

POPULAR

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2022

**WOMEN, ART
AND PHOTOGRAPHY:
INTERVIEW
WITH FEDERICA MUZZARELLI**

Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini

WOMEN, ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY: INTERVIEW WITH FEDERICA MUZZARELLI

Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini

Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini (AP and FT)

Today feminism holds a social relevance that was unknown to earlier epochs, and manifests it through the proliferation of a multitude of discourses that animate the contemporary theoretical debates. Taking this into account, is it possible to offer a different reading of the self-representation practices realized by women artists at the turn of the 20th century, so often unrecognized or relegated to a peripheral realm into the art world? What are, for you, the specificities of those years' artistic research? In what way this new way of making art by women was able to find a redemption from the traditional paradigm?

Federica Muzzarelli (FM)

Starting from the second half of the 19th century, the practices of self-representation realized by women, such as the photographic self-portrait and the diary writing, have been lessened in their meaning because they have been considered by the institutional cultural system as amateur activities. The idea that women were able to confront themselves only with the dimensions of the private and individual has provided an alibi for their exclusion from the domain of public confrontation. In reality, the marginality to which women, especially female artists, have been relegated, has paradoxically enabled them to find ample spaces of original and exceptional expression. Spaces where they could confront themselves with the experimentation of ideas and imaginaries that, until then, had been considered unrelated to the common widespread themes: the direct testimony of the self, the inquiry into one's own identity, the introspective storytelling, the research of one's own definition of gender, the celebration of one's obsessions and desires. As bell hooks has taught us, that forced marginality has progressively become a precious centrality when 20th-century's art and aesthetics have simultaneously rediscovered the centrality of

body, experience, identity and behavior. This rediscovery – which, as different philosophical traditions show, is something like a sea that bursts into 20th-century culture – arrived to have a mass impact in art only with the Neo avant-gardes of the second post-war period, in particular, with the experiences connected to Body Art in the 1960s and 1970s. It is absolutely important to notice that this was also the season when women started to become protagonists – and maybe they actually even determined themselves as the best commentators of these new instances in which art and life, aesthetic and existential experiences, constituted a sort of unsolvable twist. Of course, there are historical, political and social reasons that enabled this revolution, but, in fact, the centrality of the body was one of its characterizing elements. Therefore, today we are allowed to re-read the “private” exercises that women with artistic ambitions put in place already starting from the end of the 19th century – naturally turning for their urgencies to writing and photography – not only as interesting recoveries, but rather as forward-thinking and transgressive intuitions, and we are also allowed to connect them with the updates that explicitly feminist practices have further intensified and developed. In all of this, writing and photography are been redeemed from their purest conceptuality, namely that of being identification and performative tools way before the Duchampian revolution made such hypothesis even just conceivable.

AP and FT

In the Introduction to your book *Il corpo e l'azione. Donne e fotografia tra Otto e Novecento* you mention the marked affinity between writing and photography as tools for women's self-representation and self-inquiry into identity. Similarly, in a recent text published on the *Financial Times* entitled “I Have a Lot of Questions for You,” Elena Ferrante and Marina Abramović have questioned each other on the existing similarities between writing and performance art. There is a passage within this literary exchange that seems particularly significant to us in respect to the themes you deal with in your research. As Ferrante writes: “In *The Artist Is Present*, even more forcefully than elsewhere, you make of Marina Abramović – the artist – the work itself. And you offer that work to the public to contemplate no differently, in my view, from the way a carefully wrought text is offered to readers. I mean that the body, too, with its many experiences, is raw material, just as much as stone, wood, paper, ink. What's important is how that material is worked poetically, how we invent it, how we become its author. The rest is the industry of greatness, marketing, success, celebrity, biographical and autobiographical detail: things that are not at all irrelevant, and which we can enjoy or – with a self-control that I can assure you isn't easy – relinquish.” It is certainly interesting to think about Elena Ferrante and Marina Abramović as prosecutors of a “feminine” art and literature, understanding these terms as referred to those practices capable of putting into action radical political mechanisms and

subversion of the traditional codes of artistic production. In continuity with writers and artists of the past, in Ferrante's literary work we find the centrality of the female gaze on the world, as well as in Abramović is the connection between art and life and the centrality of the body in action. What emerges from the words of Ferrante reported here are the themes – common to both feminist writing and performing arts – of the authorship of oneself, of personal experience as a starting point for any type of artistic practice, and of the body (which is shown in images or words) as a meaning-bearing universe. In the same way, writing and photography have crossed, sharing most of these themes, and already between the 19th and the 20th centuries artists and writers have experienced their possibilities and affinities. What do you think those affinities meant for women artists in the past?

FM

For some time – and hopefully soon *as well*, in a new monograph – I have been working on “mixed” forms of creativity between photography and writing, on how these forms have become characteristic of a certain presence of women in art within a feminist perspective, and even more so of resistance. I would like to recall here the contribution given by Carla Lonzi's reflection, when she defined the feminist practice of self-awareness as the recovery of a way of thinking, talking and acting unbound from habits based on rationalization, logics and coherence, in favor of existential and aesthetic necessities that passed through the manifestation of the body. In a recent and very interesting work, which starts from Lonzi's diary, Carla Subrizi recalls the words of this famous Italian feminist scholar, when speaking of the free and irrational writing that is typical of the diary form: “[...] writing becomes a necessary tool in its original function to secure and stop thoughts [...]. It is no longer a writing connected to exceptional needs and talent.” For Carla Lonzi, the art of women had to re-establish its paradigms and restart from writing and self-consciousness. It is perhaps superfluous here to mention the reasons why, for female artists, photography appeared – alongside writing – as perhaps the most immediate and spontaneous tool to respond to the expressive need of women, confronting with identity, with the body, and with the presence in the world (digital developments have made this perspective wide and globally understood). This is why I find the activities of women, who use photography and writing, extremely interesting, as real activities of self-aware identity re-appropriation and as revolutionary practices of resistance and diversity. I am thinking of historical cases such as the scrapbooks of the Victorian-era aristocrats, or the Dadaist ones by Hannah Höch, the autobiographical-psychoanalytical work of Claude Cahun, the poetic and photographic experiments of Anne Brigman, up to the contributions between family album, diary and pamphlets offered by Carla Accardi, Francesca Woodman and Sophie Calle, or, even more recently, the multimedia projects of Alba Zari.