Chapter 10

The Temporalities of the 'Feminaissance'

Francesco Ventrella

For me, feminism has been one of the most creative things I have made in my life, even more than art [...] — Suzanne Santoro.¹

Returns and revivals

When Viv Groskop's article 'All Hail the Feminaissance' appeared on *The Guardian* on 11 May 2007, the hype of feminist art events on the global art scene that year had already been interrogated by the press: 'in recent months, art with feminist themes has undergone a massive resurgence, dominating the cultural agenda in the United States and being dubbed "the feminaissance"'. Written as a review for Matthew Buckingham's multimedia installation about Mary Wollstonecraft at the Camden Arts Centre, Groskop also expanded on a list of art initiatives celebrating the return of feminism encapsulated by a triumphant headline: 'For years feminist artists have been sidelined, or even derided. But now, almost overnight, the art world can't get enough of them'.² The article fully recognises the importance of these events, and it does so by conveying a message full of optimism (arguably shared among other professionals at the time) set in opposition to a period of neglect. Yet, narratives of return are always complicated by ideas of loss and progress. Whereas I do not intend to reconstruct the critical appraisal of the *feminaissance*, I would like to linger on this one article to investigate how 'art with feminist themes' itself becomes a document of the past, rather than a proposition for the present. Here I am not only interested in the cultural perceptions of 'feminist art' as a current phenomenon in contemporary art, but also, to paraphrase Griselda Pollock and Alison Rowley, as a phenomenon synchronous with the cultural processes 'happening in the now, and with the ways in which these processes may challenge the will to historical understanding'.³

Groskop's writing is replete with references that stress the temporal shift evoked by such 'resurgence', and in order to give evidence for the silence about feminism and make its return more meaningful, she makes reference to Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* being kept in storage for twenty years after its first

showing in San Francisco in 1979. However, as an *erratum* published later by the paper makes clear, *The Dinner Party* was not hidden for two decades, but travelled to US, Europe and Australia between 1980 and 1986, and was again on show in Los Angeles in 1996.⁴ Groskop's misinformation about the *Dinner Party* becomes useful to gauge a feminist historical imagination, while the exhibition life of *The Dinner Party* challenges the very idea of the rebirth of feminism around 2007. Although I am not trying to propose that the history of a single work ought to be taken as the paragon to assess the history of feminism in art, let alone the impact of the *feminaissance*, this instance seems symptomatic of the feelings, expectations and desires that have made it easier to imagine the histories of feminism through the tropes of loss, return and progress. Groskop's historical slip seems to show that pointing at women's absence from history is somehow more seductive than thinking about the ways in which they have been making themselves differently present throughout history. The problem remains of what subject such narratives make historically legible in the present. Claire Hemmings has argued that western feminist progress and loss narratives mutually reinforce their meaning within a common storyline: 'While they each represent their own logic as singular and as running directly counter to the other, their use of similar markers and points of transition might better be read as a debate within the same terrain'.⁵ Groskop's narrative betrays an attachment to the story that 'feminist art' was over and now it is back, and thus also reproduces the idea that the subject of feminism remain the same. The problem with a feminist revival lies not so much in the stories that we want to retrieve from oblivion and share with others, but in the politics of historiography, especially today that feminism itself has become a teaching object in the classroom as well as in the gallery.⁶ The format of the art exhibition seems to accommodate well the narratives of loss and progress which have become particularly amenable to selectively isolate feminism as one movement within the history of art.

Since Groskop published her article, even more feminist shows have been organised giving rise to a broad discussion within academia and museum curating of whether these events are the symptoms of a resurgent interest in the histories of 'feminist art', or just the effects of financial speculation on works made by women from the 1970s and 1980s which are considerably cheaper than those of their male

counterparts. Does this revival mark a new wave of feminist politics, or has the nostalgia conveyed by the narrative of revival created yet another separation between institutions and activism? These questions were already crucial in the 1970s, when feminist debates seemed polarised around two main positions. The first argued that women's works had been deliberately neglected in the past, as they still are in the present history of art; the second proposed that women had always been present as artists but in a variety of positions and competencies which did not necessarily correspond to the parameters established by the canons of modern art history.⁷ These two positions were often presented in opposition to one another, but it would not be impossible, forty years on, to think about some commonalities, for they both pose the question of historical transmissibility. While these two stances appear in contradiction when discussed along the Anglo-American axis, by moving away from this axis such polarisations become no longer legible. Turning to this narrative difference is vital to challenge the 'unmarked identity' of the voice of feminist theory and art history in the West.⁸

The recent turn to temporalities in feminist and queer theory has highlighted the role of narratives in dislocating or fixing bodies and subject positions, temporality being only one conduit by means of which unmarked positions become naturalised in historical discourse.⁹ Clare Hemmings' recent plea that feminists should acknowledge the temporalities of the stories they tell about the feminist past is especially useful to interrogate the politics of the *feminaissance*. In a painstaking survey of the narratives constructed by feminist academic journals in the past decades, she highlights recurring tropes associated with progress, loss and return according to different, but entwined temporalities in which feminist subjectivities have become legible in relation to a number of intellectual and cultural manifestations, among which I would like to consider art, art history and curating.

