, it must first be deconstructed from its foundations and then recomposed starting from a perspective of inclusion and equality of every social category, in art as well as in every field of life.

# I. THE ARTIST ARCHETYPE AND ART AS A COLLECTIVE ACTION: SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

## 1.1 The “genius” artist

The phenomenon of genius characterizes human, especially Western, history, as a way to determine ability and value. It is possible to date its origin, and prejudice, to Roman times, where it was considered an only-men condition that shaped their characters. The notion of genius, as a direct relationship with the modern understanding of individuals of superior creative or intellectual abilities, began to emerge in the early Modern period and came forward in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Chaplin & McMahon, 2016). During the Enlightenment, the figure of genius was seen as a super-human, with faculties higher to the natural reason. These traits were detectable only in white European men. Throughout the Modern age and until the 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of genius acquired those characteristics for which it is known even today. A genius was considered an individual out of the ordinary and less likely to think and act by conventional norms, genuinely original and often eccentric or even mad (Ibidem). The new cultural ideals that emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and the after-effects of the Romantic ideals, encourage the reinforcement of the idea of genius identity. Since Romanticism, as Nathalie Heinich (2016) affirms, “artists have been the very best incarnation of both the valorization of singularity and the right to benefit from privilege [...] but within the democratic sense of equity, since their marginality holds them apart from the advantages that ordinarily accompany one’s belonging to an elite” (p. 39).

In the common imaginary, such as Heinich (2016) states an artist is who:

unites the democratic longing for community with the elitist longing for singularity. This is because any vocation designates both excellence and singularity [...]. This combination of aristocratism (excellence is innate), democracy (everyone has a right to excellence), and meritocracy (excellence depends on nothing but individual merits) define the modern status of artists (p.38).

Genius appeared superior to their communities of peers, with eccentric personalities, difficulties in compliance to the observance of canons, marginality in their lifestyle: the artists became those who must be singular, in any possible way (Heinich, 2016). Whereby singularity became the distinctive trait of the category. So, the artists, to be

themselves, had to be “normally exceptional” and at the same time own the privilege of exceptionality.

Becker (2008) states that:

the romantic myth of the artists suggests that people with such gifts cannot be subjected to the constraints imposed by other members of society; we must allow them to violate rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense everyone else must follow or risk being punished. The myth suggests that in return society receives works of unique character and invaluable quality. Such a belief does not appear in all, or even most, societies; it may be unique to Western European societies, and those influenced by them, since the Renaissance. (pp.14.15)

In the Middle Ages, the artist as an individual subject was invisible, hidden by the Church’s collective and cooperative activities. Only Greek-Roman and Chinese History provides some details about the lives of individual artists. Becker discusses the *theory of artists’ reputation*. It is only possible to discuss it by taking an individualistic approach to art theory and artistic production. From this perspective, people with a special talent produce great artworks which express emotions and high cultural values. Thus, the peculiar characteristics of the artworks demonstrate the talent of their creators. The main point of the reputational theory is that the artists have a gift, a very rare talent, which allows them to do what other people cannot do without that aptitude. Artwork receives value from being created by incredibly gifted persons.

The History of Art requires to know who are these artists, and their backgrounds, but this aspect is not always taken into consideration by Western society. The predominant definition that society gives to art is made through a process of human activity’s differentiation that originated during the Renaissance. In Italy, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the activity of painters, sculptors, and architects started to be considered different from the craft activities, becoming worthy of being called *art*. The artist is not the craftsman anymore, but a creator, a sort of *alter deus* unconstrained from the common norms, and this artist’s conception merges with the aristocratic image of the artwork, unique and irreplaceable (Moulin, 1878, quoted by Becker, 2008). This conception dates back to the modern idea of the creator and created object.

In Italy, during the Renaissance, the creation of the creative genius concept is an evidence of that system of patronage around the artist where everyone competed for his services (state, church, aristocratic elite, etc.). The individual and solitary character of artistic work could be a free and unrestrained kind of life, opposed to that alienated labour (during the Industrial Revolution), especially in an historical moment, as it was the beginning of capitalism, when other

forms of works became subjected to the disciplinary organization of the several factory systems (Tanner, 2004). Artists were advantaged from the disappearance of the aristocratic patronage but at the same time, not fully integrated into the new developing market systems of capitalist production. Sociological work on the artists tried to decentralize and desacralize the figure of the artist (Ibidem).

Linda Nochlin (2014) points out that art is not the free and independent activity of a gifted person influenced by who preceded the artist. Art is the result of social circumstances, of which structure is an integral part, mediated and determined from specific and well-defined institutions, that can be academies, patronage, or the artist's myth, hero, or emarginate. In the Renaissance era, it was common to assume that men were the true artists, busy with challenging work of the imagination on a grand scale, and women had just taste and were occupied in secondary, delicate, personal pastimes (Parker & Pollock, 1981). Literature on gender in the artistic field places the ideal-typical artist as implicitly masculinized. The association between art and creative genius is symbolically masculinized as it is common to associate transcendent genius with men. Also because the ideal-typical artist relies on aesthetic evaluations from multiple public (peers, critics, and audience), which are systematically biased in favor of men (Miller, 2016). Perception and evaluation are gender-biased and women are mostly evaluated (and perceived) as less competent and less assertive than men (Ibidem). This process of undervaluation is common across several areas of social life but mainly in working life. Women are taken less seriously than men and considered amateur even if they are affirmed professionals.

The connection between creativity, isolation, and strangeness has few implications for gender since antisocial behaviours are more acceptable in men rather than in women: women must be lovely and quiet, taking care of others (the family), instead, men can be noisy and funny, while they focus on their career. As Miller (2016) considers:

the perception of artists as tortured creative geniuses introduces implicit symbolic gendering into shared understanding of the artist archetype. Transformative creative potential is more strongly associated with masculinity than femininity, and reclusion, temperamentality, and antisocial behaviour are more socially acceptable in men than in women. When we imagine artists as unpredictable creative geniuses, we implicitly imagine men. (p. 124)

Linda Nochlin declared that the criteria of greatness have always been male defined. In her essay, *Why have there been no great women artists?* Nochlin (2014) points out the historical and cultural question about the issue of the genius artist asking, if the figure of the artist embodies all the patriarchal values, why should we ask the question about the almost not-existence of women artists? Our awareness of the world is often influenced, even mistakenly, by the way questions are asked. The question is faulty from the beginning, from the formulation of all the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole. Nochlin also clarified that another reason why there have not been great women artists could be that social behaviours, and especially institutions, have always controlled women, limiting their possibilities to access to fundamental forms of art training and by binding them to domestic roles. One example can be the exclusion of women, until 1893, from the classes of Life Drawing, owing to models being naked, and when women were admitted, models were partially covered (Nochlin, 2014). The exclusion from this part of education meant being excluded from the possibility to acquire knowledge to realize important paintings and be stocked and limited in minor subjects than portraits, such as landscapes or general painting. Women were precluded from achieving the same success or artistic excellence as men, regardless of whether or not they were talented.

The issue is not biology, but lies in the social system, in the rules and education that women receive, from the very first moment they are brought into the world. Women who decide to focus on their artistic career to overshadow others' needs (family needs) are generally seen as selfish, rebellious, rather than considered genius.

Nochlin (2014) argued that there had been no great women artists simply because institutions and social attitudes had limited women by denying them access to basic forms of artistic training and by shaping subservient and domesticated worlds of life for them. In addition, the very concept of genius and greatness was itself gendered toward the male gender. So the reason for the fact that there have been so few women artists depends on the constitution of social institutions which forbid or encourage on the basis of social classes or groups of individuals.

The discipline of the (Western) History of Art, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the '70s of the last century, has ignored and removed the women artists from the narrative, and completely overshadowed their presence in the centuries before. The History of Art

is pervaded by structural sexism, which contributes to the production and perpetuation of gender hierarchy. Even if in the last almost 50 years has been notified, this has not brought yet an inclusive narration of the canonical History of Art, which is, for this reason, not the only version but just one part of the, Western and male-centred, story.

As Griselda Pollock (2003) affirms:

The core narratives that encode Western phallocentrism's political unconscious serve not merely to structure the study of the History of Art, but to establish a story of art as The Story of Art, the canonical legend of Western masculine Christian creativity which becomes synonymous with art, pure and simple. Against this formal creation of a version of the past that serves to consolidate gender as an axis of power on one hand, on the other, as a mark of exclusion and devaluation, it is not useful to aim merely to correct the oversights and ignorance that led art history to ignore the art of almost all women who have participated in creative cultural activity. (pp.19-20)

Feminist interventions in art history show how significant are the symbolic-aesthetic practices within culture as a whole, in representational regimes that cross disciplines, media, and practices as well as in their own specific address as aesthetic practices to signification, visibility, embodiment, desire, pleasure, and trauma.

The canon is sustained not by prejudice or ignorance, but by a profound psycho-fantasmatic structure of masculine desire and narcissism (Pollock, 2003).

Art History actively and structurally excluded women from being considered able to participate in the field of art, and from being considered artists. This has generated its ideological effect. A huge number of women artists were never mentioned in the "History of Art" books, a few were regularly referenced specifically to represent all that was at once not art because it was gendered feminine. And this can be seen as the feminine stereotype, where crucial qualities were ascribed to all women, using this negative essentialism to preclude women from being seen as artists.

Considering the ideal concept of an artist as a genius disadvantages women. It is easier to imagine men as someone who can go beyond the standard and reach success, rather than women. The quality of artistic achievements is strictly connected with family conditions, such as an encouraging environment and education. The most famous artists have grown in a challenging creative context, receiving education, training, motivation, and possibilities. They were always surrounded by their peers. The impossibilities to receive adequate education and training represented the main obstacle for a rising women artist. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost all known women artists had fathers (artists) who discovered and recognized their talent, helping and training them through

opportunities, critics, artistic materials, spaces, and sometimes the opportunity to work together. Of course, those who don't have an artist in their family cannot be sent to a male teacher to be trained, because it wasn't considered socially acceptable.

Changes in perspective, in the academic field, always occur when the modes of analysis are no longer adequate for what needs to be explained. There is a new need to reconstruct the process, theories, and methods through which the historical and ideological complexities of the histories of artistic and cultural practices are addressed. Feminism's challenge does not end art historical work: it calls for methods and practices that go beyond art history in its post-Cold War. The 1970s are a crucial phase in the history of Western art of the twentieth century: the diffusion of feminist thought contributed to a new critical awareness that pushed many women artists, curators and art historians to rethink their role in society, life and art in a different way. Feminism in the Seventies was the breaking point from the universalist assumptions about the only and hegemonic history-maker: the man. Art history and its methods and canons could not survive the impact of feminist questioning: a position that Linda Nochlin proposed in her fundamental essay, *Why have there been no great women artists?* (1971), on the necessity for a paradigm shift toward an enlarged interdisciplinary practice already in 1971 (Pollock, 2003). Feminist interventions represents a refusal at the heart of the traditional art historical establishment and a urge to embrace the larger intellectual and political revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that co-emerged with its modernist forms.

Feminism's perspective criticizes the ideal of autonomous, self-determined artists as a genius and the notion of the autonomy of art free from all social and historical determinations. Feminist artists challenged the romantic construction of the artist as individual genius, stressing the collective dimension of artistic production. Today, women artists experience artistic practice with new aspects and levels of freedom: first of all, freedom from the idea of the artistic myth, which the Western world has, and of a creativity linked to the narcissistic and magnificent idea of the figure of the artist, which has its roots in the heroic and sexualized image of the 19<sup>th</sup> artist (Trasforini, 2009). Now there are new figures, where gender is mixed with many dimensions of modernity: identity, belonging, original context, generations, traditions, genealogies (cultural, familiar and artistic).



Before the second wave of feminist revolution of the late '60s and '70s, women have rarely been successful in the profession; they have been unable, because of social reasons, to transform their circumstances into their subject matter and using them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition (Lippard, 1980). The work of feminist interventions starts with differencing the canon, not reifying the differences of women as “the other sex”, but allowing a desire for different self-knowledge in order to transform the mainstream reading of art, without focus anymore only on the traditional and stereotyped idea of art and artists.

## **1.2 The artist archetype**

Research on gender relations in artistic careers suggest that the ideal-typical artist is built on a masculine model (Miller, 2006). The collective perception of creative genius is addressed to a male subject, and this highlights that all the ideologies about artists are male-oriented. The artist archetype is symbolically masculinized through an expectation of creative genius, gender bias in artistic evaluations, and the necessity of entrepreneurial artistic labour (Ibidem). The artist archetype entails a subject who experiences life more intensely than others and who has problems tailoring himself to society due to the fact that others misunderstand or don't get his/her genius. Art and artistry, in this view, take on almost divine properties and transcend every day, but also separate the artist from society and from rules and norms followed by others.

The ideal-typical artist has to put his/her artistic creation above everything else in life and be entirely committed to their art and work with passion. But this idea of total commitment to its arts is a highly gendered expectation. As Linda Nochlin (2014) suggests, women have historically been discouraged from developing just a single competency, because several skills in different areas had been seen as more appropriate for a woman who had to be expert in several domestic duties. The freedom, like the opportunity to focus just on an unique skill, was reserved for men. Development and organization of an artistic career and the total commitment required were in conflict with the domestic duties and child care. A creative and artistic career is often difficult to balance with family responsibilities and the social expectation resulting from it, and this situation can lead to conflicts and to abandon the work to devote herself to her family. Literature on women artists stresses social-reproductive responsibility and work-family conflict as barriers to gender equalities (Miller, 2016).

Biographies of acclaimed women artists, especially between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, highlight how some exceptional circumstances (artists fathers able to understand their daughter's talent and let them have an artistic education, or let them work with him to learn) in their life pushed them across their artistic achievements. Differential gender achievements have to be attributed to cultural and social barriers. In the past, but still today, women have been able to affirm themselves in the artistic field only adopting in silence typical masculine attributes of determination, concentration, tenacity and application of ideas and techniques (Nochlin, 2014).

Creative works require a lot of entrepreneurial labour to go ahead in careers, in a continuing promotion of their artworks and themselves, and this is often symbolically associated with masculinity. Successful entrepreneurship requires individuals to take risks, self-promote, ask for resources, and seek attention: all of these behaviours are more socially accepted in men than in women (Miller 2016). Constant entrepreneurial labour requires time (and women cannot be negligent in taking time to take care of their families), a strong self-confidence and certain faith in his/her proper ability (which in women artists is eroded by the system through interactions in several artistic fields). It is a fact that women in artistic fields are less confident in their skills than men and this strengthens the idea that the artistic archetype is implicitly built around a masculine model (Ibidem).

Diana L. Miller (2016), in her analysis about the artist archetype, states that there are important similarities between the idea of the artist archetype and Joan Acker's conception of the typical worker which is also man-oriented. Acker, in his essay *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations* (1990) depicts the portrayal of the abstract worker who:

is actually a man, and it is the man's body, its sexuality, minimal responsibility in procreation, and conventional control of emotions that pervades work and organizational processes. Women's bodies - female sexuality, their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and child care, menstruation, and mythic "emotionality" - are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion. (p. 152)

Excluding women from certain activities has been a way to control them, through their roles, actions, bodies and sexuality.

Literature on gender relations in creative fields suggests that the ideal-typical artist is also gendered in ways not fully elaborated by scholarship on gender, work, and

organizations (Miller, 2016). It is a well-known fact that men artists overcome women in almost all artistic fields<sup>1</sup>.

It is fundamental deconstructing how the artist archetype is gendered for the reason why gender inequality is easily disguised by the rhetoric surrounding creative scenes (Miller 2006).

### **1.3 Gender inequalities in artistic careers**

Critical investigations highlight that the art world is deeply shaped by historical and continuous relations of inequality. The common idea of being an artist is gendered, raced, classed, aged, and abled, built through centuries of reflections about who is an artist and what is an artwork. It is through these relations of inequalities that artists shape themselves producing their artworks.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gender started to interlace with the raising of modern artistic occupations and being a woman was one of the marginalizing factors. It is during this period that the relationship between occupation, gender, and art takes shape, and it had repercussions also on the identity of women artists from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the number of professional women artists who lived selling their artworks grew. Since then women artists have increased in number and become always more presents in art schools. For women, there was the opportunity to be part of courses for artistic schooling and alphabetization, not only due to familiar networks but with universal requirements. This happened in a period when the request for artistic goods was raised thanks to the bourgeoisie. It is the case of Paris, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the raising of the art market, the processes of professionalization concerning both the artist and the new art professional, was at the bottom of new competitive forms based on gender. This means that the artists were increasingly growing in an art market that produces incomes and keeping women outside the art schools or the art training means restricting the access for them to professional education and, in this way, being in control of a monopolized market and also of limited resources (Trasforini, 2009). The growing number of women artists shows how the occupation is a structure, and also a process, deeply marked by the male

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<sup>1</sup> According to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, only 29% of the winners of the Turner Prize, one of the best-known visual art awards, have been women.

gender. Also, women artists claimed a professional role, which means social visibility, market positioning, the possibility of access to public training. And right here, gatekeepers (guardians of the entrance of the art world: directors of artistic institutions, critics, gallerists, merchants, etc) literally started to close doors (Traforini, 2001). Those artists who could take economic advantages from being artists tied to preserve, maximize and monopolize the control of opportunities and resources connected with arts, used actions of inclusion/exclusion which allow or preclude this market's position. The building of a social field during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in arts as a profession saw in action a double process of exclusion and marginalization regarding women: on one side there is the exclusion from professional artists' groups and Academies; and on the other side there is the marginalization which relegates women to less important and less prestigious roles and expertise<sup>2</sup> (Ibidem). This double process acts on more levels: it outlines an interrelation between the ideology of the right place in society for a woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and habits of professional closure. It stresses and recreates a practice that reinforces gender division and the belief of women as *amateur*, miles away from being professional artists.

Institutionalized artists were right to fear the increasing number of women artists competing for their positions on a market that had not an unlimited request. It is interesting to observe that in 1880 the State ran the Paris Salon, but then one year later the Salon was run by artists. This transition brings to an access restriction for women artists, turning a potentially less discriminatory access into a controlled and limited access. The growth of the professional (men) artists and their autonomy in managing resources and the field's structures, seems to have suffered an act of restriction, confinement, or precisely a declared exclusion towards women (Trasforini, 2001).

In a comparison between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expected growth in the number of women artists did not take place. That is probably due to the fact that where art followed a path of fast and structured professionalization, as in many European countries since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, there was a progressive marginalization of living and active women artists. The fact that their names are known today, even with strength, testify an art history that often has forgotten the existing women artists in the field. Instead, where art has not quickly reached the professionalization path, or at least where it was predominant in the form of popular art,

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<sup>2</sup> as crafts, less relevant subjects or artistic genres.

women artists had more possibilities and consequently more visibility and public space. All this shows how the form of art as a profession is interlaced with gender and how it has structured and influenced the field, marking shape and development.

Entering in a field of cultural production, achieving the right to be part of that field (that consist in the acquiring of a specific behavioural and expression's code) means discovering its constraints, in terms of limited possibilities and objective opportunities that the field offers (Bourdieu, 1996). In order for it to be accepted and at least conceived, it is necessary that this innovative research (or revolution) already exists, in its potential state (inside that system of already existing possibilities) in the form of structural lacunae, waiting to be filled by potential ways of developing and researching (Ibidem). Every action of production depends on the space where all the potential productions are, as possible options more or less compatible, where each idea/project embodies a questioning for all the supporters of other's ideas. This space of possibilities is suggested to all of them who have interiorized the logic and the necessity of the field as a system of (social) categories of perception and evaluation, of social conditions about possibilities and legitimacy which surround the freedom and necessity (Ibidem). But Bourdieu totally ignores gender as another social variable which could be taken into consideration as a constraint for being part of the (artistic in the specific) field.

It is a fact that the structure of artistic career privileges men artists. And men are almost always in the highest position of organizational power. Gender is involved in the basic system of developing social structures. The social collective organization has never been gender-neutral. The common idea of jobs and hierarchies in organizational thinking, presupposes a disembodied and universal worker who actually is a man: men's bodies, sexuality, relation to procreation, and paid work, are subsumed in the image of worker (Acker, 1990).

Even the term *artist* is gendered: in order to indicate a woman artist, the term must be qualified as an adjective. The effect is to disqualify the woman artist immediately from being treated as artists. Gender discrimination in organizations is fed by the common idea of men and masculinity who penetrate all the organizational processes. When an organization is gendered it means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine (Ibidem). The gender discrimination of work including differences between paid and unpaid work, as well as status inequalities, are shaped through organizational practices. Organizations are

showcases where cultural patriarchal rooted images are displayed and replicated. Gender differences in organizational behaviour are due to structures rather than to characteristics of women and men as individuals (Acker, 1990). Acker also states that he examines:

organizations as gendered processes in which both gender and sexuality have been obscured through a gender neutral, asexual discourse, and suggest some of the ways that gender, the body, and sexuality are part of the processes of control in work organizations. (p.140)

Gender segregation is a constant pattern and the gender identity of occupations is replicated over and over.

In the artistic field, empirical evidence demonstrates that the usual perception of an artist privileges masculinity rather than femininity, especially if we consider the men's overrepresentation as artists and their advantages in pay estimation (Miller 2016).

The ranking of women's jobs is always justified on the basis of women's identification with childbearing and domestic life (Acker, 1990), that is reproductive rather than productive labour. Women are underestimated because they are seen not to conform to the requests of "abstract" (that is, "serious", "professional", "public oriented") job.

The maintenance of a gendered hierarchy is achieved partly through such often-tacit controls based on arguments about women's reproduction, emotionality, and sexuality, helping to legitimize the organizational structures created through abstract, intellectualized techniques (Ibidem), which is also reflected in the detached, apparently value-neutral language used. While women's bodies are excluded, sexualized, and objectified, in work organizations, men's bodies are not. Indeed, male sexual imagery pervades organizational metaphors and language, helping to give form to work's activities (Ibidem).

For women artists, perception and evaluation are structured by gender (Miller, 2016). Women are usually considered less able and less competent than men and their work's evaluation is generally inferior. Women know that they have to work harder than men to have equal recognition. That led some women artists, for instance, to use male or gender-neutral aliases to avoid gender bias and not an objective evaluation of their work. Artistic careers are considerably based on reputation, recognition, and prestige, so if these aspects are more heavily present in male, the artistic careers are systematically structured by gender and the ideal-typical artist who usually accumulates and uses these

factors is symbolically masculinized. Still today women are less paid for their artistic works<sup>3</sup>.

Miller (2016) discusses *the glass runway*, a metaphor that shows the advantages in recognition that men may have. This metaphor describes gendered processes of reward that are specific to creative careers: men are pushed forward into the spotlight and showered with attention, facilitating increased recognition, higher demand for one's work, and feature opportunities. Women artists have also to face pressure to manage and employ, especially in performance-based genres, their sexuality as part of their public persona. This creates a double bind: women performers who refuse to perform sexual availability may be viewed as difficult to work with and lose out on professional opportunity; but, women who do foreground their sexuality may find that the resulting attention ignores their actual work and talent, focuses on their appearance, and ultimately harms their credibility (Miller, 2016). Some women artists may be unable to trade on their sexuality and may actually be negatively evaluated for not adequately adhering to norms of feminine attractiveness. This is another way that perception and evaluation of artist women is gender biased: others may perceive women artists through the lens of sexuality and filter their opinions through the general social expectations that women should always be physically attractive and sexually available (Ibidem). For instance, just think how difficult it is, in the film industry, to find a role for actresses which are not so young anymore.

The gender identity of the woman artist has always been reduced to the biological theory in the past decades, together with the historical variability and uncertainty of feminine: that's why the feminine socially constructed changes, and it is changed.

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<sup>3</sup> In the paper *Is gender in the eye of the beholder? Identifying cultural attitudes with art auction prices*, (2017) by Adams, R. B., Kräussl, R., Navone, M. A., & Verwijmeren, P. have demonstrated how gender bias influences the Art Market. Participants in the experiments are unable to guess the gender of the artists simply by looking at a painting and they vary in their preferences for painting associated with female artists. Using a sample of 1.5 million auction transactions between 1970 to 2013 in 45 countries for 62.442 individual artists, they document that auction prices for paintings by female artists are significantly lower than prices for male artists. Women's art appears to sell for less because it is made by women.

## 1.4 How society disadvantaged women artists

Women are methodically disadvantaged beyond cultural fields and gender prejudice in artistic and creative careers. Due to gender inequalities which historically characterized the art world, women have always had to deal with difficulties in accessing artistic careers, exclusion from the hegemonic (and sexist) official narrative, underrepresentation discrimination<sup>4</sup>, devaluation (from a social and economic point of view, women are less paid than men, when it doesn't lead to exclusion, segregation, gender gap in recognition, career length)<sup>5</sup>, personal and emotional efforts to be part, or just to be admitted, to a male-dominated artistic field<sup>6</sup>. All these discriminations fit the fact that they are women.

History of Art is not inclusive, rather is permeated by structural sexism. Women artists are not presented in the same way as their masculine peers: the focus is on their private life, their sexuality, tragedy, or trauma, rather than their art. Obviously, any case is different and there might be different explanations for lower remuneration, lesser opportunities, or devaluation in comparison to men, but it is undeniable that gender inequality (not only) in the art field is a systemic issue.

Differential gender accomplishment can't be attributed to social and cultural barriers. Gender is deep-rooted in the social structures. Gender addresses social expectations above artists and artistic work. The job should be separate from the person who does it. Evaluation should estimate jobs, not their incumbents. Job is the basic unit in a work organization's hierarchy, a description of a set of tasks, competencies, and responsibilities represented as a position on an organizational chart (Acker, 1990). Both

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<sup>4</sup> The investigation *Diversity of artists in majors U.S. museums* published in 2019 by the scientific journal *Plos One* estimates that among 18 major U.S. museums only 12.6% of artists are women. In 1989 The Guerrilla Girls exposed the fact that less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections of US museums were women, but 85% of the nudes were female.

<sup>5</sup> The National Endowment for the Arts (2019) found that female visual artists earn 81 cents for every dollar made by male artists, on average. As women get older earn progressively less than their male artist counterparts: women artists aged 55–64 earn only 66¢ for each \$1 earned by men. In addition, the research *An asymmetrical portrait: exploring gender inequality in the Arts*, published in the Sage Journal in 2016, reports that women in arts make about \$20,000 less than men per year.

