

Unexposed negatives

Carla Lonzi, *Taci, Anzi Parla. Diario di una femminista 1972–1977* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2024), 1088pp., €25,00 pb., 979 1 28172 302 3

Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2024). 416pp., €22,00 pb. 978 889481 449 1

Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel e Altri Scritti* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2023). 144pp., €16,00 pb., 978 8 89481 448 4

Carla Lonzi, *Feminism in Revolt: An Anthology* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2024). 312pp., £19.99 pb., 978 1 80309 156 3

Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait* (Brussels: Divided Publishing, 2021). 364pp., £13.99 pb., 978 1 91642 508 8

Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi, eds, *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). 288pp., £25.99 pb., 978 1 78453 732 6

In the autumn of 1969, Italian art critic and art historian Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) published the experimental interview book *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait), which reads as a polyphonic montage and a seemingly endless conversation between Lonzi and fourteen central figures in the Italian art scene. Central topics for this imagined group discussion are the role of the art critic, the artist and the student activist in Italy – questions with which Lonzi had long been occupied and now expressed through a constellation of voices. In this way, Lonzi put into practice an argument stated in the book through her choice of editorial method, namely that artists are ‘natural critics’ and should reclaim artistic autonomy from the critic’s formalist concept of art. In 1969–70, Lonzi abandoned art criticism for feminism and co-founded one of Italy’s first separatist feminist groups, the decentralised and anti-authoritarian Rivolta Femminile in Milan, together with artist Carla Accardi and journalist Elvira Banotti. To paraphrase Lonzi’s comment in her first feminist essay, ‘Sputiamo su Hegel’ [Let’s Spit on Hegel], from 1970 – ‘Today, woman openly judges that culture and that history that sustains male transcendence, and judges that transcendence’ – her critique of party politics and art criticism continued in the form of a feminist critique of sexuality.

In ‘Let’s Spit on Hegel’ Lonzi directed this critique toward the intellectual figure that embodies an imagined revolutionary consciousness, as well as the imagined nationalist democratic subjectivity. In her view, feminine subjects are not and should not be shaped by legal, political, gendered or philosophical forms of representation: they must critique those dominating forms and the subjectivity that they entail in order to imagine otherwise.

Lonzi called this imagination the practice of *deculturalisation*.

‘Let’s Spit on Hegel’ became decisive for Italian feminism in which women’s rights were called for with anti-colonial analogies. While feminists contemporary with Lonzi, including Shulamith Firestone, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James have identified this link between feminist and anti-colonial projects, little attention has been paid to the technical and formal means of their pursuit in Lonzi’s practice. Lonzi’s use of photographic and transcription technologies, including typewriter and voice recorder were fundamental to her distinct process of feminist consciousness-raising as ‘deculturalisation’ – a notion which prior to her had been used by Frantz Fanon to describe the ‘cultural alienation’ of colonised subjects. From 1966 through to the 1970s, Lonzi systematically recorded and transcribed conversations with artists and fellow feminists, materialising the historic absence of these people’s experience in art criticism and politics. These montages of relations imprinted on the material substrate of paper served to ‘disidentify’ with and unlearn ‘patriarchal culture’ – a process she understood in terms of rediscovering the oppressed experience of the subaltern. In line with what Lonzi scholar and philosopher Maria Luisa Boccia in 1990 described as ‘scrittura autoconscienziale’ (consciousness-raising writing), Lonzi refunctioned art criticism into a technique of disalienation, understood as a process of deculturalisation. The negative aspect of deculturalisation in Fanon’s use of the word was hence turned on its head by Lonzi when she used deculturalisation to describe sexual liberation. In her writing, sexual autonomy materialised in a technical withdrawal from heteronuclear society. She

insisted that autonomous sexuality – practiced in the refusal to adapt logics of procreation, art and law alike – could obliterate the established order, such as laws on abortion. Following her thinking it is striking how collective desires for liberation, actualised through technologies of reproduction and transmission, are a common denominator across Fanon's and Lonzi's thinking of how experiences of deculturalised subjects are to be expressed – within and against confining cultural forms.