Michelle Meagher has navigated Hemmings' theorisation to take to task the dominant narratives in feminist art history which maintain the artificial divide between an essentialist first generation and a poststructuralist second generation — a divide which, she argues, performs the function of disidentification that is necessary for one generation to disconnect from, or disavow the other.¹⁰ However, rather than matching Hemmings' three narratives to the feminist problem of

generations alone, I would like to use her ideas about temporality to complicate the map of feminist art history. In this essay, I am going to look at three exhibition projects which took place in Italy to examine how the temporalities of the *feminaissance* make illegible some geographical differences, alongside generational ones.¹¹ Hemmings' arguments have been fruitfully applied elsewhere with great effect in the context of telling the stories of feminist art history. The dominant discourse of the *feminaissance* shows that this temporal construct cannot account for projects which may have set themselves apart from the art world also assumed in Groskop's article. Nostalgic narratives of loss are activated through a fantasy of progress that makes emancipation legible along a monological and chrono-normative vector embodied in the very etymology of the portmanteau *feminaissance* — with its obvious reference to the Renaissance, the historiographical period which has set the tempo of art historical narration in the western canon.¹² Thus, the *feminaissance* conveys historical representations which have a retroactive effect, as they turn feminist art into a movement which sits alongside other movements such as pop art and minimalism. Rather than thinking emancipation through linear progress, one can start to imagine the relationship between art and feminism, as 'a synchronic configuration of debates within feminism, all of which have something valuable to contribute to the enlarging feminist enterprise'.¹³ Shifting the focus from 'feminist art' to *art as a feminist practice* could be one initial step towards a more complex understanding of the relations between art and feminism, rather than by amalgamation with the globalized language of contemporary art practice.

On not translating 'feminist art'

While reviewing the exhibition catalogue of Wack!, in order to answer the question of why feminism had suddenly become so 'sexy' in 2007, Bojana Pejic made the interesting remark that 'the text on Italian feminist art criticism by Judith Russi-Kirshner, at least for me, is a historical discovery'.¹⁴ Followed by only two other studies in the catalogue dealing with specific locations of the postcolonial Anglophone world and Chile, the essay on Italy revolves on three major art critics associated with the 1970s feminist movement in Italy: Carla Lonzi, Anne-Marie Sauzeau Boetti and Lea Vergine.¹⁵ Russi-Kirshner explains that in Italy the theories

and politics of sexual difference have been more influential than the struggle for gender equality, and argues for taking into account this difference when we look at the works made by women.¹⁶ Most women artists mentioned here, and indeed the two Italian artists included in the exhibition, Carla Accardi and Ketty Larocca, did not easily identify with a feminist art movement.¹⁷ Russi-Kirshner astutely explains that these works could have not been made from within the context of a feminist art movement and, in fact, gain their potency from working on what Sauzeau-Boetti called a 'negative capability'. Rather than investing their energies in fighting for inclusion in the male-dominated art world, 'Lonzi, Suzeau Boetti, and Vergine deliver themselves from patriarchal culture and from the general constraints of modernism' in order to reimagine 'the potential of creativity and critical discourse to liberate their subjectivity'.¹⁸

Along the same lines, Jo Anna Isaak has argued that, amongst the preoccupation with 'reliving and rebutting our feminist history', Italy seems to represent an exception for 'almost no mention is made of Italian women artists in Italian histories of art'.¹⁹ In focusing on a feminist curatorial initiative instigated by co-curators Gaia Cianfanelli and Caterina Iaquina, Isaak emphasises that in this project there is no specific position taken against women's exclusion from the art world, and she concludes that the project to reinsert women in the canon of art history does not seem to have the same urgency in Italy that it had in North America: 'No one seems to be doing the Guerrilla Girls' job of keeping statistical track of the inequities of the art world'.²⁰ However, the two readings that Isaak and Russi-Kirshner give of the Italian scene also differ, for only the latter proposes historical and institutional arguments to explain how those women artists did not receive critical attention beyond Italy, as during the 1970s and 1980s they were overshadowed by the 'cultural packaging' of mostly male neo-avantgarde artists associated with Arte Povera and Transavanguardia.²¹ And both scholars turn to the legacies of Italian feminism, especially mentioning Rivolta Femminile and the writings of Carla Lonzi, a former art critic who, while rejecting art criticism as a profession, offered a sustained and consistent critique of the 'myth of male culture'.²² In fact, the same year Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay 'Why have there been no great women artists?' appeared in *ARTnews* (1971), Rivolta Femminile published a short manifesto titled *Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile*

(Woman's absence from the celebratory moments of male creative manifestation, 1971) in which women's refusal to celebrate male creativity ('art that is made by men for men') as spectators becomes the only condition of possibility for their creativity through feminism.²³ Unlike Nochlin, however, Lonzi was not interested in surveying those historical and institutional conditions which prevented women from entering the canon of art history, but she turned to the separation between active makers and passive viewers to interrogate another axis for the perpetuation of patriarchal culture. According to Lonzi, when they look at their relationship with male creativity, women find themselves with two options:

the first one, which has been employed so far, entails the achievement of equality on a level that has historically been defined by man [...]; the second, which is sought by the feminist movement, deals with woman's autonomous liberation to regain a creativity of her own fuelled by the repression imposed through the models of the dominant sex.²⁴

North American scholars have looked at Lonzi's position as a claim for autonomy resonating with the *autonomist* movements of the 1970s. Rather than investing energies in the institutions that have been shaped by the very absence of women from their rooms, 'contemporary Italian women artists do not seem to be looking for compensation for the way they are excluded from the art world'.²⁵ Our temporal distance should not obliterate the historical and political issues posed by Lonzi's separatism, but it may create a space of resonance to counter the segregation of 'feminist art' into yet another period of western art history. Lonzi did not recognize 'feminist art', and by not doing that she has left us with a creative demand to experience *art as a feminist practice*.²⁶ The intersection of the temporal problematic of the *feminaissance* with one specific location does not only represent cultural difference, but implies the production of differences. Griselda Pollock reminds us that 'to make a difference is to work to create the means to signify difference, and that cannot mean merely changing sides or perspectives'.²⁷ The radical position against culture that was expressed by Rivolta Femminile today resonates with a number of transnational feminist movements which have started to tackle the complexities of gender equality in order to open up a space of discussion for difference as a means of emancipation.