<sup>6</sup> According to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, only 27 women (out of 318 artists) are represented in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of H.W. Janson's survey, *Basic History of Western Art*, up from zero to 1980s.



jobs and hierarchies are theoretical categories that should not be built on human bodies and gender.

The woman worker assumed to have legitimate obligations other than those required by the job, did not fit with the abstract job (Ibidem). In industrial capitalist societies, strategies of control are built upon a deeply embedded substructure of gender difference. Gender processes, including the manipulation and management of women's and men's sexuality, procreation, and emotion, are part of the control processes of organizations too, maintaining not only gender stratification but contributing also to maintaining class and, possibly, race and ethnic relations (Acker, 1990).

Bias in aesthetic evaluations systematically favours man over woman and the need for entrepreneurial labour and self promotion, requires artists to engage in behaviours that are more socially acceptable in men than in women (Miller, 2016). Looking for attention is not well seen in a woman. Commonly, they may be less engaged and devoted to self-promotion, which is necessary to obtain positive evaluation judgments and evaluations. This positions the ideal-typical artist as implicitly masculine, as his routine behaviours are more acceptable in men than women: seeking out recognition from multiple stakeholders and convincing others to reward him and his work (Ibidem). Estimation bias is tricky for women artists because aesthetic qualities are intrinsically ambiguous and often not objective: there are no absolute standards for what makes great art and the gender stereotypes can influence, not always in a conscious way, the judgement and the evaluation.

The fact that collective judgments of aesthetic quality are gender-biased suggests the social structuring of perception as another mechanism of gendering (Ibidem). One example can be the fact that spaces where women artists work, create and perform, are not designed around their needs: the ideal-typical worker as the ideal-typical worker is implicitly male (Ibidem). Women are always relegated to the bottom of organizational structures. Divisions of labour, of allowed behaviours, of locations in physical space (of power) including the institutionalized means of maintaining the divisions in the structures of labour markets, the family, the State (Acker, 1990).

In a society where power is the focus of an (almost) all-male circle, feminists' one (focus) is addressed to the bottom part of the society trying to show the possibility of a non-patriarchal way of working.

## **1.5 Art as collective action and the art world as a cooperative network: sociological theories.**

The main Western tradition of art history places the artist and the artwork as central to the studies of art, totally forgetting about the network of cooperation without it there would not be the artwork and neither art in general. Social relations of cooperation have always been fundamental, and still are. The myth of the genius artist built during the Modern age has seriously reduced the full comprehension of the art field. It led to focus only on an actor, forgetting the true aspects of the art world: the creative works as the result of several actors and many worlds collaborating together, in a close network of relations, support, and gatherings. Artists are linked to the people who work with them, (such as the craftsmen who help to make art), that are as important as the people who conceive the artwork.

Howard Becker's (2008) sociological analysis explores the "art world" concept, intended as:

the network of people whose cooperative activity is organized through their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, and produces the kind of artworks that the art world is noted for. (p.24)

This approach seems to be in contradiction with the main readings in theories of art, which defines art as something more special, in which creativity comes to the surface, and the essential character of the society expresses itself, especially in great works of genius. The prominent tradition takes the artist and the artwork, rather than the network of cooperation, as central to the analysis of art as a social phenomenon (Becker, 2008). Becker's approach aims to understand the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens. Artistic works, like all human activity, involve the joint activity of several persons and the artworks show signs and effects of cooperation: the effects of the art world will always affect the production and the consumption of artworks.

In the common idea, the artist made the artwork. But it is not so simple. Becker discusses support activities and personal, as residual categories, designed to include all

those activities and people without whom there would not be any artwork. Moreover, after the realization of it, there has to be a network to support, who work in relation to it, appreciate it, and open it to the world. There is not just one way to produce an artwork, but if some support activities are missing, the artwork will be different. All the human activities we know involve the cooperation of others. Every art is based on a division of labour. It doesn't require that all the subjects have to work together at the same time, but they have to collaborate, eventually also getting in conflict, to make the artwork complete. The recognition goes through the artists' community and those who are not known by other artists, are targeted to remain invisible. This is what happened to many women artists during the past. The visibility gets through that network of relationships, connections, links that constitute the base of an artistic career: what sociologists usually label with the definition of mediators, but inside a complex, collectively intended, social fabric, where cooperations and relations, in Becker's view, are prioritized.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, being part of a social salon was fundamental for women artists' visibility. The bourgeois social circles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were places where there was a prominent gender (masculine) identity. Gradually, these circles bring to an exclusion of members, with a negative impact on women artists as new social figures who needed to have access to public spaces. This was well understood by women painters and sculptors of the association *Union des Peintres et Sculpteurs* who were born in Paris at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the aim to create spaces where women artists can be seen, and a true annual separatist Salon. On this path, a few professional women artists groups all around Europe and in the United States raised around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These women understood the need to build social and professional spaces focused on women's independence and self-determination.

Today, new theories about the gender issue highlight the influence of (collective) groups, of interactions, friendships, and impact of cooperation not only on a merely professional and economic connection, but also to support the creativity itself (Trasforini, 2009). Making art is based on a long series of relationships and not in heroic loneliness. Social networks and relationships are necessary not only during life but also after. The work of women artists has often been lost or forgotten because there was no social network, familiar or institutional, that survived them and preserved their work after their death. Social networking in the artistic field advantages men (and not

everyone in the same way), because these restricted-access clubs are often made by only men, and where information, opportunities, and resources spread through their network and women have less chance to access them.

### **1.5.1 Howard Becker and the theory of the art worlds**

Howard Saul Becker is an American sociologist, belonging to the second Chicago School of Sociology, who gave an important contribution to the Sociology of Art, and not only. His volume, *Art Worlds* (2008) moves the focus from the individual artists to the entire field of social relations who occur inside the art worlds. Becker was one of the first to theorize art as many people's activity, coordinated by the conventions they share and organizations with which they work. Becker's sociological analysis is an exploration of capabilities of the notion of the art field to improve the understanding of how art is produced and distributed. Becker moves the focus from the artwork to who makes it, which is not only the singular artist, but everyone who contributes to each step, from the conception to the production, exhibition, selling, consumption, etc. For Becker, art is a social practice that takes shape from the wholeness of many relations and their social structuring. He highlights how technicians and craftsmen who cooperate in the production of the artworks are as relevant as those who conceive it. It seems obvious to say that if everyone whose work contributes to the artwork does not do his/her part, the work will come out differently. But it is not unequivocal that it becomes a problem when there is to decide which of all these people is *the* artist, while the others are only support personnel. The main tradition focuses on the artist and the artwork as the main subject of the analysis of art as a social phenomenon, relegating to the background the network of cooperation, forgetting the fact that without it there would not be any art world. According to Becker's idea, each artistic work, like every human activity, requires the joint action of a certain number of people. Due to this cooperation, the artwork becomes what we can see.

Each artwork hides in itself all the signs of this cooperation, which gives life to those models of collective activity that are called "art worlds". In order to appear as an artwork, there is the necessity of what Becker calls *support activity*, fundamental for all the processes that led the artwork to become what it is. If any of these categories are missing, the artwork will be different, because each support activity affects the result

differently. Even if art can seem like a solitary activity, it is not. Those who take part in the creation of artworks, and other members of the society, consider artistic creation as something that requires specific abilities, talent, or skills that only someone has. These individuals can be called artists, and their talent can be seen in their artworks.

According to Becker's theory, the romantic myth of the individual genius artist began during the Renaissance, with the conception that the artwork is the expression of the ability and creativity of a special person, with a special talent, which is the great artist. The title of artist belongs only to those who accomplish the core activities, essential to make artwork an object, instead of a common use, industrial or crafted item. Instead, other activities are done by support personnel. Thus, the ideology establishes a direct connection between the artist and the role to fulfil the core activities in the production of an artwork. The difference is in the artist's contribution, that is what makes the artwork unique, and it's something that nobody else could do for him/her.

This discourse is fundamental because society judges the artists according to their work, so it is necessary to know who actually made it. The artists' reputation is built on the base of values that their artworks award. The artist acts inside a network of cooperation where each person has its role, because everything that is not done by the artist has to be done by someone else. And everyone cooperates in order to achieve the result. So a chain of cooperation arises every time the artist depends on someone else. And sometimes this reliance constrains the work that the artist can produce.

This can be seen as a constraint, as a limitation, if we think the artist in the traditional way as the individual genius (male) artist. But this "limitation", that forces people to work together is seen differently from the point of view of the feminist artists who, during the Seventies, decided to cooperate and foreground collective work a source of further enrichment, a key strength, through which find visibility in their network. This way of working together, of making art together, of raising self-awareness about their identities as women and artists, is the way in which the feminist art collectives work gave female artists the opportunity to go out from that isolation where women, and who was commonly discriminated, were relegated. Acting together was the way in which feminist artists claimed a new position for women in art, as agents rather than passive objects.

The art world, like many other worlds, is settled by conventions, that set of norms, rules, and customs, which concern all the decisions useful to produce an artwork. Conventions are also essential to regulate relationships between the artist and the audience, establishing rights and duties of both. But practices can be also restrictive for the artist. The artistic conventions explain the artist's ability to produce artworks capable of provoking an emotional response in the audience. The artwork can be able to provoke emotive effects only because the artist and the public share the knowledge of the same conventions. In fact, the possibility of the artistic experience lies in the awareness of the existence of a series of conventions used by all the artists and the public, to which can refer to giving meaning to their artistic experience. The knowledge of these conventions circumscribes the external border of an art world, and also the presence of an audience who doesn't have any specific knowledge. But the conventions also allow coordination between the artist and the support personnel.

Art worlds do not have defined borders. At the same time, they are part of a wider social organization which are also part of commercial, crafted, and popular arts. Most important is the fact that art worlds, more than producing artworks, assign an aesthetic value to them. Each art world is composed of the creators, spectators, and personnel of support, but it is also made by all the shared knowledge and conventions fundamental to collective action. In every art world, there is a distribution system that takes care to provide materials and technical staff for the development of the work. So, according to the shared conventions, the artist is who actually does the work, taking decisions that convey to the artwork its artistic value and its fulfilment. He/she is only one of the actors who take part in the creation work: everyone else has the duty to assist him/her. Sometimes, in many artistic forms, it is really difficult to distinguish between who is the artist and who is the technician, because their roles overlap and boundaries are blurred. The artists need a support system behind him/her, without which it is impossible to survive in the artistic field. Just consider the distribution system: it brings the artwork to the public and without it the artist remains unknown. But also, each member of the art world needs others. Examining the network of cooperation behind a gallery, for instance, there is at least a gallerist who owns the venue where to show artworks for potential buyers; a group of artists who produce the pieces (employing materials and techniques who are produced or assisted by someone else); few regular buyers; several critics who review artworks; and a main group of visitors, who attend vernissage,

opening and go around visiting exhibitions sharing the interest in artists, talking and recommend them around. But also, each person who identifies him/herself as a member of the art world is part of it as well.

The distribution system is full of people who act as intermediaries between the artist and the public. Distribution acts on reputation: what is not distributed stays unknown, it is not considered and it has not historic relevance. Only what has a good reputation is distributed. This means that the judgement about what type of artwork is known is also influenced by the distribution systems, with their specific bias. If the public can be reached only through the official distribution system, the artist has to adapt his/her work to it or give up the public's recognition.

To sum up, Becker states that it is the art world that produces an artwork, rather than the singular artist. Of course, the artist is the most visible character and the one who takes the most difficult and important choices, and also he/she is the one who receives compliments or critics. Taking part in an art world influences the artist's activity and also the artwork's features.

Changes happen when some artists' work doesn't fit in the common system of distribution and they stay outside of the existing system, so they try to create new ones, focus on their goals. When an artwork, or an artist (or a group of them), cannot find his/her place in an existing art world, they simply create another one. If a distribution system refuses significant numbers of artists who want to take part in it, someone could create an alternative system to distribute their artwork. And this, we could argue, is the case of feminist artists. Women artists who felt rejected by the normative system gave rise to a different system, focused on women and feminist artists, where they can operate as they prefer, outside of the systematical prejudices about their gender and structural constraints.

Inside the art world's conventions there is the necessity to understand and distinguish between what is art and who is an artist. For Becker, this necessity stays in the capability of the art world to incorporate in it what is new, and accept it together with its creator. In his theory, Becker distinguishes between different kinds of subjects and relations that they have with an organized art world, and the modality of participations that they assume in it. He classified these kinds of relations between integrated professionals, rebel artists, folk artists, and naive artists.

In the perspective of Becker's theory, feminist artists can be placed within his classification of artists as "rebels", at least in the beginning. Because, as rebel artists, feminists cannot fit inside the conventional art world in which they were located, considering their constrictions unacceptable. They have proposed a change in the perspective that the traditional art world cannot accept inside its ordinary production. So, as the rebel artists, feminist artists kept following their innovative path, refusing the traditional ones where women were excluded, creating an art world in which women were the main characters and they could act as they wanted without fit in the rules imposed by a masculine centred art world. At the same time, they foreground how art worlds already worked, that is collectively. They had to find a way to empower themselves, finding their voices to emerge from where they had been relegated for decades, hidden by the shadows of men artists, and express themselves.

The rise of feminist activism in the arts during the '70s (in the context of the feminist second wave) can be seen under the point of view of the phenomenon of women's networks. By contrast to men's networks, which were typically structured along vertical professional lines, women's networks were friendship networks, laterally spread, and geographically unbounded (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

The rebel artists address their activity in relation to the artistic canonical and traditional world, mutating its conventions but unconsciously accepting its system as such. Their work is often incorporated (even if later) with the tradition of the institutionalized art world, becoming in this way acceptable with time and practice. Rebel's artworks were absorbed through the conventions. This happens because rebel artists, even if refusing the rules of the art world's norms, share with it its aesthetic values, and in this way they can connect with the members of that world, although oppositionally. Thus, the revolution is not only in the artwork itself, but rather in the relationship between it and the conventional art world.

The most significant difference between the rebel artists and the feminist artist is that most often, the work of rebel artists is transitional: their innovations are not fully integrated into the canon, their creators disappear or stay unknown, so their art is not preserved and vanishes with them. If the work of rebel artists is very often transitional and does not modify the system that integrates them in depth, on the contrary, feminist artists often change the mindset of the art world and at least unmask, if not change, its structures and power inequalities, upsetting the canonical narrative and giving rise to feminist art history, feminist art places and feminist approaches to art. Feminist



revolution changed the point of view of art historians, asking for a reinterpretation and a change in perspective, refusing the old way to see the story and the old models, celebrating new artworks as signs of the new universal aesthetic values. Artistic revolutions make substantial changes in the character of the artworks that are produced and in the conventions used. The entity of change depends on what the challenges an art world can handle, accept and incorporate (Becker, 2008). Each attempt to change accepted conventions is perceived as an attack on the related aesthetic. Because for the people, their aesthetic beliefs seem natural, right, and ethically good, so they feel the attack on shared conventions as an attack to morality (Ibidem). In art, the conventional praxis relies on the existing network of cooperation, which recognizes who succeeds to employ the conventions properly, in accordance with the concerned aesthetic.

According to Becker's (2008) theory, a new art world is born when people who have never cooperated before, meet on the basis of conventions ignored or used in another way until then. The new art world develops around technical, conceptual, and organizational innovations. At the basis of what produces new art worlds, there is the development of a new concept, of a new way of thinking, which possibilities can be explored and exploited as well as some technical inventions. What makes a true innovation depends on the possibility that artists are able to open for others in the field based on their interpretation of traditions, interests, and the resources they can attract. When an art world becomes known outside of its local borders, many people have to learn new conventions in order to be able to perceive the aesthetic experience they are offered. The new art world has to convince the rest of the world about its value, about the fact that what they do is art and deserve all the entitlements and privileges connected to that status.

### **1.5.2 The art world according to Nathalie Heinich**

Nathalie Heinich, French sociologist, is the Research Director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. She has studied with Pierre Bourdieu, from whom she acquired her interest about the constitution of social fields, interlacing this with her concern about the recognition of the artistic subjectivities.

According to Heinich, there are many problems of definitions for the word *artist*, from a sociological point of view. First of all, it requires a distinction between fine arts and crafts, and between professional artists and amateurs. Also, the myth of the self-made

artist is an effect of the modern representation of the artist, since the Romantic age, when the talent, the innate gift, is preferred over the training, where the individual value is preferred to the collective transmission of resources, where inspiration is preferred to work. Talking about the term artist, Heinrich states that it was imposed at the end of the XVIII century to indicate painters and sculptors that before were named as craftsmen. It expanded also into music, theatre, and cinema. There had also been a change in the connotative sense because as a descriptive term, it became more evaluative, taking judgement on positive values, having an adjective value also as a name. The evolution of the term shows how there was a progressive valorization of creation in Western society and also the tendency to move the interest from the aesthetic judgement of the artwork to the artist as a person. In this way, there is a tendency to deal retrospectively with the major artists from the past as iconic types of their categories who represent common sense. During the Romantic age, the painter's representations were seen as a direct result of an inclination where this greatness had to respond only to singularity. The creator, to be a true artist, had to be unique, and at the same time, had to know how to express his inwardness, but in an universal form.

The artist is historically seen as an individual actor. The singularity of the artist as a specific regime of valorization, capable of establishing a specific functionality of collective emotions, when the actors' skills prioritize uniqueness, originality, abnormality; being this regime of singularity an aspect specifically inherent to art during the Modern age (Heinich, 2004). The myth of the self-trained artist, indeed, is the effect of the modern representations of artists, that from the Romantic age favour the individual talent against the artistic education and training, promoting the personal virtue as opposed to the collective sharing of resources, and the inspiration opposed to the work.

The artist, in Bourdieu's perspective, is not seen anymore as someone with her/his own psychology or as a social class member, but as someone who is placed in a specific position inside the field of the production, where her/his creation is explicated (Ibidem). So, the collective parameter of the field corresponds to the individual ones which is the *habitus*.<sup>7</sup> According to Heinrich, this perspective avoids the threat to subordinate the

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<sup>7</sup> What we usually call *creation* is the point of contact between a socially constructed *habitus* and a specific position already established in the labour division of the production in the cultural system. So the subject of the artwork is not the individual artist, nor a social group, but instead it is the field of the artistic production as a whole.

artwork and the individual artist to a bigger subject (as the society or a social class) thanks to the concept of *relative autonomy*.

Heinich takes her theory from Bourdieu's tradition about the *autonomy of the field*, where the role of the artist is not questioned as in Becker's theory, which makes a more political use of it. Becker's Art World focuses on the relations that shape the art world, rather than targeting the field itself.

According to Heinich's theory, an artwork finds its place as the result of a complex network of actions made by several actors who cooperate together. Without all the members who establish the art network, the artwork will not find any spectator who appreciates it. It is almost impossible to talk about autonomy in the art world, simply because everything depends on something else. In fact, Heinich shows how the concept of *relative autonomy* is strictly connected with the Bourdieu concept of *field* and its use in the art sphere. No field is completely autonomous since the actors are part of multiple fields simultaneously. In this way, any artistic field is involved in one bigger field. But at the same time, no field is completely subordinated to external determination. So, the more an artistic activity is mediated thanks to a network of actors, institutions, etc, the more it tends towards the autonomy of its choices and its values (Ibidem), which is what Bourdieu affirms talking about the autonomization of the art field in *The Rules of Art* (1996). To ensure that an artwork is what it is, the artists have to leave their lonely job and come into the art field, acting with the cooperation of other members.

Bourdieu lays the foundation of a science of artworks, in which the object is not only the material production of the artwork in itself but also the production of its value. He analyzes the artist as someone who has a specific position in the field of production in which its creation takes place. The collective parameter of the field corresponds to the individual parameter of the habitus, through the structure's activities and the incorporated dispositions. In this perspective, the subject of an artwork is not the singular artist, nor the social group, but the field of artistic production in itself. The experience of the artwork as meaningful and with value is an effect of the agreement between habitus and the artistic field that blend together. The field can be described as the medium term between the person and the social space, characterized by a specific subsystem of relationship in which social actors take part. The artwork space is presented in every moment as a field of position. It is possible to argue about an

homology between the space of artworks defined in their strictly symbolic content, especially in their form, and the space of positions in the production field.

Bourdieu's perspective of the art field describes art as the social space where several actors interact, in conflicts. These actors possess different forms of capital and interests. In the autonomous field, objects have no use value, and competition is ruled by the mindset of differentiation and distinction. Inside these power relations, there is the issue of legitimacy, which raises several questions about what has to be considered art and what not, who is legitimately an artist (or who can be considered as such), and who tells the history of the field and about who was there. Inside these productive actions of the field, gender has an upsetting and, at the same time, structuring role discriminating women artists.

Analyzing Becker's theory of the art world, Heinich goes through Becker's deconstruction of some conceptions rooted into the tradition as the individuality of the artistic job, originality, or artist's singularity. She argues that art is a collective action, coordinated and subjected to material and social constraints, beyond the aesthetic problems (Heinich, 2004). There is the necessity to coordinate actions in a multiple universe, with regards to the activity's moments (idea, execution, consumption), the kinds of expertise, the categories of producers (the kind of different artists, according to Becker's idea: integrated professionals, rebel artists, folk artists, and naive artists). So, the description of the art experience that Becker gives reveals it as essentially collective, coordinated and heteronomous, which means that it is subjected to all external influences that set social and material constraints.

Becker's concept of the art world emphasizes the interrelationship and interactions which occur to assemble and label an object as an artwork. The notion of field, in the Bourdieu perspective, highlights the internal structures, hierarchies, and conflicts related to other activities. These two notions have something in common: both highlight the plurality of actors involved in the world of art. The two theories both stress the social experience of art beyond the aesthetic plane. They also share the critique about the attempt to demystify common beliefs about the autonomy of art and the individuality of an artist as a genius.

An artwork is an art object made by an author. To be perceived as an artwork and not as an object, it is necessary to have three requirements: it does not have any function

except the aesthetic ones; has to be attributable to an artist; and which has to be unique and authentic, so not replaceable (Heinich, 2004). But the meaning of an artwork contains in itself everything who made the artist. So the artist and the artwork are indivisible entities, which define each other.

## II. FEMINIST ART THEORY, PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS

### 2.1 An historical excursus: questions, reflections and themes

A feminist influence in art can be observed already in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to those brave and unstoppable women who claimed for political power through suffrage movements that demanded equity rights, such as the voting right. Artists like Romaine Brooks, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore were making what would be considered queer feminist art works already in the 1910s, long before the creation of the term “feminist art histories” (Jones & Silver, 2016). After the World War II, theories about identity increased in number and the release, in 1949, of Simone de Beauvoir<sup>8</sup>'s *“The Second Sex”* was a crucial moment in the development of feminist theory, alongside the rights movements, such as those against racial and gender discrimination, of the 1950s and 1960s (Ibidem).

The feminist art movement in the West world emerged in the late 1960s, in concomitance with the fervor of American anti-war demonstration and the spreading of gender, civil and queer rights movements around the world. The beginning of a widespread feminist movement in US can be identified in the publishing of *“The Feminine Mystique”* by Betty Friedan<sup>9</sup> in 1963. It explores the experience of suburban white middle-class America cis women, that led to protests, radical literature and, in the art world, schools, programmes, galleries and workshops (Ibidem).

Trying to come back to the utopian ideals of modernist movements of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist artists wanted to rewrite a man-dominated history of art, challenging the contemporary and mainstream art canon, intervening to establish also their position and their art. Art historians have been forced to face the fact that women have always painted and sculpted, but their use of feminine stereotypes for everything made by women have caused the separation of women's art from institutionalized Art, produced by men, highlighting the contradiction between the reality of women's activities and the myths of male cultural creativity (Pollock & Parker, 1981).

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<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a French writer, philosopher and teacher. She was considered one of the mothers of feminism.

<sup>9</sup> Betty Friedan (1921-2006) has been an American activist, and a theorist of the Feminist movement on 1960s and 1970s. In 1966 she founded the NOW - National Organization for Women, an organization that gathered a huge number of feminist groups in the US.

With the rising of the second wave of the women's movement, feminist artists, critics and art historians began questioning the absence of women artists and the stereotyped removal of women's art. During the last decades, an important work has been done to expose all the limits of art history, reacting against the dominant perspective. Hundreds of women artists have been brought to light and recorded and in the same way the limited and standardized vision of art and artists, which art historians have assumed until someone started talking about a feminist history of art. Women artists are, on the one side, being incorporated and absorbed inside the already narrative channels but, on the other, they have been considered just as not truly integrated additions.

It is useless to bring to the surface all the weaknesses of the system without considering how it has shaped the entire social field of art, and showing how the relationships between social practices, art and women are strictly bounded to precise social-historical schemes of meaning negotiations and not to immutable natural traits, like sex (Pollock, 1987). The Western art system, as the society in which it has emerged, is patriarchal, sexist, and mostly not inclusive at its roots. It is not a question of just overcoming the ignored women artists by art historians, because their huge presence has been fully demonstrated. Even if for art historians it has been difficult to admit, women have always been present in the production of art. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, in their *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (1981) revealed that in the twentieth century, with the establishment of Art History as an institutionalized academic discipline, women artists were systematically hidden from the discourse.

How to make art history inclusive, then? Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) propose a critique of the *structural sexism* in the discipline of Art History itself contesting the idea of autonomous, self-determining artists as geniuses and the notion of the autonomy of art as free from all social and historical constraints. Art's literature is fully permeated by what Parker and Pollock call "the feminine stereotype", which is a determinant and structuring category in the discourse of art history. The feminine stereotype is a product of a patriarchal culture that builds male dominance through the meaning it assigns to sexual difference. A woman artist was acceptable in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but by very different criteria than those applied to men, insofar as her person, her public persona, conformed to the current notions of woman, not artist. Everything produced by a woman was considered full of femininity attributes and women were judged inferior in the arts, because of the existence of a system of values based on men's

work against which women artists had to be measured. The ground for this process, according to Parker and Pollock, can be situated in the social history of the artist and of the role and positions of women in the social sphere. Men and women had different and conflicting paths so that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century what was conceived by the term women (as passive dependent to be fulfilled through domestic and maternal roles) and what the artist represented (an antisocial, independent creator) were set in a conflicting relationship.

