

## **Introduction**

While reflecting on the representation of labour in the visual arts, art historian T. J. Clark argued that in the 1960s and 1970s there were «very few images of work».<sup>1</sup> This statement seems to rest on an art-historical blind spot, for it does not consider the multitude of images of women giving birth, raising children, cooking, ironing, or washing the dishes that proliferated in Europe and the United States after the Second World War. That is to say, the multitude of representations of women at work within the household that punctuated postwar and contemporary Western art, together with the various art practices that may not depict labour as a motif but nonetheless engage with it. In this article, I aim to confront this blind spot, while unearthing its ideological, sociocultural and material roots. I intend to do so by looking at the entanglement of reproductive and creative work that shaped a specific strand of artistic production in 1970s Italy. I will notably address the practices of two women-only art collectives, namely Le Pezze and Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese, which tackled the mechanisms of social reproduction and the labour it entailed by means of art, alongside activists and intellectuals who gathered in the same years in the Wages for Housework network and fought against the way this form of labour was made invisible.<sup>2</sup> The two collectives were in fact composed of artists who were active in the contemporary art scene and at the same time constrained in the traditional roles of wives, mothers and housewives, that is, forced to deal on a daily basis with the naturalisation of unpaid reproductive work.<sup>3</sup> This very condition, together with the generalised climate of protest against it that was unfolding in Italy at the time within the horizon of the social reproduction struggle, impacted on the artistic work of those who were close to it, engendering a peculiar contamination of practices.

To analyse the production processes of both collectives, I will perform two operations. First, I will endeavour to reveal the material nexus between reproductive and artistic work articulated in the practices examined, in order to understand how the material conditions of a daily life spent within the household could affect artistic production at the level of materials, techniques and forms. Or, conversely, how these women resorted to art to make visible their living and working conditions as both artists and «household workers», given that the visual languages they mobilised led to the heart of specific conditions and modes of production tainted by the imperatives of social reproduction.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, I will attempt to shed light on the strategies these artists deployed to challenge the prevailing myths of modern art: a necessary operation so that they could emerge from the household as both political subjects

and creative subjectivities. Notably, I venture the hypothesis that they contributed to dispel the myths of the autonomy of the art object and of the creative genius, by emphasising instead the contingency of the creative gesture. They did so, I argue, while repositioning themselves as «producers», of both meaning and art, rather than mere «reproducers» or «consumers».<sup>5</sup>

### **Metonymies of Reproductive Work in the Artistic Production of Le Pezze**

The series of paintings *Le Pezze* was produced by Diane Bond and Mercedes Cuman, with contributions from Ester Marcovecchio. They then began operating together under the collective name Le Pezze (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> The term *pezze*, meaning «rags», literally designated the fabrics that the group collected and employed as their artistic medium in order to make the series. They included old clothes, lingerie, aprons, linens and bed sheets, which were assembled with lace, hair, hooks, garters, pins and ropes, and painted with acrylics and pastels. They were then hung up with clothes pegs like laundry on the line. The materials were sourced from a range of sites and chores associated with social reproduction, including items from the artists' own wardrobes and immediate surroundings – that is, the domestic environment in which they would both perform housework and make art. For instance, the classic red-and-white checked apron incorporated into the portrait *Housewife* was removed from Bond's kitchen and deprived of its original use-value as «work uniform» so that it could be invested with other functions and meanings. The apron was indeed incorporated in the portrait *Housewife*, metonymically evoking the gender role and labour



1 *Le Pezze, Le Pezze*, 1974, mixed media, variable dimensions, Milan, installed at La Cappella Underground in Trieste, March 1975

pertaining to such figure. This operation brings to mind a series of works produced in the same years, such as Mariuccia Secol's plastered aprons and Heidi Bucher's latex-soaked apron. Although the techniques and final forms of these artworks differ considerably, the medium remains the same, bearing witness to a commonality in the living and working conditions of their makers. Such commonality chronicled the structural and systemic nature of the sexual division of labour that organised both socio-economic and symbolic production under capitalism, which this kind of works exposed, echoing the coeval political action of the Wages for Housework groups. To this end, while the materials employed had long been stored in private closets, kitchens or laundry rooms, the final products of this artistic operation were destined for the streets. In fact, *Le Pezze* were preferably hung in the public space, such as parks and gardens, or used to infiltrate renowned institutions and galleries. In 1975, the series was shown as part of the collective exhibition *L'armadio*, meaning 'the closet', hosted at Galleria d'arte di Porta Ticinese in Milan. The display consisted of an empty closet placed in the gallery space, with the *Le Pezze* series hanging from the ceiling. The exhibition text recited:

«*Le Pezze* were born to hit the streets. We no longer wanted to hang out the laundry in solitude, but together [...] with repeated gestures: ironing, folding and arranging our things back in our wardrobes. [...] We dismember the private wardrobe. [...] We want to connect with other women and collect other creative experiences to open a space of our own and work together.»<sup>7</sup>

It was a call to break the isolation of the home and come together to foster subjective and social change against the main form and means of women's exploitation, that is, countless hours of reproductive work, epitomised in this short text by the repetitive gestures of hanging out the laundry, ironing, folding and storing clothes in closets.

In 1976, the same call for women to bring the reproductive work they performed daily in the privacy of their households outside, into the public space, for all to see, was voiced again and put into practice. This occurred at the Centro di Attività Culturale SIMARYP in Valenza Po, within the framework of the exhibition *VVD Verso Versi Diversi* (fig. 2). For the occasion, *Le Pezze* were displayed at the Viale Oliva gardens, hung with laundry pegs and left fluttering on a rope tied around the trees. The installation calls to mind the performative piece *Laundry*, conceived by the radical architect Gianni Pettena in 1969 as part of the event *Campo Urbano* organised in Como by Luciano Caramel, Ugo Mulas and Bruno Munari. Pettena's performance consisted of the act of hanging stolen laundry in Como's main square, enacting a disobedient and intentionally inappropriate gesture against the discipline and norms that govern the use of public space. The displacement into the public sphere of a household chore traditionally meant to remain hidden within the home, establishes an analogy with *Le Pezze*'s action. However, as Silvia Bottinelli remarked, Pettena was not interested in problematising the gender hierarchies and power relations structuring housework in the domestic context.<sup>8</sup> The everyday experience of housewives and household workers – devoting themselves to that «enormous amount of work that women were forced to provide each day to produce and reproduce the workforce, which was the invisible, because unwaged, base on which the entire pyramid of capitalist accumulation rested» – remained once again out of focus.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, by hybridising their artistic practice with materials and procedures pertaining to the reproductive work they were doomed to daily



2 Le Pezze, *Le Pezze*, 1974, mixed media, variable dimensions, Milan, hung at Viale Oliva gardens within the framework of the exhibition *VVD Verso Versi Diversi*, at Centro di Attività Culturale SIMARYP in Valenza Po, 1976

perform *as women*, Le Pezze shone the spotlight on this very experience, shedding light on the situatedness and contingency of an artistic positionality marked by sexual difference.<sup>10</sup>

Because of this, Le Pezze's installation may be best compared to Ana Lupaș' *Humid Installation*. The Romanian artist's processual sculpture, first installed in 1966 in the Grigorescu neighborhood of Cluj, consisted of parallel rows of wet linen hung to dry by several women who had volunteered to reenact, collectively and publicly, a working activity customarily performed in private. Analogously, *Le Pezze* series was set up by several women, staging together the act of hanging the laundry in the gardens of Viale Oliva in Valenza Po. As expressed in Le Pezze's statement quoted above, such collective gestures aimed to socialise a working activity that was becoming increasingly segregated, albeit only to expose its dynamics and ultimately reject it. In fact, as Alisa Del Re noted, during the 1970s technological advances in household appliances were gradually reducing the opportunities for women to meet, thereby increasing their isolation and depriving them of the possibility to connect and organize their resistance.<sup>11</sup> Le Pezze countered this trend with a collective and situated artistic gesture that simultaneously unmasked the degrading working conditions of women's labour within the home and the preconceptions that relegated them to the margins of institutionalised art and culture. Resembling a guerrilla action, their artistic operation consisted in women pouring out onto the streets, taking up public space, and claiming visibility for their work. That is to say, for both their artistic and their reproductive work, considering that the former integrated materials (like aprons, bedsheets, clothes), techniques (like stitching), and procedures (like hanging the laundry) belonging to the latter. The «arcane of reproduction» described by Leopoldina Fortunati was therefore taken by assault on two fronts: the social and the symbolic, which were the two planes, intersecting in