The political grammar of curating 1: Venice, 2005

Whereas I concentrate on the syntax of exhibitions, I am aware of the risk of erasing the agency of artists and artworks in defining the content of exhibitions themselves. Another essay should be written on how artworks can resist the overwriting of a curatorial rationale. My focus here is twofold: on the one hand, I am interested in analysing the frame of exhibitions, which I intend as the semiotic and spatial context (not necessarily a physical container) that create narratives by choreographing bodies through itineraries and soliciting interactions and associations; on the other, I will attend at the discourse of the show, intended as what the show shows, and shows off.²⁸ Since there is no instructive intention in this research, my essay will favour analysis over judgment. My attempt to read the temporalities of art exhibitions does not amount to a calendar of feminist curatorial practices, but will inform a very partial and very personal and self-reflexive journal. By engaging with Clare Hemmings' provocative study on the political grammar of feminist theory I wish to ask whether the return of 'feminist art' in curating has any potential to imagine the feminist past differently 'as a series of ongoing contests and relationships rather than a process of imagined linear displacement' in which the past exists only as an exhibit.²⁹

The 51st edition of the Venice Biennale, curated by Maria de Corral and Rosa Martínez, was significantly dubbed 'the Feminist Biennale'. The fact that the main curators of this edition were two women was then unprecedented in the centenary lifespan of the biennial. That year, three women artists received distinctions for their achievements: Barbara Kruger was awarded the golden lion for her career, Annette Messager received the golden lion for the best pavilion, and Regina José Galindo the golden lion as best young artist. Finally, in the exhibition installed at Le Corderie, curated by Rosa Martínez and titled *Always a Little Further*, over 50 per cent of the artists were women of different generations. The press was particularly taken by Joana Vasconcelos' installation welcoming the astonished audience in the antechamber of the Corderie with a gigantic chandelier made of tampons. The installation, physically invasive, and visually compelling, required visitors to go closer to find out that the shiny pendants constituting the chandelier were indeed

commercial tampons individually wrapped in industrial cellophane. In the same room, the large-scale posters of the Guerrilla Girls appeared almost like a backdrop to Vasconcelos' installation. One of their posters addressed Venice historical museums and showed the male icon of 1960s Italian cinema Marcello Mastroianni riding Anita Ekberg in a scene of Fellini's movie *La dolce vita* (1960). The text reads: 'Where are the women artists of Venice? Underneath the men'. The reference is to the number of works by early-modern artists such as Marietta Robusti, Rosalba Carriera, Giulia Lama, and Isabella Piccini which are kept in storage, or have rarely been on display. Another poster, instead, appropriates Canaletto's eighteenth-century vistas of Venice to function as the background for a number of claims and sarcastic questions speaking directly to the Biennale institution: 'French Pavilion has solo show by a woman: Who cares if it's the first time in 100 years!' The statistics at the bottom of the poster show that the percentage of women from the first Biennale in 1895 until 1995 shifted from 2.4 per cent to 9 per cent [Figure 10.1]. A mock-up version of the same poster, which is only reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, shows one Guerrilla Girl holding a placard with a message that points the finger at the Italian art system: 'Mamma mia! Why don't Italian women artists win more prizes?'³⁰ When I visited the show in 2005, these questions resonated with my desire to critique patriarchal culture and radicalise art history in Italian — a desire that I had at least begun to satisfy in a foreign language. However, the culture wars are not a ubiquitous phenomenon, let alone a universal one: how does their question, in spite of its subversive intent, reproduce the 'peripheralisation' of Italian women artists, both in temporal and spatial terms?³¹ The questions posed by the Guerrilla Girls do not account for the number of Italian women artists, radicalized during the 1970s, who have continued to show their work in feminist spaces, women artists co-ops and anti-violence groups. As Jo Anna Isaak illustrates in her essays, Italy still is home to a constellation of feminist initiatives in which artists have shown their work outside the conventional circuits of the art world. Far from being a choice of invisibility, these contexts have proved instrumental to showing art made by women and this is demonstrated by the growing number of academic studies on women's networks and spaces.³²

The press release, published for the opening conference of the Biennale, unpacks the title of the exhibition - *Always a Little Further* - which derives from the adventures

of Corto Maltese, the male hero created by Venetian writer and illustrator Hugo Pratt. In the introduction of the exhibition catalogue, Rosa Martínez explains Pratt's writings have turned Corto Maltese into a legend: 'he personifies the myth of the romantic traveler always open to chance and risk, and always crossing every imaginable frontier in pursuit of his own destiny'.³³ The title both frames and showcases the work of many artists, while producing an uncomfortable resonance between feminism and the male hero. Martínez obviously wanted to celebrate the ways in which feminism has changed art history, which it did. As she claims in another recent essay, women artists 'demand that the values of the old French revolution — equality, freedom, fraternity — be readdressed from the new perspectives of gender, race and class'.³⁴ However, in 2005 feminism was presented as a universalising theme (rather than as a transnational effort), as one moment within a narrative of progress that is redolent of the modernist caveat that art is moving 'always a little further'. In the context of a global art biennial, putting forward 'a shared feminist future requires the fantasy of a shared oppressive past', which corresponds to the erosion of dissonant stories.³⁵ Such representations become coextensive with the globalised view of the contemporary art world, in which gender equality becomes the marker of 'our' democratic present, while we become increasingly unable to question who 'we' are to speak for others.³⁶