Art history tells the story of art and artists in order to narrate and rebuild the flow of the ongoing human creativity process. Who consider art as something which has no sex is ignoring the clear differences between men's and women's experience of social structures of class and sexual divisions in the society. Such a cultural concept has excluded the recognition of women's creativity because the structural logic of historical time, progress, and activity is written in masculine terms in the patriarchal narrative. Every contemporary art history textbook gives the misleading impression that there are no women artists in history. This kind of denigration with regard to women artists is covered/hidden by a strict structuring view of Western art history, its tradition and its canons.

The feminist movement showed that changing women's positions is a challenge to the structure of society. Feminism, in both practice and theory, has exposed new areas of social conflict and has thus generated new kinds of analysis, of the construction of gender, sexualities, reproduction, domestic labor, and of the powerful place of cultural images in the cementing of the hierarchical relations between social groups and genders (Pollock, 1987).

To discover the history of women and art means to discover assumptions, prejudices, and to reveal that the negative way women artists are remembered or forgotten is functional to the perpetuation of the myth of masculine creative superiority and its social dominance (Ibidem). The myth of masculine creativity about women's objectification became widespread and impregnated women's own vision with their subjectivity, making it inexistent, making women perceive themselves not as the artistic creator, but as the art object itself (Macedo, 2015). One of the main objects of the critique of art history by the feminist art historian is the institutionalization of the ideological practice that contributes to the perpetuation of pre-existent discriminations in the social system. Feminists have been fighting to make understand that art history



itself, as both a symbolic and material system, had to change, making it contradictory and differentiated through the deconstruction of the existing structures in order to reach out a true understanding and rewriting of the history of women and art.

The spread of the second wave of feminism and the need of answers to questions about the position of women in culture led to the necessity of institutionalizing women's studies as an academic discipline: this meant to clear the way to feminist art history. Already during the 1970s, the feminist discourse pointed its attention towards art as a cultural practice, structurally historical and social (Timeto, 2005). Feminism highlights how women's positions and representations as art's subject and object, are strictly bounded to specific systems of value and exerting power (Ibidem). Feminism in the '70s was the first radical split from the common and universalist assumptions about art and the artists. History of art in 21<sup>th</sup> century has continued the narration and the discourse following the tracks of the already institutionalised history until the deconstruction that, in the '70s, was initiated to highlight the liability of the old narration about gender, sex and other assumed social categories (such as race). These works opened new ways and unexpected theoretical perspectives also leading to the discovery of forgotten women artists. Feminist art historians and critics had a central role in this work.

During the 1970s, artists, art historians and academics started noticing the issues of inequalities in the art world and turning their attention to them in order to find a solution. For example, in the 1970 they formed the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists to protest against the low number of women's artworks exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York (Parker & Pollock, 1987). In those years it was common to see police closing exhibitions due to the presence of some representation, considered obscene, in women's paintings: several inequities like this one led museums to be questioned by artists and art historians about the representation of women.

Even if there were several traces of feminist influence before the 1970s, a significant moment for the feminist art history has been marked by Linda Nochlin's acclaimed book "*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*". It has been published in 1972 and it is considered one of the first systematic attempts, if not the first, to redefine the methodology of art history from a feminist perspective. In a brilliant and provocative way, raising this question, Nochlin opened a new point of view about Western traditional History of Art. Some feminist art histories questioned the role of women

artists in the artistic field trying to bring to light those forgotten women artists of the past, in order to add them to the shared History of Art. Nevertheless, digging out all the names of the almost unknown women artists who actually populated the field was not a sufficient answer to why there have been no great women artists: on the contrary, it emphasised the fact that these women did not become as popular as their male peers. This could be of course a worthwhile way to rediscover all those names who have been unknown for decades, honour their memories as women and artists and fill those visible lacunae in the History of Art; but for what purpose? The exhibition *Women Artists 1550-1950* that took place at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1976 and was curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris is an example of challenging what was usually exhibited in the museums.

The crucial question, in fact, is not who has not been in art history and its narration, but why they have not been there. Why have they been kept out from the mainstream narration? The reasons behind their absence are not biological, but rooted in our society, in the rules that control the world and shape dynamics of power, starting from the education to which we are subjected (Nochlin, 2014). Just as the ideologies about creativity, the limited and biased attitudes, with which art historians have told the past, have also deep roots in the social order and in our beliefs. Which are the reasons behind the removal of women from the official memory up until a certain moment? Women artists have always existed, they worked a lot and there have always been more, despite discriminations and limitations, but it is necessary to ask why they have been forgotten. In order to give an answer to this question, it is necessary not only to rediscover them, but also to deconstruct the discourses and practices of traditional art history (Trasforini, 2001).

The feminist attempt to deal with this deconstruction process is harder, because the reasons behind this process are deeply rooted in the dominant social order. To break up the supposed universality of the main tradition, which has been ruling for decades, it is not enough to fill the gaps or to rewrite the history from a feminine point of view, but it is necessary to address the critique to the structure of the institutional and educational system, which made it possible (Timeto, 2005). Discovering the history of women and art is important to explain the way in which art history has been written, and revealing its silences and prejudices is essential for the definition of art and artists in our society (Parker and Pollock, 1981).

As Parker and Pollock claimed in their *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), the historical recovering of women from the past is not sufficient, because it is necessary to identify the originality of the women's work through a theoretical structure, which doesn't underline the femininity of their work, but rather recognises the value of women artworks. This is much clearer in the historical moments of avant-gardes, during which women started affirming their artistic originality: they demand for an originality compared to men's art and, at the same time, also for a distinction from a generical labeling of "feminine art" or "feminist art". During the 1980s, the encounter with the postmodern ideology led the feminist discourse about art to reconsider the sexual differences inside its relationship with other differences, of class, gender, ethnicity. In the '80s there was a renewed sense of the power of culture that affected how people saw the world surrounding them.

The relation between theory and activism has always been fundamental for feminism. Feminist art history started just in the period in which activism was widespread, challenging many notions about the objectivity of art and aesthetics. Without the interventions of activists, feminism would remain an academic, apolitical attempt in acting in the patriarchal social and cultural structures. The analysis of patriarchal structures and thinking are the basis of feminism activism. Activist art, instead, is process-oriented: it has to take into consideration not only the formal mechanisms within art itself, but also how it will reach its context and audience and the reasons why (Lippard, 1984). As Lucy Lippard<sup>10</sup> (1984) declared, Activist art is something that "provides a developing, shared consciousness whose impact we can't predict... a kind of consensus in practice that is now at a stage of consciousness-raising and organizing" (p.1). Activist art has always had an evolving and pragmatic nature, reflecting life's experiences, encouraging artists to speak not just for themselves, but especially for their communities, which is a crucial prerequisite for self-empowerment.

Artists alone cannot change the world, such as women alone cannot change their condition, but together, organizing themselves in the collective work, they can find a way to act together. According to Faith Ringgold, the '70s were years in which "people really thought they could change the world [...]. Today people just feel like they can't

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<sup>10</sup> Lucy Lippard established herself as an influential art critic and was very active in radical and activist groups, such as the Art Workers Coalitions. She theorized the "dematerialized" art practice.

do anything. Then we believed that an individual in consort with other persons could change the world” (quoted by Broude & Garrard, 1994, p. 269).

Women artists soon found that the power that they found in their collective groups, in their acting together, was subversive and could challenge men’s established authority. Together they develop their ability, their awareness, their power, and then make others see the society and the art field through new eyes, developing a new perspective where women were the center of their world and all the attention was focused on them. They were able to break the usual dynamics of power put in place from the authority embodied by the patriarchy, to break those system of control expressed over the women (in terms of money, prestige, the possibility of telling people what to do), to oppose the norms, subvert them and go out from the prescribed channels.

In the feminist art movement of the 1970s, influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s psychology and radical feminist activism and theory, two themes stood out: the investigations about gender identity and the relationship between practice art and public life (Broude & Garrard, 1994). In order to better understand the feminist art movement of the ’70s we should look outside the art-world discourse, because the initial urge came from the larger world of political action. Women wanted their cultural production to align with those set of values that they claimed from the society. In practice, feminist art might include teaching, publishing, organizing in or out of the art community. Many feminists artists have been depicted as catalysts in their attempt to combine social action, social theory and the artistic practice in their spirit of multiplicity and integration. Feminist art built possibilities and spaces that did not exist before for women artists.

During the 1970s the nature of female identity was seen as something not yet known, but knowable: private experience and public one were investigated due to their role of shaping gender identity and the analysis of individual identity hid behind the critique of the dominant culture. The pioneering work of ’70s artists on gender crimes and violence against women has been ignored by the critics during the past. Those artists appear to react only if their artworks are judged according the popular cultural influences, in matter of domestic violence, rape, incest, incarceration and prostitution. The result is an art that has a “stylized” look or that remains topical, but that is naive in its interventions strategies. Activism, instead, is opposite to analysis, with a clear-cut art world bias

toward the latter, that recalls its condescension toward political and community based art of the 1970s. Among the women who made common cause for feminist action, there were no differences of ages, race, class, sexual or geographical identity. These women found themselves part of a bigger network, something like a family, but they were connected for a purpose, they shared a vision and they were convinced that the past and also the world could be changed and reformed. Gradually, feminism's multiple contradictions regarding the so-called natural order have been naturalized. This memory must be kept alive in some way, to inspire again now and in the future.

The subjective perception of feminism and what constitutes social change is different for every single person, but it often appears that the commitment to feminism in its entirety was missing from the debate, because people tend to focus on the burning issues, such as the whole body of the woman, gender equality and political struggle. The awareness of the materiality or corporeality of the feminine thus meant the redesigning of the boundaries of the female body and the search for new patterns of representation, in parallel with a redefinition of the patterns of identity, subjectivity, social roles and political citizenship. Whereas the majority of political movements have employed art and artists for propaganda purposes, feminism has worked to transform art and artists themselves (Parker & Pollock, 1987). The language to interrogate history was popularized during 1970s and feminist artists from the firsts years of feminism understood that both the presentation and the forgetting of history always contains several others political plans. Feminism definitely became public as an emancipator movement and represented the opening up and the promotion of new territories of enquiry through its global critical commitment on behalf of women (Macedo, 2015)

During the '70s, the desire to connect, to share similarities, aiming at a social transformation, was interesting for feminist art and so gender identity was constructed within an activist paradigm. In the following shift from an inclusive, socially contextualized and activist notion of identity, to a theoretically differentiated one in the 1980s, something has been lost and feminist art criticism became an internalized dialogue in a wider field.

The publishing in 1981 of *Old mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, started a new trend: it was about focusing on artists' lives, instead of just digging out, in order to understand the reasons of inequalities. They stated that

feminist art history should go beyond only naming women artists, going through a deeper level of studies with analysis and critique.

“Feminism is not synonymous with simply collecting and exhibiting works by women artists and that also implies a shifting of paradigms, including going beyond notions of gender (men and women artists) and engaging with difference: sexual, ethnic, cultural, geographical, generational, orientational and so on?” (Pollock, quoted by Kokoli, 2008, p. 251).

Feminist scholars emphasised that is not possible to simply reinsert women artists back into the canonical narrative. According to them, not only is it necessary to carry out a thorough investigation about the assumptions about the existing conventions that need to be examined and interpreted, but also to find new ways to think about art made by men and women (Kokoli, 2008). This self-awareness regarding marginalized people introduced a new intersectionality in the way in which art history was written and a more general thinking into the feminist perspective about art history.

In the past decade, in the Euro-American context the art world and art historians showed a renewed interest in feminist art, resulting in a number of international exhibitions, conferences, essays and books about the topic (Jones & Silver, 2016). But, as Marsha Meskimmon (2003) states, the problem is still here:

When second-wave feminists sought out the women who came before them, they uncovered a substantial body of evidence confirming women’s important political, artistic and historical presence in the cultural life of the past and this material changed the way in which they understood history and their place within it. However, this groundbreaking work has not yet fully changed the iniquitous dynamics of sexual discrimination in the present, in the art world or elsewhere (p.1).

The inclusion of women and the shifting of art histories represented and still represents a challenge, as feminist art historians have provided institutions with data on this issue for fifty years, and yet inequalities have only marginally changed. The problem of social visibility of women in art seems to have been overcome since the 1980s. The current scene of the art system, which involves galleries, museum, expositions, offers a huge freedom of participation and visibility to women in the artistic world. Therefore, the approach to art from the women’s point of view has changed as well: women don’t have to prove or claim their position anymore, they can express their action and carry out their research more freely. It doesn’t mean that that feminine specificity has been lost, but that the research’s urge and the desire to use new mediums (especially video and photography, which were the most used mediums in the 1970s) better highlighted the

differences between the commonly mediums used before. Feminist artists used alternative materials to create their artworks, materials that were commonly associated to the female gender such as textiles or other mediums less used, such as photos and video, far from the common tools used by male-dominated art categories such as painting and sculptures. Women tried to expand the mainstream definition of fine art, incorporating a wider variety of artistic perspectives, through the use of not-traditional tools.

In parallel with a general tendency to self-reflection in art, which corresponds to the period immediately after the protests of the '70s, women renewed their interests for the everyday, the private and intimate reflection. For example, the themes of identity and of sexuality were addressed in a more playful and intimistic way and the same themes have been addressed by feminist art in the last decades, during which the absence of artistic defined tendencies has corresponded to a request for pluralism of themes and artistic techniques. The recovery of expressive traditional forms and expressive modalities, in the 1970s, such as painting and sculpture, was renewed through the contamination with the video or through more sophisticated techniques of reproduction. The feminist character of an artwork is not a matter of the gender (woman) or political identity (feminist) of its maker, but of *effect*: an artwork is feminist (or not) depending on “the way [it] acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers” and whether “it subverts the normal ways in which we view art and usually seduced into a complicity with the meanings of the dominant and oppressive culture.” (Kokoli, 2008, p.5).

In the 1990s, with the recognition and spreading of several feminisms (such as Marxist feminism, global feminism and ecofeminism), feminism became more intersectional and therefore accessible to a wider group of women: intersectionality introduced a wider global perspective to feminist art histories. Since the 1990s, as many feminist artists started exploring not only their gender identity through their art, but also their racial, queer, abilism and other aspects of identity, to contribute to the establishment all the minorities not only in the art field, but in the world in general. In this way, it is possible to affirm that feminist art and speculation have connected a large amount of different voices worldwide, not only the female ones. Feminist interventions represent a refusal at the heart of the traditional art historical establishment to open itself to the larger intellectual and political revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The feminine issue now is

moving toward those cultures in which countries or religions keep repressing women's freedom. The lack of freedom today can derive not only from external constraints, but also from psychological constraints caused by society. Women's success in art depends not only from the gender binarism of past feminist art histories strategies, but also depends upon class, age, economic status, spaces and ethnic or racial origin (Meskimmon, 2003), observing as the issue is much more complex and wider social elements play an important role. It is the cultural tendency of patriarchy to divide in two and then judge which one is superior to the other.

Linda Nochlin (2014) states that as a feminist community of artists, art historians and art critics, working together have been able to change the narrative and the production in their field. It is no longer possible to talk in terms of a single History of Art (unique, exclusive, and totalizing) since contemporary subjectivities (plural, heterogeneous, fluid) necessitate other openings in relation to encounters with plural realities and other cultures and social and historical standpoints. Removing norms of an alleged universal history, filling the absence of women means dismissing the accepted parameters as insufficient and out-sized. This also means opening up other histories that are not aligned with the official ones and answering to silence that lasted for centuries, giving rise to a new language that must be taken away from its representation of power, which is entirely sexist (as well as classist, abilist and racist).

The interrogation of women's identity was as much a part of the 1970s feminism as of the 1980s, but with one significant difference: in the earlier decade, individual identity was seen in relation to a possibility of public, an lifelike art action (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

One of the myths of the history of the women's movement is that it fell to pieces in the 1980s when issues of differences between women were raised. Researching the history of the movement, however, proves that this is indeed a myth, and a white, heterosexual myth at that. Women were organizing around their particular interests, identities and differences for as long as they were organizing around anything: it can take those with authority (particularly if they self-identify as radical) a long time to recognize the power they use - by which time the cracks may be so wide they cannot be bridged (Robinson, 2015, p. 47).

Feminist art broadened and deepened the whole notion of political art by incorporating the element of the personal, autobiography, consciousness-raising, and social transformation, which led eventually to the still broader notion of the 'political is



personal' - i.e., an awareness of how local, national and international events affect our individual lives (Lippard, 1984). If the point of any feminist and/or queer theory and practice is, at the very least, to create an awareness of the ways in which gender and sexuality inform discourse and determine structures of individual as well as collective social, cultural and economic power, then we can say that both are inherently political (Jones & Silver, 2016).

## **2.2 Feminist Art Institutions**

The story of feminist organizations and networks in arts is a chapter of the larger women's movement that was spreading during the 1970s and it is also necessary to underline the fundamental nexus that there was between the visual arts, political activism and feminism in those ages. However, the efforts made by the activists of that time to force museums to show more art created by women could seem vain, because still today women artists are less represented in comparison with their male peers. That has been a starting point for all those victories that women conquered during the last fifty years. The building and the exponential growth of feminist networks and organizations, the rise of feminist artists and art historians is a story of successes, made of essential fights for claiming those rights of which women have been deprived for decades. Still today, more than fifty years after the first women's liberation movements and even after coming a long way, women are not completely allowed to demonstrate their capabilities in the art field because they are still compared to men.

Given the context of women's liberation movement, the position of women into the society concerned in general the claim of the assertion that the personal was political and that politics, in which sex roles and gender are involved, was a personal issue as well. Nochlin (2014) stated that there was the need to question everything about the institutions and the given assumptions:

The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education, education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals (p.150).

From this perspective, Nochlin deconstructs one by one in a sharp and accurate way a series of assumptions, such as the concept of the genius in the mainstream narrative, the myth-making in art historical writing; the historical lack of future expectations for

women and the lack of access and permission they historically have had to practice art; the authority that keeps out women from studying from the nude (and therefore forbids them from becoming major artists aware of human anatomy); the goals middle-class women are expected to achieve versus the professional ambition expected of their brothers; and the choice between career and family, which is not required for men.

Nochlin's conclusion is that the institutions and the intellectual structures of the art world need to be analyzed and critiqued, rather than seen predominantly in terms of individual or private circumstances for each woman artist; and that contemporary women must face up to the fact that disadvantage may be an excuse, but anyway is not an intellectual position (Robinson, 2019).

We have to consider that the time of production of a theory or of a revolutionary movement or idea is not the same as the time of its reception. The urgency that structured the collective's reading and the lessons learned from it led to the awareness that the values and the omissions of culture are ideologically created: the art world's structures are not neutral nor were the exclusion, omission, rejection and devaluation of art made by women an accident (Ibidem), but rather something intentional. To note this, we have to consider that many influential art history books of that time included not even one woman artist. Thankfully, from the 1970s on, a good amount of books about women artists has been published.

### **2.2.1 Feminist Art Institution in the United States**

The modern feminist movement in the US can be traced back starting from different events: the publication of "*The Feminine Mystique*" by Betty Friedan in 1963, the addition of the category of sex to Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964 and the founding of the NOW - National Organization for Women in 1966 (Broude & Garrard, 1994). At the same time, radical feminist consciousness emerged within New Left and civil rights organizations, such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic society (SDC). In 1967, during its annual conferences, NOW drew up the Bill of Rights of Woman, demanding equal rights for women, the enforcement of law banning sex discrimination, the respect for the maternity leave rights in employment and in social security benefits, the tax deduction

for home and child care expenses for working parents, the creation of children day care centers, an equal and unsegregated education, equal job training opportunities and allowances for women in poverty and, last but not least, the right of women to control their reproductive lives.

The main places from where feminist activism in the art field initiated were Southern California, and New York, but there was a substantial difference: while in New York women artists were fighting against those well-structured institutions focused on promoting mainstream male art, in California women artists had to build new institutions from scratch, for the common goal of becoming known but also to build a strong network of professional structures such as women critics, curators and so on. Exactly from these needs, came the urgency to create a new educational system and new university courses focused on women's art (such as the one held by Judy Chicago at Fresno, CA, in 1970) with the use of alternative mediums and an interest in study and research rather than in market.

Not surprisingly, this could occur and take place in California, where there was a major freedom of teaching and also a very widespread presence of private schools. In fact, the San Francisco Art Institute and the California College of Arts and Crafts were private schools and for the American white women, feminism developed inside universities as a campus movement (Robinson, 2019). Moreover, in California there was a very careful legislation in relation to the defence and the promotion of artists: two important institutions of the 1970s have been the California Arts Council and the Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts.

West Coast feminism was characterized by a greater experimentation with forms and materials. Compared to the East Coast, artists were often gathered in isolated groups around academic institutions.

Since 1968, several women's groups spread across the nation and started publishing their point of view. Early feminist political actions led to the awareness of the sex discrimination in women's lives and in the world in general.

In 1968 from the group New York Radical Women (which was one of the earliest political groups of discussion founded in 1967), two groups formed, the WITCH<sup>11</sup> and Redstockings<sup>12</sup>. Both brought their theories in the streets, focusing on women's issues, and they took inspiration from the inversion of misogynist stereotypes (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Redstockings are also known for introducing consciousness-raising, the practice that emphasised the political importance of personal experience. In their Manifesto, published in 1969, they proclaimed that "the practice of consciousness-raising is not a therapy which implies the existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes that the male-female relationship is purely personal" (Broude & Garrard 1994, p.91).

Sisterhood<sup>13</sup> produced a form of growth which can be best described with the analogy of the cell division (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Whenever a group was formed, it split into other groups, due to the differences related to thinking, ideas, politics, etc. between the members, creating in this way more action, more issues and more involvement in several fields. NOW is the example of one of the major organizational split, in 1968, when New York president Ti-Grace Atkinson challenged Betty Friedan's hierarchical male-model structure, proposing a more egalitarian rotating-leadership model, walking out and forming a new group, The Feminists, just as Redstockings Artists came out in 1970 from the initial Redstockings, founded by Pat Mainardi, Irene Peslikis, Marjorie Kramer, and Lucia Vernarelli. These women also founded the first feminist art journal, *Women and Art*, published for the first time in December 1971: a split between Marxist and not-Marxist factions inside the editorial staff led to the creation of the non-Marxist

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<sup>11</sup> The WITCH official acronym was Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy From Hell, but was variously explained, depending on the occasion, as Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment, Women Infuriated at Taking Care of Hoodlums or Women Inspired to Commit Herstory. Their first action in New York was "Up Against Wall Street" in 1968, against banks and brokerage firms (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Redstockings, also known as Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, was a radical feminist group founded in 1969 in New York. Its name came from the term 'bluestocking', used to discrediting feminists intellectuals, and the term "red", for its association with the revolutionary Left wing. Their first action can be settled in Atlantic City, in 1968, when they symbolically trashed (not burned) their bras and girdles, as symbols of women's oppression, and a live sheep was provocatively crowned Miss America - because the Miss America pageant was the target of this first demonstration.

<sup>13</sup> The word sisterhood was spoken freely and unselfconsciously at that time. The unity of women and the cause of feminism were assigned the highest priority, because sexism was seen as the original alienating act from which other human oppressions derived (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

*Feminist Art Journal* in 1972, directed by Manardi, Irene Moss and Cindy Nemser, which lasted until 1978.

In 1969 the AWC (Art Workers Coalition) formed in New York and it established as the largest of several new radical groups, with a male-dominated structure inspired by student movements of the late '60s and representing varied interests, which also elaborated a program of requests for museums published in 1970. In this text, among other requests, it is possible to read their claim for a more significant representativeness of minorities and the promotion of women artists. Inside the AWC that same year, the WAR formed (Women Artists in Revolution). The AWC splitting started from the Whitney Museum's 1969 Annual, which included only 8 women in an exhibition of 143 artists. The AWC's feminists started demanding the change of the museum's policies and more inclusiveness for women's artists. At the same time, artists became interested in those antiwar movements as well, such as the protest set up in May 1970 by the Art Workers Coalition, which organized the New York Art Strike, to protest against the invasion of Cambodia, the Kent State killings and racial violences in Mississippi. On May 23, 1970, this strike caused a one-day shutdown of many New York museums and galleries, and in addition a withdrawal from the Venice Biennale. Nevertheless, in June, at the School of Visual Art, a "Biennale-in Exile" was organised to protest against war, racism, fascism, sexism and repression, but before the opening a new organisation, the WSABAL (Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation) formed to protest against the exclusion from the show of women and blacks. WSABAL, guided by Faith Ringgold, demanded a fair representation and it was fundamental for launching both feminist and black arts movements.

In the fall of 1970 another group called Ad Hoc Women Artists' Group, founded by Brenda Miller, Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold and Poppy Johnson, protested against the New York museums, focusing on discrimination against women in Whitney annuals, demanding 50% of representation in shows. Their strategy turned out to be successful, in fact the percentage of women represented in the 1970 Whitney Annual of Sculpture saw a 22% of women (Broude & Garrard, 1994). The Ad Hoc Group provided for short-term political actions, it had a more egalitarian structure, with no rules and no member list.

Since 1970, women's movement reached the apex of media visibility: its supporters included radicals and conservatives; whites, blacks, and Latinos; housewives, students, and working-class women. On August 26, 1970, for the anniversary of women's suffrage, the first national demonstration for women's equality took place in Washington D.C.

Always in 1970, concurrently with the Whitney protests, others political protests started spreading in California. In Los Angeles, a protest was organised against the all men show *Art and Technology* at the County Museum of Arts. From this protest, the LACWA (Los Angeles Council of Women Artists) was created and it included art historians, critics, curators and collectors.

In April 1971, the Women in Arts (WIA) formed. With an open letter to the MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan, Guggenheim, the Whitney museums, and the New York Cultural Center, they wanted an exhibition that included 500 works of women artists. The exhibition, *Women Choose Women*, was organized in 1973 at the New York Cultural Center and it was the first and biggest event of this kind, of fundamental importance for the women's movement in art. They pressured the museums to represent women's works and serve as a networking agency.