While the wave of interest in Lonzi's work has been vividly apparent for almost ten years, the most extensive study on her legacy to date is still Boccia's 1990 monograph *L'io in rivolta. Vissuto e pensiero di Carla Lonzi*. Based on Lonzi's extensive diary of more than a thousand pages, read through the history of Italian feminism and with an overview of the parallel emergence of Autonomia, the book ranges across Lonzi's methods for writings on art and feminism, where Boccia introduces the notion of consciousness-raising writing. Since 2010, several of Lonzi's books on which Boccia based her monograph have

been republished in Italian for the first time since the 1960s and 1970s: *Autoritratto* (1969; 2010; 2018; 2024), *Taci, Anzi Parla. Diario di una femminista 1972–1977* (1977; 2024) and *Vai Pure* (1978; 2010). In 2011, the anthology *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta* collected essays from prominent Lonzi scholars covering Lonzi's period as an art critic and her subsequent feminist period. In 2012, an anthology of Lonzi's art criticism, *Scritti sull'arte*, was published, and her writings on art were critically introduced at length for the first time since Boccia. In 2016, art historian Laura Iamurri published the monograph *Un margine che sfugge. Carla Lonzi e l'arte in Italia 1955–1970*, in which Lonzi's correspondence with her close friend and fellow art historian Marisa Volpi was analysed for the first time. This book is particularly relevant to Lonzi studies today, since the correspondence is no longer available after Volpi's passing.

Since the opening of Lonzi's archive to the public in 2018 (which currently is closed again due to the fascist



siezure of the Italian national gallery in which the archive resides), studies of Lonzi's biography and translated writings have also begun to emerge in the Anglophone academy. In 2021, art historians Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi edited the anthology *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, including articles based on archival findings and interviews that contextualised these in the field of feminist art histories. Already in 2017, Zapperi had published her PhD thesis on Lonzi, *Un'arte della vita*, with a French translation following in 2019. In 2021, *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait) was published in English translation by Allison Grimaldi Donahue for Divided Publishing, and in 2023, the first critical anthology of Lonzi's writings, *Feminism in Revolt*, was published by Seagull Books. Edited by Luisa Lorenza Corna and Jamila M. H. Mascat, these are the first English translations of both Lonzi's art criticism and feminist essays together, along with other previously untranslated essays and texts, and contextualised by the two editors. Introducing Lonzi's oeuvre, Corna and Mascat discuss the disintegration of the dialectics of art and life as immanent to Lonzi's 1969 dropout from art criticism, and the critical, legal and political subject as a central problem for Lonzi. In contrast to Corna's and Mascat's focus on the conflictual relation between art and sexuality immanent to Lonzi's withdrawal and feminist debut, Ventrella's and Zapperi's anthology put a great emphasis on the modern, critical subject as merely an obstacle which figures like Lonzi supposedly got rid of. Despite the highly refined archival studies that this anthology encompasses, such an approach ignores the problem of the immanent dialectics of the critic that Lonzi materialised and describes in detail in 1969 and 1970. As a result, Lonzi is introduced as a post-critical and post-subjective feminist from the very beginning. This approach neglects the central and conjuncturally specific critique of the crisis of dialectics that Lonzi expressed in the essay 'La critica è potere' [Criticism is Power] from 1970. Reading Lonzi through her social context is indispensable for an understanding of the subjects of the curator and the feminist respectively, to which Corna's and Mascat's anthology gives special attention in the two introductory essays by the editors in which Lonzi's dropping out is also described as a 'cultural boycott', timely as ever.

The recently published *Gendered Labour and Clitoridean Revolt* (2024) features mainly Lonzi's and Rivolta

Femminile's essays on gender and sexuality – some of them for the first time in translation – along with excerpts of Lonzi's contemporary and co-founder of the feminist operaist group Lotta Femminista, and thereafter Wages for Housework, Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housewives, Prostitutes, Workers and Capital* (published by Verso, in February 2025). The collaboration between Arlen Austin and Sara Colantuon, who have edited the anthology together with Jaleh Mansoor and translated both Lonzi and Fortunati, allows for a thinking across these two influential but very different feminists' work in the light of the current legacy of both [and is reviewed in depth in this issue of *Radical Philosophy* by Christina Chalmers below].

