

Unexpected Artists. The Cooperativa Beato Angelico in the Context of 1970s Feminism

Abstract

On April 8, 1976, a women's cooperative comprising eleven members variously active in the field of art inaugurated a self-run art gallery in Rome's city center, at Via Beato Angelico 18. Surprisingly, instead of showing works from the members' own production, the inaugural exhibition of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico (CBA) brought a baroque artist before the public: Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Aurora* (ca. 1627) was installed on an easel and accompanied by a leaflet featuring archival and bibliographical references. Starting from this remarkable opening, this essay explores the CBA's expository and archival practices, which were specifically directed at works by female artists past *and* present. Building on previous research on the cooperative and re-engaging with archival sources and oral memory, I newly focus on the temporal dimensions of the initiative's activities. First, I unravel the ways in which the CBA participated in countering the structural imbalance of the art-historical canon – a concerted effort effected by the increasing popularization of feminist ideas in the art field at the time. Second, and more importantly, I argue that the cooperative's distinctive handling of the temporary exhibition and the archive translated into a rejection of conventional models of history-writing. If read in relation to the questioning of chronological and dialectical notions of progress conceptualized in the ambit of 1970s separatist feminism, the CBA's historiographical tactic – based on a non-linear interweaving of past and present positions – loses its apparent contingency and can instead be reassessed as a focused disruption of the continuum of men's history. I conclude that women artists from different times, 'presentified' and re-signified in the CBA's exhibitions and archive, thus came to embody feminist thinker Carla Lonzi's idea of woman as the "unexpected subject".

On April 8, 1976, the Cooperativa Beato Angelico (CBA) opened its doors on the ground floor of a historic building in the center of Rome. The semi-official name of the cooperative derived from the narrow street named after the early Renaissance painter Beato Angelico (Guido di Pietro) in the immediate vicinity of the Pantheon where the most prominent co-founder, the artist Carla Accardi, had rented a space. Including Accardi, the cooperative comprised eleven female members – eight artists and three critics – who had emerged through their cultural activities in Rome, Milan and Turin: Nilde Carabba, Franca Chiabra, Anna Maria Colucci, Regina Della Noce, Nedda Guidi, Eva Menzio, Teresa Montemaggiore, Stephanie Oursler, Suzanne Santoro and Silvia Truppi. In the brief period of its existence, from 1976 to 1978, the CBA acted as a self-organized gallery. Since the establishment of an all-women cooperative was unprecedented in the Roman art scene at the time, its opening received special attention. In the sparsely furnished, low-ceilinged space in Via Beato Angelico the organizers installed an historical, large-format oil-on-canvas painting, and set out an accompanying leaflet. The text provided four pages of information about the seventeenth-century artist Artemisia Gentileschi, thereby revealing the authorship and background of the painting on view. Surprisingly, instead of showing contemporary works by the members of the cooperative, the opening exhibition brought a baroque artist before the public.

Starting from this remarkable inauguration, the present contribution intends to explore the cooperative's expository and archival practice, discussing it in the context of 1970s feminism. The jointly managed art space tackled the controversial theme of 'women's art' by unsystematically publishing and documenting past and contemporary female artist positions. At the time the cooperative disbanded in early 1978, the program had totaled only eight exhibitions. The gallery was abandoned and its archive partially dispersed.¹ It may be due to this unspectacular conclusion that the initiative has long been forgotten. Only in the course of the last decade has the cooperative been the subject of a number of art-historical studies. While the preceding contributions have attempted to reconstruct the activities of the CBA² or to position them against the backdrop of the 1970's trend of alternative, system-critical art spaces,³ the present article will instead take a closer look at the distinctive historiographical practice underwriting the cooperative's program. Despite the temporary nature of the initiative and the relatively rapid separation of the eleven members, I argue that the opening exhibition and the overall handling of expository and archival activities at the CBA importantly destabilized traditional concepts of history. By cultivating horizontal relationships and establishing non-linear connections through its program formats and content, the cooperative not only highlighted the structural imbalance of the art-historical canon. Also, and more fundamentally, it revealed the underlying progressive time-model as arbitrary. As I will show, this

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1 Archival material that has survived can be viewed in Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome (FSS).

2 See Almerini 2007/2008; Cozzi 2012, pp. 164–99; Seravalli 2019, pp. 58–72; Almerini 2020.

3 See Almerini 2018.



1 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Aurora*, ca. 1627, oil on canvas, 218 cm × 146 cm. Rome, private collection, from *Orazio e Artemisia Gentileschi* 2001, p. 252

break with the paradigm of linear sequence reinforced a principle of feminist separatism, and thus tested out a far-reaching strategy of feminist curating.

Anachronic Reassessment

The artwork exhibited at the cooperative's inauguration came from a private collection in Rome, and depicts Aurora-Eos, goddess of dawn (Fig. 1). In the gallery space the large-format oil painting – 2.18 m high and 1.46 m wide – was installed on an easel set diagonally opposite the entrance door, so that the visitor's gaze was immediately drawn to it. Accompanied by a hovering putto, the life-size female figure turns her face towards the dark and pushes back the night with an imperious gesture, while the sky behind her brightens. A flowing cloak with pronounced folds makes her nude body appear even more monumental. The contrasting illumination of clouds and foliage dramatizes the scene. At various levels, the theme of the dawn permeates the image: figuratively depicted, it is simultaneously negotiated in the strong chiaroscuro. Iconography and painting technique thereby detach the mythological figure from its original context in antiquity, and establish it as a baroque subject.