During the '70s and early '80s, especially in the West Coast, feminist art students opted for collaboration characterized by activist components and in those years several women's artistic groups based on activism has been created: Mother art (1974), The Feminist Art Workers (1976), the Waitress (1977), Ariadne, A Social Art Network (1978-80), and Sister of Survival (1981) formed in California; whereas in New York Group Material (1978), No More Nice Girls (1980) and Carnival Knowledge (1982) formed (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Many of these groups lasted for years, challenging the notion of a singular authorship as well as the art world's constraints on activism. These collectives were the precursors of groups such as the Guerilla Girls and Women's Action Coalition (WAC), which formed respectively in 1985 and in 1992.

In the fall of 1970, Judy Chicago developed the Feminist Art Program at the Fresno State College, in California. It was the first feminist art program in the US, where students could decide autonomously their studies program. It was based on exchange and cooperation, sharing of experiences, and on the free expression of women students. The principles of the groups were consciousness-raising, the production of an art that

was content-oriented but with the possibility to experiment on forms and materials, the valorization of feminine themes, observed in a more active and liberatory point of view, the intention to fill lacunae in art history, starting a research job, cataloguing, archiving of data in all those field where women contributed: this latter aspects were typical of feminist artists working in the US.

The practice of consciousness-raising had a proper structure and there were several steps to go through. The West-East Coast Bag<sup>14</sup>'s Rules are an example:

1. Select a topic.
2. Go around the room, each woman speaking in turn. Don't interrupt, let each woman speak up to 15 minutes and then ask questions only for clarification.
3. Don't give advice, don't chastise, don't be critical.
4. Draw generalisations after everyone has spoken or, before that, go around the room and talk again.
5. Draw political conclusions - if you can.
6. Keep the group below 10 women.
7. In order to develop trust and confidence, don't repeat what has been said in the meeting or talk about members outside of the group.
8. This is not a therapy, encounter or sensitivity group situation. (Parker & Pollock, 1987, p.66).

Women in the groups discussed several topics, such as how they felt about other women, about women artists, about how they became artists, about their relationships with men, about being and becoming mothers and other themes like these. The consciousness-raising rules shed light on the central early feminist practice and activity. The rules suggested were simple, but trying to maintain them in a structure that intentionally refused to have any form of group leadership. The group dynamic was crucial: the bonds between members were fundamental for the development of the groups' experience. In several cases, friendships led to the institution of groups and some relationships born inside the groups created new lifelong friendships; in other cases, the break up of friendships provoked expulsions from and abandonment of the groups. Two things required time to develop and were very challenging: on the one hand, the organizing process as feminists, on the other, the commitment to overcome all the difficulties in which women came across during the creation of the working methods to cooperate collectively and in a feminist way.

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<sup>14</sup> The West-East Coast Bag was an international women artists network founded in 1971. Its aim was to inform, combine and support women's action in the art world and it was committed to create connection for feminist artists outside the art world centers of New York and Los Angeles.

In 1971, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro brought their educational program to the California Institute of the Arts. In 1972 they reached high visibility in the West Coast area especially with the opening of the *Womanhouse*<sup>15</sup>. On January 21, 1972, the West Coast Women Artists' Conference was actually settled in the *Womanhouse*, gathering together Californian women artists for the first time in a large number. The success derived from the Conference brought to the creation of the Woman's Building<sup>16</sup> in Los Angeles in 1972-1973. In the wake of the Californian and East Coast events, there was the foundation of a national movement: the West-East Bag (WEB) in 1971 and from 1973 it could boast about having representatives in 20 states and 8 countries.

The simultaneous explosions of feminist groups and movements in the art across the country can be explained only with the special phenomenon of women's networks. In contrast to men's networks, which were typically structured along vertical professional lines, women's ones were friendship networks, laterally spread and geographically unbounded (Broude & Garrard, 1994). This kind of networking kept spreading during the 1970s and also beyond, through personal exchanges and the dominant women's presence in the movements, crossing the country to speak at college campuses and at women's groups, bringing news and divulgations of ideas.

Around 1972, the Feminist Art Movement shifted from the activist first phase to a more consolidated second phase. The 1972 saw protest actions mainly addressed to museums, to have immediate results in terms of representativeness in their exhibitions, and the creation of organisations that could act with long-term programs in order to change the situation within the existing institutions. From 1972, the key structures that had supported networking and lifted it to a professional level, such as women's organisations, centres, galleries, conferences, panels and publications, were even more institutionalised. In those years, radical groups changed quickly. In fact, since 1972, the WAR left its museums' attacks to focus on consciousness-raising, Ad Hoc Group started teaching in the university turning their work of research about discrimination against women and WSABAL became less activist. Always in the same year the

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<sup>15</sup> *Womanhouse* was an art installation and performance art space settled up by J. Chicago and M. Shapiro with the students of their course at the CalArts.

<sup>16</sup> The Woman's Building was a non-profit arts and education center located in Los Angeles.



Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) was created at the San Francisco convention of the College Art Association (CAA), where women artists met art historians and museum women, breaking the boundaries between these groups in the same aims, sharing their same stories of discrimination in the art field and discovering, again, not to be alone fighting for their battles. There were a huge number of conferences all around the country, about the issues of women and art, establishing a new format for the discussion of these issues and also for networking. Their structures became a fundamental part of WCA conferences, which were important sites where women could clarify the identity of feminist art through discussion and debates, the value of the separatist art training for women, and discuss about differences between art of men and women. The organizational development of the Women's Caucus for Art is the most important example of how a group could evolve from a radical structure, to an institutional permanence.

In 1976, the exhibition *Women Artists 1550-1950* opened in Los Angeles and it was curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. It has been and still is one of the most comprehensive exhibitions on women artists, including 158 works by 84 painters from North America and Europe. Not only did the exhibition travel to Austin, Pittsburgh and New York, but its catalogue has also been translated into Italian and French as well. It was an important moment to recognize the value of those women artists exhibited, especially for their legacy, which together with their names had the possibility to be discovered and known such as institutionalised artworks commonly exposed in museums.

In 1976 the status of the situation regarding women and art caught the attention of the first Democratic President of the US: with the encouragement of the President Jimmy Carter in fact, Joan Mondale, the Vice President's wife, turned herself into a spokesperson for the arts: working closely with the WCA leaders, Mondale spoke out in particular for women in the arts (Broude & Garrard, 1994). At that point, times were ready to work on the legislative front too. In 1977 the Coalition of Women's Arts Organizations (CWAO) was founded, which embraced all the great diversity of women's art organizations of that period, headed by Joyce Aiken and Ellouise Schoettler. The CWAO was highly visible in the first major march on Washington in 1976 to push the urgency of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

Thanks to WCA and CWAOW, women in arts had gained a strong support from the government. But, unfortunately, when the Carter administration ended in 1980, things started becoming complicated, even if the women's movement was already becoming a national political force. The first thing that fell through was the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but it was stalled. In 1982, for the third time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the battle for the ERA ended, blocked by a new rising, antifeminist national mood. At that point, women's organizations started an economic strategy to try and ratify the ERA, but this brought internal discussion and divisions, departures and abandoning from the various movements, causing a gradual loss of those initial values that could keep these groups together.

The 1980s have seen a shifting of focus in feminist movements, from a national perspective to a more local one, and this brought also a change in the WCA, which gradually changed its constitution from university-based art historians and artists, to artists primarily based in cities and communities across the country. Other structural problems emerged, causing new disagreement about goals for the national organization. Many members started observing that the national level of the organizations was too distant, preferring to identify with local groups. So, the 1980s saw this transformation from grassroots activism towards an increasing conservatism.

But this phase was abruptly interrupted by the arrival on stage of new groups, such as the Guerrilla Girls. In 1984, reacting to MoMA's International Survey of Painting and Sculpture (less than 10% female), the Guerrilla Girls aimed at the streets of SoHo, plastering walls with statistics about the art world establishment, presented in an ironic style. Nobody knows who these women were, nobody has ever seen their faces because they acted during public apparition always wearing gorilla masks to preserve their anonymity so as to maximize the collective power. In 1988, the Guerrilla Girls published a poster entitled *The advantages of being a women artist*, which was a provocative summary that could well describe the current situation of women artists. In this statement it is possible to understand the situation in which women artists recognised themselves, as something commonly seen as inferior in regard to the other sex:

Working without the pressure of success.  
Not having to be in shows with men.  
Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.  
Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.  
Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labelled feminine.  
Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.  
Seeing your ideas live on in the works of others.  
Having the opportunity to choose between a career and motherhood.  
Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.  
Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger.  
Being included in revised versions of art history.  
Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.  
Getting your pictures in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.<sup>17</sup>

In 1989 the SisterSerpents was founded in Chicago, a collective of artists who used art as a weapon for broader social changes: with their distinctive winged serpent as symbol, SisterSerpents produced hard-hitting satirical posters, protesting against violence against women (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

In the late 1980s, when artists began exploring also racial and ethnic identity in the increasingly multicultural US, new feminist organizations for women of colour emerged, such as Coast to Coast (African-American women), Vistas Latinas (a group of Latinas artists) and Godzilla (Asian American artists with a strong feminist component) (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Afterwards, women of colour worked to define the unique positions of their individual groups, often sharply challenging white women's authority and tendencies to speak for women in general.

In the Western world, feminist women artists paved the way to the autonomy of later generations. But during the '80s, the wave of newness went down and the group broke away. Over the years, the environment became unfavourable to feminists artists. Those who did not fight, maybe because of a privileged situation in everyday life, did not even notice the proper value and importance of that struggle which, on one hand, had given them those privileges and, on the other, they did not want to take part in. Instead, those who were fighting, driven by certain values, could not open and change vision of the events and needs.

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<sup>17</sup> Guerrilla Girls' poster of 1985, courtesy of <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects>.

The 1990s saw the rise of the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) founded in New York and a phenomenal growth of its members. For its focus on action rather than on theory and its fluid hierarchical structure, the WAC recalled the early 1970s feminist groups and the first phase of feminist art protests, but this is not surprising because many WAC activists were also first-generation feminists, sort of survivors into America's third decade of feminism (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

### **2.2.2 Feminist Art Institutions in Great Britain**

In Britain, feminist activities in the art field began in the early 1970s, more or less at the same time in the whole country, and since the beginning they established a link with radical feminist issues, such as building a women audience. Coming from a Marxist background, British feminists have been politically active since the first steps of the movement, situated in the broader context of radical and socialist activism in the social history of the UK. The early phases of the feminist art movement was influenced by American feminists like Lucy Lippard, Linda Nochlin and the *Feminist Art Journal* (Gouma-Peterson & Mathews, 1987).

The context of feminism in the UK was very different from the US one, which developed in the academic environment. In the UK, the women's movement developed mostly outside the campus in its early years of activism and development of feminist theory, and often within the context of trades' union activism, the cooperative movement, the labour movement (including important organizations like the Workers' Educational Association or WEA), intellectual movements aligned with this such as the New Left, and debates within Marxist thinking (Robinson, 2019).

In Britain, the presence of a major political party of the left wing, with formal links with the Trade Union movement, led some groups resulting from the uprising of the late 1960s to intervene in the establishment of political structures (Robinson, 2015). This led to the creation of the Artist's Union (AU) in 1972, which was born with the aim of being affiliated to the Trades Union Congress. Documents of the early history of the AU prove the presence of a feminist intervention strategy inside the Union, the Women's Workshop, showing also the presence of three women, Mary Kelly, elected as Chair of the AU, and also Margaret Harrison and Carol Kenna as Secretaries. The activity of the Artist's Union was mainly focused on workshops about issues that afflicted women

artists such as education, art patronage and exhibitions. They also claimed to establish parity on the Regional Council, which was formed by all Union officers and all Union members. With the active presence of women running the Union, women's issues became visible and this highlighted the need to take action against the sexual and racial discrimination in the arts. One of the purposes of the Women's Workshop was to connect with other women in other groups, to act together being conscious that women had lower salaries and bad work conditions: their intent was to support other women in a common struggle. As women artists trying to be visible in a male-dominated culture, they also faced some contradictions, such as the considerable absence of women in art history, compared with their overwhelming presence as subjects of representation, portrayed in the traditional idealized way. In order to change this situation, they proposed the following actions:

to pressure local councils to provide studio space for women with children; to ensure that public galleries and national museums include women artists in both retrospectives and contemporary surveys; to demand that art colleges hire female staff in proportion to the number of female students (could be enforced through the anti-discrimination bill); to examine the entrance requirements to art schools in relation to discrimination against women (Robinson, 2019, p. 68).

In 1972 *Spare Rib*, a feminist collective magazine which is still active, started its publication, and the magazine *Block* published significant feminist articles. In the same year, the Women's Art History Collective was established, while later on, in 1979, the journal *Art History* published many feminist researches. In the 1970s collectives were formed out of dissatisfaction with the situation and the state of the artistic discipline. Collectives were founded on pedagogical bases and their members tried to re-educate themselves and produce innovative knowledge related to art history.

While in the US people were reading Nochlin's essay, *Why have there no great women artists?*, in the UK two different schools of thought about the UK art and Art History establishment were spreading: the first was by a man (John Berger<sup>18</sup>) with his male colleagues, through the use of established means of communication and dissemination of information (the BBC's TV channel and the Penguin Books); the second was a classic example of local organising within the UK women's liberation movement. John Berger developed and presented a TV series, *Ways of seeing*, transmitted by the BBC in

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<sup>18</sup> John Berger was a famous British art theorist, at the time was close to the left-wing political and cultural journal *The New Statesman*. He became a public intellectual thanks to his show *Ways of Seeing* (Robinson, 2019).

January 1972, which then became also a book with the same title published in the same year. Both the TV show and the book were polemical and rhetorical and had a huge impact on how people in general, and not only academics, thought art history could be made (Robinson, 2019). The second episode of the series and the third chapter of the book were about the representations of women and femininity, presenting a continuum of representational tropes in oil painting, advertising and pin-ups. Berger and his teams declared that they were close to the feminist struggles of the time, and this was something never said before. The TV show and the book were the depiction of those revelatory thoughts about art and Art History that emerged from both Marxist and feminist thinking. Berger was able to embed feminist thinking into his work and this has been crucial for the development of the new art history in the UK. Not only did this establish the incorporation of feminist thinking in left wing critiques of culture and art history, it was a continuation of the foundation of the UK women's movement in class politics and Marxist thinking (Robinson, 2019).

In 1968 Monica Sjöö, a Swedish painter who lived in the UK, arranged small exhibitions between London and Bristol. That year she painted her artwork *God Giving Birth* (that later became an iconic feminist artwork) and exposed it in 1970 in St. Ives Town Hall during an art festival. In the text *Art is a Revolutionary Act* (1980), she told that the painting, considered obscene and blasphemous since there God is depicted as a non-white unsmiling women of great divinity with a child coming out from her womb, was taken down by the police. Clearly, this painting attacked directly the myth that the creative force is male and phallic (Robinson, 2015) and it has been censored and removed other times from other exhibitions, causing several scandals. For this reason, Sjöö decided to write an open letter to other women artists who had the same experiences and she invited them to come together and form a group or a movement that would spell out who they were, what they wanted and their aims as artists and women. This episode marked the beginning of Sjöö career as a radical feminist artist. She aimed at acting collectively within a context of art and revolutionary action. Some women answered to Sjöö's appeal and eventually she formed a group with Beverly Skinner, Anne Berg, Roslyn Smythe and Liz Moore. In 1971 they addressed the Arts Council of Great Britain and requested exhibition spaces and economic support, but they were refused. They managed to stage their first collective exhibition, *Five Women Artists: Images on Womenpower* in 1973 in Swiss Cottage Library in London, and it was

reviewed as the first tangible manifestation for centuries of the return of women's culture (Ibidem). The blasphemous painting of Sjöö was part of the exhibition, causing another scandal, and, probably, also the great visibility that the exhibition had. The pornography squad of Scotland Yard was called to investigate about the painting and this had big resonance at national level, bringing a huge number of visitors. This further episode led to the formation of the Women's Art History Collective, whose counted among its members also Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker, Denise Cole, Pat Kahn, Tina Keane, Alene Straussberg, Lisa Tickner and Anne de Winter. This represented an historical turning point: women started understanding that images were part of the problem which they were facing in this second wave of feminism.

The Women's Art History Collective met regularly, but only for two or three years, laying the foundations for the development of a feminist thinking about art, shaping the way in which the field developed in the UK and beyond, becoming very influential (Robinson, 2019). It consisted of artists, art historians and critics and it led to a shared desire to "explore the relationship between contemporary women artists and the problem they face, just as the overall cultural role and position of women and creativity (Harrison, quoted by Horne & Tobin, 2014, p.5). The collective tried to restore women to the art historical canon by re-evaluating the historical construction of women's art, usually categorised as craft-based. Through this attempt of reintegration and their theoretical and artistic activity, the collective developed an understanding of the ideological suppression of gender endemic within the foundations of modern art history (Horne & Tobin, 2014).

Griselda Pollock highlights how such collectives worked, like self-help groups and feminist consciousness-raising and auto-didactic exploration, with a feminist approach to art and art history, and while describing the Collective she said that it was "a typically feminist group of that date, an informal auto-didactic collective" (Pollock, 1993, p.11).

The group had three main purposes:

firstly, an identification with the direct relevance of the issue to ourselves and our work as part of a political movement of women and secondly a response to the still limited literature on the subject which highlighted many important problems but was not on the whole theoretically very rigorous or helpful. [...] A third influence was the attempt made by certain feminist artists to provide what they termed an alternative and positive imagery of women which, though important in terms of the political solidarity it encouraged, in fact foregrounded the impossibility of challenging existing imagery without an adequate theory of ideology and representation (Pollock, 1987, p.25).

It had anti-hierarchical principles and its structure was an hybrid, variously functioning as a site for consciousness-raising (The Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union) and artistic production (the Women and Work Collective) in the 1970s, as a locus for the coordination of diverse events (Women's Art Change) in the 1980s and as a framework to organize academic interest (Feminist Art and Histories Network) in the 1990s.

They affiliated the Collective with the Women's Workshop of the Artist's Union, where Tina Keane, who focused more on her artwork, was an active member, along with artists such as Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, Alexis Hunter and Mary Kelly. Lisa Tickner went on to produce important theoretical works about body image and sexuality, as well as on the visual culture of and about the suffragettes, on sex, gender and modernism; Anthea Callen, while practicing as a painter, also wrote about women artists in the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as 19<sup>th</sup> century French artists including the representation of women in painting, and women as spectators (Robinson, 2019, p.10).

The partnership between Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock brought to the writing of some key books for the feminist engagement with art history and for the history of the early feminist art movement in the UK, but also they were fundamental for the development of feminist art criticism. The members of the Collective, with their texts, were acting inside the structure of an academic discipline, trying at the same time to radically change it.

From 1968, both in the United States and in Britain, women declared war on ideological sexism in contemporary visual culture protesting against that idea of women as merely beautiful image and spectacle (Parker and Pollock, 1981) offered to a consuming masculine gaze in a gendered regime of seeing (as masculine) and being seen (as feminine). In the perspective of ideological sexism in fact there are many differences which separate the spheres of men work and women work, identifying distinctly the male artist and the female artist. The categorization which distinguished women artists from men artists within a sexual discourse was created on the bases of the growing hegemony of men in institutional practices and in the language of art itself (Pollock, 1987). Women were thus represented as art objects rather than art producers and this vision corresponded exactly to the patriarchal culture. Therefore, feminism invited and



still invites women artists to experience relationships, to take on the collective responsibilities, to connect with others and with art institutions and to sustain women's artistic practice in order to dismantle any prejudice related to patriarchal culture and perspective: in this way women can actively and culturally produce, maintaining and co-constructing the social relations of which they are part (Klostermann, 2019).

According to Griselda Pollock, one of the leading theorists in the field of feminist art history and theory, feminism came out as a contestation of the whole system of symbols and meanings. By engaging with feminism, women were asked to become a new kind of subject: a feminist subject and the subject of feminism (de Lauretis, 1990). Pollock theorized about the problematic differences of what feminism brings out: feminist thought has never meant limiting women to the study of women's issues. Thus, feminist work regarding art history is not just about returning women artists to history. It has meant broadening the entire field of intellectual effort to recognize the significance of sexual and other differences among the many social, economic, semiotic, and psychological factors that can be considered.

Griselda Pollock's urge for a pressing shift of paradigm and a redefinition of Feminism as a

series of interlocking practices of making, analysis, historical revision, theoretical expansion, and astute and continuing analysis of ever-changing socio-political and cultural situations [...] feminist work is transgressive of existing institutions and structures in which it nonetheless has to intervene, and to which it should make a radical difference (Pollock, in Kokolli, 2008, p. 255)

Feminist thought confronts the entire field of the histories of artistic and cultural practices with questions about difference, formulating new theories and methods of analysis with which to rewrite Western phallogocentric culture (Pollock, 2003). According to Pollock, feminist interventions in the histories of art' and culture are a redefinition of the objects we are studying, and the theories and methods with which we are doing it so that the making and reading of artistic/cultural practices can take their place in the enlarged sphere of the arts and humanities. Knowledge is shaped in relations of power and invested with interests, that are political, ideological, and also imply the psychological plane.

There are several interesting things about what emerged from the establishment and work of the Collective. It was not ruled by established norm, but was driven by urgency, and inspired by the British-working-class tradition of self-help groups.

This situation was clearly different from the campus context of the US (for example from the Feminist Art Programme by Chicago and Shapiro), in which the purpose was more oriented to reverse the balance, bringing back who was excluded through the publications of their researches on women artists. Their methodology was focused on biographies, rather than on the attempt to situate the artists historically, going in this way to repeat the same mistake of the dominant American way of writing the history of art (Robinson, 2019). On the contrary, with the work carried out by Women's Art History Collective we can observe the partial absence of the critical historicizing of the artists and their work or any attempt to understand the sexist structures that led to their marginalization.

In 1978, the Arts Council sponsored the first British exhibition organized by women, which showed predominantly women's work: The Hayward Annual II Exhibition. It opened on August 23 at the Hayward gallery in London, and it was the first event in Britain to involve so many women. 23 artists were exhibited, and only seven of them were men.

### **2.2.3 Feminist Art Institutions in Italy**

The antecedents to the modern feminist critique of art history and art criticism in Europe can be found in the book that represented a catalyst for the women's liberation movement, i.e. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in French 1949 and in English 1953. De Beauvoir's criticism of the Western Euro-centric culture as patriarchal, produced primarily by men for the benefit of men and masculinity, includes the analysis of mythological representations of women, the contrasting of binary differentiations, such as creation and procreation, and a criticism of the gendered language, of the reductive thought and of the economic circumstances perpetuating the women's status as "the second sex". De Beauvoir's most important arguments are two: first, that femininity is socially constructed; second, that woman is constructed by patriarchy as "other" to man and this concept has been the normative standard. A decade

later, Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) showed interest in the position of women acculturated as wives, mothers and homemakers: the book shows less awareness of class and race specificities (and presupposes a white, Jewish, middle class female subject).

In 1970, three highly influential books were published by feminist activists, bringing the women's liberation movement of the 1960s to a new level. Particularly worth noting is the fact that each author came from an art or literature background, reflecting the engagement of the arts with feminist and counter-culture activism and with the criticism of patriarchy from that early point in the development of the movement (Robinson, 2019). The American artist and writer Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics*; the Canadian activist Shulamith Firestone published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*; and the Australian literary academic Germaine Greer, who has been living in the UK since 1964, published *The Female Eunuch*. Each author had a distinct position from which she analysed sexual politics. Their plans for social and political change were set up first in English, addressing the Anglophone Euro-centric cultures, and then translated in many other languages, the languages of the countries to which they would export their works. Non-Anglophone cultures produced other writings – for example, those of art critic Carla Lonzi and artist Carla Accardi in Italy, who founded Rivolta Femminile together and wrote its manifesto in 1970. It is thus important to recognise that feminist thinking and activism in art was not imported from the US and UK to other contexts and cultures, but it was occurring in many countries concurrently. Yet it is also necessary to acknowledge the influence of the publishing industry and the hegemony of English-language authors.

One important moment in Europe, especially in Italy, was the publishing of the book *Body art e storie simili: il corpo come linguaggio* by Lea Vergine<sup>19</sup> published in 1974, even if it talked about only 10 female artists in comparison with the 61 male artists included in the book. Even if the Italian situation was not so strongly-defined as the much more lined up American and British situation, there is no doubt that it was completely involved with what was happening in the society. The development of the feminist movement in Italy can be compared to those originating in the US and all around Europe, although with some historical specificities. The feminist experience in

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<sup>19</sup> Lea Vergine was an Italian art's critic and curator.

Italy assumed a variety of forms and expressions, which brought many differentiations inside the groups. The context and the political environment of the students protest of 1968 and of the “autunno caldo” in 1969 and the formation of new left’s political parties were at the root of this new second wave of feminism. In fact, the first groups in Italy formed in the early 1960s. Starting from the fights in 1968, feminism developed an identification with and observation of the single person, which led to the creation of a new authentic perspective. One of the most important contribution of the American feminism to the European and Italian ones has been the adoption of separatists’ and self-consciousness’ practices. This separatism, with the complete exclusion of men from the groups, became a sort of organizing principle, and was justified by the necessity to establish and defend feminine autonomy, although not all feminists agreed.

The period of major spreading of feminist ideas and practices occurred between 1974 and 1976, when feminist reached those segments of feminine population that had remained untouched up until that moment. In the same period, debates with the institutions about themes like the law about the birth control, the recognition of chore and the violence against women took place. The first big victories were the referendum for the abortion in 1974 and the law about the Right of family in 1975. The ’70s political climate was deeply different in comparison with that of the 1960s, when the student’s and workers’ movements contrasted with the Christian-Democratic party, which was in charge of matters of social transformation. After the election in 1976, the Communist Party opposed the Christian-Democratic party, and the new left’s groups entered into crisis and started breaking up. With the end of these groups, the phase of the double militancy<sup>20</sup> ended and the Italian feminism radicalized in new totally autonomous forms.