In *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, published by University of Minnesota Press in 2014, art historian Siona Wilson underscores the sexual difference of the division of labour as existing beyond wage difference due to the unpaid aspect of homework and night cleaning, which only strengthens existing political divisions. The question is what happens if we discuss the sexual difference of media itself. To reflect a gendered experience with means of mechanical reproduction sheds a new light on the Benjaminian theory of art and culture. Around a decade after Lonzi's feminist debut in 1970, Fortunati published *The Arcana of Reproduction* in 1981, in which she speaks of women's unpaid reproductive labour as a photographic negative in the context of capitalist production. In focus for this analogy is the essential and yet overlooked mediation which both housework and the photographic negative entail, as reproductive forms that enable commodity production without being sold as commodities or labour power. As Lonzi outlines in *Autoritratto*, her transcription practice was a way of 'finding a page that is not written', which from the point of view of Fortunati's analogy, is *unexposed*. The 'unwritten', 'unexposed negative' of society that both Fortunati and Lonzi called for with different arguments and methods necessitates a critical reflection on the relation between mechanical reproducibility, social reproduction and sexuality. While Fortunati was striving for the material inclusion of the negative in the bigger 'photographic' picture of society, Lonzi saw an opportunity in the blank page and refused to have it synthetically filled with culture – a process which would only force her into the same negative role of mediation

that Fortunati sought to elucidate with her reference to photography. Different from Fortunati, Lonzi saw that role as a way out. Emphasising the technical measures that disintegrate the authenticity of the artwork and the relative autonomy of the critic in Benjamin's view, Lonzi transforms the subject of critique (and sexual difference) to what is not yet represented and hence 'unforeseen'.

In September 2023, Rivolta Femminile's first compilation of texts, *Sputiamo su Hegel e Altri Scritti*, published in Milan in 1974, was republished in Italian for the first time since the 1970s. The regained accessibility of the texts resulted in new discussions regarding Lonzi's understanding of sexual difference and the role that it plays in the twenty-first century, especially in light of the contemporary neo-fascist pro-life movement

in Italy. During a book conversation organised by the transfeminist bookstore Tuba in the Roman district Pigneto, then 78-year-old Maria Luisa Boccia stated that for Lonzi, sexual difference was not a matter of sexual identity but rather 'a negation of sexuality as dogma.' If we understand Lonzi's use of the notion of deculturalisation in line with Boccia's proposal, it stands out as a social withdrawal from the identities produced by social, legal and cultural forms. Correspondingly, Lonzi wrote in 'Let's Spit on Hegel':

Women are not in a dialectic relationship with men. The demands we are trying to make clear imply not an antithesis, but *a moving on another level*. This is the hardest point to understand, but it is essential that we do not fail to insist on it.

Frida Sandström

Subjective objects

Carla Lonzi and Leopoldina Fortunati, *Gendered Labour and Clitoridean Revolt*, eds. Arlen Austin, Sara Colantuono, and Jaleh Mansoor (Vancouver: Fillip, 2024). 280pp., £14.99 pb., 978 1 92735 441 4

Gendered Labour and Clitoridean Revolt is an important resource in the study of Italian feminisms in English, providing the translation of several texts drawn from the oeuvres of the workerist feminist Leopoldina Fortunati (b. 1949) and the existentialist feminist Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) thus far untranslated into English. The contributions by Lonzi in particular extend the areas of her work available to Anglophone readers, including works which are often referenced elsewhere but have hitherto been unavailable in full (such as 'The Clitoridean Woman and the Vaginal Woman').

Lonzi's texts include the short piece 'The Absence of Women from Occasions Celebrating the Manifestation of Male Creativity' (1971), which discusses the meaning of male culture, and which links her art criticism to her feminist writing: the notion of the artist-spectator divide, which parallels the gendered divide in culture. Two texts deal with the psychic or psychoanalytic resonances of feminism, including 'Female Sexuality and Abortion' (1971), which considers the importance of theorising male and female pleasure and sexuality vis-à-vis pro-creative sexual intercourse; and 'The Clitoridean Woman

and the Vaginal Woman' (1971), which deals with theories of vaginal sexuality and their attendant teleologies of sexual development in Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and others. Lonzi here proposes one of her key ideas: the 'clitoridean woman', who pursues radical pleasure and orients herself away from an exclusive focus on male cultural dynamics towards 'authenticity'. 'An Itinerary of Reflections' (1977) is the least well-known text, comprising reflections on and critiques of contemporary feminists, including Julia Kristeva, Lea Melandri and Sylvia Plath, and considerations of figures or themes in feminism like Electra, the figure of the void and the dynamic of ceding. A dense but simultaneously very productive text, it both extends her theories and clarifies her applications of the latter, as in the clitoridean woman (a term she uses to criticise other feminists). For the editors, this text marks a change in focus across the 1970s, from male culture to 'the relationship with women, in both the past and the present.'

The contributions by Fortunati include sections of her forthcoming book *The Arcana of Reproduction*, a re-translation of what was earlier published as *The Arcane*