

Conversations across time

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Double Hesitation, 1977, acrylic on masonite, 49 x 37 inches, Elmhurst College Art Collection, Elmhurst, Illinois

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Let's Spit on Hegel, a provocative tract authored by Carla Lonzi in 1974, is regarded as one of the founding texts of Italian Feminism. As I have limited language skills and rely on the generosity of others, I periodically scour the internet for translations of Lonzi's work uploaded by individuals and collectives, since there is still no formal Italian-to-English translation of even her most celebrated work. This somehow seems appropriate, understanding shared in company, a digital form of Samizdat¹. Although I remain unsure who our contemporary censor is, conversely, I can locate a community of generous readers united in the search for texts they need to read, echoing Lonzi's earlier attempts in company to enact collective, supportive, political gestures.

Research image of *Double Hesitation*, Christina Ramberg 1977, and scraps of material given to me by Rebecca Shore, that her and Ramberg used to realise work with in the 1980s. Photo by Nadia Hebson

1) A dissident activity to evade Soviet censorship in which individuals reproduced suppressed publications by hand and passed the documents from reader to reader.

I repeatedly seek out the work of older colleagues in the guise of mentors, allies, confidantes and provocateurs to find ways to keep working in the present. To see clearly, repeatedly, in extended company that the work of artists and writers can travel faster than their own thinking and of course the thinking of the historical moment they emerge from.

Found online in 2015, the year a friend introduced me to Lonzi's writing and activism, the following text is an edited excerpt from *Let's Spit on Hegel* (which others call *We Spit on Hegel*), translated by Veronica Newman. It allows us to start with Lonzi's words significantly in translation as a way of approaching her work.

We have looked for 4,000 years; now we have seen! Behind us is the apotheosis of the age-old masculine supremacy. Institutionalized religions have been its firmest pedestal. And the concept of 'genus' has constituted its unattainable step. Woman has undergone the experience of seeing what she was doing destroyed every day. We consider incomplete our history which is based on non-perishable traces. Nothing, or else misconception, has been handed down about the presence of woman. It is up to us to rediscover her in order to know the truth. Civilization had despised us as inferior, the church has called us sex, psychoanalysis has betrayed us, Marxism has sold us a hypothetical revolution.

We ask for testimonials for centuries of philosophical thought that has theorized about the inferiority of woman. We hold systematic thinkers responsible for the great humiliation imposed on us by the patriarchal world. They have maintained the principle of woman as an adjunct to the reproduction of humanity, as bonded with divinity, or as the threshold of the animal world, a sphere of privacy and pietās. They have justified by metaphysics what was unjust and atrocious in the life of woman.

We Spit on Hegel.

The servant-master dialectic is a setting of account between groups of men: it does not foresee the liberation of woman: the great oppressed by the patriarchal



Carla Lonzi

no means a Lonzi scholar, my understanding of her positions comes from the work of others, including Federica Bueti, Clare Fontane, Francesco Ventrella and Giovanni Zapperi. These readings sit alongside my own attempts to intuit from her texts, in a language I can't speak, some form of understanding rooted in my own subjective and empathetic thinking. So my understanding and undoubtedly misunderstandings of Lonzi's work are from a partial, speculative, in some sense opportunist, viewpoint.

This is important.

Like many people at this moment and previously, I am by necessity engaged in a form of recuperation, simultaneously driven by the need to find alternate histories and to explore the reasons why I and others are compelled to do so. But this activity, this form of established biography, where legacy and life stories cohabit in line with modes of research enmeshed in patriarchal thinking cannot continue in its current complicit form. The question then becomes how to undertake this work. How can the gestures we pursue contain a self-reflexive awareness that sidesteps the conventions that have historically served to exclude? The answer of how to enact reimagined biographical enquiry can perhaps only begin in a consideration of the medium or mediums which one works within, with a provocateur as informal guide.