The leaflet set out to accompany the painting was authored by art historian Eva Menzio, co-founder of the CBA. In a narrow, newspaper-style format it provided densely packed archival references, a list of works and a bibliography on Gentileschi, newly attributing the work on view to the baroque artist (Fig. 2). In fact, in addition to

a reference to the *Aurora* in the catalog raisonné, the leaflet cites art historian Filippo Baldinucci's 1681 discussion of the work.⁴ This historical source had made it possible to prove Gentileschi's authorship of the picture.⁵ Elsewhere in the leaflet, Menzio further draws a connection between the artist and the goddess portrayed in the painting. The list of works includes a drawing of Gentileschi's hand made by Pierre Dumonstier in Rome in 1625. An inscription on the drawing relates its subject to the mythological figure: "A thousand times more to be praised than the beautiful hands of the goddess are those of the talented artist."⁶

This spectacular inauguration enacted an immediate claim of institutional authority. The artwork's exhibition under a new distinguished authorship in fact performed a process of authentication supported by the historical sources listed in the leaflet, concomitantly ascribing value to the painting and the cooperative's space alike. Conventionally, the authentication of historical artworks was reserved to museum displays and specialist literature. Staging such a consecration process under changed institutional conditions gave the collective launching of the CBA special prominence. Yet the motivation for the leap back into the seven-

4 On the history of Gentileschi's *Aurora*, see Bissell 1999, pp. 220–222.

5 Art historian Maurizio Marini, the painting's owner at the time, had attributed the work to Artemisia Gentileschi. The inaugural exhibition at the CBA, however, marked the painting's first public appearance as a work of Gentileschi. I have this information from art historian Eva Menzio – daughter of the painter Francesco Menzio, and, from 1965 to 1967, wife of the art critic and publisher Paolo Fossati – who co-founded the cooperative and was especially instrumental in organizing the opening exhibition (email to the author from 5 January, 2021).

6 "Les mains de l'Aurore sont louées pour leur rare beauté. Mais celle cy plus digne le doit estre mille fois plus, pour sçavoir faire des merveilles, qui ravissent les yeux del plus judicieux. S."

3 View of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico's opening exhibition, 8 April 1976 (photo Alfio di Bella/Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome)



ing the inception of the all-women cooperative, the painting at once manifested the CBA's focus on gender.

Indeed, the significant afterlife of Gentileschi's work and subject in the context of this opening exhibition could be read as an effect of the new women's movement. As early as 1947, the writer Anna Banti (Lucia Lopresti Longhi) had composed a widely read novel on Gentileschi's biography, entitled *Artemisia*. A further instance in this context is the Artemisia Gallery in Chicago founded in 1973 by an activist cooperative. Moreover, Accardi remembers a London gallery that was then also showing interest in Gentileschi.⁹ Reasons for the anachronic re-semanticization of the baroque artist¹⁰ were first of all her remarkable professionalism – her fame ultimately surpassed that of her father Orazio – combined with the exclusive and at times unconventional focus on female figures, often with self-portrait-like features, in her painted oeuvre. A court case initiated by the artist's father, which brought the painter Agostino Tassi to trial for the sexual assault of Artemisia Gentileschi, also played a decisive role. Including mention of this trial, the CBA leaflet referred to her career in the male-dominated art system of the seventeenth century and compiled her canon of painted motifs in a catalog raisonné.

Although the mobilization of Gentileschi for a feminist art history began later,¹¹ the conception and reception of the opening exhibition at the CBA gallery shows that Gentileschi's work and her persona were instantly read in connection to contemporary women's experience. In the *Corriere della Sera*, Vittorio Rubiu qualified the decision to exhibit a painting by Gentileschi as a "sensitive

7 I have this information from a personal conversation with former member of the CBA Suzanne Santoro (phone call on 2 December 2019).

8 In Milan, through the Libreria delle donne and Feltrinelli; in Rome, through Maddalena libri (cf. the exhibition announcement in *Data* May/June 1976, viewed in the FSS).