Hemmings identifies in the narrative of progress a desire to reassure the subjects of feminist thinking 'that the present is a time of proliferation'.³⁷ This does not entail a refutation of the achievements of feminism, as these two perspectives do not necessarily exclude one another. However, by locating 'feminist art' and the 'feminist biennale' through the chronotope described as 'always a little further', Martínez allegedly conveys a perception of time that is in line with the modernist (oedipal) narrative of art history, in which the new is always exchanged, as a commodity, in place of the old. Indeed, it was exciting for me to hear the very expression '*la biennale femminista*' in the sound of my mother tongue. Yet, the universalising grammar of Martínez's exhibition project illuminates a uniformity of progression that is as seductive as it is misleading, since the narratives of global feminisms cannot rely on one (and indeed one's) *lingua franca*. What this seduction concealed was that feminist art had become the next big thing. Embracing new knowledges or forgetting old ones are two options that appear as mutually exclusive

only while they remain fastened to a progress narrative that is also a story of consumption and commodification.

The political grammar of curating 2: Rome, 2010

In the ongoing mapping of current feminist exhibitions undertaken by scholars through academic conferences and round tables since 2007, the exhibition *Donna: Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* is an interesting inclusion (Figure 10.2). Curated in 2010, it was a collaboration between Angela Andreina Rorro, director of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, and Gabriele Schor, curator of the Verbund Collection in Vienna, which has become prominent in Europe for the acquisition of feminist artworks. The collection has been on tour around Europe for many years, and it was again on display in London at The Photographers' Gallery in 2016. The Italian show included the works of seventeen artists from the collection, among the most popular in the recent feminist blockbusters: Cindy Sherman, Suzanne Lacy, Francesca Woodman, Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Nil Yalter, to name just a few. Being a selection from one single collection, the project did not aim to create links with the Italian feminist movement, nor to engage with a critique of the rampant sexism broadcasted by the 'pornocratic' regime enforced in twenty years of media culture under Berlusconi.³⁸ *Donna* is obviously not the first exhibition to showcase the work of women artists in Italy. Only the appendix at the end of the exhibition catalogue, compiled by Alessandra Lanzoni, shows the variety of curatorial initiatives which have involved both institutional and independent spaces since the 1970s. By not engaging with the present, however, the exhibition relied on a sense of nostalgia drawing on an exclusive archive of the 'feminist avant-garde' that included only one Italian artist, Ketty Larocca (whose work was acquired in this occasion). The paratactic arrangement chosen for the hung emphasised the museological mind in operation in lending a corporate collection to a national museum. Occupying a museum space between the rooms of Joseph Kosuth and Arte Povera, *Donna* perhaps materialises a limited art historical intervention, but it also lends itself to an investigation of the role of women artists in the history of twentieth-century art.³⁹

By making the case for a feminist avant-garde, this exhibition aligned itself along the trajectory drawn by other feminist exhibitions, such as *Wack!*, oriented to find a

place for feminist art in the history of art history after 1945. Therefore, the exhibition catalogue makes an important attempt to rewrite the historiography of the avant-garde by putting women back where they belong.⁴⁰ In the latest English version of the catalogue, Schor clarifies this position and stresses her intention to create a connection between 'feminism' and 'avant-garde' in order to enlarge the male canon of the avant-garde and to 'embed the decade's consequential feminist activities and production in the historiography of the avant-garde'.⁴¹ But what does it mean to reinsert women artists into a historiographic category that has been shaped by a masculine discourse? As many scholars have demonstrated, the category of the 'woman artist' seems to clash with the historiography of the avant-garde, for it undermines the very authenticity of the modern artist by contamination with gender.⁴² Since the history of the women's exhibition has been tinted with exceptionalism, it may not be enough to claim and expansion of the canon without tackling the problem of how the canon in question was created first.

In spite of art exhibitions being organised by women's societies since the nineteenth century, the woman artist remained a sub-category of modern art history and visual culture. The surrogate of an ideal (male) great artist, the woman artist has been a disqualifying category according to modernist standards, because it is defined by sex, rather than by the quality of the art.⁴³ Although Donna seems to propose that gender and sexuality do not undermine the avant-gardism of women's works, but are an integral component of the avant-garde, the effect produced by the singular subject in the title is that of an alignment of the woman artist with a male historiographical project. At the same time, the epistemological effect is that of a segregation, in which 'woman' occupies the space of an 'other' that is designated, set apart, spoken of.⁴⁴ Like the title of another major blockbuster show to come out of the *feminaissance*, *elles@centrepompidou* (2009), the title Donna too presents a set of problems dealing with the very symbolic and political boundaries of a women's exhibition. Elisabeth Lebovici has argued that 'The resistance of women artists to the woman in the artist is rooted less in the forgotten histories of the practices themselves than in the history of art as a chronological, canonical account, a discipline of separation and hierarchical order'.⁴⁵ The history of the woman's art exhibition must therefore be examined in relation to the political and institutional conditions that help define such a category in a historical perspective, and which include disciplinary historiography.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to do away with women's exhibitions and embrace a genderless curatorial rationale, for this claim of equality is in fact an effacement of the social, historical and symbolic conditions that mark difference. Instead, Lebovici indicates that women's exhibition should take up the task of challenging the very hierarchical orders that give art exhibitions its set of rules, conventions and expectations. A women artists exhibition organized in the very rooms shaped by their exclusion seems to defeat the purpose, especially when the curators' task of recovery and inclusion is the only vehicle to interpret the artworks.⁴⁶