Lonzi's writing and activism aren't the subject of my own work, which over the last ten years has taken the form of a thinking through of the expanded legacies of British painter Winifred Knights and American painter Christina Ramberg and most recently Ramberg's creative female circle, through a reconfigured approach to painting, object making and writing. Rather Lonzi's work in its militancy and polyvocal make-up offers me a provocation, an alternative template for working, significantly a template for how to keep on working in the long

civilization. Class struggle, as a revolutionary theory developed from the servant-master dialectic, excludes woman. We question socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. By not recognizing herself in male culture woman deprives it of the illusion of universality. Man has always spoken in the name of humanity but half the world's population now accuses him of having sublimated a mutilation.

Man's strength lies in identifying with culture, ours in refuting it. After this act of conscience man will be distinct from woman and will have to listen to her telling what concerns her.

The world will not explode just because man will no longer hold the psychological balance based on our submission. From the bitter reality of a universe that has never revealed its secrets we take much of the credit given to the obstinacies of culture. We wish to rise to be equal to an answerless universe. We look for the authenticity of the gesture of revolt and will sacrifice it neither to organization nor to proselytism.

We communicate only with women.

The feminist movement is itself the means and the end of any basic transformation of humankind. It needs no future, it makes no distinctions — bourgeoisie, proletariat, race, age, culture, clan or tribe. It comes neither from above nor from below, from the elite or from the base, it needs neither leadership nor organization, neither diffusion nor propaganda. An entirely new word is being put forward by an entirely new subject. It only has to be uttered to be heard. Acting becomes simple and elementary. There are no goals, there is the present of our here and now. We are the world's dark past, we are giving shape to the present.

Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) was an Italian art critic, feminist, writer, poet and activist who, along with Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti, founded the feminist collective *Rivolta Femminile* in Rome in 1970. It is important to note that in seeking categories to describe Lonzi I immediately go against a founding principle of her feminism, which is the necessity for women to resist constraining roles, identities and categorizations. I am by



Rivolta Femminile, Carla Accardi, Elvira Banotti, Carla Lonzi

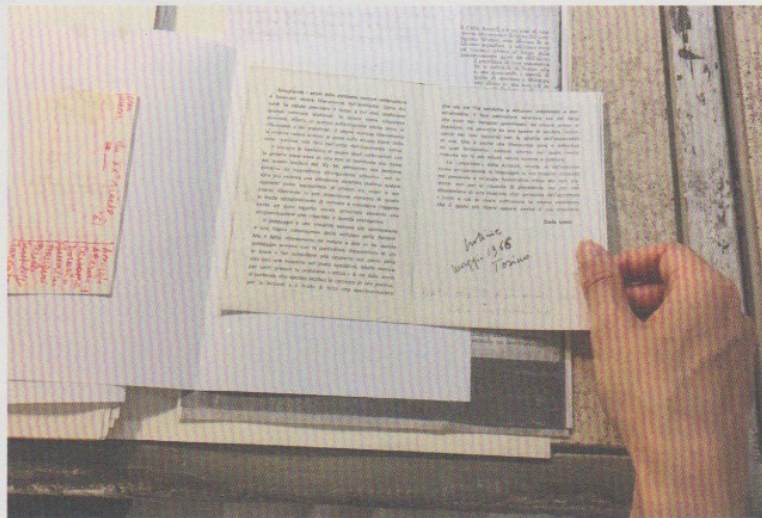
term. I see her as an ally and provocateur rather than a mentor, offering a complex way of being in the world informed by a *working against the self*. If you explore Lonzi's biography she could be described as working from an ethically compromised position, but she is immensely aware of the agency her privilege affords. Nothing is half-arsed in her thinking, and the degree to which she follows through her thoughts into actions is extreme. So maybe I can say Lonzi has offered me, for want of a better word, a methodology, and my understanding of this is what I will share from a categorically subjective position.