The thriving cultural environment stimulated the development of the feminist phenomenon, promoting it through written publications of texts, articles and books. One example has been Gabriele Mazzotta, which promoted a series of important feminists’ collective publications, starting with *La coscienza di sfruttata* published in 1977, a book-manifesto of the Italian feminist movement, written by a group of women engaged in civil right protests, like Luisa Abbà, who founded the Libreria delle Donne in Milan

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<sup>20</sup> The expression “double militancy” refers to the coexistence of feminist and artistic activity.

with Lia Cingarini in 1975. In 1978, the photographic book *Ci vediamo mercoledì, gli altri giorni ci immaginiamo* was published: it was an example of a collective feminine artistic collaboration in Milan, where these women artists gathered in the Galleria di Porta Ticinese. They investigated the feminine identity through the observation and the discovery of the body, considerations about motherhood, gender roles, their own image and the relationship with other women. Until 1973, this small space built by Gigliola Ravasino was available for socially committed artists that formed the Collettivo Autonomo Pittori di Porta Ticinese. The idea on which it was founded and the gallery activity was to manage independently an expositive self-financed space for a kind of art committed to the community. This experience saw a correspondent feminist example in the foundation of the feminist collective *Le pezze* in 1976 with the exhibition titled *L'armadio*. But the most important exhibition was *mezzocielo*, held in 1978, which was focused on art's languages tied to those claims spreading in those years. Women felt the necessity to ask for a presence in the art world and to highlight their condition of being women, in their realization of artworks. During the period of activity, the gallery became a place of meeting and discussion, following the example of groups of feminist self-consciousness, in which it was possible to share artistic ideals and goals, but also social contents.

The city of Rome has been a catalyst for the development of feminist artistic groups, because it was the center of the country for the artistic research and for the development of feminist thought, before the 1970s as well. In Rome, there was the foundation of one of the first feminist groups in Italy, *Rivolta Femminile* in 1970, created by the art critic Carla Lonzi and the artists Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti.

In the Italian context in those years a huge number of feminist artists emerged and they lived their feminism in an autonomous way. Of course, feminism pushed the development of a feminist artistic research and practice, proposing a new model of woman.

Even before political changes in obtaining parity of rights and into the fights for abortion and divorce, the movements produced a change in the perception of the woman herself and her possibilities. The awareness of the condition of oppression and of self-recognition as active subjects, supported by the idea of gender aggregation and at the same time separatism as a fundamental path to liberation, pushed many women to get

close to fields still not very explored. The idea of women gathered together, at the basis of feminism, worked as a powerful concrete and psychological support, encouraging many others to research a new social collocation, unrelated to their traditional feminine role. The period between 1974 and 1976 was the most interesting period to the spreading of feminist practices and ideas.

To trace an history of the relationship between art and feminism in the 1970s in Italy, it is necessary to go through the experience of Carla Lonzi. Her thought has been unnoticed for years, but with the publication in 1970 of the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile*, she became a fundamental part of the national and also international feminist thinking. She abandoned her profession of art critic to completely commit herself to feminism, refusing any form of culture, especially art, because she maintained that art and feminism were incompatible.

The 1970s represent a critical moment for the inception of the radical feminism in Italy, which started at the beginning with the experience of Rivolta Femminile in Rome and Anabasi in Milan, that was formed in July of the same year by Serena Castaldi. Both groups practiced self-consciousness and separatist's practices, and both identified the roots of feminine subordination in sexism. These have been the first groups formed entirely by women. Rivolta Femminile had a major echo in comparison to Anabasi, firstly, because after the institution of Rivolta Femminile in Rome, similar groups were founded also in Milan (headed by Marta Lonzi, Carla's sister), in Torino and in Genova in 1971 and then in Firenze and Lugano. Moreover, Rivolta Femminile favoured the written texts, making it easier the spreading of thoughts inside the groups and not only, moving away from other groups which preferred the oral communication, in which many things tended to soon be forgotten. The institution of their publishing house, with the same name of Rivolta Femminile, has been not only a practical gesture but even more a political action: it derived from a necessity of autonomy and taking the distances from any male implication. With this spirit, Rivolta Femminile's most important books were published and shared: *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1970); *La Donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1971); *E' già politica* (1976-77); *Taci, anzi parla* (1978); *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo* (1978). It is necessary to admit that a big part of the success of Rivolta Femminile was due to to Carla Lonzi and her new views and revolutionary ideals.

The strong bond between Accardi and Lonzi, which would eventually be drastically broken, had already begun in the mid-1960s. Lonzi had great admiration for Accardi's artistic work and inclusion of themes (which Lonzi herself defined as proto-feminist). Their bond, not only intellectual but also of friendship, flowed into the foundation of Rivolta and the writing of the *Manifesto*. Accardi's role, however, was overshadowed by Lonzi. After the starting moment, the radical nature of Rivolta Femminile grew and it was perceived by many women as fanaticism, not shared by all. The separatist choice of Lonzi and her refusal of the art world were not so much appreciated. Many perceived a certain impatience with the too rigid positions of Lonzi, and Carla Accardi was one of these and felt the need to distance herself from Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile. Consequently this dissatisfaction led to the establishment of new groups, such as Rivolta Femminista. In 1976 Carla Accardi founded the feminist art group Cooperativa di via Beato Angelico, in Rome. This group was at first an exhibition space managed only by women. It was composed of eight artists and three art critics: Carla Accardi, LeoNilde Carabba, Franca Chiabra, Anna Maria Colucci, Regina Della Noce, Nedda Guidi, Eva Menzio, Teresa Montemaggiori, Stephanie Oursler, Suzanne Santoro e Silvia Truppi. The Cooperativa was a place where it was possible to research and express about feminine creativity. The initial separatist models of Rivolta Femminile were recovered by Accardi and employed as an essential prerogative in the definition of the space, as an answer to the necessity of female artistic autonomy. This collective represented for Carla Accardi a solution to the incompatibility between art and feminism claimed by Carla Lonzi. Not all women involved in the Cooperativa had militant feminist or self-consciousness experiences. The absence of the political component made the Cooperativa a hybrid space, close to the alternative artistic spaces of those years and in line with the rising American collectives, even if the fact that it was composed only by women was already a sign of protest towards the male centric art world and an expression of its feminist stance.

A similar experience was that of the only women group Donna&Arte, established in 1977, from the idea of Rosanne Sofia Moretti, sculptress and choreographer. It was created to sustain and promote a free and alternative creativity, outside the traditional venues not very focused on the feminine artistic activity. From the name itself it is possible to understand their desire to insist on the relationship between women and art, and also their desire of a precise identitarian recognition, constantly affirmed in their activity to let it impress in collective memory. Donna&Arte had the purpose to set

women free from their position of subjection, not only from repression by the society about their expression, but also to obstruct their artistic career, their desires to share their artworks. The feminist idea of acting collectively in D&A was the fundamental base on which enacting an overcoming individualism to favour group work. Together with their artistic activity, the collective was also focused on group's discussion and their connection with the public was translated into artistic militancy, looking for a direct connection with their public and so with people, showing their artworks but also discussing with the audience. Their public exhibition took place in public spaces in direct contact with the public that could interact with them.

The first Italian groups constitution, recognisable in the feminist separatist perspective, in self-consciousness and political struggle, did not recognize art as their primary interests, neither as a communicative medium. The reflection about self-determination, about the woman condition, the urgency of the struggles, like those for the abortion or for the divorce, were the focus of the groups, even if the function of the image assumed a primary role, as modality of creative expression which later brought feminist groups to focus on art. The feminists of the Italian groups initially expressed their creativity in public demonstrations. The strength of their creativity was tied with their presence as a singular individual, but at the same time it was inseparable from the collective dimension of the public demonstrations.

In this context the explicitly feminist journal *Effe* was founded in 1973, and its characteristic was that it was distributed in newspaper stands as any other newspaper. The issues handled in the journal represent the only true theoretical reflection of militant feminism, from a separatist's point of view. Many feminists felt to be allowed to express themselves freely only in all-women context, as a guarantee of respect of their own sex. In 1975 the journal *DWF. Donna, Woman, Femme* was founded. It was very different from *Effe*, because it collected international anthropological, historical and social studies about women, with an opening also towards those men interested in women issues. DWF had a space which gave voice to feminism's cultures, that were taking more and more space inside the culture.

In 1977/78 the collective *Donne/Immagine/Creatività* was founded in Naples, composed by Rosa Panaro, Bruna Sarno, Anna Trapani, Ela Caroli e Mathelda Balastresi. It was



created in a more political feminist perspective, rather than based on an artistic tendency; the group has seen in the collective gathering the key for the determination of a feminine language, made by and for women. Using poor materials, such as paper, wood and textile, they wanted to promote a renovated proximity to the craft work, to the detriment of industrial product, working at the same time on overcoming the limit between the creator and the spectator. As the other feminist groups, even Donne/Immagine/Creatività complained about the relegation of the women only as a muses, excluding women from the role of active subjects.

One of the most substantial contributions to the feminine involvement in art history is given by Simon Weller, who in 1976 published the first investigation about the presence of women in 20<sup>th</sup> century art history: *Il complesso di Michelangelo*. Her book was an inquiry on the role of the woman artist and a counting of feminine presence into the artistic field.

The relationship between feminism and institutions has been different through its history. The first feminists active in Rivolta Femminile adopted radical separatists' positions. But the new formations, which started from and after Rivolta, were characterized by a softer position, more open towards other women and they became more militant, choosing the streets as places to "occupy", in which it was possible to carry out their mission, to share their reflection and thinking, to involve more people, to make other women aware, to fight directly near other women.

This was also the case with the Feminist Movement of Via Pompeo Magno (which would become the Roman Feminist Movement). Although the methods of Rivolta and the Pompeo Magno collective were different, this experience also had radical positions that did not accept compromise with the environment outside the group. Their refusal of culture was their way to protect their authenticity. This refusal also meant an estrangement from the places designed historically for women by patriarchal and sexist institutions, and also meant the re-foundation of the system on a new basis of equity. It also opened new possibilities of dialogue with the official culture and with the institutions.

In 1974, Milli Gandini, Mariuccia Seol e Mirella Tognola, formed the Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese. The Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese together

with the artists Silvia Cibaldi, Milli Gandini, Clemen Parrocchetti, Mariuccia Seol, Mariagrazia Sirroni was the first group of feminist artists to be included in the Venice Biennale in 1978: after that event, they had many exhibitions all around Europe.

In the early 1970s, the women started leaving their role of women, firstly symbolically and then physically, abandoning the silence where they had been kept for decades (Gandini & Seol, 2021). Their social battles for equal recognition between women and men for the main feminist themes of those years (such as abortion, the wage for domestic labor, inclusion of women in art and institutions and so on) were expressed through their artworks. One of their main goals was to turn over the “needlework perspective” that saw women as housewives, the most exploited member of the working class since her affective work and household did not produce incomes and it was seen by the society as a natural women’s duty. Feminists carried out a political action without precedent, building up this new narrative with a plurality of languages which opened new views characterizing the work of many women artists.

In 1975 they met the Gruppo Salario al Lavoro Domestico of Padua, which theorized about wages for domestic work, hypothesizing that a total strike by housewives throughout Italy could bring about the paralysis of the country's entire economic system. This group did practical research, working on real things and not just theorizing. They had created a newspaper, *Le operaie della casa*, and it was composed of various contributions from women belonging to other feminist groups.

To become creative and be recognized as artists, women had to destroy all the inner and social constraints, and they assumed that economic autonomy was a fundamental step. The political action they built, created and used to leave the everyday routine, was something very happy for them because they saw them doing things that before that moment they have never thought to do. For some of them, the separation from their family was hard, especially from the role of mothers and wives, but art is that thing that could operate that cultural revolution.

### III. FEMINIST ARTISTIC WORK AS COLLECTIVE WORK

#### 3.1 The origins of feminist collective work in the arts

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women artists worked in a relative cultural isolation, gathered by men's categorization rather than by their choice. Women artists in the 1950s and 1960s suffered professional exclusion from their own history, in an era in which women artists of the past had been totally forgotten from the Western narrative of Art History<sup>21</sup>.

The 1970s have been a crucial moment from the point of view of women's self-consciousness regarding their conditions and their possibilities of redemption in the society. In the cultural world emerged the need and the necessity to take part and encourage shared projects, gradually becoming collective practice, already widespread in the male art, at that period and also earlier, as a need to be part of something inside the society.

The feminist art movement of the 1970s was an important turning point in women's history and in the history of art. Until then, there were no self-conscious female voices in art, analyzing and representing female experiences from an informed social and political position, and finding common points in defining one's experience in relation with the experience of other women: *the personal is political* is the 1970s slogan. The crucial element was based on the model of the second wave of feminism that made wide use of the practice of consciousness-raising (exploring personal inner narratives, histories, and experiences) and the foundational of the impulse of the movement which empowered women to use their own experience, to break down barriers between areas of thought and activity and to believe that there was a hidden history that they might reconstruct to teach and inspire others (Pollock and Parker, 1981).

The struggle for the entry of the feminist subject into representation challenges a phallogocentric order and its complex and varied sociohistorical forms and temporalities, therefore, between historical stereotyped remembrances and iconography (Pollock, 2016). It is also necessary to critically think of feminism as a succession conflicts

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<sup>21</sup> The influential textbook *History of Art*, published in 1962 by H.W. Janson did not either include one name of a woman artist.

between generations (Ibidem). The production of different spaces of encounter for artworks and cultural history resisted any unifying retrospective narrative influenced by the dominant imaginary and symbolic orders of meaning and subjectivity (Pollock, 1999).

Feminist instances that characterized the 1970s included collaboration, dialogue, a constant questioning of aesthetic and social assumptions, and a new respect for the audience (Lippard, 1980). Feminist contribution to the evolution of art reveals itself not in shapes but in its structures. Only new structures bear the possibility of changing the vehicle itself, the meaning of art in society (Ibidem).

Women artists started to make art a public good, free to be consumed by everyone. One of their goals was to interlace together feminists care perspectives (about their ethic of resistance to the inequities reserved them by the patriarchy) in a political theory, political philosophy on public space, and assembly. The aim was to create and to act in public spaces, so that women's assembly and their way to make art could come together in a place, which became public, inclusive, where people, and women in the first instance, could work, make art, and stay together in an environment that guaranteed access without discriminations. Taking care has always had a strong association with the invisibilized and feminized domestic labour that takes care of reproduction behind the scenes in private, rather than with work performed in the public realm. Each performative act of assembly renders the political dimension of these activities explicit.

It is possible to talk about a shift from the system of individuality to the system of commonality: the social or the general is emphasized, rather than the particular or the unique (Heinich, 2016). This change in the framing of the arts may indeed be presented as a critique of the dominant belief in individuality within the different artistic realms. For Heinich (2016), sociological reasoning or the "system of commonality" implies an ethical preference: if one explains an action in terms of "commonality", one also values the social above the particular, or the individual. The individuality of artists or of works of art is commonly associated with their particular position within a broader stylistic community. In the arts indeed, the concept of individuality or singularity has often more to do with a striking variation that the single artist carries out in the artwork according to the personal interpretation of a stylistic code in common, rather than with a "genuine" particularity.

The founding principle of all the avant-garde artistic movements of the past century lies in the observation that since the relationship between art and society had drastically changed, the old ways of looking at the world were already inadequate: therefore, the need to find new roads (Perretta, 2002). The neo avant-garde of the 21<sup>th</sup> century had to face a new form of participation and elaboration of the artistic sign, that laid the foundation for the later collective way of doing art (Ibidem) as a new form of dialogue and hearing of the other. The artistic experience, thanks to the communitarian work, has been completely renewed and presented as community research. The discourse about community reaches a wide territory: escaping from the old art system and overcoming the idea of artists as a subjective genius. This means developing a new sense of community that leads to a transformation of the archetype of the artist. The socially conflictual character between the culture of the self and the other is moving from the singular to the collective. The concept of collective groups of artists places itself in the middle, since it can be explained as a plurality that expresses itself through a singularity (Ibidem). Because even if it is about collective way to work, the singularity of the artists are not suffocated by the collective. The collectives are made, always by a plurality of individual people.

So the action of the feminist art collectives is expressed in a plurality of voices that express individually the inner personality of the self. Becoming a group means a collective experience of elaboration and realization, which implies the elimination of the artist as an individual and the subtraction of his condition of untouchable genius. The group should be a means of strength and at the same time, have a function of reassurance for the attendees, a safe place where to work together, express themselves, and be women artists, free of all the social implications, favouring alternative space, self-managed. The starting point, in the feminist art collectives, was a work of self-consciousness for knowing themselves, listening to each other, to their inner voices, getting free from all those taboos and the weight of the patriarchal culture where they grew up, in a complex relationship with the other members. They started to understand how important it was for them to meet in a place with other women and confront the conditions and problems that every woman was going through. Such as the importance of having a place only for them, which raises another question about the fact that women didn't have a place for them, in their houses, and the need and the right to have it. Feminists claimed the right to have space in their own house, an individual space that

was not the kitchen, where to exercise their creativity which was not needlework. Before, the need for an individual space was not perceived consciously as a necessity to have an independent identity, because it was considered as normal just doing things that wives and mothers do. Instead, feminist women artists claimed that being creative also meant social liberation. And those women felt the urge to confront other women about creativity, and specifically on art (because they were artists). Their revolt was addressed to a system that owned women's creativity and made women accomplices to their own oppression. They wanted to express themselves as artists and also rebuild the idea of art and artists. Affirming themselves as professional artists was one of their main goals, such as being seen as artists from the art world and recognised as such. Their need was to arise from their anonymity in history. It was the liberation and self-realization, refusal of those labels built during centuries, and acceptance of diversity. They rejected their role as it was seen until then, of just women, wives, mothers, and also their role of muses for male artists. Their artworks embodied their condition of impossibility of those women to be artists, and moreover to be recognised by the system as (women) artists. They also wanted to become artists appropriating all the means of art, refusing using poor materials for instance, and to be paid for their artworks, they wanted their artworks to be exhibited in galleries and museums. They claimed the affirmations of their need to enter in the institutions, become popular, but also to deconstruct existing hierarchies and institutions and found new ones.

Doing consciousness-raising, women artists took back the tools to understand their possibilities and the rights to affirm their needs, to get free from prejudices and moralism. In the beginning, they had the necessity to refuse the male presence in their collectives, they initially chose separatism, because they understood how they were influenced by their presence and what they embodied.

Their reflection started from their social conditions, their role in society, their bodies. For their artistic work, women often started from reflection from their bodies, using them for realizing their performances and their artworks. Their bodies as tools for their arts. Their art also used materials commonly associated with women, such as kitchen tools or objects to stitch (such as strings, tissues, fabrics, etc.), that were brought outside from their original contexts to symbolize the abandoning of the their assumed role.

Women artists of collective groups used the collective self without giving up their individuality, their singular ideas. They wanted to be people who could express

themselves intellectually and sexually just for the pleasure to do it, for searching and experimenting according to their necessity, to communicate and affirm their existences (Gandini & Seol, 2021). They started to work and do art together to open new ways for all women, and artists, and for going out from the cages of society.

Going deeper through the history of the feminist movement and all the socially implication from which it derives, we can understand the reasons that led some women to take charge of their lives and motivated other women to do the same, reaching in this way individual and collective empowerment. There are complex dynamics behind the development behind the development of this kind of groups and it is possible to observe this domino effect: the shared solidarity about the issue led to actions and protests, which created on one hand a wider networking and on the other a deeper solidarity, that established the construction of a broader agenda and the founding of organizations (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

Feminists chose the way of collaboration because it provided a forum for challenging modernist notions of individualism and isolated production (Ibidem). In the feminist view, art could express the self in a metaphoric encounter with the others.

Consciousness raising and community organizing were techniques for understanding and enacting both individual identity and the differentiated, multiple natures of communities. The practice of self-consciousness was based on the individual perception of a woman's own individuality as a person and it was founded on the belief that women have been deprived from their authentic self and, as a consequence, the failure to identify their own value and their interests. The re-discovering of what had been taken away from them could happen through the awareness, through a self-comprehension of their own minds, built collectively.

It is not surprising that the Women's Action Coalition (WAC), one of the most important feminist social action groups of the 1990s, was led by artists.

## 3.2 Examples of collective works across United State, Great Britain and Italy

In the '70s there have been many important events for the history of feminist art, especially regarding the collective work of several groups of women artists. Many have been organized in each country where the women's movement was claiming their position in the art field. Here I examine three different examples of feminist collective projects, which represent three different, innovative attempts to subvert the institutionalized art field, change the mainstream bias in regards to women art, that left a huge legacy in the art field.

### 3.2.1 United States: *Womanhouse*

In the fall of 1970, Judy Chicago<sup>22</sup>, a pioneer also in feminist education, developed the Feminist Art Program at the Fresno State College, in California. It was the first feminist art program in the US. She started with 15 students, and many of them are still well-known names, such as Suzanne Lacy and Faith Wilding, just to name a few. One year later, with Miriam Shapiro<sup>23</sup>, Chicago brought the Program to the newly formed California Institute of the Arts, which was active until 1976.

Paula Harper, who was an art historian teaching for the Feminist Art Program at the CalArts in 1971, had the initial idea of *Womanhouse*, and she helped conceptualize it; the project was developed and set up by the 21 women students of the Chicago and Shapiro program. The collaborative art environment also saw the involvement of already known women artists, such as Wanda Westcoast, Sherry Brody, Carol Edson Mitchell, who collaborated on the development of the project and also exposed their artwork inside it.

At 553 Mariposa Avenue in Hollywood, in an abandoned house, these women created *Womanhouse* in only six weeks. It was open to the public from January 30, 1971 to

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<sup>22</sup> Judy Chicago is a pioneer feminist artist, active since the '60s in the US.

<sup>23</sup> Miriam Shapiro was also a pioneer feminist artist, active in the US simultaneously to Chicago. At the time of *Womanhouse* she was already a well-known artist, who had shown her artworks in prestigious venues, and she was also a feminist leader on the women's movement in the arts in Los Angeles in '70s. She was also considered a leader of the Pattern and Decoration art movement.



February 28, 1972. The house where they settled *Womanhouse* was meant to be destroyed after the exhibition, as in fact happened. It is not easy to describe what *Womanhouse* represents. It has been one of firsts and more successful collective artwork in the US that has seen all-women participation and that was much successful: *Womanhouse* had more than 10.000 visitors who came to see the environment and the performances. Furthermore, it was an avant-garde site installation in an actual house. But it turned the concept of house inside out. *Womanhouse* was not only an artwork, but embodied many different things. It was a place where young women artists could choose to be what they wanted, without following the institutionalized rules that imposed how they had to behave to be considered women. *Womanhouse* was a safe place where women could make art together without complying with traditional feminine roles and imposed rules. Judy Chicago, talking about *Womanhouse* said: “*Womanhouse* became both an environment that housed the work of women artists working out of their own experiences and the house of female reality into which one entered to experience the real facts of women’s lives, feelings, and concerns” (Chicago in Broude & Garrard, 1994, p.48).

The purpose was common, but their personal and artistic choices were singular. It was a fundamental project for the history of contemporary art and not merely feminist art, because it showed what happens when women artists cooperate, in a place where every decision is in their hands, and where they are free from all the imposed boundaries of society and external influences. *Womanhouse* was a women-oriented artistic microcosm, focused on being artists and being women in the 1970s. New aesthetic subjects, related to the suburban American homes and unexplored until then, broke into the public sphere through these installations and performances (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

From the beginning, the participants involved in *Womanhouse* shared a new experience, never seen before, creating an all-female community of artists, led by Chicago and Shapiro who became power models in their role as teachers of their women students.

The principles of the groups were, obviously, feminist-oriented ones, such as consciousness-raising, the production of an art that was content-oriented but with the possibility of experimenting with forms and materials, the valorization of feminine

themes, observed in a more active and liberating point of view, the intention to fill the lacunae of traditional art history, starting a research job, cataloguing and archiving data in all those fields where women contributed.

The house, even if with an already imposed architectural structure, needed a deep reconstruction, and the educational method of the program was much more a learning-by-doing, fixing and restructuring it, and this was a fundamental element for the students to improve their artistic skills and learn how to work collectively. The women involved worked eight hours a day and were always let free to choose to do so. Students developed not only artistic skills, but also more practical competency such as carpentry and window glazing, which became part of the creative process. This had never happened before in American art schools, where students did not learn the actual necessity of hard work in the field of fine arts. Chicago and Shapiro also had the idea to also involve the local community apart from the art world, as well as the American feminist network of individuals and institutions. In the following years, this structure of collaborative artistic work started to be assumed in much feminist works in Southern California. The West Coast became a model for feminist production, nationally and internationally, and the lasting and pervasive influence of the *Womanhouse* experience laid the basis for new similar experiences that were developed afterwards.

*Womanhouse* was addressed mainly to women's relationships with others, through a journey firstly addressed to the internal dialogue with themselves. The housewife role is the main character of the *Womanhouse*: everything moves around her and her figure shapes all the ideas and the imagery. What emerged was an idea of the housewife oppressed and exploited by the environment surrounding her, from her birth to her death, bounded in the patriarchal imposed gender roles and norms, but willing to escape from that. The whole environment built in the house, packed with images and objects in every corner, revealed an overwhelming feeling of oppression.

Putting in practice the psychological self-discovery offered by the consciousness-raising format of the women's movement was essential for the development of the artistic work settled in *Womanhouse*. Consciousness-raising allowed its participants to speak about their experiences, their lives, giving them the opportunity to share with others their fears and concerns, and at the same time to listen to the others' life experiences. These contributions, which emerged from the consciousness-raising sessions, were essential

from the development of the project. The artists involved in the project also shared their concerns about the *Womanhouse* exhibitions, their anxiety about the success of the challenging event they were living in. It was common to organize consciousness-raising sessions to put in practice the ideas and their artwork, to look for memories in the personal lives of the members, to transform them into objects and pieces of the installations realized in and for the house. In their art, these artists were influenced not only by the feminist context of the '70s, but also by their personal experiences as girls, women, daughters, wives and mothers.

The house was composed of 17 rooms, and each one became a venue where the artists transformed the environments for settling their own installation of radical and complex contemporary art. Many meetings and discussions were necessary to decide plans for the art environments, and to prepare the public opening of the exhibition. The work was organized in small groups of collaboration, which explored all the possible forms and meanings they wanted to share and spread with their artistic projects. Many kinds of events, and especially live performances, were also hosted in *Womanhouse*.