9 Cf. Accardi 1977, p. 390.

10 More in general on this re-semanticization see Lander 2017.

11 Mary Garrard's essay *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 1989, counts as the first feminist-motivated art-historical study of this artist. Yet, already in 1981, Eva Menzio published Agostino Tassi's trial files under the title *Atti di un processo per stupro* (Files of a Rape Trial), furthering the research on Artemisia Gentileschi's life and work she had begun in the context of the CBA. Her introductory essay to this volume had previously been included, in English and French translation, in a publication titled *Mot pour mot / Word for Word*, accompanying a thematic exhibition centered on Gentileschi's work *Judith and Holofernes* at Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris, in 1979 (cf. Menzio 1981; *Mot pour mot* 1979).

idea”¹² In her review for *Il Giorno*, Maria Torrente interpreted the exhibition as a comment on the precarious role of women in contemporary society.¹³ Starting from Gentileschi’s position, Anty Pansera in *L’Ambrosiano* also reflected on the persisting lack of autonomy and recognition of women in this professional area.¹⁴ In *Il Messaggero*, Maurizio Fagiolo welcomed the publication of an artwork that he considered “self-evidently emblematic” and found it at the same time “intriguing” and “important” to bring to the fore a “mythic figure [i.e., Gentileschi] to represent the difficult position of the female artist.”¹⁵ In *Il Paese Sera*, Elisabetta Rasy considered the opening of the cooperative’s program with the “most famous” and “most brilliant” female Italian painter of the past to be “a duty.”¹⁶ In *Spare Rib*, Amanda Sebestyen further qualified Artemisia Gentileschi’s life and work as an “archetypal struggle with the male world.”¹⁷ The anachronically-deployed work therefore encountered feminist-informed patterns of interpretation. This consensus of critical coverage reveals a broad awareness and public acceptance of feminist concerns. By addressing a large audience under the popular symbol of Gentileschi, the cooperative contributed to favor the normalization of feminism in the art field and thus promoted a qualitative change in feminist practice at the neuralgic center of the Italian women’s movement.

Separatism, Militancy, Art

Feminist initiatives had gained strength over the previous decade. In the course of the 1960s and early 1970s, radical fractions broke away from the student movement and the communist and Christian democratic organizations (respectively, the UDI, *Unione donne italiane*; and the CIE, *Centro italiano femminile*).¹⁸ Uniting many of the newly formed groups was a radical questioning of formal gender equality. For them, the concept of equality as it has emerged in history, was merely an attempt to forcibly equate women with men. Women become citizens by conforming to the male political order, which therefore remains neutral and universally unquestioned. From this critique ensued a separatist stance, which foregrounded an existentialist claim to liberation over an activist claim to emancipation. First of all, the quality of the female needed to be redefined in and of itself. Starting from the groundbreaking contribution of Simone de Beauvoir, whose work *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) was first published in Italian in 1961, separatists focused on reflecting and re-signifying sexual difference. By conceiving and practicing forms of relational consciousness-raising, *autocoscienza*, women began to discuss the problems they were confronting, exploring their shared rather than individual dimension. Through the practice of *partire da sé* (starting from oneself), a culture of verbal, informal, horizontal discussion that took place exclusively among women developed all over Italy, across social contexts and strata. Investing the private with a political dimension, new alliances were cultivated in an effort to break with implicitly male-coded forms and structures of power. Separatist thought collectives set a different female subjectivation, independent of the male norm, as the basis for a transformation of society. While the practice of *autocoscienza* and a strong focus on independent publishing¹⁹ characterized radical feminism as a whole, the individual groups engaged with the pub-

12 I viewed this and all newspaper articles mentioned in this essay in the FSS. (“[P]ensiero delicato”. Rubiu 1976).

13 Cf. Torrente 1976.

14 Cf. Pansera 1976.

15 “[I]nedito, emblematico manco a dirlo”; “intrigante e importante”; “un mito della difficile condizione dell’artista-donna” (Fagiolo 1976).

16 “[L]a più nota”; “la più geniale”; “doverosamente” (Rasy 1976).

17 Sebestyen 1976.

18 On the history of Italian feminism, cf. Bracke 2019; Lussana, 2012; Lumley 1990.

lic realm to a different degree. On the one hand, collectives like Pompeo Magno (later Movimento Femminista Romano) were also dedicated to public militancy. Separatists like Rivolta femminile (Feminine Revolt), on the other hand, refused to adopt such strategies and kept gathering in closed circles.

Current research approaches to Italian postwar feminism insist on the complex interrelationships between separatism and militancy and the transnational dimension of political exchange.²⁰ In the field of art as well, radical positions did not act in isolation from one another or disconnected from international tendencies, but no coherent movement formed. Numerous artists, however, contributed to reinvent and consolidate feminism in elementary ways. The founding of Rivolta femminile in 1970 can be traced back to an influential art critic – Carla Lonzi – and an established artist – Carla Accardi – with the participation of other artists, such as Cloti Ricciardi, Suzanne Santoro, Stephanie Oursler, Simona Weller, Elisa Montessori, Anna Maria Colucci, Anna Paparatti, and Elisabetta Gut. According to Marta Seravalli, three different attitudes of women artists towards feminism emerged in the Roman art scene. The first of these was an obvious mobilization of one's own artistic practice for militant contexts (as, for example, with Ricciardi, Santoro and Oursler). The second was a private participation in feminist practice, which, however, did not necessarily result in an apparently politicized aesthetic (for example in the cases of Weller, Gut and Montessori). Third was a committed artistic practice that developed individually, apart from official affiliations with feminist organizations (for example with Anna Esposito, Tomaso Binga and Mirella Bentivoglio).²¹ Seravalli's classification, albeit schematic, gives an impression of the complex relationships between art and feminism during the 1970s. It was not only predominantly conservative institutions and actors that offered the potential for both friction and reflection, but also the politically progressive neo avant-garde scene, mainly constituted by male-dominated groups succeeding one another – for instance, *Arte povera* following pop, and *Arte informale*. Last but not least, the radical principles of the separatists themselves played a polarizing role. In 1970, Lonzi came to reject art as a male field, officially ceasing her art criticism in favor of feminism. This radical withdrawal led to tension with the still successful Accardi, who in turn left Rivolta femminile around 1973.²²