Listening to Giovanna Zapperi's lecture 'Towards an Autonomous Feminist Institution: Carla Lonzi and *autocoscienza*, I transcribe the following quotes: "Lonzi abandoned art for feminism in order to investigate the relations between art and feminism from a minority perspective, Lonzi's work though difficult to define includes a number of feminist experiments with writing, creativity and alternative knowledge generation in which she reinvents established forms of expression: the private journal, the conversation and the manifesto."²

In 1968 Lonzi published *Autoritratto* or 'Self-portrait', a work which has been read as a prelude to her feminist engagement. In this book, Lonzi collides interviews with Arte Povera artists with her own poetry and autobiographical detail to create a subjective, non-linear prose. As Zapperi describes: "Self-portrait" is based on a montage of a series of conversations that Lonzi recorded, transcribed and assembled. Each conversation is first fragmented, then re-composed as a non-linear ensemble, where Lonzi ceases to ask questions or discuss the artist's work, but where she speaks for herself, in her own voice. She constructs the fiction of an uninterrupted conversation in which her role is essentially participatory. Once the original conversation is destroyed Lonzi composes the text in which she and the artists,



Carla Lonzi. Image from the Fondo Carla Lonzi, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea



Looking at material in the Fondo *Carla Lonzi*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome. Photo by *Nadia Hebbson*

2 & 3) Quotes transcribed from *Towards an autonomous feminist institution: Carla Lonzi and autocoscienza*, Giovanna Zapperi, a lecture in the frame of *Feminist (Art) Institution*, organized by TRANZITDISPLAY, 20 June, 2017.

converse, so to speak, with each other. Lonzi is focusing on subjectivity and non-hierarchical exchange."³

Autoritratto signaled Lonzi's break from the conventions of art history and the conception of her radical dictum that women should strive to make visible their creative political position as unexpected subjects, outside of societal constraints, in order to halt the patriarchal monologue of history. Lonzi perceives feminism as an interruption in the continuum of historical time, a continuum of women's oppression. The feminist subject represents the emergence of the 'unexpected subject', a subject that requires neither the past nor the future. The promise of the future is a lie sold to women to keep them enmeshed in a constraining, unending, patriarchal compromise.

contratto offers a template for another way of being. Cooperation is abandoned in order to participate in the creative moment. Authority is lost with coherence and unity is rejected and the search begins for a different authorial voice, rooted in dialogue. For Lonzi, the potential of imagined collective narrative is fragmentary, tentative and radical. Non-canonical text, it is incompatible with established art historical narratives, but it can be viewed as a proposition for other forms of interaction, comprehension and speaking with.

What does it offer?

Along the route Lonzi instigates leads towards a creative, equivocal circumstance, where the author's biography and subjectivity sit alongside the insights, suppositions and direct quotations, a fragmented biography, of the other considered subjects. Where it is unclear where one thought ends and another begins, where multiple voices are heard both simultaneously and intermittently. Lonzi eventually refused the established concept of creativity, specifically the notion that art itself could be an emancipatory practice for women. She considered creativity to be colonized by patriarchy, so that cultural creation was irrevocably a patriarchal product. Lonzi eventually distanced herself emotionally and in practical terms from art criticism; from friends and allies, including Accardi; and from her partner, Pietro Cosagra, in a series of radical acts that were the logical conclusion of her uncompromising politics. This extreme gesture – I am not committed to calling it a dropping out – is not without precedent amongst other notable women artists and writers of the era.

Reminding me of a (my) note for a lecture: *Not seeking to reconfigure an extant canon, not inserting the less considered into established narratives, not responding to constraints shaped by patriarchal thinking, not finding ways to give clarity,*

singularity, elevation or authority, not addressing absences, nor delineating omissions, nor rehabilitating occluded artistic inheritances.

When Lonzi died in 1982 she was working on a book in which she was 'in conversation' with a group of 15th-century 'bluestockings'. This text foregrounds her notion of 'Resonance', defined by Lonzi as a relationship that can be established between two or more women, who do not necessarily live in the same place or period of time, as a way of seeing one's own experience reflected in the experience of someone else, a form of mutual recognition.