*Womanhouse* literally brought to life the ideas expressed in 1963 in *The Feminine Mystique* of Betty Friedan, activist and a leading figure of the feminist movement. The common line which connected the *Womanhouse*'s artworks, the house itself, its several rooms, and the activities was the relationship between biology and the social roles of the woman, representing her in the space "essentially" linked to her nature where, as a matter of fact, she has been socially relegated for centuries: the family house. The desire to highlight and bring to the surface all the issues, feminist ideas and viewpoints concerning menstruation, sexuality, marriage, pregnancy, mental breakdown and suicide in the homes of middle-class suburban women was mostly driven by frustration, despair and discouragement but also by the desire to resist and bring the personal to a political level.

The rooms were inspired by the conventional areas of a traditional house: kitchen, bathroom, dining room, challenging at the same time the activity commonly situated in those rooms and especially the meaning of that activity for women's self-image, through creative exaggeration of the ordinary physical and emotional elements of each space. In every theme-room, feelings of the artists are conveyed through the striking colours employed to represent domestic spaces and roles, that clash with the several

media used, in the juxtaposition of abstract forms and representational images. Three different conceptual bathrooms were created: *Nightmare Bathroom* designed by Robbin Schiff; *Lipstick Bathroom* by Camille Grey; and *Menstruation Bathroom* by Judy Chicago. *Nightmare Bathroom* was characterized by its black, green and rust-coloured, and dominated by the depiction of a woman in a bathtub. It was made totally in sand, and during all the six weeks of openings of the exhibition it was erased by the hands of visitors that continued to touch it. The sand was used as a sign of women's vulnerability. On the ground, there was a snake, symbolizing the biblical ancestral connection with Eve. The Camille Grey's *Lipstick Bathroom* was a chaotic environment with many beauty products and materials displayed, which created a feeling of oppression attributable to the effort that women feel to have to do for their appearance. The *Menstruation Bathroom* was a metaphor of the unspeakable, presenting women's blood as a taboo, and the puberty moment as something to be ashamed of and to hide behind the door of a bathroom. As Judy Chicago states about her installation:

Under a shelf full of all the paraphernalia with which this culture "cleans up" menstruation was a garbage can filled with the unmistakable marks of our animality. One could not walk into the room, but rather, one peered in through a thin veil of gauze, which made the room a sanctum (Judy Chicago, quoted by Broude & Garrard, 1994, p.55).

Shawnee Wollenman, instead, designed the *Nursery*, with giant-sized components inside, that made the visitors feel like children. Faith Wilding<sup>24</sup> projected and realized the *Crocheted Environment*, covering the entire walls with a fabric tent, creating a protective form inspired by the female womb. Her work had several meanings, such as it represents a mother's woven nest of blood and everyone's "first" room, the heart of the house (Broude & Garrard, 1994). At the same time, the *Crocheted Environment* also embodies that sort of trap in which housewives are stuck in their own home.

The only two human figures were employed with mannequins: one all dressed as a conventional bride (*Bridal Staircase* by Kathy Huberland), on the stairs with her bridal train (which turned from white to grey) trailing to the kitchen; the other represented as if in pieces, completely naked between the axis of the linen's closet, literally squashed through her sheets (*Linen Closet* by Sandy Orgel). From a careful observation, it is

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<sup>24</sup> Faith Wilding, attending of the Chicago's all female course at Fresno, in 1970, followed her to CalArts in 1971 to be candidate in the Feminist Art Program.

possible to note that there are two exaggerated aspects of the same woman, who squeezed herself between and inside two conventional cultural roles socially attributed to women, the housewife and the mother. If we follow the repetitive path of the bridal train, made of several recurrent dishes (breakfast's dishes, lunch, dinner, starting over) of the Kathy Huberland's mannequin, we get into the flesh-pink *Kitchen*, conceived by Robin Weltsh, Vicki Hodgett and Susan Frazier, with the walls and the ceiling covered by fried eggs (*Eggs to Breasts*) that recall breasts' images, and numerous plates of prepared foods. When Weltsh, Hodgett and Frazier started to think about the imaginary for the kitchen, they were stuck. So, Chicago proposed a consciousness-raising session to disentangle their ideas, focusing on what the memories of the kitchen carried out in their personal experiences, past and present. The kitchen was supposed to be the war-zone of the house, where most of the things happen in a house, where conflict raises not only about food, but also around power dynamics, daily fights about domestic tasks. At the stove, the heart of the kitchen, the egg is the image of nourishment that means food and also signifies the hunger in many women's hearts and lives (Ibidem). The eggs, like breasts attached to the walls, were put there as a reminder that just because women have breasts, they automatically embody the role of the one who has to cook the family's meals, and thus in the common understanding, they would be the only form of nourishment for the family. The food in the kitchen was in plastic, also to symbolize the dualism between nature and culture, organic food and its plastic representation, like the concept of the giving mother and the consuming rest of the family (Broude & Garrard, 1994). The *Dining Room* saw the collaboration of Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq, Robin Mitchell, Miriam Shapiro and Faith Wilding. It recalled a normal-house dining room, with a sophisticated table and (plastic) food laid on it, and on the background there was a still-life painting by Anna Peale.

In addition, there were also three bedrooms: *Personal Space* by Janice Lester, *Painted Room* by Robin Mitchell and *Leah's Room* by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman. *Personal Space* and *Painted Room* remembered post-adolescent bedrooms, such as college's dormitory rooms, tiny little rooms with single beds, avoiding the common functions (sex and procreation) usually addressed in marriage, but with only references to self. On the contrary, the watermelon-pink *Leah's Room* was elaborated with references to Colette's novel, *Cheri* (Ibidem).

Miriam Shapiro, together with Sherry Brody set up the *Dollhouse Room* like a house within a house. This was composed of six rooms, elaborately decorated and constructed, under a roof. Shapiro and Brody, who usually used fabrics and sew garments in their artworks, employed the same tools and skills of their individual artworks. The artworks realized for and within *Womanhouse* were influenced by individual ability of the artist involved, but as a consequence, the *Womanhouse* experience influenced also the later work, and artworks, of those women artists that have been involved in the projects.

*Womanhouse* has been also the stage of many deep performances that embodies feminist issues trying to deconstruct the mainstream idea of the women. One of the performances was *Cock and Cunt* by Judy Chicago. It was performed in the living room, by two women wearing black bodysuits, and the character of She (played by Faith Wilding, embodying the wife), wore a giant pink vagina, instead the character of He (played by Janice Lester, embodying the husband), wore an outsized penis. The exaggeration of the size of the costumes was comic, but the audiences soon discovered that the piece was everything other than funny. The dialogue between the two characters moved around the traditional opposite combination between biology and culture within the role of men and women inside the house. The dialogue between the characters was the depiction of the battle between the sexes favoured by social dynamic which include the prevarication of man on the woman, binding in their preordered sex roles imposed by the patriarchal society. The play leaves no doubt that the biological differentiations have been put on stages only to determine those roles of prevarication, that are able to provoke only women devaluation and discrimination, in their private life but also in working environments.

*Waiting* was another performance hosted in *Womanhouse*. In this piece, Faith Wilding performed a woman who waits, sitting on her chair, in a room, alone, surrounded by the silence of the audience, speaking in a low tone litany, from the beginning to the end, describing women's life as characterized with the waiting for the life of others and the waiting for others to make decisions for her life. A part of the text of the piece reads like this:

“[...]Waiting for my breast to develop/Waiting to get married/Waiting to hold my baby/Waiting for the first grey hair/Waiting for my body to break down, to get ugly/Waiting for my breasts to shrivel up/Waiting for a visit from my children, for letters/Waiting to get sick/Waiting for sleep [...] (Broude & Garrard, 1994, p.58).

She exemplifies the consciousness-raising effort of the women's movement, breaking silence by speaking up, thus revealing women's bitterness as a chorus of single voices (Broude & Garrard, 1994). The reference to *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is pretty evident. The character in Wilding's play, in the act of waiting, perfectly embodies the housewife who is not invited to take part in life, but is fully committed in others' life. She is a solitary full-time worker. For the young women artists who worked in the *Womanhouse*, who attended and lived this performance signed a break with the tradition, a goodbye to a stereotyped image of the women, a step further from the stuck traditional female model. Most of the women participating in *Womanhouse* were young, with no experience of housewife's life, only a few of them were actually married and had children.

*Three Women* was another successful performance at *Womahouse*. It was performed by Nancy Youldelman, Shawnee Wollenman and Jan Oxenberg, and written by the Feminist Art Program Performance Group. This performance was different from other *Womahouse's* performances because it grew indirectly out of the experiences of those developing the piece (Ibidem). These students made all original choices for their lives, also conscious of their desire to break with the defined roles and live their life as artists. So, they put in place an exploration of the psyche of three stereotyped characters (a hippie, a prostitute and a mother) exploring how could have been their life if they had not become artist. In the preparatory meetings of their performance group, they asked themselves what would have happened if they had taken other decisions for their lives. Judy Chicago, talking about this performance, and especially about her students, said:

[...] Each of them had reached crossroads in their lives when they had to make decisions about being "women" in the sense that society demanded, or defying society and being themselves. They had all made healthy choices, but it was easy for them to imagine what would have happened to them if they had accepted society's commands (Broude & Garrard, 1994, p.60).

*Birth Trilogy* was a performance focused on the exploration of the relationships built inside and between the members of the *Womanhouse*. It was a three-part piece, which represented a ritual of rebirth and new identity, symbolizing the community of women who attend their own and one another's birth, inspired by initiation ceremonies.

Remembering the first night that *Womanhouse* was opened, Judy Chicago said:

we performed only for women. The response was overwhelming. The actresses could hardly get through the lines of the *Cock and Cunt* play (a comedy), the laughter and applause was so loud. During the *Three Women* piece, women cried, laughed, and empathized, and the *Waiting* play caused a profound silence - everyone was deeply moved. After the performances, the acting group was ecstatic, and our ecstasy lasted until our next performance the following week, which was for a mixed audience. Through the evening, there was inappropriate silence, embarrassed laughter or muffled applause (Broude & Garrard, 1994, p. 61).

It is impossible to quantify the impact, the legacy and influence that *Womanhouse* had on its artists, visitors and the art audience. Those who did not come to visit the *Womanhouse* in person or who did not attend their performances anyway could experience *Womanhouse* through its visual and verbal documentation about it. *Womanhouse* was more than a mirror of the battles and concerns of the feminist movements of that time: it made explicit the expression of that rising feminist sensibility which was emerging in those years, providing a source and reference for a tradition of innovative and socially concerned contemporary art made by women (Broude & Garrard, 1994).

### **3.2.2 Great Britain: The Hayward Annual Exhibition II**

A group of five women artists (Lilient Lijn, Tess Jaray, Rita Donagh, Kim Lim and Gillian Wise) in 1978 proposed and organized the Hayward Annual Exhibition II, deciding to include 23 artists of whom only seven were men (in contrast with the tendency of the year before when the exhibition showed only one woman). These women were not part of a feminist group, but as Lijn states, “doing this has made us so” (Pollock, 1979, p.33).

The Arts Council sponsored the exhibition, which opened on August 23 at the Hayward gallery in London and was the first art show in Britain to be organized by women and to exhibit more than a half women artists. It was also one of the first occasions in which British institutions in the art field were confronted with the instances of feminism.

An event like this could never have happened if a group of women would not have proposed it, to reverse the trend of bias about women art as inferior. During the '70s in Europe, the feminist interests in the art world were not addressed to art institutions or major established art exhibitions, as it was happening in the US with concrete protests against the institutionalized art system (museums, galleries, public organizations, etc.). So, the arts institutions continued with their structural sexism.



But in 1975 there was a feminist public demonstration against the Hayward Gallery itself because in the exhibition *The condition of Sculpture*, only four women were shown compared to 36 men. The protests of women came out on the streets with decorated balloons, stickers and banners with the slogan “Combat Male Artocracy”, and reached the Arts Council offices where the feminists claimed for a 50% presence, at least, of 50% in state financed shows and in selectors’ panels, and also a parity in fellowship, awards and subsidies for the artists (Pollock, 1979). Not long after, Liliane Lijn<sup>25</sup> proposed to the Tate Gallery an exhibition of contemporary women artists, but her suggestion remained unheard. She also proposed an additional section about British Modern artists for an exhibition by the Arts Council concerning women’s art from Los Angeles and another about British women’s art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but all her proposals were rejected. During these negotiations, the Arts Council was thinking of an annual survey of British art located at the Hayward Gallery, so, finally and surprisingly, they invited Liliane Lijn to set up a committee of five women to organize the second edition. The motivation according to which the Art put these women in charge was not clear, because it was not a response of the protests in 1975, or of a change of policy, but maybe an attempt to end the constant pressure of Lijn and her group of women artists (Pollock, 1979). The evolving of feminism, also in art history, started to scare the institutions, so it was rather a defensive gesture from the part of the Arts Council. Of course, it was a great opportunity and possibility of visibility for the women artists' involvement, especially it was an occasion for them to raise awareness about the presence of women in the art field. But this way to answer, (focused on the numbers of women exposed compared to men) to the pression of women artists claiming for their inclusion caused much confusion, first of all a confusion between discrimination against women artists and the symbolic gesture to fix the wrong on one hand, and on the other, the debates about the type of art made by women, and all this confusion created problems for the promoters of the show and also for visitor and critics (Pollock, 1978). Of course, the starting point for the organizers was the discrimination within art field and exhibition practices. The initial purpose was to exhibit less known or unknown women artists. But the exhibition saw the presence of eight women artists which had already had a solo-show in major galleries, and ten taught in London art schools, so they were almost all known (and established) names. The initial intentions were hence

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<sup>25</sup> She was an American artist living in London since 1966.

unrealized. Lucy Lippard, in the catalogue essay for the Hayward show (Lambert, 1978) criticized the choice of exposing well-known names, she even considered it disappointing: the feminist aim, in her view, did not merely consist in showing the presence of women artists in the art field, but was rather oriented toward the deconstruction of the institutionalized system of the arts all together. Ensuring these women artists were absorbed by the system could then change the way all known artists - predominantly men - were exhibited too. But there is no doubt that the establishment of this exhibition has left a great legacy in the British art system and has been an important moment for women artists in the Country.

As part of the exhibition, the organizers also arranged several discussions, seminars, performances, film screenings, readings, debates and events, in an area called Open Spaces, which took place in parallel with the exhibition, and this gave the possibility to other “alternative” groups to take part in the show, focusing also on not-traditional art practices (such as body art).

This is because the women artists who organized the Hayward Exhibition became aware of different perspectives to interact with the institutionalized art system by other feminist artistic groups. At the beginning, the organizers of the Hayward Annual Exhibition invited a community group of women artists from Liverpool to join the Hayward show, but they declined the invitation because they considered their community-based art, and themselves (as a feminist group of artists) too far from the idea of institutionalized art, and for that reason they refused the traditional shows and that kind of audience. This group was part of that feminist tendency that Pollock (1979) defines as “cultural feminism”, which was diffused in Great Britain and was characterized by the feminist commitment to alternative art practices, with a tendency to refuse the established institutions, such as galleries and museums.

The artworks of women artists shown in the exhibition were part of that category of women artists in Britain which was already known by the institutions and the art audience, but at the same time they were also concerned and active in re-positioning the role of women artists in the art field, even if most were not part of the feminist movement or politically involved in their protests. They wanted to affirm, as (women) artists, their presence in the institutionalized system, fighting against the unavoidable discriminations in treatment, opportunities, exhibitions, and reputation. Contrary to people's expectations, the show was also criticized because the artists invited seemed

not to exhibit anything new, or at least different from other British art shows of the period. There were examples of colour field painting, constructivist sculptures, bricks, graphs, photomontages, found objects assemblages, performances and so on. In spite of the wide range of artworks, the lack of innovation and surprise left critics disappointed. Why should the show be something different from the other British shows? Just because of the fact that the exhibition was organized by feminist women, with a predominant presence of women, means that it should be “something” different from the traditional one? Why?

Another tendency shown in the exhibited women artists was recognizable in especially in the works of Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller and Alexis Hunter. They argued that it is important to acknowledge the significance of being a woman, and that it is important to engage with and take part in the main currents and institutions of contemporary art practice. This was in contrast with the feminist positions of the organizers because being admitted in the institutionalized places makes feminism invisible or at least difficult to read. But from another perspective, the feminism of Kelly, Hiller and Hunter was inevitably silenced by the context of an Arts Council survey of current art, and by the surrounding artworks, which invited a more traditional reception and critical response (Pollock, 1979).

The exhibition was dominated by an emphasis on visual aesthetic pleasure and ensured the evident representational content (Pollock, 1979). The themes of the artworks presented were bonded to the relation with people and nature, as Pollock (1979) affirms, “with the shared belief in the power of art to transcend the real situation of people and their material and social conditions” (p.4). This ideology was widespread in the works exposed by Sandra Blow<sup>26</sup>. The fantastical architectural constructions of Deanna Petherbridge were detailed drawings which revealed a fascination with the urban installations, but also a repulsion at the same time and a will to return to nature. Sue Beere made an *Installation Piece* exhibited on a terrace of the Hayward Gallery, such as Steve Furlonger who also exhibited an artwork called *Tether* on the sculpture terraces.

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<sup>26</sup> She describes herself as “an academic abstract painter because she concerns herself primarily with the self-contained problems of pure painting such as balance and proportion, tension and scale, issues that have been important since art began” (Lambert, 1978, p.11).

The exhibition took over the entire gallery, including the outdoor sculpture courts. The show was splitted into separate spaces for each artist, reaffirming the individualist notions of the artists even if it was a shared and collective space, remembering the institutional influence of the environment which was focused on the affirmed stereotyped notion of individual artist, as the only adequate in that context. This strategy of shaping separate spaces for each artist was very much criticized by the feminist movement, because it seemed to fit too comfortably with the surrounding non-feminist art.

It is not possible to define this show simply as a feminist exhibition because it was not. There are several considerations to be done, starting from the environment in which they were acting and the historical context of the women artists in the '70s. We have already seen that their purpose was different from the final result. For the five women organizers the decision to set up a mixed show was not easy. Each one of them chose two artists and the rest were chosen on the basis of discussion panels, and this process of selection was extremely difficult for artists who had to choose other artists on the basis of a limited number (23, as it was there). If they had done a solo-women show it would be much easier to receive a denial by the Arts Council and they would have given up on the event. In an all-women exhibition the reception would focus only on the feminine component, instead on their art and their involvement with contemporary art practices.

In addition, they had to take a side in the feminist discourse which involved the idea to do separate show of women and men means to reinforce the tendency to consider women art different from that of men, going to support discrimination in regard to women's art. The problem was avoiding the categorization and the separation of women artists and being comprehensive. So, the solution found by the organizers was a mixed show that subverted the usual strategy of inclusion among men and women, prioritizing female presence.

The main problem was the fact that they did not openly specify that the purpose of the show was to attempt to change the established bias about women's art, and that their intent was not to raise questions and issues about the kind of artworks produced by women. Their choices were much criticized from the feminist side, which contested their strategy of selection and failing the opportunity to show as many women was possible. And of course, for giving so much space, once again, to men.

The choice of this mixed show attracted many critiques that highlighted the position of women as a disadvantaged minority. This choice, together with the show, had unexpected results, but even some unrealized expectations. The art world and the audience saw a show organized by five women artists, with the purpose to be an offensive for the art establishment. But the results were not properly and fully feminist ones, and the relieved critics were glad of this “failure of intent”. Feminists were very disappointed because this could be an important opportunity, but was not, being both as a failure in addressing political issues in art selecting, and a defeat for women visibility in the institutionalized art system as.

However, there were also many positive critiques, which found the show stimulating for its innovation, and for the political commitment of the organizers.

From today's point of view, there was no hope that an event like that would have a full success in their intent. Those were the initial years of feminism in art, the reception and the critics were not ready enough, and the event needed a more complex strategy, well-addressed with a political perspective (which did not have). Nonetheless, it it succeeded in foregrounding the obvious discrimination against women artists, also because the critiques were addressed especially toward the organizers and the women artists exposed, focusing on their being feminine rather than on their art. So, this made clear that the main problem of women's art was the fact that it was made by women.

### **3.2.3 Italy: *La materializzazione del linguaggio* - Biennale 1978**

1978 has been a crucial year for feminist art in Italy. Especially because the Biennale di Venezia hosted the first only-women exhibition, *La materializzazione del linguaggio*, curated by Mirella Bentivoglio. Bentivoglio was an Italian artist, poet and performer which worked in the field of visual poetry, and curated also many feminist's art exhibitions. She was committed to the fact that each feminine event which involves or in which is interested the women's world has to be handled entirely by women. As a result, even the title of the exhibition implies a re-appropriation of language by women, a patriarchal language that relegates women in a subjugated role. The title also indicates the poetical-visual research in all its forms (writing, visual poetry, objectual poetry, etc.)

and the research based on the physical part of the language, on its sound and on the support objects for the text. The world “materializzazione” is also clearly addressed to the world “mater”, intended as matrix, origins and substance (Portinari, 2017) from which language originates. This is therefore bound with the tendency of women artists to transform the language in textile artworks, which has always been part of women history and was much employed in the US feminist art movement as well. The exhibition saw the presence of 80 women artists, national and international, claiming spaces and visibility in a place that has been always inhabited by a strong male dominance. For this reason Mirella Bentivoglio decided to bring together all these women artists, both collectively (with the presence of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese and the Gruppo Donna/Immagine/Creatività from Naples) than as individual artists, proving the huge presence of women artists in the contemporary art scene. The exhibition included also a tribute the feminist artist Ketty La Rocca, who had died two years before, with an entire room dedicated to her life and career.

The Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese has been the first feminist collective to propose itself to the Biennale di Venezia and there they exposed their most complex artwork. Their presence was fundamental to show their visibility as a feminist’s art collective in the international artistic field in Italy. The group was composed by the artists Silvia Cibaldi, Milli Gandini, Clemen Parrocchetti, Mariuccia Secol and Mariagrazia Sironi. These artists put in the collective self, their art, without abandoning their individual ideas, to gather their power and their expression as women artists and go out from the cage where they have been imprisoned by the society. They wanted to be part of the Biennale to claim the existence also of women artists in a landscape mostly-populated by men. They created an environment inspired by the dialectical relation between art and nature. Their exhibition was inaugurated the 20 of September in the huge space of the Magazzini del Sale. And they decided to share the venue, inviting the Gruppo Donna/Immagine/Creatività from Naples. It is interesting emphasize the fact that the initial decision to establish this feminist art collective had been made two years before right there, after the visit of the Biennale by Rosa Panaro, Mathelda Balatresi, Antonietta Castiello and Mimma Sardella. After visiting the expositions they were disappointed by the marginalization of women artists, so they decide to embrace feminist thought in their art. Two years later, the renovated group Gruppo Donna/Immagine/Creatività, with new members, was invited to show their artwork at the Biennale. Their collective project, *Dalla donna alla donna passando per*

*il cielo*, wanted to be some kind of compensation for the previous edition where only few women's works were exposed, was an installation which reconnected with their previous feminist works. The installation was about the overturning, symbolically and literally (of 180°), of the tradition that associates the figure of the man with the earth, and the figure of the woman with the sky, with the employment of a painted root of a rose.

The involvement of those feminist groups has been an important political gesture to claim the spaces that women deserved. The artists of the collectives from Varese and Naples founded their practices on feminist life choices, and they wanted to show, each in its way, the results in their art, obtained from the relation with feminism, but especially from the relation with the other members of their collective and the results produced from working together. They wanted to affirm themselves in the art world, as professional artists, and affirm their artworks highlighting the value and the autonomous, free and unexpected appearance.

Their presence at the Biennale has been the demonstration to show that there were many other possibilities to do art, beyond the institutionalized art field.

The creation of a feminine area was conceived to contrast the exclusion of the women artists from the official Biennale, which, however, amplified their marginality especially by providing them a location for their exhibition far away from the official venues of the main areas. This question of keeping separate the women exhibition from the “male” one was a debated issue of those ages, and the feminist critique was split by the additional risk that this marginalization could provoke. Especially for those feminists who claimed the fact that adding feminine names to the male-dominated landscape did not need to fill the gap. But it is impossible not consider that be present at the Biennale, for those feminist artists was a great sign of affirmation and a way to improve their visibility in the art field, as well as a way to bring their feminist perspective in the art world.

The conceiving of the exhibition has been troubled, but thanks to her persistence and confidence, Mirella Bentivoglio could set it up. Even the reception, unfortunately, did not have the expected success, also because it was inaugurated two months after the official opening of the Biennale, and despite the large networking of women artists and the careful curatorship of Bentivoglio. The exhibition was handled by the Biennale administration as a minor event, a sort of compensation for these women artists for their past invisibility. The already marginalized space was also dedicated to other “feminine”

events at the end of the Biennale timeframe, making the exposition a sort of appendix. Even if authors of the artworks were already well-known names in the art field, such as Lucia Marcucci, Lia Drei, Anna Oberto, Maria Lai, Paola Levi Montalcini, Sveva Lanza, the Japanese Chima Sunada, the English Paula Claire, the Portuguese Ana Hatherly, the Dutch Christina Kubish, Mirella Bentivoglio<sup>27</sup> herself and also Ketty La Rocca, together with the Varese's Collective and Naples collectives.

This clustering of women art in a same space, and mostly peripheral, was aligned perfectly with the Biennale context, where the artists are divided by nationality from the beginning, and this also created a ghettoization. But the *Materializzazione del Linguaggio* allowed women artists to claim their visibility nonetheless.

The theme of nature, together with the art (which was, obviously, the common thread of the Biennale), is clearly identified with the theme of anthropological feminine culture, which is the point around which everything revolves (today this naturalization would appear more problematic and at risk of essentialism). The focus moves around the themes of creativity as the concept maternity-nature of the Gruppo from Varese, to the visual poetry with the involvement of the other national and international women artists.