Under this premise, the founding of the women's cooperative materialized a qualitative change in the relationship between separatism and the art field. Of the eleven co-founders, some, especially Accardi herself, had contributed to Rivolta femminile. While not all of them professed a radical position, they still ran a gallery together. The institutionalized amalgamation of their heterogeneous positions thus signals a shift: by forming the cooperative under the premise of a relaxation of the separatist imperative, they contributed to the broader popularization of feminism that emerged in the mid-1970s in the course of the massive campaigns for the right to abortion, later subsumed under the term *femminismo diffuso* (widespread feminism).²³ Though operating in the art field, the CBA claimed relative autonomy. The legal form of a self-governing, equally and consensually managed cooperative intended to at once promote the members'

19 Rivolta femminile founded a publishing house of the same name in 1970; in 1974 the Edizioni delle Donne (Women's Publishers) publishing house was founded in Rome, a collaboration between Maria Caronia, Manuela Fraire and Elisabetta Rasy. In 1975 the Libreria delle donne (Women's Bookstore), which still exists today, was launched in Milan.

20 Cf. Bracke 2019.

21 Cf. Seravalli 2013, pp. 56–57.

22 Cf. Iamurri 2016, pp. 146–166; Zapperi 2017, pp. 178–188. More in general on the relationship between art and feminism in postwar Italy, and the impact of Lonzi's decision see the recent contributions by various authors in Zapperi/Ventrella 2020.

23 Cf. Calabrò/Grasso 2004.

visibility and to put them in a largely autonomous position.²⁴ In so doing, the founding of the CBA was clearly directed at counteracting the structural marginalization of women artists.

Throughout those years, in fact, the position of women artists in the art field and in art history had been triggering heated debates. In the Rome context, three different thematic strains dominated this discussion: art-historical revisionism; ‘the female symbolic’; and gender-neutral professionalization. The structural imbalance – the numerical inferiority – that the cooperative had to confront when it began operating in 1976, was evident.²⁵ As a result, numerous voices were raised calling for equality in the historical record of art production. Critics and curators such as Francesco Vincitorio, Lea Vergine and Romana Loda felt it necessary to add a ‘female half’ to the art-historical canon.²⁶ They advocated an equal presence for male and female artists, qualifying the latter’s contribution as “enrichment”.²⁷ The parity argument ignored, however, a second crucial aspect: the symbolic coding of art as a male prerogative. As early as 1971, Rivolta femminile published an essay on the *Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile* (Absence of Women from Celebratory Moments of Male Creative Manifestation) in the series of *Libretti verdi* (Little Green Books).²⁸ The study describes the art field as a place of competition between men, in which women are admitted only in the role of spectators. In order to gain recognition as artists, they are obliged to work according to male models and categories. In 1970s Italy, the progressive neo avant-garde – conceptual and narrative art, performance, post-minimalism, *Arte povera*, as well as corresponding tendencies in dance, theater and music – had refrained from eradicating the categories of the creative genius and the masterpiece. In 1967 critic-curator Germano Celant established the – albeit short-lived – militaristic symbolism of the *guerrilla* for *Arte povera* artists;²⁹ in the long term, suggestive role models of the alchemist, the outsider or the shaman persisted. Alongside the male majority, the structures and discourse grounding the art-historical canon thus appeared increasingly problematic.³⁰ In Foucault’s words, one could conclude that more fundamentally, the historical *a priori* of contemporary art was imbalanced: its “conditions of reality for statements”³¹ (and actions) varied drastically depending on gender.

Especially during the years of the CBA’s founding and existence, a lively discussion broke out in feminist circles. Was it possible to retrace distinctive features in the work of women artists; could a feminine-coded idea of creativity be derived from this? The art critic and publisher Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti countered the above-mentioned parity camp with the concept of *altra creatività* (other creativity). While women artists strove to make up for lost time, concom-

24 Accardi had rented the space; all of the members committed to pay a monthly fee. Formats and activities were co-organized (cf. the document of foundation in the Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome).

25 A study by Daniela Lancioni of the capital’s lively exhibition landscape makes it clear that the predominance of male artists was overwhelming, both in private galleries and in large exhibition events organized by public and private institutions of national importance such as the Quadriennale or Incontri Internazionali d’Arte (cf. *Roma in mostra* 1995).

26 Exhibitions dedicated exclusively to women artists included for instance *Esposizione internazionale operatrici visuali*, 1972, *Coazione a ripetere*, 1974; *Magma*, 1975; *Altra misura*, 1976; *Il volto sinistro dell’arte*, 1977 (cf. Perna 2013).

27 “[A]rricchimento” (Vincitorio 1976).