a secret complicity, on which Le Pezze militated.<sup>12</sup> It was no coincidence that they performed their action while wearing masks, which were crafted by the artists in their own image to be exchanged and worn by one another and by the spectators as well. The use of masks, which hindered the possibility of singling out and recognising the individuals behind the collective gesture, reinforced the connection to the visual and material strategies of street militancy, engendering a further contamination of contexts that contributed to demystifying the myth of art as an autonomous sphere of activity. In fact, the use of mediums and processes derived from the artists' immediate surroundings, as well as the recourse to guerrilla strategies, dispelled the illusion that art could exist separately from the social reality of those making it. The women involved were engaged instead in the effort to craft a material vocabulary articulated along a militant syntax, in order to voice their dissent and open the field for the emergence of a new collective political subject in revolt on the common ground of social reproduction. No artistic position could have been further from the paradigm of the creative genius celebrated by modernism, individual and unique, and therefore removed from relations of production and social relations in general. On the contrary, *Le Pezze* led to the core of their own material conditions and modes of production, tainted by the imperatives of social reproduction. In other words, they functioned as metonymies, that is, material extensions of the contexts of their making: the household that was the living and working place of their producers.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Refusal of Work in the Artistic Practice of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine di Varese**

The analytical category of metonymy could be also mobilised to examine a set of works produced under similar circumstances in Varese, around 1975, by the Gruppo Femminista Immagine.<sup>14</sup> The main strategy of struggle conceived by its members in order to make visible and resist the imperatives of social reproduction consisted in a rejection of the traditional roles and functions assigned to women (notably those of wives, mothers, housewives, etcetera), expressed first and foremost in the refusal of domestic work.<sup>15</sup> This refusal first occurred in the kitchen. Milli Gandini took all the pans and pots she had, she painted them, and, after piercing their sides and lids, she ran lacquered barbed wire through the holes and closed the cookware for good, turning them into assisted ready-mades (fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> These objects gave shape to the guerrilla warfare that was brewing in the home and, more specifically, to Gandini's decision to stop cooking. She would rather send her son and daughter to the deli every day to buy ready-made meals, thus relinquishing her role as cook in the household. Meanwhile, veils of dust descended on the furniture, enveloping the interior of the home. On the blanket of dust covering shelves and tables, reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *Elevage de poussière* (1920), Gandini and her comrade Mirella Tognola would trace with their fingers the symbols and slogans of the feminist struggle and the word *SALARIO*, meaning 'wage': an act that was documented in a set of photographs later published in the 1976 winter issue of the journal *Le operaie della casa* (fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> While making art, Gandini was on strike: a strike against reproductive work. She named her refusal to continue performing those chores and thus contribute to the reproduction of a socioeconomic system deemed unacceptable *La mamma è uscita*, which means 'mother walked out', but also 'mother came out', in reference to the possibilities of becoming that awaited her after she deserted her ascribed functions and identities. It was indeed her way out of the house, as well