The showing of the Verbund collection in Rome did not establish any link with the local feminist community nor attempted a translation of feminist art into a local context which has traditionally challenged this definition. The aesthetics of the exhibition, mostly comprising of black and white photographs and videos, unwillingly endorsed a sense of nostalgia and created a strange consistency with which to frame the feminist avant-garde like an old photo-album. The problem of loss narratives, Hemmings writes, is that they 'require the "death of feminism" in order to retain a static and familiar object to be lamented, in order to ensure at all costs that they do not encounter that object in the present'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the turning of feminism into a series of exhibits is also symptomatic of its potential commodification, that is reflected in the twenty-first-century shift of the museum from the shrine of national patrimony into a realm of commerce and consumption.⁴⁸ In the Rome exhibition, this shift has left legible traces of the inequalities among employees. Some of the captions on the gallery walls were signed by Angela Andreina Rorro, some by Gabriele Schor, and others were not signed at all. Why was the work of the wider team not acknowledged? This erasure of intellectual labour within the spaces of the museum triggers the question of what the difference between a feminist exhibition and an exhibition whose theme is feminism might be: this issue becomes especially strident when one considers the feminisation of the workplace in the museum environment, let alone the critical mass of female interns who statistically represent the majority of students coming from art history and curating degrees. Indeed, while women artists are underrepresented in Italian museum collections and art history, women represent the largest group working in the museum sector. This paradox instigates the discussions around my third case study, *Autoritratti: Iscrizioni del Feminine Nell'arte Contemporanea Italiana* (Self-portraits.

Inscriptions of the Feminine in Contemporary Italian art) a project organised by a collective of women working at the Museum of Modern art of Bologna in 2013, under the coordination of Uliana Zanetti, an employee of the museum collection department.

The political grammar of curating 3: Bologna, 2013

In approaching my third example I am aware that its position in my story might also create a progress narrative. In fact, neither *Always a Little Further* nor *Donna* should be judged as 'bad' exhibitions, in opposition to my third example as 'good'. My aim here has been to focus on the temporalities inscribed in the stories curators tell about feminist art, and my discussion of a Bolognese project will further explore the entwinement of loss, progress and return narratives. Before becoming an exhibition, the project originated in the initial discussions for a potential rehang of the permanent collection to bring out the works made by women. An all-woman workforce has been involved, to the extent allowed by their time and willingness to participate in the elaboration of the project. Contributors to these discussions became quickly aware that a new display showcasing women's works in an institutional space whose authority has been defined by their exclusion would have resulted only in a temporary concession. Nonetheless, as co-curator Uliana Zanetti argues, the museum could still be used as a laboratory 'to stage and experiment with new forms of relations'.⁴⁹ When thinking about women, Zanetti does not think of museums only as physical spaces and containers demarcated by their absence. If the task of the museum is that of preserving and disseminating heritage, one should also include the museum's institutional and interpersonal dynamics, real and virtual publics, and the daily labour of its employees. Thus, the starting point of this project lies not in the attempt to fulfil a historical void, but from the desire to explore common stories, continuities and attachments, what women have in common in spite of the physical separation and institutional hierarchies of knowledges and skills in operation within a museum institution.

As the subtitle of the project indicates, the women's group returned to Griselda Pollock's concept of 'inscription of the feminine' in order to revise how sexual difference is inscribed in the work place, as well as in the history of art, the history of

philosophy, family relations, and so on, in the recognition of ‘those working within the predicament of femininity in phallogentric cultures in their diverse formations and varying systems of representations’.⁵⁰ In this sense, *Autoritratti: Iscrizioni del Feminine Nell’arte Contemporanea Italiana* (Figure 10.3) re-narrates post-structuralist feminist theories, to show how these questions do not eschew an encounter with the problematics of labour and agency. This ex-centric reading of Pollock’s ideas is a revision through which the project might be seen as an embodiment of a ‘return narrative’, which Hemmings associates with the current interest in new materialism elaborated in response to the apparent ineffectiveness of the cultural turn, and the stress on discursive practices fostered by poststructuralist theories (including psychoanalysis).

The incommensurability of the cultural turn and materialism produced in return narratives retells the story [...] of a feminist political landscape and its subjects. [...] In return narratives there are two primary political motivations for a revised materialist approach that necessitate the abandonment of a focus on representation. [...] In the first, performative theory has failed to achieve social transformation, implying that without the interruption of such theoretical approaches, social conditions might perhaps have improved. In the second, the political interruption that cultural theories and debates represent can no longer be justified in the face of re-emergent inequalities.⁵¹

Only later the collective envisaged the possibility of organising the exhibition, and turned to Carla Lonzi’s thought to find a model of feminist authority that derives from women’s mutual recognition (*riconoscimento*), and the necessity for women to represent themselves without the interference of others.⁵² The title of the show declares their desire to engage with Lonzi’s legacy, for *Autoritratto* was the title of the collection of artist interviews she published in 1969. While *Autoritratto* represented Lonzi’s definitive resignation from the art world, *Autoritratti* (the exhibition) has turned the so-called missed encounter between art and feminism in the institutional art world into an advantage. The project propagated also outside the museum, thus involving a wider network of participants, among artists, curators, art historians and thinkers, who progressively joined in. Zanetti describes the aim of this methodology as twofold: firstly, they wanted to make visible the traces of a network

that already existed and which could link, from within the institution, some women to other women; secondly, these discussions soon merged into broader issues about life and politics outside the museum, thus turning the institution into a space in which women could talk about themselves to themselves and, consequentially, produce culture from the standpoint of mutual recognition.⁵³ Rather than taking Lonzi's choice as a historical interdiction, the exhibition *Autoritratti* embraces Paola Di Cori's proposal that the history of feminism can be told only via continually reinventing, revisiting and re-visioning the asynchronic stories of feminisms.⁵⁴ 'From Paola di Cori', Zanetti explains:

[...] we got the idea that only by continually reinventing feminism can we trace its history back without turning it into an innocuous archival object. I am convinced that it is neither right nor fair to assimilate everything into a kind of 'dominant feminism' (this risk exists and it would be only a sad replica of the very mechanisms that we would like to undermine), but the issue, for how I see it, stands in the very possibility of a translation among different languages.⁵⁵

The exhibition showcased artists selected by following a methodology of mutual recognition among women. These included artists who belong to different generations and different stages of their career, and who also operate in different fringes of the national and international art world. Many works were produced specifically for the show and addressed feminist memories and genealogies: Sabrina Mezzaqui made a transcription of Simone Weil's notebooks; goldiechiari showed the video *Anygirl* (2012) which documents the murdering of Wilma Montesi, the first case of femicide to be discussed in postwar Italy; Paola Anziché looks at another woman artist in the work *Sur les traces de Lygia Clark. Souvenirs et évocations de ses années parisiennes* (2011); Moira Ricci, Marzia Migliora and Letizia Renzini explored the mother/daughter relationship. The exhibition catalogue explains that the show was not the end goal of the project, but only one stage among talks, workshops and publication. Indeed, the process behind the show was hardly visible in the museum space. Does this mean that an art exhibition is not able to accommodate the practice of *riconoscimento* upon which the initial discussions had slowly and organically developed into a curatorial project?

Like many art projects variously associated with relational aesthetics, this relational form of curating too survives only in the stories that we tell about it.⁵⁶ The stories that were told during the meetings and workshops inevitably exceed the walls of the museum. Yet, what may appear as a failure is perhaps also a success. As the title of the show declares, this project did not aim to give one single monumental history, but a series of self-portraits, inevitably subjective and singular, which await, like portraits do, for another subject to recognise them. I do not think the collective of *Autoritratti* wished their initiative to become a model for feminist curating. This encounter represents a demand, rather than a description or representation, for difference and singularity. ‘An exhibition in which women artists actively enable each other and are accountable to and for each other’ Jo Anna Isaak writes, ‘represents a feminist future in the making: “once connected, the excluded are not marginalized”’⁵⁷

Conclusion

Who is the subject of these three exhibitions? The narratives of the *feminaissance* often naturalise the use of ‘we’ and, consequentially, iron out the cultural and geographical differences of the stories ‘we’ tell about feminist art history: ‘it is precisely the endowing of one feminist subject and not another with the capacity to take feminism forward that produces the shared narrative of feminism as over in the first instance’.⁵⁸ While the desire for a collective political subject remains amenable and reassuring, today it has become tinted with the nostalgia of loss narratives which have tamed its potential and distracted ‘us’ from unforeseen encounters with what ‘we’ could become. As a ‘*generational*’ pronoun, ‘we’ marks the territory of a potential exclusion and inclusion – above all, the implied exclusion of not cis-gender women artists. But we could be *generatively* formed as a subject that enables the telling different stories, through projective acts of identification and disidentification. By challenging naturalizing assumptions about sex and gender, feminist artists (then and now) show that ‘we’ can reshape gender identities in a way that allows more of us to feel at home in them. I am not trying to define a feminist-specific pronoun here: saying ‘we’ is especially problematic for me because, although I want to work for and with feminism, I do not want to speak for women. However, I think it is important to imagine a way of saying ‘we’ which is not merely replicative, but one which is instead transformative of the relationship between sex and gender.

Indeed, 'we' can be used not to naturalise oppositions from, but to make bridges with. According to Iris Van der Tuin, if we want to encounter the unforeseeable, and the new, we need to embrace non-linear and non-causal temporalities for 'bridging what was conflictual for a previous generation is an instantiation of jumping generations'.⁵⁹ It is an assumption that new generations ought to interact *in favour of* or *in opposition to* only one wave or theoretical strand in order to start a 'new' categorization. This monological way of representing feminist epistemologies is structurally oedipal for it requires a progress narrative to be discernible. Therefore, van der Tuin proposes upsetting this process through the methodology of 'jumping generations' which instead enables 'bi-directional running on single or multiple tracks'.⁶⁰ This different mode of thinking about generationality and gender in feminism reveals itself as a generative way of thinking through which we can address those shared conversations that happen in a creative mode through a non-linear representation of time. This is not given as a prescription, but it would be good material to relay 'our' certainties about what we know of the past of feminist art history, and what makes us feel good about imagining its future. Perhaps, as Hemmings suggests at the end of her book, we can do without the feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return 'because we would like a present and a future with some unpredictability in them'.⁶¹

I would like to thank the editors for their helpful comments. I am also especially grateful to Abi Shapiro and Suzanne van Rossenberg for their constructive criticism on earlier versions of this essay, and to Alexandra Kokoli for picking my brain on the transformative meanings in saying 'we'.

¹ Suzanne Santoro and Marta Serravalli, 'Intervista a Suzanne Santoro (Capranica, 9 dicembre 2010)', in Marta Serravalli, *Arte e femminismo a Roma negli anni settanta* (Roma, 2013), p. 222.

² Vivian Groskop, 'All hail the feminaissance', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2007. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/may/11/art.gender> (Accessed 3 November 2016).