28 Rivolta femminile 1971. Also in 1971, Linda Nochlin’s seminal article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” attributed the relatively small number of recognized women artists to the hurdles historically placed in the way of their professionalization, but the text did not appear in Italian translation until 1976 (cf. Nochlin 1971).

29 Celant 1967.

30 See, for instance, Ricciardi 1974.

31 Foucault 1972, p. 127.

itantly, a universalizing idea of creativity had to be differentiated anew. In 1975, in the journal *Data*, Sauzeau-Boetti began to look for ‘female’ characteristics in the oeuvre of women artists while reporting on the art scene in New York. She pleaded for a distinction between male and female creativity based not on biological determinism but on the lived experience of the respective gender: “Whether it is visual language or writing,” Sauzeau-Boetti maintained, “the female expression will be ‘the other,’ outside the linguistic system that reality has ordered according to the male experience.”³²

The suggestion of a female symbolism, however, for other practitioners risked not only to essentialize aesthetic differences, but also to indiscriminately promote the ‘art of women.’ Artist Simone Weller therefore advocated questioning the universal male coding of the categories of ‘genius’ and ‘masterpiece,’ yet without putting women artists in a fundamentally alternative position. In 1974–75 Weller undertook an Italy-wide study of the production of women artists, which she published as a book entitled *Il complesso di Michelangelo* (The Michelangelo Complex) in 1976 and turned into an exhibition one year later.³³ Weller was looking for ways out of the ghettoization of ‘female’ art production and vehemently distanced herself from any form of artistic diletantism. Strategically, she adhered to the criterion of professionalism: in the long term, for her, the art field could only be changed from within.³⁴ In Rome, calls for art-historical revisionism (Vergine et al.), the conceptualization of female symbolism (Sauzeau-Boetti) and the plea for gender-neutral professionalization (Weller) thus variously nourished the debate on the relationship of women artists with the art field and art history, without finding a resolution.

Exhibition and Archive

Previous research on the CBA ascribes a fatal indecision to the cooperative with regard to this discussion. Although the initiative clearly served to promote women artists, no unified strategy was designed and implemented due to differing viewpoints among the members, Almerini, Seravalli, and Cozzi conclude.³⁵ Indeed, the CBA united women with very different experiences, whose relationship to art, separatist feminism and militancy – as Seravalli’s above-mentioned classification suggests – went through changes, or remained ambivalent. Neither did the cooperative’s program seek a systematic overview; nor did it set explicit selection criteria for the art of women. In the first case, however, the members of the CBA would have engaged in the unsatisfactory enterprise of revisionism; in the second, they would have put themselves in the questionable position of having to characterize certain aesthetics as intrinsically ‘feminine.’ In what follows, I suggest to re-evaluate the character of the cooperative’s program, hitherto dismissed as arbitrary, by newly taking into account the historiographical agency reclaimed by the CBA through the formats of the exhibition and the archive.

On a custom postcard, the eleven women summarized their unified goals. The letterhead listed their names in demonstrative lowercase letters and in alphabetical order, programmatically lined up without intermediate spaces (Fig. 4). Refraining from militant jargon, their statement read:

32 “Che si tratti di linguaggio visivo o di scrittura, l’espressione femminile sarà l’‘altra cosa’, fuori dal sistema linguistico che ha riordinato la realtà secondo l’esperienza maschile.” (Sauzeau-Boetti, 1975, p. 55; cf. also Sauzeau-Boetti 1976).

33 Cf. Iamurri 2019.

34 The criterion of professionalism did not encounter the favor of radical feminist positions, which often rejected any form of commercialization. Militant voices – e.g., in the journal *Effe* – programmatically supported amateurish and realistic idioms.

35 Cf. Seravalli 2013, pp. 83–84; Cozzi 2012, p. 195; Almerini 2007/2008, p. 49.

carla accardinilde carabba franca chiabranannamaria colucci regina dellanocenedda
guidievamenzioteresamontemaggioristephanieourslersuzannesantorosilviatruppi

La cooperativa nasce con il proposito di presentare il lavoro di donne
artiste che operano e hanno operato nel campo delle arti visive.

A fianco di tale attività la cooperativa si propone di studiare, rac-
cogliere e documentare tale lavoro e sarà quindi grata a chiunque vorrà
aiutare in questo senso facendo pervenire materiali, libri, fotografie.

cooperativa di via beato angelico, 18 - al collegio romano - roma (italia)

4 Cooperativa Beato Angelico's declaration of intent, printed paper, 1976 (photo Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome)

The cooperative was founded with the aim of presenting works by women artists who work or have worked in the field of the visual arts. In addition to this activity, the cooperative intends to study, collect and document this work, and is therefore grateful to all who would like to help in this respect by providing materials, books and photographs.³⁶

From the outset, the cooperative thus insisted on the activities of rendering public and historicizing. Past *and* current work by women artists should become the object of “present[at]ions,” of practices of “study[ing],” “collect[ing]” and “docu-ment[ing].” The engagement with (historical) women artists held historiograph-ical potential. Exhibition and archive – event and narration – were mobilized to intervene both on the present and the past. To say it with Foucault, the CBA directed its agency to expand “the law of what can be said [and done].”³⁷