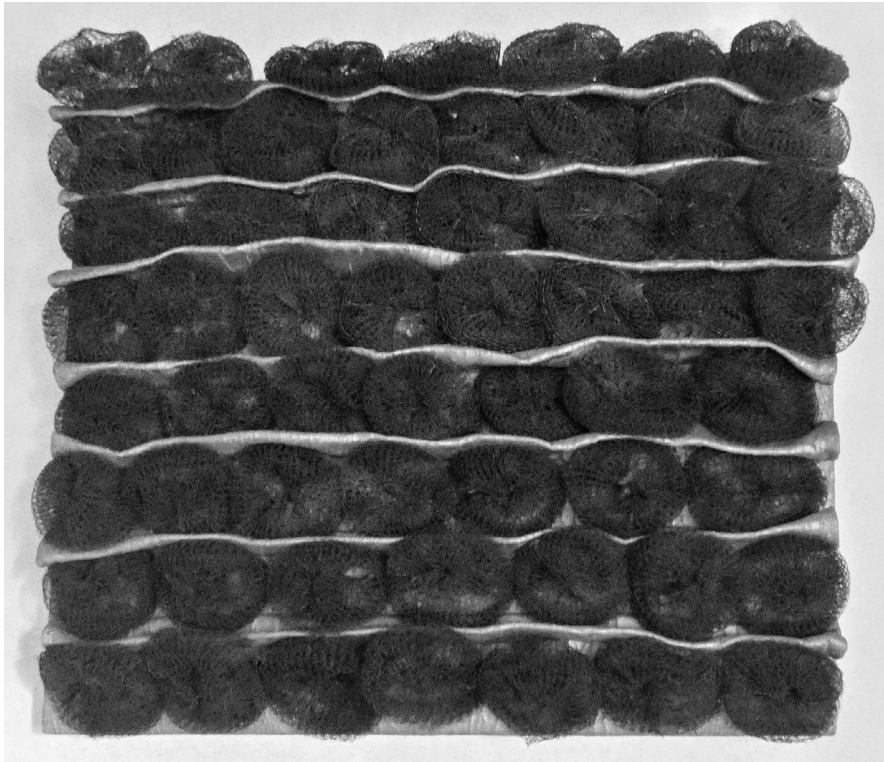
3 Milli Gandini, *Pentola inagibile (Condemned Pot)*, 1975, assisted ready-made, painted pot and barbed wire, dimensions unknown, Varese



4 Milli Gandini, *La mamma è uscita*, 1975, performance, Varese, two photographs from a series

as out of the roles to which she had been assigned: the mother, the care giver, the cook, the housekeeper. *La mamma è uscita* was an artistic performance, but also a political statement and a prophecy.<sup>18</sup>

In her house, Mariuccia Secol was doing the same. She would not cook or clean the floor any longer, and she would rather use the objects she had employed during her entire life as working tools (such as kitchen aprons, sponges, plates, and scourers) as artistic materials, producing large-scale assemblages that rendered these tools dysfunctional and ultimately inoperable. The suspension of activity is evoked for instance in an assemblage composed of fifty-eight scourers, which were removed from the kitchen to be arranged in eight horizontal rows on a canvas (fig. 5). The obsessive repetition of these quasi-identical units conjures the series of identical products carried by the assembly line in the factory or arranged on the shelves of a supermarket. The latter was in fact the place where the artist had purchased those very scourers before using them to clean the cookware in the kitchen and, eventually, depriving them of their use-value in order to make art out of them. If they are not perfectly identical to one another, it is precisely because they have been used before, and hence bear the traces of the effort and labour performed through them. The alteration in the form of each scourer suggests that the repetitive pattern they shape does not coincide precisely with the order organising serial production in the factory. Repetition, here, rather pertains to the work of reproduction carried out daily in the home, where chores and gestures need to be repeated over and over, to keep the bellies full and the house clean. More than repetition, we are faced with



5 Mariuccia Secol, *Untitled*, c. 1976, discarded scourers on canvas, approx. 50 × 60 cm, Daverio

repetitiveness, where the body of the housewife, trapped in a perpetual work routine, is reduced to a means, a function, a component of the wider mechanism of social reproduction by which the workforce keeps being produced and reproduced in the household – veritable extension of the factory. If the logic of the ready-made and the seriality of industrial production dear to minimalism and pop art are evoked by this work, they are also confronted and complexified.<sup>19</sup> In fact, if the ready-made or the minimalist work of art might suggest a refusal of the manual labour traditionally required of the artist to make art, in Secol's assemblage this very labour remains of the essence. What is rejected is work of a different kind, that is, housework, whose traces, however, remain present: meticulously registered in the work of art. A stance of refusal infused Gandini and Secol's artistic practices, giving them shape, matter and substance. And, conversely, artmaking was for them a way to provide a visual vocabulary to name the object of their struggle, that is, to render visible an invisible condition of exploitation while attempting to undo it.

### **Feminist Productions against Capitalist Productivity**

When we look back at Le Pezze and Gruppo Femminista Immagine's artistic production, we are confronted with an ensemble of acts of guerrilla, sabotage and strike, performed against reproductive work and aimed at rendering its tools inoperable and its procedures dysfunctional. As such, it gives shape to a specific form of abstention from work, which, according to the workerist political category of the refusal of work, is to be understood first and foremost as a life technique.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, although operating primarily on a symbolic level, the images of struggle and refusal the two collectives have brought into existence reveal that something was underway on the plane of subjectivity, because the rejection of ascribed roles and related functions, which goes hand in hand with the abstention from work, enables a radical transformation. It sets in motion a metamorphosis of the self that takes place within, at the level of one's identity, and unsettles entrenched habits, behaviours, affect and personal relationships.