³ This quote comes from the call for papers of the academic session 'The Year Was 2007: Historical Understanding, Difference and the Contemporary Exhibition Effect', AAH Conference, London 2008. See <http://www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference/past-conferences/2008/academic-sessions-2008/academic-sessions-london-2008-19#sthash.Q92fo2ma.dpuf> (accessed 3 November 2016). For a discussion and selected references about the feminist revival in the visual arts see Amelia Jones, 'The Return of Feminism and the Visual Arts 1970/2009', in Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe and Malin Hedlin Hayden, eds, *Feminisms is still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices* (Newcastle, 2010), pp. 11-56; Angela Dimitrikaki and Lara Perry, 'How to Be Seen: An Introduction to Feminist Politics, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions' in Angela Dimitrikaki and

-
- Lara Perry, eds, *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*. (Liverpool, 2013), pp. 1-21.
- ⁴ See Jane Gerhard, 'From Controversy to Canonization: *The Dinner Party*'s Journey to Brooklyn', in Judy Chicago, ed., *The Dinner Party. Restoring Women to History*, (New York, 2014), pp. 265-276.
- ⁵ Claire Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter. The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, 2011), p. 61.
- ⁶ See Alexandra Kokoli, 'Fetishism and the Stories of Feminist Art', in Alexandra Kokoli, ed., *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* (Newcastle, 2008), pp. 206-226; see also Victoria Horne and Amy Tobin, 'An Unfinished Revolution in Art Historiography, or How to Write a Feminist Art History', *Feminist Review* 107 (2014), pp. 75-83, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume.
- ⁷ Griselda Pollock, 'Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978', in *Feminist Review* 2 (1979), p. 34.
- ⁸ Hilary Robinson, 'Introduction: Feminism-Art-Theory — Towards a (Political) Historiography', in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, ed. by H. Robinson, (Hoboken, 2001), p. 3.
- ⁹ See Elizabeth Freeman, ed, 'Queer Temporalities', special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 13: 2/3 (2007). Catherine Grant has eloquently discussed some of these concerns with temporalities in relation to the politics of looking back at 1970s feminism in contemporary art. Catherine Grant, 'Fans of Feminism', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34/2 (2011), pp. 265-286.
- ¹⁰ Michelle Meagher, 'Telling Stories About Feminist Art', *Feminist Theory*, 12/3 (2011), pp. 297-316.
- ¹¹ While I speak about Italy, I am not assuming one Italian national identity. This definition is especially problematic, and requires taking into account the history of internal migration as well as global migration movements. For an intersectional analysis of these problems see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York, 2012).
- ¹² See Nanette Salomon, 'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission', in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 344-355.
- ¹³ Griselda Pollock, 'The politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories', in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generation and Geographies in the Visual Arts. Feminist Readings* (London, 1996), p. 5.
- ¹⁴ Bojana Pejic, 'Why is feminism suddenly so "sexy"?' in *Springerin*, 2007. Available at http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=2025&lang=en (accessed 3 November 2016).
- ¹⁵ Marsha Meskimmon, 'Chronology through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally'; Nelly Richard, 'Fugitive Identities and Dissenting Code-Systems: Women Artists During the Military Dictatorship in Chile', in Butler, ed., *Wack!*, pp. 322-335; 414-427.
- ¹⁶ Judith Russi-Kirshner, 'Voices and Images of Italian Feminism', in Butler, ed., *Wack!*, p. 386.
- ¹⁷ While Ketty Larocca was never involved in the feminist movement, Carla Accardi did not want to be associated with feminism after the Cooperativa Beato Angelico was dismantled in 1978. See Katia Almerini, 'The Cooperativa Beato Angelico: A Feminist Art Space in 1970s Rome', in Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi, eds, *The Legacy of Carla Lonzi: Art and Feminism in Postwar Italy* (IB Tauris, forthcoming).
- ¹⁸ Russi-Kirshner, 'Voices and Images', p. 389.
- ¹⁹ Jo Anna Isaak, Gaia Cianfanelli, Caterina Iaquina, 'Curatorial Practice as Collaboration in the United States and Italy', in Jill Fields, ed., *Entering the Picture. Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists* (New York and London, 2012), p. 296.
- ²⁰ Isaak, Cianfanelli, Iaquina, 'Curatorial Practice as Collaboration', p. 298. See also Cianfanelli and Iaquina, *Dissertare/Disertare* (Genoa, 2008).
- ²¹ Russi-Kirshner, 'Voices and Images', p. 387.
- ²² See Zapperi's essay in this volume.
- ²³ Isaak, Cianfanelli, Iaquina, 'Curatorial Practice as Collaboration', p. 306.
- ²⁴ Carla Lonzi, 'Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile', in Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel e La donna clitoride e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Rome, 1974), pp. 64-65.
- ²⁵ Jo Anna Isaak, 'Insights from Italy. Pleasure, Plurality and the Shaping of the Present', in Dimitrikaki and Perry, *Politics in a Glass Case*, p. 170.
- ²⁶ Francesco Ventrella, 'Carla Lonzi's Artwriting and the Resonance of Separatism', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21/3 (2013), pp. 282-87.
- ²⁷ Griselda Pollock, 'Painting, Feminism, History', in Michèle Barrett and Anne Philips, eds, *Destabilizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Stanford, 1992), p. 158.
- ²⁸ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposure. The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (London and New York, 2006).