At that time, the two core activities conjured by the cooperative – the presen-tation and documentation of art – were being increasingly mobilized by artists, curator-critics, and gallerists in the attempt to intervene in the making of an art history of the present. Since the rise of the neo avant-garde during the previous decade, the temporary exhibition provided the framework for the public happen-ing of increasingly ephemeral and procedural art. Archives specially set up for documenting these new art practices, on the other hand, ensured that the fragile works or traces thereof were kept and re-mediated for future reception. Decidedly relational, situational, time-based exhibition events, which in the course of the 1960s often took place in peripheral and semi-official contexts, but were subse-quently increasingly institutionalized, reflected the performative developments traversing the arts.³⁸ In Rome, Plinio de Martiis's series *Il Teatro delle mostre* (The Theater of Exhibitions) at the Galleria La Tartaruga translated the ‘dematerializa-tion’ of contemporary art into an institutional format: in May 1968, artists were invited to use the space, each for a single day. A few years later, one-day exhibitions were a core component of the program of the association Incontri Internazionali

36 “La cooperativa nasce con il proposito di presentare il lavoro di donne artiste che opera-no e hanno operato nel campo delle arti visive. A fianco di tale attività la cooperativa si propone di studiare, raccogliere e documentare tale lavoro e sarà quindi grata a chiunque vorrà aiutare in questo senso facendo pervenire materiali, libri, fotografie.” (Cf. the postcard in the FSS).

37 Foucault 1972, p. 129.

38 Cf. Bernardi 2014; Troncone 2014; Acocella 2016.

d'Arte (IIA) at Palazzo Taverna. A prelude to this was the restaging of individual contributions by Italian artists to the Paris Biennale in 1971, under the title *Informazioni sulla presenza italiana* (Information on the Italian Presence).

This combination of temporary artwork and equally ephemeral exhibition found a valuable counterpart in documentation. The new general importance the archive had gained at the time is shown by a debate initiated by critic Francesco Vincitorio in March 1971 in the journal *NAC – Notiziario d'arte contemporanea*.³⁹ Vincitorio addressed the urgency of establishing diverse *Centri di documentazione delle arti visive contemporanee* (Centers for the Documentation of Contemporary Visual Arts) at the national level. At least one private initiative had preceded him: as early as 1970, Celant had launched an internationally oriented archive in Genoa that would significantly contribute to his establishment as an art impresario. In responding to Vincitorio's suggestion, Celant characterized his Information Documentation Archives (IDA) as an institution specializing in "theory, information, and organization"⁴⁰ which, in addition to collecting and conserving, also provided services for publications and exhibitions. According to the critic-curator, documentary procedures had the potential, in contrast to hermeneutical approaches, to establish a non-authoritarian art criticism, a *critica acritica* (acritical criticism).⁴¹ The Genoa archive now seemingly certified selective documentation as his private trademark.⁴² Celant's response to Vincitorio in the journal *NAC* discloses that the IDA already gathered around 50,000 archived items under the rubrics *Arte povera*, Land Art, Conceptual Art, and Radical Architecture; further sections on alternative theater and counterculture were in the making. In the course of the *NAC* discussion in November of the same year, critic-curator Achille Bonito Oliva founded a similarly ambitious Centro di informazione alternativa (Center for alternative information) (CIA) coordinated by Bruno Corà for the private association IIA in Rome.⁴³ Bonito Oliva's initiative was presented as an alternative to comparable commercial institutions and, in addition to a publicly accessible archive, also comprised a library. Besides documenting positions from the visual arts, theater, architecture and political protest movements, another focus of the CIA was on *informazione attiva* (active information) resulting in exhibitions and podium discussions held at Palazzo Taverna.

In the aftermath of the 'exit from the picture' initiated by the neo avant-garde, the temporary exhibition and the archive were therefore increasingly used as interrelated formats to historicize the art of the present. Their mutual entanglement made it possible to publicly (re-)enact artworks, and to contextualize and carry them into the future in the form of their documentation. The afore-mentioned examples of influential archives that developed in connection with the new professional profile of the critic-curator cemented a long lasting connection between the neo avant-gardes and Marxist-oriented protest cultures. From the exhibition to the archive, power dynamics and gender asymmetries were perpetuated, thus shaping the historicization process. For instance, among the circa eighty contemporary figures listed as memorable, Celant's archive in 1971 included only two (international) women artists, Simone Forti and Hanne Darboven.

Against this backdrop, the women's cooperative's commitment to disposing of its own, legally defined space; various key roles (artists, curators) and formats (temporary exhibition, archive) signaled its aspiration to take part in the current

39 Cf. Vincitorio 1971a; Vincitorio 1971b.

40 Cf. Celant 1971.

41 Cf. Celant 1970.

42 For a retrospective assessment of Celant's archive, see Conte 2020.

43 Cf. *Incontri* 2003; Lonardelli 2016.

dispute over historicization.⁴⁴ Beyond the concern of promoting women artists, however, the horizontal and unsystematic program formats embodied a so far neglected feminist questioning of art historical parameters. In conclusion, I will suggest that the CBA not only exposed the imbalance of the art historical canon. Going beyond demands of art-historical revisionism as articulated by the parity camp, the cooperative more fundamentally called into question the progressive model of historical time underlying canon formation. With this shift, the all-women initiative reactivated key concerns of separatism by turning them into an influential tactic of feminist curating.