'Resonance' related specifically to the female artistic experience but it issued from Lonzi's work with artist Carla Accardi through Rivolta Femminile around Autocoscienza or consciousness-raising, a tool to develop women's self-confidence through the sharing of experience with other women. Formulated as an active political tool to empower, it acknowledged the potential of female friendship as a form of resilience in the face



Image of *Carla Accardi* installing work, from Fondo *Carla Lonzi*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome. Photo by *Nadia Febson*

of patriarchal structures that govern women's lives, to enable solidarity and change.

A consideration of Accardi and Lonzi's conception of female friendship as a potent and melded terrain, one where the personal, political, emotional, claimed as objective, messily cohabit, has become increasingly key to the development of my own work. For me, an exploration of creative female friendships, which have in many instances sustained entire careers that were conducted in obscurity, has become a consuming area of interest.

This area of enquiry can only be tenable for me if complex and resistant forms of working, driven by a creative necessity rather than any canonical requirement or academic validation, shape my engagement. In line with Lonzi's thinking I advocate for critique, refusal and rejection of the conventions which instrumentalize knowledge production in the forwarding of the knowledge economy. And to return to Lonzi's description of 'Resonance', I have understood my own thinking with and

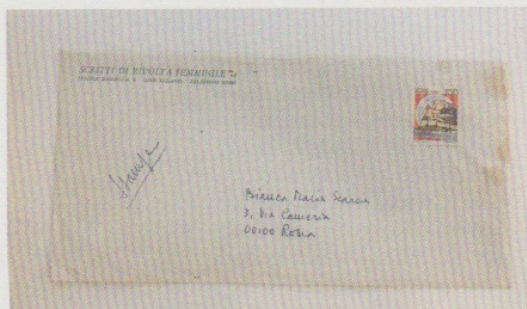
paying close attention to the work of both Winifred Knights and Christina Ramberg and her creative female circle in this form.

When I consider Lonzi's version of 'Resonance' I see her engaging in an imagined conversation with women across time; these are women in whom she sees herself. A mirroring. This is not a recuperation or conversation with people, with women, outside her social or intellectual milieu. In one sense it does not require great leaps of empathetic understanding, but it does ask us to consider what paying close attention or close translation might mean. It issues from an acknowledged subjectivity and a need both to put one's voice in the world and to hear one's voice in the world. To comprehend the power and worth of that voice, even if it is solely a way to value one's own position. It can be seen as a starting point for an unravelling of structures that have historically dominated and silenced. Allowing for a new conception and imaginative possibility of others' work and the fixed narratives that may have obscured or reduced them.

In relation to my own practice, which in part explores the expanded legacies of my predecessors through 'subjective biography', I imagine 'Resonance' as a form of paying close attention. As a form of translation from the conditions in which an artist may have historically worked, to the meaning and possibilities of their practice in the present, which may have travelled faster than the artist's own thinking. Lonzi's writing sits for me in a constellation of feminist literary precedents, which have delineated a way and granted a form of permission. Christa Wolf, Ingeborg Bachmann, Bhanu Kapil, Elfriede Jelinek, Dorothy Richardson, Lucia Berlin, Chris Kraus: each in varying ways has explored the radical potential of the subjective female voice, of empathetic enquiry, some the deployment of autobiography and autofiction as valid, valuable forms of thinking through. The potential of speculative invention to understand