-
- ²⁹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 131. By ‘grammar’ Hemmings means ‘the techniques (oppositions, intertextual references, and so on) that serve as narrative building blocks’. She then uses the expression ‘political grammar’ to address the political life of these stories, the way in which they are stitched together and make some things visible, while they hide some others. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ³⁰ Rosa Martínez, *Always a Little Further. 51st International Art Exhibition* (New York, 2005), p. 125. As it often happens with big shows, the mock-up version reproduced in the exhibition catalogue is different from the final work. I am grateful to Käthe Kollwitz for discussing the project with me and allowing me to mention the line in the draft version.
- ³¹ I am borrowing this question from Angela Dimitrikaki who has critiqued the uncritical valorisation of cultural difference in an essay that examines the reception of feminist art history in Estonia, Greece and Great Britain. Angela Dimitrikaki, ‘Researching Culture/s and the Omitted Footnote: Questions on the Practice of Feminist Art History’, in Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher, eds, *Over Here. International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (New York, 2004), p. 354.
- ³² See Katia Almerini *Arte e femminismo in Italia negli anni Settanta. Il caso della Cooperativa Beato Angelico*, MA dissertation, Università degli Studi di Roma Tre (Rome, 2009). See also Serravalli, *Arte e femminismo*.
- ³³ Martínez, *Always a Little Further*, p. xvi
- ³⁴ Rosa Martínez, ‘Women in Art, a Politically Unbalanced Relationship’, *Quadernes de la Mediterrània* 14 (2010), p. 175. Interestingly, this article contains a reproduction of the mock-up version of the poster by the Guerrilla Girls and not the final work.
- ³⁵ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 149.
- ³⁶ Cornelia Butler, for instance, stated that her curatorial ambition with Wack! was ‘to make the case that feminism’s impact on art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international “movement” of any during the postwar period’. Cornelia Butler, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Cambridge MA, 2007), p. 15. What Butler does not explain is why the achievements of women artists since the 1970s should also not be helpful to question, rather than endorse, the canonical periodisation of art history and its institutions.
- ³⁷ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 39.
- ³⁸ The feminist movement in Italy is mentioned only twice in the exhibition catalogue. Firstly, the introductory by Gabriele Schor makes reference to Rivolta Femminile. Secondly, Suzanne Santoro’s work is discussed in Gisliind Nabakowski’s essay on Nil Yalter. Gabriele Schor, ed., *Donna: Avanguardia femminista negli anni ’70* (Milan, 2010), pp. 26; 72.
- ³⁹ The title Donna was used in the occasion of the Roman show only. A new catalogue has now been issued in German (including 34 artists) and in the expanded English version (including 48 artists). Gabriele Schor, ed., *The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Sammlung Verbund Vienna* (München, London, New York, 2016).
- ⁴⁰ Gabriele Schor, ed., *Donna: Avanguardia femminista*, p. 23.
- ⁴¹ Schor, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, p. 20.
- ⁴² Griselda Pollock, ‘The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women’, in Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds, *Modern Women. Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 2010), p. 67.
- ⁴³ On this matter see Catherine Gonnard and Élisabeth Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes, artistes femmes. Paris, de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007).
- ⁴⁴ Alexandra Kokoli, ‘The “Woman Artist” as a Curatorial Effect’, in Dimitrikaki and Perry, *Politics in a Glass Case*, pp. 187-204.
- ⁴⁵ Élisabeth Lebovici, ‘Women’s art: what’s in a name?’, in Camille Morineau, ed., *Elles@centrepompidou*, (Paris, 2009), p. 278.
- ⁴⁶ Helen Molesworth, ‘How to Install Art as a Feminist’, in Butler and Schwartz, eds, *Modern Women* (New York, 2010), p. 504.
- ⁴⁷ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 73.
- ⁴⁸ Lara Perry, ‘“A good time to be a woman”? Women Artists, Feminism and Tate Modern’, in Dimitrikaki and Perry, *Politics in a Glass Case*, p. 43.
- ⁴⁹ Uliana Zanetti ed, *Autoritratti. Iscrizioni del femminile nell’arte italiana contemporanea*, Corraini and MAMbo, Bologna, 14.
- ⁵⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Stories* (London and New York, 1999), p. 33, cited by Zanetti, *Autoritratti*, p. 17.
- ⁵¹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, pp.104-105.
- ⁵² Uliana Zanetti, ‘Autoritratti. Iscrizioni del femminile nell’arte contemporanea’, *Via Dogana* 105 (June, 2013), pp. 26-27.

-
- ⁵³ I would like to thank Uliana Zanetti for taking me through the many stages of the project.
- ⁵⁴ Paola di Cori, *Asincronie del femminismo. Scritti 1986-2011* (Pisa, 2012).
- ⁵⁵ Zanetti, 'Autoritratti', p. 27.
- ⁵⁶ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, 2012), pp. 11-40.
- ⁵⁷ Isaak, 'Insights from Italy', p. 170.
- ⁵⁸ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 193.
- ⁵⁹ Iris van der Tuin, 'Jumping Generations: On Second- and Third-wave Feminist Epistemology', *Australian Feminist Studies* 24/59 (2009), p. 24. I would like to thank Alex Martinis Roe for discussing this article with me.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁶¹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* p. 226.

Illustrations

Fig. 1

Guerrilla Girls, *Where are the Women Artists of Venice?* C-print on vinyl, 518 x 335 cm. © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com

Fig. 2

Donna: Avanguardia femminista negli anni '70 — dalla Sammlung Verbund di Vienna. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. Installation view. © photo: Barbara Ulli / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna.

Fig. 3

Installation view: *Autoritratti. Iscrizioni del femminile nell'arte italiana contemporanea.* Museo d'Arte Moderna, Bologna. Installation view. © photo: Matteo Monti.