Non-Linear History Practice

In her anthology *Asincronie del femminismo* (Asynchronies of Feminism), historian Paola di Cori discusses feminism's focus on the present as a transformative space of possibility.⁴⁵ The practice of starting from oneself, which was seminal in the relational structure of *autocoscienza*, rejected the dominant notion of the past as a homogeneous or objectifiable foundation. Instead, it privileged the here and now of women's everyday life to create new structures for social reorganization. Participating in shaping this broader engagement with the present, separatist groups like Rivolta Femminile further fueled a reconsideration of women's place in history. Despite the CBA's structural involvement in the art field, a questioning of the apparent neutrality of historical time informed its practice.⁴⁶ The non-linear bringing together of different time levels and their reinterpretation starting from the present resonates with the separatists' endeavor to rethink history beginning from the position of women.

While the practice of *autocoscienza* can in retrospect only be comprehended to a partial extent,⁴⁷ the writings of the influential co-initiator of Rivolta Femminile, Carla Lonzi, offer fundamental insights into the then current discussion about women's relation to (historical) time. Lonzi's texts vividly convey the need to break with those temporal concepts that had come to appear irreparably entangled with a millennia-old male domination. Based on Lonzi's idea of *soggetto imprevisto* (unexpected subject), Giovanna Zapperi has studied the relationship between subjectivity and time in the writings of the feminist thinker.⁴⁸ Zapperi argues that Lonzi in her book *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait) of 1969, disregards the idea of a unified art-historical development; in the first manifesto by Rivolta femminile and Lonzi's small volume *Sputiamo su Hegel* (We spit on Hegel) of 1970, the Hegelian-Marxist teleology is under explicit attack; in Lonzi's diary *Taci, anzi parla* (Be Silent, Rather, Speak) of 1978, the author counteracts a linear logic of self-constitution.⁴⁹

In *Autoritratto*, a text-photo collage based on interviews with influential artists including Accardi that Lonzi conducted in the course of her work as an art critic, the author implicitly subverts conventional views of the art field as a coherent sequence of tendencies and positions. Lonzi pulled apart the artist statements she had recorded at different points in time, to then intermix and reassemble selected transcriptions thereof as a fictitious, polyvocal conversation interspersed with public and private photographs. Instead of giving a chronologically structured account of the art scene, with this singular book the author rather created

44 Given the short time span of the cooperative's existence, to my knowledge its archive of women artists remained an unrealized potentiality. Press coverage, however, reveals that materials documenting the exhibited artists were available during the opening hours of the gallery (cf. Rubiu 1976).

45 Cf. Di Cori 2012, in particular pp. 40–43.

46 On the mutual entanglement of separatism and artistic practice, cf. Zapperi 2019.

47 Cf. Boccia 1990.

48 Cf. Zapperi 2017, pp. 119–156.

49 Cf. Lonzi 1969; Rivolta Femminile (1970) 1991; Lonzi 1970; Lonzi 1978.

a relational dispositive – intertwining different generations of artists, and different moments of conversation – the key to which was evidently her biography. In disregarding linearity, *Autoritratto* constituted an attempt to at once reveal and disrupt the power dynamics underwriting the relations between artist and critic. In writings that followed, Lonzi proceeded to reflect on how to exit the role of the spectator she retrospectively felt the artists had imposed on her. She would go on to place the subjectivity of woman at the center of her feminist thinking.

Rivolta femminile's first manifesto, consequently, reasons on the relationship between women's subjectivity and history. The rediscovery of the historical presence of women, the text maintains, is the responsibility of women themselves. For this purpose, however, they cannot fall back on the "immortal traces"⁵⁰ with which men guarantee their own persistence in time. In Hegelian-Marxist teleology, the feminist collective sees a patriarchal dynamic at work that always excludes women. As a result, a dialectically understood past is male-determined and cannot give women a basis for their future. It is only starting from their awareness as an "unexpected subject," according to the manifesto, that women are able to break with the continuum of male history. Hence, in *Sputiamo su Hegel* Lonzi programmatically focuses on the task of self-realization in the present. In this context, feminism is posited as a transformative experience that takes shape in a subjectively-lived now.

This process can only function, however, if the past is incorporated in a new way. In her diary *Taci, anzi parla*, begun in 1972, Lonzi bids farewell to the idea of linear self-development. Rather, she transcribes the efforts made in the context of *autocoscienza* to reinterpret past experiences in collective conversations, with respect to one's own present. In the relational fabric of the feminist collective, Zapperi concludes, Lonzi promoted a non-linear, subjectively-pointed appropriation of the past based on a criterion of personal *risonanza* (resonance) and mutual *ricoscienza* (recognition).⁵¹ Instead of retroactively inserting women into a given continuum, which would mean imagining their future on a male-determined foundation, their subjectivity was to be reinvented through significant connections among female positions across time.