What Le Pezze and Gruppo Femminista Immagine translated into art practice did not correspond to a regular strike, but something deeper. It did not correspond to a general strike either, but something vaster. It was closer to what Claire Fontaine would later name the «human strike», that is, a process of de-functionalisation of subjectivities, which in this case assumes a specific gender dimension.<sup>21</sup> Far from being effective or productive from the point of view of organised struggle, this kind of strike simply happens, against oneself and against the very logic of productivity dear to capitalism and its work ethic.<sup>22</sup> In this way, a subjectivity that used to operate to grant the smooth functioning of a given system ceases to be functional, to perform as it is supposed to, producing a short-circuit in that very system and its reproduction. As in the case of those women who suddenly refused to function as «good» mothers, wives and housekeepers, and invented a way to exist otherwise. By making visible their invisible work, calling attention to the related material conditions and modes of production, the women in question did transform their everyday lives. They did affirm their position as artists against a cultural construction that relegated women to the margins, while emerging as political subjects against a sociopolitical backdrop that had subjugated, objectified and exploited them until then. In this rests the potential of their practice.



- 1 T. J. Clark: *Image of the People. Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, 2. ed., Princeton 1982 (1973), p. 80. Also quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson: *Art Workers. Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2010, p. 30.
- 2 Those same years when Le Pezze and Gruppo Femminista Immagine were forming, that is, the beginning of the 1970s, saw in Italy the emergence of a specific strand of feminist struggle, informed by Marxist thought and concerned with questions of social reproduction. Its proponents gathered in the so-called Gruppi per il Salario al Lavoro Domestico (Wages for Housework groups), which were extra-parliamentary political groups rising on the initiative of activists and intellectuals who embraced Marxist-feminist theories in order to analyse and counter the specific forms of women's exploitation taking shape under capitalism. For a historical account of the formation of these groups, I refer the reader to Antonella Picchio/Giuliana Pincelli: *Una lotta femminista globale. L'esperienza dei gruppi per il Salario al lavoro domestico di Ferrara e Modena*, Milan 2019. To trace the itinerary of the political and theoretical thought underlying the formation of these groups and, more generally, the International Wages for Housework Campaign, see Mariarosa Dalla Costa/Selma James: *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol 1972; Silvia Federici: *Wages Against Housework*, Bristol 1975; Nicole Cox/Silvia Federici: *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen. Wages for Housework. A Perspective on Capital and the Left*, New York/Bristol 1975; Lucia Chisté/Alisa Del Re/Edvige Forti (eds.): *Oltre il lavoro domestico. Il lavoro delle donne tra produzione e riproduzione*, 2. Ed., Verona 2020 (1979); Leopoldina Fortunati: *L'arcano della riproduzione. Casalinghe, prostitute, operai e capitale*, Venice 1981; Silvia Federici: *Revolution at Point Zero. Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland 2012.
- 3 For more on this position, cf. Helen Molesworth: *House Work and Art Work*, in: *October*, 2000, no. 92, pp. 71–97.
- 4 The definition «household workers» refers to the journal of the Wages for Housework movement, titled *Le operaie della casa. Rivista dell'autonomia femminista* and edited by the Gruppo redazionale del Comitato per il Salario al Lavoro Domestico di Padova, in the 1970s in Venice.
- 5 For more on the historical tendency to deny women the position of producers within the tradition of Western visual art, cf. Griselda Pollock: *Vision and Difference. Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, 2. ed., New York 2003 (1988), p. 13. For more on the role of spectators, and hence consumers, ascribed to women within patriarchal art history, cf. *Rivolta Femminile: Assenza della donna dalle momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile*, in: Carla Lonzi/Rivolta Femminile (eds.): *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, 3. ed., Milan 1977 (1971).
- 6 The women-only art collective Le Pezze was founded in 1974 in Milan, more precisely in the kitchen of activist Adele Faccio, and included artists Diane Bond, Mercedes Cuman and Ester Marcovecchio.
- 7 From the invitation card to the exhibition *L'armadio* at Galleria di Porta Ticinese, Milan, 1975. See Diane Bond's personal archives. My translation.
- 8 Silvia Bottinelli: *Double-Edged Comforts. Domestic Life in Modern Italian Art and Visual Culture*, Montreal/Kingston 2021, p. 195.
- 9 Giuliana Pompei (Pincelli): *Salario per il lavoro domestico*, in: *L'Offensiva. Quaderni di Lotta Femminista* 1972, no. 1. Now in Picchio/Pincelli 2019 (as note 2), p. 66. My translation.
- 10 To introduce the concept of sexual difference into this reflection, I notably refer to Griselda Pollock, for she provides a definition of it that, eluding all possible essentialist drifts, grounds the concept in contingency and material conditions. Indeed, she defines sexual difference as a historical asymmetry that is socially, economically, and subjectively constructed, stressing that the difference in the way men and women make art is «the product of the social structuration of sexual difference and not any imaginary biological distinction». Cf. Griselda Pollock: *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*, in: *idem: Vision and Difference. Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, London/New York 2003, p. 76.
- 11 For example, Del Re remarks that the vacuum cleaner had replaced the carpet beater, relocating the work of dusting from the balcony to the interior of the house. Similarly, the washing machine had replaced the communal wash house, where women used to go to work together and, in the meantime, socialize with each other. Therefore, any potential form of organisation and resistance to the mechanisms of social reproduction tended to be nipped in the bud. For more on the increasing segregation of reproductive work, cf. Alisa Del Re: *Struttura capitalistica del lavoro legato alla riproduzione*, in: *Chisté/Re/Forti* 2020 (as note 2), pp. 35–38; 45.
- 12 Fortunati 1981 (as note 2).
- 13 Lucia Re: *The Mark on the Wall. Marisa Merz and a History of Women in Postwar Italy*, in: Marisa Merz. *The Sky Is a Great Space*, ed. by Connie Butler, exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art et al., London 2017, pp. 37–75.
- 14 The women-only art collective Gruppo Femminista Immagine was founded in 1974 in Varese by artists Milli Gandini, Mariuccia Secol and Mirella Tognola.
- 15 The refusal of labour, or rejection of work, was a strategy and a political category deriving from the tradition of Italian workerism and, specifically,