*Materializzazione del linguaggio* was proposed like the final documentation of a many years feminist research in the arts focusing on the relation of women and language, experimenting on language and image, and language and the object on the basis of a poetic process. One of the purposes of the exhibition was also didactic. In fact, the exhibition showed an introductory part with not so commonly used materials, representing women's genuine interest for the depiction and transcription of language. Among the exhibited artworks there were works made with fabrics, examples of the popular traditions, ornamental motifs of carpets and blankets. Together with these pieces there are others by anonymous authors, because as Mirella Bentivoglio (1978) explains these were linguistic-objectual examples of the past that with their presence suggested a symbolic continuity of female creativity, and showed how the *mater*, or the feminine component, had always had a special relation with language, as well as showing how their public language came from the private one. It is possible to observe how the new language employed by women is expressed consequently in their artistic

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<sup>27</sup> Mirella Bentivoglio had an already well-established career behind her, either as poetess, artist and curator. Her presence has been fundamental for the achievement of the exhibition, especially from the beginning, when she started to make the requests of participation directly to the Biennale president, Carlo Ripa di Meana.



language, in the new artistic forms, as the use of materials traditionally associated with the feminine. According to Bentivoglio (1978) this was an unprecedented research which employed these new forms of expression, connected with the idea of the *mater*, deeply intrinsic in the women artists who have to affirm themselves against the patriarchal culture that has always dominated over the culture, poetry, literature and so words. This underlined how the male expressions acted through elimination, duplication and overexposure, instead the feminine way to express “language” was more based on forms addressed to the simplification and emptying (Bentivoglio, 1978).

Following this introductory part, the exhibition shows a little exhibition dedicated to the women artists of the first twenty years of the ‘900, celebrated as precursors, such as with the artworks of Benedetta Marinetti who had created the tactile boards in 1921; the illustrations about the women artists of the Russian Avant-garde such as Sonia Delaunay, who employed the worlds in her tissues; the exponents of the second Futurism such as Maria Ferrero Gusago, who composed artworks with numbers and mathematical formulas, or Regina Cassolo Bracchi, who focused on translating in colours tonalities the sing of her canary. Another important participation was that of the Japanese women artist Chima Sunada, and her presence at the Biennale was significant to make knowable the fundamentals of the art of Japanese writing.

Maria Lai, who traced threads of writing on diaries-chassis, employing little chassis for weaving where she intertwined textures which became illegible books, and wrote with strings on paper and cloth through the sewing machine. Ketty La Rocca put captions in contrast with expressions of rapid gestures shot in photos or writing on x-ray plates. She died in 1976, and she has been honoured with a retrospective arranged by the Biennale at the Museo Correr in Venice. Bentivoglio considered Katty the author of the first cross-media linguistic signs, because these signs were “the first de-semanticized signs, made linguistic because expressed with writings” (Bentivoglio, 1978, p.2).

A great part on the side of the poetry was handled by artists as the French Ilse Garnier, who wrote “spatial poetry”, using a modality of very radical phonetic poetry. Or the Italian painter Simona Weller, who instead employed the childhood school writing to arrive at repetitions of coloured words in her artworks. Lucia Marcucci specialized in visual poetry which produced collages with pieces of photos, handwritten letters, and comics. Other women who write on unusual materials such as Bianca Pucciarelli Menna (who adopted the male name of Tomaso Binga) started her artistic research writing on wallpaper and continued using technology, such as the typewriter. Greta Schödl wrote

on bedsheets, cloths, tubes, baskets, employing them in collective and performative contexts. Other exponents of visual poetry make their poetry the form of object, such as Chiara Diamantini who used school books where she inserted maps, photos creating tomes-objects; or such as Elisabetta Gut who packed assemblages with images, literary texts, strings, etc. Even the artworks of Mirella Bentivoglio are stone compositions evoking the idea of broken letters, which she defines “tombstone-books in marble”.

During the inauguration, Mirella Bentivoglio, staged performances that she called “phonetic experimentation on language”. Bentivoglio insisted on recording the performances on videotapes, to keep them in the collective memory.

The project of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine was realized in the shared dimension of their collective, without abandoning their singularity as artists, but putting their individual self in the collective work. After the work that they made in their personal and professional collective practice, they were aware of what they wanted to state and to show at the Biennale. They wanted to affirm their presence in the contemporary art field and the Biennale was the perfect stage. The idea proposed was aligned with the concept of the relation between art and nature. Nature was relegated into images portraying natural elements, with evident references to the feminine element, such as the moon, mountains, deserts, rocks, trees, sea and alternating these images there was a postcard with the image of the feminine symbol carved into the stone by a woman in the Paleolithic age. These natural images were placed on a panel which delimited the external of the exhibition area. Going beyond this barrier, nature reemerges in the water element and natural fabric fibres. The water was contained in a pool of 5 metres of diameter on the ground, symbolizing the maternal water. It was a mirror for the five artworks, with equal dimension, made collectively, placed up the pool, supported by a metallic rigid structure. Reflecting on the water, the borders of the artworks were blurred, looking for equilibrium between the individuality and the collective (Scotini & Perna, 2019). Seol showed a tapestry with woman profiles; Gandini’s towel, decorated with cross-stitch, depicted some pregnant women; those of Cibaldi and Parrocchetti put together daily objects shaping fragmentary textures corking tied together traumas and memories through images; Sironi employed domestic ready-made such as laces, trimmings, etc, to reproduce the ancient chart of Mileto. The artworks were made with poor materials, which remember tradition, but also with technological materials, which focus on the present. The employment of the materials also recalls a journey of

reconstruction of their own history, putting together all the past experiences, where the women artists have the experiences of the past and the present all together in front of them. The natural materials, the tissues are used together with more modern materials to build an expressive pattern as rich as possible. A studied use of materials in relation to women's art emerges: an employment that never identifies the artist with an exclusively expressive language. This exhibition is a journey in feminine creativity, in the spaces that it assumes where it can give up to any formalistic conformism. The artworks represent their vision of their deep meaning of being women artists and work together as a collective. The idea, the project, the installation of the project was done always working together. In the collective meaning of their group these women found the meaning of their being artists, in their being able to rely on each other against who tried to make them invisible. In their collective they found the support to affirm themselves as women and as artists, to take back the place they deserved also in an hostile environment such as the Biennale was.

The purpose of the exhibition *Materializzazione del Linguaggio* was to underline the relationship between women and language. It was possible to observe the presence of several tendencies attributable to a common linguistic matrix: poetry, spatial, visual, graphical, with the employment of different materials and forms of expression, put in place/display to prove the progression of the feminist research, but especially to investigate the deep relationship between women and language, because of their necessity of proving their presence after her "dematerialization" of the past resulted in their public disappearance (Bentivoglio, 1978), by the re-appropriation of a male-dominated field such as that of the language. Furthermore, the other purpose was showing the presence of women artists into the international art scene. Women artists that together, through their artistic works, their way to operate, collectively or individually, were there to prove the validity of their presence in the contemporary art field.

The new language of these women developed in their art, it was not satisfied by refusing their prescribed role and the imposition of the society, but it produced new artistic forms. These women opened their work to (not only) the Italian artistic scene, but at the same time, the artistic field had to give them that space they deserved. A new language

that tries to find a passage, through the words, with a new way of denaturalization of the language (and of its devices) where the gender is already given.

It is not a case that the artworks were mostly based on written-visual materials/devices, synonyms of their urgency to communicate, of their new language revealed from their art.

## IV. THE CASE OF CLAIRE FONTAINE

### 4.1 Claire Fontaine: art, ideology, political commitment (and the reasons behind the choice of collective work).

Claire Fontaine is the feminine singular name of a feminist collective artist: it is in fact composed by Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, an Italian-British duo. It was established in 2004 and her name comes from a famous French brand of stationery. The practice of Claire Fontaine is founded, in part, on the basis of the Situationists and in the wake of the Italian and French post Second World War avant-garde: movements which considered their artistic works as an intersection of chance, unconscious desire and conscious intention (Mansoor, 2019). Claire Fontaine declared herself to be a ready-made artist, following in the footsteps of Duchamp, and, in order to realise her conceptual and political art, she works with neon, video, sculptures, paintings, flags, coins, texts and so on, constantly questioning contemporary society and the mainstream idea of individuality as the only form of social recognition. Claire Fontaine is always in search of subjective emancipation, trying to deconstruct the notion of authorship, experimenting with collective protocols production and the creation of various devices to share intellectual and private property. The mix of skill, originality, creativity and authorial intention are displaced and dissolved in the expanded field of capitalistic reproduction (Ibidem).

The circuitry and processes of production, distribution, and consumption create a seamless feedback system that, resonating in the social field, disciplines all aspects of social life to support, enable, and service the extraction of value<sup>28</sup> from the worker through labor – regardless of however widely dispersed production sites and distribution chains are in the present global financial order. Rather than collapsing into either melancholic or nihilistic rhetoric, the collective's text turns to recent history to suggest the possible continuity of revolutionary time in the present (Mansoor, 2019, p.10).

Claire Fontaine proposes the restoration of the revolutionary feminist history as a way to recognize and analyze the contemporary struggles, to which she wants to return.

As an artist, starting from the choice of using a feminine name, Claire Fontaine centers on feminism as the focus of a work of aesthetic research interlaced with a critique of the present. Claire Fontaine takes up the feminist perspective, rearranging it in her artistic

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<sup>28</sup> Value, in Marxist theory, has two aspects, use and exchange value. The separation between work and machine defines the social relation between capital and work. These two aspects give rise to the capitalistic system of production, that is able to transform the production of use value in exchange value.

career through artworks and texts, in fact, the words are one of the main materials employed by Claire Fontaine in her artworks. The main themes of her works range from reproductive work, to relationships with production and reproduction, use of value, and disappearance of borders between private life and work. These aspects are perfectly in line with the feminist necessity to rethink all the production systems on the global level in an anticapitalistic direction or, at least, in a more sustainable perspective. The Marxist feminists of the '70s accused Marx of having recognized the paid workers as the only political subjects, as if there was a qualitative difference between the paid work and the (unpaid) work done by a housewife. But, what qualifies the active work is not the fact that the worker is paid, but instead its ability to produce value. This concept also expresses a power relation, between the ones who have a paid job and the ones who have not, so between men and women, rising gender discriminations.

Feminists claimed a salary for domestic work in a political perspective (Federici, in Scotini & Perna, 2019), a fundamental revolutionary struggle, to state the housewives political presence as workers. As Silvia Federici (2020) states, the “hidden” work of housewives produces value too. It contributes directly and actively to the capitalist process. The work of the housewife, in its different components (such as the domestic labour, care labour, procreation and emotional labour) produces a commodity, which is the only commodity to have an use value that has the capacity and potential to produce other use value, that is the workforce itself, in the person of her worker husband and in her kids, potential future workers (Ibidem). The denial of a salary for the housework makes this work invisible, producing the illusion that it is just a sacrifice of/for herself, just a proof of love, of practical, natural and biological application of her role as a woman, addressed only to her devotion to her family. The Marxist theory allowed feminists to be aware that “capitalism would never have allowed domestic labour to survive if it could not exploit it” (Ibidem, my translation).

In her texts and also in the book *Lo sciopero umano e l'arte di creare la libertà* (2017), Claire Fontaine discusses the crisis of the singularity that affects any side of the society: she notices the contradiction in the fact that one's “self” derives from collective actions. In the last century, there has been a diffuse struggle to reach a condition of social equality, however, more and more inequalities, such as class inequalities, cultural ones, gender ones or age ones, have taken root.

According to Claire Fontaine, it is necessary to stop being, thinking or acting like just on a singular basis; people should in fact start behaving considering the point of view of acting collectively, for the common good, aiming at the improvement of the individual and social life of everyone. Without losing one's own individuality, that is what happens in the feminist artistic collective: the final purpose of acting collectively is the fact that being together means being stronger and more voices aggregated are easier to be listened to, compared to one only voice.

According to Claire Fontaine, the protests and rebellions that took place during the '70s suddenly revealed several of the inequality matters rooted in the society, including sexism, and those were examples of "human strike". These protest movements were characterized by the fact that they did not fit into those sociological categories normally used to define the character of protests. In Italy, those were years of great and thriving collective creativity and it was the feminist movement which unleashed this transformation.

Writing is a fundamental part of her artistic practice, melted together with conceptual art, which can be found in two different forms: the first one is inside the artworks with words or sentences with different mediums (neon, paintings with texts, newspapers, prints, covers of books, etc.), while the second form is the theoretical reflection. Texts are different according to the purpose (artworks' presentations or projects, political texts, etc.), offering, on the one hand, a history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art and, on the other, radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, to reformulate the social aspects of the present society. In 2017 Claire Fontaine arranged her written texts in the book *Lo sciopero umano e l'arte di creare la libertà*. There are several themes that contribute to keeping together the collection of texts inside the book: these are the crisis of subjectivity, the woman condition, the age of terrorism, the work and art system, etc. In general, a reflection comes out about other possibilities for humans inside the system of post-industrial neoliberalism that shapes society, and the imagination of a desire that opposes a sort of resistance to the system, and this imagination embraces around art, politic, philosophy, economy and feminism.

Being a feminist artist, for Claire Fontaine, means the refusal of making art in a way that destroys the dignity of the subject-observer and of the subject-maker of the artwork. Claire Fontaine finds her inspiration in Carla Lonzi's cultural legacy and her intellectual roots in the group of "Rivolta Femminile", the feminist group founded by Carla Lonzi, Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti in Rome in 1970. According to Claire Fontaine (2017)

the legacy of Carla Lonzi is as precious as it is problematic, because at the beginning of her battles there is that against the complicity with the existing culture.

Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) was a feminist, and art critic looking for freedom and above all a political subjectivity (Claire Fontaine, 2013). Her personality and her intellectual work cannot be distinguished: she made her life her most important work. She became the embodiment of a problem, abolishing the distinction between the physical person, bearer of certain opinions and their diffusion, her professional career and practice, making feminism what it actually is: one with lived experience (Claire Fontaine, 2015). The expression of female subjectivity has to be built through freedom and cannot be produced through the identification with the existing cultural stereotypes that are masculine, built by patriarchy. The change of self-perception that allows women to have access to freedom is in fact something that cannot be divided from the social relationships that made them up. But, according to Lonzi, the awareness of this condition makes social relationships totally intolerable. The implications of her work of research into the art world, such as Ventrella & Zapperi (2020) consider, represent a fundamental feminist standpoint, from which we can interrogate the structure of feminist art history and the role of feminist criticism in general today.

Carla Lonzi refused to comply with the dominant structures and she had a starting role: from a feminist point of view and perspective, she reinvented the spaces and the possibilities of conducting critic work, of writing about art, of expressing oneself creatively and, in general, of producing knowledge.

At a certain point in her life, she started believing that her work as an art critic in a world with a strong male component did not correspond to her self-realisation. She considered the job of the art critic as a fake one. In her first texts and articles, it is possible to find some early moments of concern about the career of the art critic that prove how her relationship with her job as an art critic has been conflicted since the beginning, the ground of constant intellectual research for something that she could not find in that profession.

It has been a radical rupture with the institution of art critic career, that was based on that status, which gave Lonzi the right and freedom of interpretation lived and felt a



constriction, like an unbearable control of artistic authenticity identified with the dominant patriarchal, male, phallogocentric culture that she recanted.

This break matured gradually over time, and culminated with the publishing of the article *La solitudine del critico*, which appeared in the journal *L'Avanti!*, in December 1963. In this article, she made a public statement about those principles that shape the figure of the art critic and her position towards the artists. The reflection on the relation between art and critique and the reflection through intellectual identification and existentialism in the creative act led Lonzi to rephrase the critic language in a feminine way which, therefore, is translated in a constant and widespread analysis of the feminine creativity independent from the masculine one.

At the same time she completely denied the role of art critic seen as a patriarchal subject of power and she employed a radical analytical structure of art critic language, acquired from her development process about her approach to the feminist issues. With her feminism, Carla Lonzi put in place a deconstruction of the common (sexist) language, depriving it of its power. Her gesture or recording (used, for example, to record the interviews of the artists collected in *Autoritratto* (2010) and her conversations with Consagra included in the text *Vai pure* (2011) is also the expression of the necessity to employ a new language, a language proper of the people who have no voice, with the aim of becoming a new way and a new strategy to express themselves. This new language owned by the oppressed, was employed by feminists when they became aware of their exclusion from many sides of the society, and started to see this exclusion as a resource to live and to think differently, by deconstructing its power. And it is also from this renovation of language that Claire Fontaine, with her written artworks takes inspiration from. According Claire Fontaine (2017) this language, spoken by the oppressed is a new mother tongue that feminists tried to teach one another to claim their value and their space in a system that refused them.

In 1970 in Rome, Carla Lonzi founded the group “Rivolta Femminile” with Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti. Rivolta Femminile has been the first consciously separatist feminist collective founded with the publishing of their Manifesto, that was focused on the breaking point with any form of ideology, abandonment of the class struggle, tabula rasa of the culture and opposition to activism. In her involvement with feminism later on, Lonzi also rejected the prevailing concept of creativity, in particular the notion that art itself could be an emancipatory practice for women in a field of creativity colonized

by the myth of male culture (Ventrella & Zapperi, 2020, p.1). Here it is possible to discern the first signs of what will be expanded in Rivolta Femminile's Manifesto and in the *Sputiamo su Hegel's* text, as a radical rejection of male culture and the refusal of the Hegelian binary system of the "self" opposed to the "other" and of the "man" opposed to the "woman". According to Claire Fontaine (2017), women are reduced just to a sex, to an organ, and nothing more, in capitalistic and patriarchal society, with the only function of reproduction. The fact that women have been reduced just to their sexual and reproductive functions, is dialectical, in the sense that women have been historically forced to adopt a social behaviour which hide their functions (Ibidem). Lonzi saw this as a struggle to not only become an individual subject, but also to develop a new language and a new symbolic order owned by women through the self-consciousness practice of the feminist collectives. For these reasons the publishing of the manifesto of Rivolta Femminile marked a point of no return in her relationship with her profession as an art critic.

If we analyze the thought of Lonzi about the critic job, we can notice how the statements expressed in her feminist texts reflect her way of behaving in the first phase of her life, when she tried to find - and actually found - a new way of conducting her job of art critic and, at the same time, to affirm her own personal creative way. This is also the case of her inclination to the collective work, already expressed in her young participation in the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), in her young intellectual group works with her colleagues and friends.

In 1969, it was published her first book, *Autoritratto* which includes fourteen interviews with artists, recorded from 1962 to 1969, and which is considered a watershed in the art critique of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simultaneously, after working for over a decade as a professional art critic, that same year she withdrew from the art world. In the book, she decided not to remain invisible in the text, but to reposition her role as art critic at the same level of the one of the artist, reinventing writing about art as a creative process, instead of a way to analyze and evaluate art as separate from the critical act. In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi discovers that the position/role of the artist is much more honourable than the one of the critic and her position towards art is going to radicalize during the years. As Ventrella & Zapperi (2020) affirm in their text, the book *Autoritratto* weakens the hermeneutic role of art criticism through the attention on the process and on montage and through the nonlinear approach to narrative. According to Ventrella &

Zapperi (2020), the book can be considered as “a theatre in which different voices are brought together in a space that retains a feeling of the everyday” (p.7-8) and the making of feminism, recorded in the conversations between Carla Lonzi and Carla Accardi, is a key element of the contemporary landscape. If we follow this conversation, it is possible to read *Autoritratto* as a document on the beginnings of Rivolta Femminile. As a matter of fact, Accardi anticipates some issues that will then be the key for the early texts of Rivolta Femminile and, together with Carla Lonzi, she poses “a number of questions that have to do with sexual difference and the way men’s history has overdetermined women’s work” (Ibidem).

From 1960 Lonzi took part in the rising feminist movement, but she did not want to become a feminist art critic. She refused academism, struggling for a satisfying balance between practices, daily life and her intellectual expression. Any strategy aimed at self-preservation and self-affirmation is bravely refused by Lonzi, even if the price to pay is her absence/not-existence from the art world. By positioning herself off-stage, not only did Lonzi want to expose the myth of male culture, but she also highlighted other ways to produce knowledge, being together and conceiving a feminist subject that had huge impact on the lives of people, and especially on the ones of women.

Abandoning her work as art critic and starting dealing with militant feminism, she became one of the most influential voices of Italian feminism and of the research on feminine issues in next years. According to Lonzi, within feminism women find the collective feminine consciousness, which elaborates the themes of their liberation from the cultural oppression.

The establishment of Rivolta Femminile contributed to the rising of other groups, like Movimento di Liberazione della Donna and Lotta Femminista. Rivolta Femminile was also a publishing house and an artistic space: they published most of the texts written by Lonzi, like *Sputiamo su Hegel* in 1970, which provoked many Marxist feminists<sup>29</sup> leaving from the group. The book, with its irreverent title, accused Marxism of the same insensitivity toward gender claims which could not be reconducted to the

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<sup>29</sup> The Marxist feminists had a classist vision of the hierarchized relationship between sexes; according to them, feminism and class struggle were the same thing. They refused the liberal feminism such as the traditional one.

socioeconomic conflicts between the classes. Along with condemning Marxism, *Sputiamo su Hegel* attacked Hegelian thought and its fallacious consideration of masculinity as the only possible human form. The radicality of the ideas of Lonzi, addressed toward an internal and conscious reflection, caused internal conflicts that provoked many abandons from the group.

The publishing of *Sessualità e aborto* and *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* in 1971, that were critical concerning abortion and questioned the male sexual revolution, created a series of conflicts that also caused the estrangement of other women which lead to the creation of other feminist groups in many other cities, like Milano, Torino, Genova and Firenze. In a short time, in the Italian women movement, the ideas of Lonzi managed to occupy a central position for many feminist groups across Italy, which is also why her art critic commitment quickly took second place becoming less relevant (Ventrella & Zapperi, 2020). Nevertheless, recent studies have revealed that there is a huge number of female texts and creative practices coming out in the 1960s and 1970s that were inspired by the writings of Lonzi about feminism and knowledge, but have not been shared and have remained unread due to the mainstream narratives of art history of that period in Italy (Ibidem). At the same time, feminism allowed many women in Italy to practice art in their lives, starting from the space where art was shared with other women artists. For many women, exploring ephemeral forms of art making, like performances, and forms of writing, like letters or diaries, embodied a strategy to create or preserve spaces where they could find new ways of expressions and where they did not have to depend on institutions like museums or art galleries. Working on the margins of the institutionalized art world, these groups of feminist artists developed new creative ways to stay together thanks to a series of collaborative practices that were inspired by the search of Lonzi for non-hierarchical relations. In these groups, the relations between the personal sphere and the way in which the members connected each other was fundamental for the building of that dimension of subjectivity that each member developed in the group.

Carla Lonzi started speaking from the position of feminist in the political struggle, completely leaving the illusion of equality between men and women, highlighting the fact that women must know that they are the result of their own struggle and negotiation with patriarchy and with all the other forces active in the society that structure the lives

of women. According to Lonzi, patriarchy had to be fought abandoning men to themselves and, according to Claire Fontaine (2013), “refusing to play into the mythology of a complementarity constructed entirely at the expense of women” which “means rejecting a sexuality that is nothing but a form of colonization” (p.5).

In the work of Carla Lonzi there is a constant research for a balance which aimed at the maintenance of independence, joy and pleasure for women, that can be called “revolt force” (Claire Fontaine, 2013): this is representative of the Italian situation in the '70s, because she identified politics with an existential space, with the practice of subjectivization (Ibidem), establishing the strength and the weakness of the feminist fights of those years. In the feminists groups of the '70s, there was this spasmodic research for the authenticity in the revolt gesture, in the oral or written expression of telling and sharing stories during the self-consciousness sessions. This search for authenticity is directly linked with the collective groups where women could be themselves, create their art, be free from the social pressure and institutional stereotype, with the possibility to focus mainly on their inner, personal and aesthetic research. But at the same time as Carla Lonzi (1974) states: “feminism begins when a woman seeks the resonance of herself in the authenticity of another woman because she understands that her only way to find herself is in her own gender.” (p.147, my translation).

The writings of Lonzi come from her own investigation in herself, through her pain and loneliness, looking for freedom. Her texts have a special relationship with her own experiential background and precisely because of that, they also have a terrible power. Lonzi finds a way to transmit a desperate and devastating energy, to tell the conflict between the hope and the insufficiency that coexist in every situation (Claire Fontaine, 2015). Lonzi pushed her radicalism to the point of thinking against herself, against her social and political identity and against the advantages that these could offer her in exchange for compromises that are as ordinary as destructive (Ibidem). She wanted to dismantle that double bind that makes women accept systematically what is unacceptable: staying quiet or speaking with words in which they don't recognize themselves, dying or living into lives made by and built for men. Her research allowed her to raise her voice and speak up from her position, which was the position of someone who does not have nothing to lose, a position that was far from the common sense, the same common sense that structures the modesty and the fear that separate us from our freedom (Ibidem)

Claire Fontaine has also produced several artworks inspired by Carla Lonzi. One of these is *Untitled (We are all clitoridian women)*, 2015.



It is a silkscreen image of the iconic representation of Marilyn Monroe made by Andy Warhol. Claire Fontaine took the canonized image and stencilled it in spray, painting on the words: we are all clitoridian women. These words are taken from the essay *The Clitoridian Women*, written by Lonzi that also inspired Claire Fontaine to write her own essay titled *We are all clitoridian women* (2013). This is a political artwork that addresses the contradictions of those twenty years, from 1949 to 1969, that can be called

“miracolo italiano”, when Italy experienced a late and fast modernization: the exodus of Italians who moved from the South to the North of Italy, looking for working possibilities in factories. The rise of this industrial development was supported by U.S. capital with the Marshall Plan. This plan had been thought to keep communism under control, through the establishment of a flourishing economy. The politics of Lonzi was already critical not only towards the Communist Party for its unsuccessful addressing of patriarchal structures, but also towards what she called “the proletariat’s reformist tendencies” (Mansoor, 2019) when it came to women; her political beliefs emerged from her historical affiliation with the left wing and with the Communist Party, with which many in the Italian left wing broke during the 1950s and the 1960s, protesting against its ultimate complicity with U.S. capital with the post-war managing class of the “miracolo economico” (Ibidem). The words of Lonzi in the silkscreen made by Claire Fontaine are in a dialectical relation with the image of Warhol, suggesting a kind of sexuality on the surface and the superficiality associated with American pop culture, forging its cultural arm so that “pop” became the synonym of capitalist realism (Ibidem). As a matter of fact, just as the idea that capitalism was the only way for society to exist, so Pop Art in the ’60s was seen and considered as the “only” expressive form able to describe and represent the flourishing economic condition of the country. The above mentioned artwork of Claire Fontaine, by saying that all women are clitoridian, claims a new perspective on the position of women in contrast to the stereotyped and mainstream way of subjugating them. Claire Fontaine highlights that for Carla Lonzi “being a clitoridian woman has not only sexual connotations, but *existential and political* connotations as well” (2013, p. 6).