The Conditions, oil on canvas, *Nadia Febson*, 2019

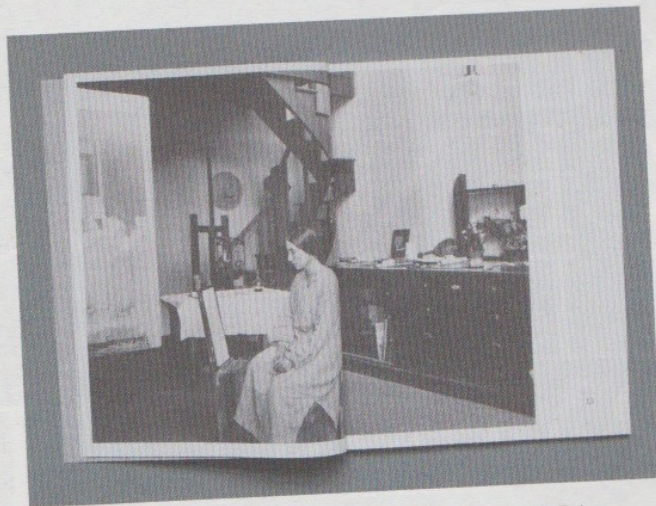


Envelope from *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile* in the Fondo *Carla Lonzi*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome, summer 2019. Photo by *Nadia Febson*

network of women artists and writers. Opening out a space for personal or intuitive readings.

The theme is taken up more recently by Kate Briggs in *The Little Art* and Natasha Soobramanien in 'Five Notes on Smarginature', around the work of Elena Ferrante. In these works, Kate Briggs and Soobramanien explore translation as a mode of paying close attention. Briggs the translator of Roland Barthes' lecture series *On the Preparation of the Novel*, responds upon the practice of literary translation as a subjective and intensely relational experience, as practised by herself, Helen Lowe Porter and Jennifer Bussey amongst others. In considering these women's work Briggs proposes her version of translation as an invitation to write and read intimately alongside and through the work of another writer. In 'Five Notes on Smarginature' Soobramanien blends the women's friendship novels to an act of translation. Soobramanien writes: "Lila and Lenù are translated beings, translating one another, shifting continually between the Neapolitan dialect of their childhood and the standard form of Italian both have a talent for expressing themselves in. And it is in this more rarefied linguistic sphere that Lenù finds success, and her professional voice as a writer (a voice modelled on Lila's writerly voice)."

Imagined female friendship as a form of translation, a space of attention, mirroring, testing, exchange, admiration, productive envy, a space of agency. These associated but subtly different forms of translation stand in proximity in some way to this impulse to speak with other artists. They relate to my reading of Carla Lonzi's notion of 'Resonance', and her belief that a woman's *autocoscienza* will never be complete until it is recognized through the *autocoscienza* of another woman. Briggs and Soobramanien's work returns me to the circumstance of my own: Do I work with intimate, highly personal forms of



Winifred Knights in her studio, from the book *MODA WK: Work in response to the paintings, drawings, correspondence, clothing and interior design of Winifred Knights, (an expanded legacy)* by Nadia Hebson. Book designed by Kaisa Lassinaro, published by AND Public and Nadia Hebson, with the support of The Derek Hill Foundation and Newcastle University, 2014



Research image of Black 'N Blue Jacket, Christina Ramberg, 1981. Photo by Nadia Hebson

translation? Do these gestures lead to a polyvocal circumstance where multiple voices are both heard and seen, through the prism of my own particular thinking and making? I look at, live with, think through the work of Christina Ramberg to understand how to keep going, how to steel myself, how to overcome artist's block, how to speak about the complexities of self-objectification, how to celebrate the agency of clothing, how to mix the perfect slub grey, how to scrutinize the conditions under which both she and I make work, how to configure a bid for the long game. I am not interested in naming or ascribing permanent meaning to the work she realized. I am deeply committed to the imaginative space the consideration of another artist's work can open up, the things their work can mean. As Ramberg's ascendancy continues to accelerate, I have conversely watched the calcifying of the narrative around her practice. Lonzi offers us many things, but above all else she demands we fiercely resist the stealthy restraints of a patriarchal culture, which celebrates the historical monologue, the singular definitive reading. In its place she advocates for the imaginative, expansive possibilities for the unexpected subject to freely engage in *autocoscienza*. She insists on reciprocal translation, most likely imagined as a significant transformative act, in which we may find ourselves anew.



Women Are Art Schools, Billboard commission for Kingsgate Project Space, summer 2019, Nadia Hebson