from *Autonomia*, that also characterised the stance of important figures from the International Wages for Housework Campaign, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, as well as Selma James, who was also in touch with the Black radical tradition in the United States. For more on this, cf. Maud Anne Bracke: *Between the Transnational and the Local. Mapping the Trajectories and Contexts of the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1970s Italian Feminism*, in: *Women's History Review* 22, 2013, no. 4, pp. 625–642.

**16** For a reflection on the link between the ready-made and the political category of the refusal of work, cf. Maurizio Lazzarato: *Marcel Duchamp et le refus du travail. Suivi de misère de la sociologie*, Paris 2014.

**17** Gruppo redazionale del Comitato per il Salario al Lavoro Domestico di Padova, in: *Le operaie della casa*, 1976, no. 2–3 September–December, p. 21.

**18** Manuela Gandini: Prefazione. *Nel vortice degli anni Settanta!*, in: Gandini/Secol 2021 (as note 15), pp. 10–11.

**19** For an in-depth reflection on the link between minimalism and the politics of labour, cf. Bryan-Wilson 2010 (as note 1).

**20** Lazzarato 2014 (as note 15), p. 15. Giovanna Zapperi: *Carla Lonzi. Un'arte della vita*, Rome 2017, pp. 256–257. For more on the intersections between Italian workerism and the practice of Gruppo Femminista Immagine, cf. Jacopo Galimberti: *Images of Class. Operaismo, Autonomia and the Visual Arts (1962–1988)*, London/Brooklyn NY 2022.

**21** Claire Fontaine: *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, South Pasadena 2020, p. 47.

**22** *Ibid.* p. 109.

## Image Credits

**1–2** Diane Bond's private archives, Milan, courtesy: Diane Bond

**3–4** Milli Gandini's private archives. Courtesy: Manuela Gandini

**5** Mariuccia Secol's private archives, Daverio. Courtesy: the author