There is also the problem of the subjectivity and self-consciousness of women: Lonzi accepted the fact that not only the personal was political, but that actually the political was personal, so that collective determinations of state and market would affect the quality of the lives of women insofar as women were relegated to the domain of the private and intimate by a state-to-market axis interested in placing women there (Mansoor, 2019). It is curious to observe, in this artwork, the choice of splitting the word women in ‘wo’ and ‘men’, becoming a detached word (men) in the last line, suggesting the fact that women cannot really be separate from men without compromises with those who shape the rules of the society.

In *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1974), Carla Lonzi dismantles psychoanalytic theories about women's pleasure, showing how women can enjoy an autonomous sexuality. Creating a distinction between sexuality and reproduction in and of itself can be an opening to a new subjectivation for women. Lonzi's discourse turns around the differences between a vaginal and clitoridian woman: this differentiation happened because, traditionally, women's pleasure has been associated with men's pleasure, as an answer to men's pleasure and with their correspondence. However, this involves, for the woman, the loss of herself as an autonomous subject. Since the patriarchal sexual culture is based on reproductive culture, it has produced a model of woman pleasure that is conceptualized as the vaginal pleasure with the reproduction as the only purpose of the sexuality. Instead, considering that the clitoris is an organ designed exclusively for pleasure, it is independent of the reproductive process and it opens, also for women, the way for a non-procreative sexuality. In patriarchal ideology, only the vaginal woman is considered a woman with a proper sexuality: the vaginal pleasure is the only official pleasure legitimized by patriarchy. Reaching the vaginal pleasure means the feelings of accomplishment in the only way it could be rewarding for the woman, gratifying man's expectation. In contrast, feminism theory establishes the vaginal woman as the one who is subjected to men's pleasure, while the clitoridian woman is the one who refuses to identify her sexuality coincident with the man's one. The clitoridian woman represents all that men do not want women to be. According to Lonzi, being a clitoridian woman has existential and political connotations, not only sexual ones. Sexuality and sexual pleasure are noted as those interstices of everyday life through which women are socialized and submitted to the rational disciplinary order of the reproduction of social life to maintain the status quo. In this sense, sexual and political autonomy are interlaced. Lonzi (1974) talking about the clitoridian woman states: "finally, in full possession of her sexuality, no one can convince her that her efforts will be rewarded and that the pleasure of a moment will be worth a life of slavery" (p.95).

This slavery is the economy where women, women's work and women's time are devalued in order to remain unremunerated while enabling the conditions for the possibility of men's work to be considered as value productive, and to be awarded and remunerated for it (Mansoor, 2019). Domestic labour has been imposed on women and has been made a natural attribute of femininity. And the fact that it is not paid makes it



appear as a non-job. However, it is a full time job which requires not only the employment of physical labour, but also of emotional one. Reproductive labour is work just like productive one (recognised as such). Plus, this implies that domestic labour is exclusively feminine work, reserved only for women. In this context, the female body becomes a crucial element in the reproductive labour: according to Federici (2020) Marx did not consider reproductive labour without which the entire capitalist system could not exist. Without reproductive labour done by women, the working class could not reproduce as such at all.

According to Lonzi, distinguishing between clitoridian and vaginal women is not a way to discriminate one or the other, but just to indicate the reaction that contains in itself the premises for the self-consciousness mechanism. At the same time, feminism is the natural outcome for those women who choose to live their life as singular subject without identifying themselves with their expected and socially imposed role, without being subjected to others. A vaginal woman could instead live and perceive feminism as a trauma, since she is not used to have an independent thought, whereby she became conscious of her subordination to the patriarchal society: for her, feminism can be a turning point in her life. The concept of autonomy for women does not mean isolating men or distancing themselves from men, rather it means keeping for themselves everything that, due to decades of subjugation, was addressed to men and to the family and that had social implications in respect to their being women, mothers, or wives.

In 2015 Claire Fontaine realized this artwork, inspired by the original editions of the books published by Rivolta Femminile publishing house. The artwork is composed of four pieces: *Sputiamo su Hegel*; *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale brickbat*; *Taci, anzi parla brickbat*; *La presenza dell' uomo nel femminismo brickbat*. These are actually sculptures of bricks covered with the covers of the corresponding books. Instead the brickbat is an object, often a stone that first had been wrapped in a sheet of paper on which there is a message of threat and then thrown through a window. There is a correlation between the text and the action among Marxism about the relation between theory and praxis, where Marx was to have taken the dialectic of Hegel and turned it on its feet to make change in the socio-political field according to Mansoor (2019). Claire Fontaine, in these artworks, suggests how the books of Lonzi can be as effective as direct actions, like “weapons”: an example of how to act against the economy of gendered slavery.



***Claire Fontaine, Brickbats, Francia 2015.***

The name and the voice of Lonzi situate the divide as a problem specific to women's political self realization as individuals and as a class. “*Let's Spit on Hegel*” is especially passionate about the need to overcome the masculinist fetish for authors, theories, ideas,

in the expectation that words might finally be used to do something about the master–slave dialectic Hegel was so keen to expound. Carla Lonzi, at the end of the book, wrote that only the ones who are not in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic can enter the world of the unexpected subject. Moreover, Lonzi made feminism make a radical shift towards the figure of the woman as a feminist subjectivity, not only because in her idea of subtraction from the master-slave dialectic the woman evades from her historical role of object, or because with the class struggle cannot end the fight against the patriarchal system (until when men will not stop considering sex as a natural fact, and will admit it is a social construction), but rather because Lonzi recognizes that, in the Marxist and Hegelian dialectic, the original roles are not lost, instead they are preserved until when the slave will overthrow the master’s role. Staying in the struggle, but overcoming its dialectic, will mean letting new subjectivities emerge, as unexpected possibilities. In the struggle against the patriarchal system, the woman cannot do without men, though, since as Lonzi (1974) states “on the woman-man level there is no solution that eliminates the other (my translation).

The 1970 was also the year in which Carla Lonzi started her sentimental relationship with the sculptor Pietro Consagra: this event is crucial to better understand the next works. *Taci, anzi parla* is a diary that Lonzi kept from 1972 to 1977, and it was published in 1978. It can be considered “an inextricable tangle of vanity and modesty, a pendulum swinging constantly between a completely self-centered approach and a passion for others that can lead to the deepest transformation of subjectivity” (Claire Fontaine, 2013, p.1)

Lonzi claimed that individual subjectivity was the women battlefield, that is filtered by the feminist’s practice of consciousness-raising. This practice is the main character of the journal that is a deep journey inside the relationships. Inside it we can find all the human material that capitalism, the social order and the patriarchal politics try to cover up and forget.

The value of this journal testifies how difficult and disruptive her choice in everyday life can be. The last pages and years of the journal are less populated by stories about the collective lives of women and more centered on her relationship with her partner Pietro Consagra and her challenge of overcoming jealousy and finding an acceptable balance. It is possible to observe her unspectacular, obscure, everyday revolt, her

absolute refusal to indulge in her own weaknesses. Her exploration of contradictions, even when it leads to a dead end, is even more heroic if considered in relation to the peaks of strength she reaches during the early years of Rivolta Femminile. By putting her intellectual power at the service of the feminist collective and by deciding to simply give it up in order to concentrate on herself, Lonzi refused to capitalize on her positions of power within and outside the collective. She said she wanted to finally get rid of the residue that the passage through the masculine world had left on her, she wanted to give up theoretical writing.

An important legacy of the thought of Lonzi is *Vai pure* (1980), a transcription of her last conversations with her partner Pietro Consagra before their decision to break up. These conversations are the setting where all the social forces and dynamics about art, artists and relationships play out. This dialogue also embodied the separation of Lonzi from the art world and its ethics. Lonzi left her role of art critic when she reached the point of abandoning her illusions about the freedom of the artists, when she understood that the possibilities offered by the creative space do not come without the compromises and mythologies that the artistic profession is based upon (Claire Fontaine, 2013). According to Carla Lonzi, Consagra gave more value to his artwork and his work as an artist rather than to their relationship.

Lonzi unmasks the demon of work and the gender struggle hidden inside love (Ibidem). According to Lonzi, women are still oppressed and unrealized in their private life and they cannot reach the doorstep of life with sufficient stability, because they start with a handicap.

Women seek for love and a relationship with a male partner, but this relationship will only take place in a way that gives power to the partner, helps him to face the world from a stronger position (Ibidem), so that need of women for love is created by patriarchy to help men succeed in life. According to Lonzi, women give love an independent value, while men give it an instrumental one. And men consider this love as an absolute value in the arts, in poetry, in the artworks that live and grow through these non-relationships.

The sublimation involved in art making is politically unacceptable for Lonzi. She talks about the fact that the role of the artist, as commonly intended and in which Pietro Consagra reflects himself, comes before the simple role of man, that totally absorbs the human being, causing troubles to their relationship. Consagra claims the complicity of

Lonzi, which is not only about support and that she cannot and does not want to give to him. From their conversations, it comes out how Consagra, as man and as artist, embodies the artwork and its values, while Lonzi represents a feminist desire for radicalism, the need to unmask the violence of productive dynamics and the possibility of living a life without a frame, a life that questions itself without hiding behind habits and obligations, a life that is truly an artwork (Claire Fontaine, 2013) in its authenticity.

*Vai pure* is the recording of four days of conversation with her partner Consagra about their relationship and the future of it. They discuss the incompatible points of view of two persons which personify two different cultures: Lonzi, who wanted to lay the foundations of her recognition as woman, and Consagra (embodying also the artist), who wanted to keep holding on to who he was and to his necessity. This conflict is the common conflict between the need of autonomy and the need for love, that women always lose in the patriarchal logic: women look for love in a men dominated world, a world owned by men, looking for the meeting point between these two aspects, which puts them in condition of emotional begging and loneliness. This kind of approach towards the human and sentimental relationship is what irreversibly keeps apart Lonzi, the woman whose life is one with her ideologies and her work, and Consagra, the artist and the man whose attention for his work and his art eventually crushes his life and love. At the end of the love story between Lonzi and Consagra, a universal truth clearly appears: Lonzi shows how the personal sphere is political as well, but also how the work of the artist can become the worst enemy of the freedom of women, how the artist is an alienated worker more than other workers and how his illusion can destroy human relations, objectifying it in the worst scenario.

It is here that the feminist position comes to be manifested as a strike - *the human strike* - against the organization of life organized according to male perspective, which tends to correspond to the professional component. The human strike is a form of insurrection in which the differences between the existential and professional aspects of each life enter into conflict, in which the economic, emotional and political complicity of each is brought into play (Claire Fontaine, 2015). The human strike is called like this because it is a reaction against the global exploitation and all-pervasiveness of the person which arrives up to the colonization of one's own subjectivity (Ibidem). This revolt is about the non acting and not behaving as common sense or conventions suggest to do, it consists in allying with the freest part of ourselves even if it could be the most dangerous to

break the bound of social and emotional relationships that connect us to an internal identity from which is impossible to escape. It is for this reason that both Lonzi's abandonment of her professional position and her separation from Consagra have to be read as deeply and somehow connected political gestures, because they represent her political commitment also in private and in public and professional decisions.

The personality of Carla Lonzi appears clearly from all text she wrote, just like her stance which is expressed inside them.

## **4.2 Between Claire Fontaine and Carla Lonzi: the Human Strike**

The work of Carla Lonzi provides Claire Fontaine with some tools for her analysis of the present, founded on texts as much as on objects. According to Claire Fontaine:

We must run the blockade and force it together: this imperative still resounds with its unbearable weight of truth, each in her home, in her bed, in her workplace, in her social relation. Each must find her voice and her silence, her ability to remain existentially creative without getting eaten by the illusion that artistic, intellectual, and professional recognitions will help her to make this gesture.

Running the blockade will be something we will do within ourselves, it will be the human strike in which we will break our complicity with what holds us back in ourselves and we will create the social and collective relations in which this illegible revolt will become euphoric and contagious.

Running the blockade means forcing oneself to read Lonzi as a friend we created in our minds of readers in order to make ourselves exist and capable of freedom, the social and emotional relationships that overturn those who make us what we are (Claire Fontaine, 2015).

Claire Fontaine focused on the work of Lonzi to highlight her central role in way in which she has broadened the public debates bringing in it the theme of labour, to women across class nonetheless bound to the common and shared logic of labour at that time: founded on the social principles of capitalism which means unremunerated labour founded on economical reproduction (Mansoor, 2019).

Between 1968 and 1975, in an atmosphere of social protests due to the social, political and economic situation in Italy, there was the proliferation of the dynamic, rich, complex spectrum of feminisms (Mansoor, 2019). While most of these feminists focused their struggles on the wages and accumulation of unremunerated work of women enabling the worker to produce value, Carla Lonzi focused on the exploration of the intersubjective, social, psychosexual, and collective existential dynamics structuring everyday life (Mansoor, 2019) which Claire Fontaine analyzes in her essay *We Are All*

*Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi's Legacy* (2013). Claire Fontaine shifted the parameters of feminism from the psychoanalytically theorized sexual difference to a materialist analysis of the social field revolving around the wage relation. This exploration will necessarily entail stepping back to address the history of class struggle from which Italian feminism derived, in distinction from other feminisms, due to its preoccupation with wage relations.

In the essay *We Are All Clitoridian Women* (2013), Claire Fontaine stresses the way in which power is structured through time for women and task performance highlights how Carla Lonzi defines the feminine skill of multitasking: “For me, doing one thing has a value because it prevents me from doing two” (Claire Fontaine, 2013, p.5).

With this statement quoted by Claire Fontaine, Lonzi questions the concept of women work in the capitalistic society where emphasis was, of course, on valuing productive labour over the interests of the workers. Lonzi (1974) understood the fact that “the patriarchal world has an absolute need of women as an element on which rests also the liberating effort of man, and feminine liberation can be realized only independently from the patriarchal forecasts and by the masculine liberating dynamics” (p.64).

Starting from her condition of subjection in relation to male creativity, she discovers to have the possibility of the autonomous liberation of the woman which is what the feminist movement looks for, recovering her creativity powered by the repression imposed to her by male models. In this manner, Lonzi theorized the absence of women from the creative moments of men, as an act of awareness, liberation and creativity, at the same time. The feminists of the women's collective in Bologna for the domestic salary in 1976 argued that:

If we strike, we won't leave unfinished products or untransformed raw materials; by interrupting our work we won't paralyze production, but rather the reproduction of the working class. And this would be a real strike even for those who normally go on strike without us (Coordinamento emiliano per il lavoro domestico, 1976 quoted by Claire Fontaine, 2017, p.38).

Starting from this assumption, Claire Fontaine theorized the idea of the human strike, specifically inspired to the feminist tactic of resistance and integrity.

Claire Fontaine has developed an artistic work that tries to transform political crisis into subjective emancipation. She understands that making art cannot oppose or completely subvert the political condition of late capitalism, so she presents herself as an artist on strike, a readymade subjectivity, a hole in the landscape through which a revolution might creep, arriving from elsewhere. Art, for the collective, should perform an interruption of the usual perception. The problem is determining how an aesthetic interruption can transform our lives, how this gap can or cannot provide us with weapons to fight our problems. According to Claire Fontaine (2017, p. 120), “the term human strike describes the most general movement of revolt against any kind of oppression, a more radical strike but less specific of general strike [...]. It answers the question: How do you become something else from what you are?”

The term “human strike” designs the most generic uprising movement. Human strike is the refusal to continue with a behaviour that seems to be natural, but actually creates a toxic dynamic. It is a strike that “interrupts the total mobilization to which we are all submitted and that allows us to transform ourselves and its goal is the transformation of the informal social relations on which domination is founded” (Claire Fontaine, 2017, pp.38-39, my translation).

The human strike is a pure medium, a way to create something in the present, where there was only expectations and hope. Adopting a different behaviour from the one that others expect is the first step for the human strike. The refusal for every form of the present that doesn't have the guarantee for comforting future constitutes the true mechanism of slavery in which we are trapped and from which we must escape. Producing the present does not mean producing the future.

Everywhere the human strike is manifested, it declares the end of the criminal acts of equivalence between money and time, money and space, money and food, money and bodies inside the capitalistic society. The human strike is the gesture that makes readable the silent political element hidden in all things: inside women's lives, inside ordinary racism and in other things. In this mechanism we constantly become what others want us to be, but starting a human strike means reversing this movement and refusing to act, basing our action on other's actions using their power. Outside the cultural field, the strike is an organized refusal to work by workers. It is a strategy to rebel against “the



specific capitalist form of accumulation in which lives are reduced to congealed labor measured in clock time and conjugated with currency [...]. The logic of the strike is the recognition of the violent and inhuman conditions for workers who produce value for others are not a matter of ethical social choices but an inherent function of capitalist means irrespective of human agency” (Mansoor, 2019, pp.383).

It had become clear [...] that work had nothing to do with choices, with ethics, or individual will, much less self-realization. It was simply part of a system of value in which the human itself was a disposable by product. But the insight was arrived at, and acted on, first by feminists in Italy associated with Wages for Housework (Mansoor, 2019, pp 383-384).

Without the invisible structural support, there would be no relation between the labour and the capital to speak of, no labour power and thereby no value source; there would be no capitalism. The human strike involves life in its wholeness, not only in its professional aspects, recognizing exploitation in every field and not just in paid labour. The subject of the human strike is the singular subject who each of us is. Claire Fontaine (2017) highlights that the human strike is a strike without claims or requests, that reveals the feminine society is considered as a place where it is allowed the implicit distribution of responsibilities and of the not-paid job. Italian feminism of the 1970s is an example of human strike, because they suppressed those boundaries that had made politics a space for men only.

Social changes - that could be either subjective or political - are strictly interconnected, such as the human strike is about the individuals whose social identity is not acknowledged, like all those who have no place in a society.

Feminism is one of those movements, in which people are bounded by the same goal of changing themselves and in which the change of the social conditions is not the ultimate aim, but a medium to transform subjectivities and relationships. In the movement of 1968, young people and women rebelled and claimed for new rights that were not only political in the common sense of the term, but that changed deeply the meaning of the word “political”. The politicization of sexuality is a symptom of this shift. All those feminist movements that don’t look for integration in a men-built-world, where man is the only character, are part of this strike. In Claire Fontaine’s opinion, the act of desubjectification - the act of distancing ourselves from who we are, the act of becoming

other, is the only possibility to fight against exploitation. In the actual social conditions, people are exploited both in those places designed for production and outside of them, because the working space has been fragmented and it is in every part of our lives.

The abandoning of individual subjectivity leads to the human strike, which means that the desubjectification leads to the collective: in art as well it implies not to be an individual artist, but to work in a collective way, even though without losing one's own identity.

In the perspective of Claire Fontaine, groups are seen as spaces in which the subjective transformation tries to direct itself toward a revolutionary force. The force that brings to the revolt is a strength hardly renewable, which, for its creation, needs collective conditions. The human strike can be seen as an extreme attempt to reclaim those instruments of strength's production for the revolt. These tools are purposes that bring a new power that reinforces the subjectivities, giving back to them their life's value that is a tool without a purpose.

The mutual subjectification of women is created where before there was nothing; women made freedom in which they can lean on one for other, in a world where to express it and keep on to make it exist in their life.

### **4.3 A conversation with Claire Fontaine<sup>30</sup>**

**Why does Claire Fontaine call herself as a feminist collective? What is your relationship with feminist art, both past and present?**

*CF: Claire Fontaine defines herself as a collective artist, an artist animated by several singularities. She calls herself feminist because she feels a deep connection with feminist epistemic and practical approaches to reality. There are several feminisms, she is interested in revolutionary and intersectional ones. Her relationship to feminisms is passionate, they are inspiring at all levels because they provide ways of staying mentally healthy, of maintaining meaningful relationships with each other, of interpreting history and politics and above all they offer a true political and human alternative to the current crisis of value that can't solve endemic problems like racism*

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<sup>30</sup> The conversation with Claire Fontaine occurred through an email exchange between January and February 2022.

*and global warming. And above all feminism offers the possibility of rethinking the balance between production and reproduction, conceiving the latter as a form of creative work.*

**What does it mean to be a feminist art collective today? What has changed in your work and in the artistic environment since you started?**

*CF: Today artists' collectives are more widespread and it's no longer such a rare thing to be working in collaboration. The figure of the author in contemporary art is finally exiting the reactionary idea of the genius. Nevertheless there still is a lot of prudence and opportunism when it comes to taking political positions that are not in the spectrum of the "safe" and political correct. If the artspace tends to be so conformist and superficial, so afraid of whatever threatens the very values that are causing the worst crisis of our civilization, it's because its connection with the market is the wrong one. Capitalism has always supported and propelled social change and then absorbed it to extract value from it. Now, like in the 30s we have entered a cycle where political change and progressive thinking are regarded with dread. The only field in which change is tolerated is the one where it's so overdue and desperately needed that it can no longer be delayed, it's the gender field and the race field, but even there it can't be said that the artworld is at the forefront of these matters. Collectors would and could be the most progressive people in the world, like they used to be in the past, but the system treats them like spoiled children that need to be bribed and not educated, it's infantilizing for everyone.*

**What is feminist about collective work? Why do you think feminism (historically) very often takes the form of collective art making?**

*CF: Feminism – especially the non-reformist kind – offers a model for cooperating and living together honoring and respecting our mutual differences, treating them like resources and not inadequacies to a model for general equality. This respect of the complexity of singularities, this care for others and oneself is what we all need to solve the grave problems shaking our civilization. The figure of the male genius, that used to be the dominant model for the successful artist, was a model of patriarchal oppression of others, a blatant example of a socially inapt and emotionally unresolved person, whose weakness was exploited as the pretended source of his creativity. This fairy tale has excluded too many people from art history and has put women and people of colour*

*in a place that is not their own, time has come to reveal that patriarchy has destroyed the life of the “tormented male artists” who were just victims of patriarchy trying to make sense of their pain. We can aspire to a conscious and mindful way of making art without thinking of it as therapeutic, or as a social practice, that doesn’t put up with the damage that patriarchy does to the creative subjectivities and claims health, strength and prosperity for all of them, male, female, transgender, people of any possible color.*

**What is your relationship with Carla Lonzi? Where was it born and why is it so strongly present in your work?**

*CF: Carla Lonzi is a groundbreaking thinker. She left the field of contemporary art to dedicate herself to revolutionary feminism and in doing so she has elaborated theories and conceptual tools that are still precious today. Our passion for her is old and we have never stopped reading her and thinking with her because, as she explained in Self-portrait, she had joined the art field with the same aspiration as us: inhabiting a region of culture where creative thinking and a shared research into ways of living more intensely were valued. She was disappointed and quit to create Rivolta Femminile and write her books, we still believe in it.*

## Conclusions

With this chapter I would like to conclude the study by summarising the key findings in relation to my research aim and questions, but also its limitations.

This research aims at investigating the reasons that, starting from the 1970s, led women artists to work collectively in order to overcome and get out of the invisibility in which the institutionalised Western Art History have relegated them for decades.

By analyzing and going through the history of women art, this research showed that the way of working collectively has always been, since the beginning, the best way to work into the field of feminist art. As history has proven, the reason for this is that a woman alone could not obtain anything, but, as feminism has proven, more women gathered together have a revolutionary force able to take back what they have been deprived for years by history, society and patriarchy. Together, with collective efforts and commitment to work, to research and to make art, women artists have been able to take back the place they deserved in the art field and to affirm their identity as artists. From feminism, women artists took new tools to observe, analyze and deconstruct at the same time both their society and themselves, becoming more aware of themselves, firstly as women in a male-shaped society, and then as artists in a male-dominated art world, with the deconstruction of the dominant idea of the male-genius individual artist. In this perspective, I also decided to analyze the case of Claire Fontaine, a feminist collective, in order to better understand the relationship between art and feminism in the contemporary field. I realized that the motivations and the purposes at the basis of their practice are very similar to those which persuaded women artists during the Seventies to found together feminist art collectives. What changes is the context, because in the 1970s feminist's thought had just started to enter the art field and it was not so widespread. Nevertheless, nowadays, although feminist claims have gained more relevance in society, there is still much to do from a feminist perspective, and what Claire Fontaine does with her art and her political commitment is spreading awareness with a feminist perspective about art, about society and about discrimination. Focusing on themselves, on their own specificity, and yet within the general context of relations with others: that is why the collective work has been so central for women in the art field.

I have also decided to focus on the influence of three major projects and exhibitions (*Womanhouse*, The Hayward Annual Exhibition II and *La materializzazione del linguaggio*) which during the 1970s took place in three central countries for the development of Western feminist art history of those years. These events, each one with its singularity and its issues, have been a turning point for feminist art, opening new perspectives, turning lights on the women artistic scene of the 1970s.

Based on sociological researches, critical reviews, papers and books studied for this research, it can be concluded that, women artists often acted collectively to affirm their presence in the art field, to deconstruct the mainstream idea of the artists as an individual genius, affirming the power of working together, with the purpose of re-emerging from the darkness of previous centuries. Art historians such as Linda Nochlin or Griselda Pollock showed that filling the gap with women's artists names in the institutionalised discipline of the History of Art is not sufficient to affirm the visibility of women artists. It is in fact necessary to deconstruct history, the point of views, and observe them through the feminist lens, through a new perspective, in which men are not the center of the universe.

The art world is still permeated of gender discrimination and women artists still don't have the same visibility or the same wages as their male peers. Still today, in museums, women's artworks are fewer than men's one. Still today, artworks produced by women are devalued in comparison with the ones made by men, even if it is not possible to distinguish the gender of the author of an artwork by simply watching it.

With this dissertation, I intend to point the attention to the fact that still today Art History cannot be considered an inclusive discipline. The art world, such as society, reflects the gender biases which contribute to shaping the whole field.

I focus on the necessity to change the mainstream culture and perspective of this world, since, like Claire Fontaine (2017) affirms, "there is the necessity to rethink our society starting from feminism. It is necessary to rethink all production on a global level, in an anticapitalistic sense, or at least in a more sustainable environmental perspective. [...] The integration between anticapitalism and a radical and popular feminism is still unrealized today, but desirable as never before, and the growing importance of this

issues in the academic debate and also outside prove this necessity and urgency” (p. 240, my translation).

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