In the context of Rivolta Femminile, models of historical time that are based on a linear sequence – be it chronological or dialectical – were therefore discarded. Because of their respectively conservative and Marxist connotations, chronological and dialectical conceptions would be broken away from in equal measure. Both of these models had come to stand for an implicitly masculine writing of history. Against this backdrop, it seems legitimate to reassess the inconsistent appearance of the cooperative's program. When dealing with the historiographical formats of the exhibition and the archive, the CBA – even more so than did other contemporary institutions – explored their temporal ambiguity: that is, the possibility of exhibition and archive to literally make artifacts from different times co-present.⁵² At the cooperative's inception, the staging of the *Aurora* – the authentication and exhibition of the historical work – used this "presentifying" potential in an exemplary way. For the duration of three days, visitors stood face-to-face with a baroque painting instead of with contemporary artworks. The positioning on the easel at the center of the room among the public underlined the unchanged performative charge of the life-size female figure. Anachronically new in meaning, however, *Aurora* now seemingly embodied the revolutionary power of the "unexpected subject"⁵³ – the woman artist challenging art history.

50 „[T]racce non deperibili” (Rivolta Femminile, cit. in Zapperi 2017, p. 146).

51 Cf. Zapperi 2017, p. 149.

52 On the temporal dimensions of the exhibition, see *Timing* 2014; Frank/Bismarck 2019.

53 Recently, an extensive overview exhibition used the concept of *soggetto imprevisto* to characterize, more in general, the relationship between feminism and artistic practices in the Italian context of the 1970s (cf. *The Unexpected Subject* 2019).

Unlike their male colleagues, the members of the cooperative were not out to simply continue a centuries-old sequence of avant-garde triumphs, with changed actors. The imbalanced historical *a priori* of art made it impossible to merely continue or supplement a traditional narrative. Instead, the cooperative countered the understanding of history as a progressive narrative with a non-linear, constellational approach. Verticality and filiation receded into the background in favor of horizontality and newly created resonances. After the opening exhibition described above, as well as exhibitions by Santoro (April 1976) and Accardi (May 1976), the CBA returned to an examination of positions from the past. A retrospective of the futurist Regina Bracchi, who had died in 1974, was followed by an exhibition of works by the seventeenth-century Bolognese painter Elisabetta Sirani. Later there were exhibitions by Truppi (January 1977), Guidi (April 1977), Colucci (May 1977), and finally Santoro again, together with Busanel (January 1978).⁵⁴ The irregular program, the jumping back and forth between different centuries, generations and positions, as well as the call for a spontaneous, collective compilation of archival documentation beyond canonical classifications undermined the assumption that a universally valid art historical narrative had to be followed or reconstructed. Thus, the handling of the program continued the basic features of the opening exhibition described above, in a broader time frame: the CBA persisted, on the one hand, in re-contextualizing museum-worthy art by women in a contemporary gallery, and, on the other, in fostering a mutual reinterpretation of historical and present positions through a gender focus.

The experience of the CBA allows us to get an idea of how exhibition and archival practice developed along with the popularization of feminism at that time. If the all-women cooperative participated in the concerted effort of countering the structural imbalance of the art-historical canon, it also, and perhaps more importantly, vehiculated a rejection of conventional models of history-writing. The CBA's historiographical tactic – based on a non-linear interweaving of past and present positions – loses its apparent contingency when seen in relation to the questioning of chronological and dialectical notions of progress articulated in the realm of 1970s separatist feminism. In this light, the cooperative's activities can be reassessed as a focused disruption of the continuum of men's history. Through the construction of meaningful relationships between “unexpected” women artists, the separatist attitude towards history, which Lonzi conceptualized in her writings, took on a new, practical form. This curatorial approach would subsequently have its own legacy. In retrospect, we could relate to this tactic Griselda Pollock's proposal for a “virtual feminist museum” and therefore a discussion that seems no less topical today: that is, the possibility of substituting the linearity of narration with the openness of the laboratory, and the closedness of the canon with the contingency of situated re-readings.⁵⁵

54 An examination of these solo exhibitions from the aspect of temporality is still lacking. Elsewhere, I have begun to explore Accardi's interest in matrilineal genealogy in her solo show at the cooperative, *Origine* (cf. Bremer 2019).

55 Cf. Pollock, esp. p. 11.

Abbreviations

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Lorenzo Pericolo is professor of the history of art at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. He has published extensively on Renaissance and baroque art. Among his publications are the critical edition and annotated English translation of Carlo Cesare Malvasia's life of Guido Reni (2019) in two volumes, and *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting* (2011). He is currently working on a short monograph: *Deleuze's Baroque: Leibniz, The Fold, Informal Art, and the Objectile*.

Simona Vergassola

Independent researcher and scholar, her area of interest is above all in the field of Italian sixteenth and seventeenth-century painting and drawing, with research done for private collectors, along with studies carried out for personal interest and pleasure. A further field of concentration is that of Dutch and Flemish painting, in which she has studied several late sixteenth and seventeenth-century artists.