

Beyond the Monocular Eyesight

Lessons from Italian Women Photographers in the Seventies

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Abstract

This chapter explores the meaning and transformative power of photographic art through the analysis of Italian women photographers' work in the Seventies, a biographical, philosophical, collective, and critical way of representation that fuels reflexivity about adult experience as individuals, citizens, and members of society. In the Seventies, the need for social and cultural change was expressed collectively by diverse actors through public alliances and manifestations, but also private and intimate practices of self-consciousness. Women became the unexpected subject on public scenes, bringing creativity and relationality to the forefront. New feminist pedagogies and 'another gaze' on reality built hope for the future. In the present crisis, remembering the past, and using arts-based relational pedagogies to explore experience and share action, are transformative ways of doing critical adult education.

Keywords

feminism – seventies – photography – difference – self-consciousness

1 Introduction

The Italian 'feminism of difference' lived a major moment of flourishing in the Seventies, an era of major social turmoil and cultural and political changes. Women gathered in public and private spaces not only to protest and claim for their rights, but to ask for a change of paradigm, from a man-dominated, patriarchal, and oppressive society, to a free, creative, and joyous sisterhood. Exploring the power of narratives and voices, they invented new relational pedagogies based on self-narration and entrustment (Cavarero, 2000), bringing

a radical critique to dominant ideas and practices that is still inspirational for adult educators (Merril & West, 2009; Formenti & West, 2018).

In the same period, women photographers were developing innovative projects and practices of ‘mirroring, critical inquiry, and witnessing’ (Casero, 2021), using images to convey ‘another eyesight’ to the public (Perna, 2016). They challenged the monocular eyesight based on one dominant way of representing the world (the ‘master story’) and brought to the forefront their own way to witness oppression, marginalization, desperation in everyday life, but also courage, the glimpse of alternative visions, and celebration of self-determination. They opened unexpected possibilities of creative representation, experimenting with the visual to raise consciousness of women’s lives, struggles, feelings, and desires. Women’s bodies and sexuality, intimacy, relationships, and private spaces became visible as legitimate and political themes to be artistically explored, problematized, de-constructed, and re-interpreted.

My questions in this chapter are: what can we learn from these photographs and photographers, as adult educators and researchers? And how? I have been inspired (Formenti, 2021) by these artworks in exploring exhibitions and catalogues with groups of adults, where I realized the power of these images in enhancing critical reflexivity about gender and beyond. I started a research on arts-based feminist practices in the field of guidance and students’ orientation (Formenti & Vitale, 2016) in workshops based on meeting art, feeling it with the whole body, then writing experientially and autobiographically, and having conversations about meaning and knowledge. The aim was to revise dominant ideas implementing a collective mind (Del Negro & Formenti, 2019) based on the participants’ active engagement and reciprocal positioning within a dialogic context. Adult education is about naming and recognizing the lights and shadows, freedom and oppression, desires and fears, in the lived experience of women and men. In my journey, I owe a lot to Silvia Luraschi and Gaia Del Negro: our trio developed a feminist methodology through academic friendship and reciprocity (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2019, 2020a, b, 2022). Relationality is the rule: building awareness and a ‘satisfying theory’ is a collective endeavour, a path to consciousness and action, a way to hope.

Feminist practices invite the participants to weave an open dialogue about their perceptions, feelings, and values, supporting each other in building critical awareness, opening more possibilities, and sustaining future action. This is also the method I followed in writing this chapter that weaves autoethnography, aesthetic imagination, criticality, and a pragmatic attitude. I invite you, the reader, to do the same while reading.

2 Autoethnography: The Seventies and I

Is the camera an objective witness of reality? As the daughter of a male photographer, and mother of a woman photographer, the visual is very present in my biography. This trans-generational inheritance is symbolic of a transition that is cultural and biographical, but also epistemological. From the loving but intrusive eyesight of 'the Father' to the embracing and irreverent eyesight of a dancing Daughter who asks questions with her camera. From the regime of patriarchy, domination, and objectivity, to sensitivity, creativity, and connectivity. My father's core issue was the technically perfect photograph. My daughter's lenses are a metaphor for her soul. At least, it seems to me. This paradigmatic leap interrogates my trajectory as a subject, citizen, and researcher.

Why did I choose the Seventies? Biographically, they correspond to my adolescence, when I realized that the received and internalized perspective was not necessarily true, or the only one. My family had climbed the social ladder from working class to small business owners – my father started his own activity as a photographer when I was 4 – so, I experienced all the contradictions of my parents, who had low education and high ambitions. They praised knowledge and invested on my education, but with a misplaced expectation of continuity with the past. Both creative, open-minded, and modern, still struggling with new emerging values. My mother was never recognized as a worker. She was the 'silly one' as she used to say. Yet, as the housewife and book keeper of my father's shop (he was 'the artist' – totally disinterested to financial issues!), she managed with a double unpaid career and learnt by herself how to do with clients and contractors, she did all the paperwork and negotiated with banks, creditors and debtors. However, the family narrative was all in favour of his brilliant conversation, professional capacity, and social intelligence.

So, it took some time to open my eyes to oppression, especially related to the feminine, and to my social position as a woman. Male domination appeared natural to me, besides I wanted to please my beloved father, and I dreamt of being born male myself. I behaved as an obedient, complying girl. But then, during adolescence, I was exposed to 'the hot Seventies', and this provided that informal counter-education that family or school were unable to offer. Since preadolescence, indeed, I saw collective resistance to domination. Social and private struggles enforced cultural change through songs, pamphlets, manifestations, new clothing and language. A whole generation revolting against imposed rules. The Seventies meant antagonism, sabotage, insurrection, as well as freedom and creativity. I realized soon that I belonged to the blessed, the Youth, those who were going to change the world!

In those years, social and intergenerational conflict became the normal in public spaces, media, and families. Workers' wildcat strikes since the 1960s and the world-wide youth revolt in 1968 (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2020b) started a season of unexpected alliances across social strata: students protested with workers, tenants, migrants, and intellectuals, to claim for freedom and human rights. Groups and movements mushroomed, and among them a massive and loud feminist movement with different branches. My mother grasped the aesthetic side of it, and sewed long hippie skirts and coloured dungarees for me. Even the most conformist were run over by the outbreak, and the State started a season of important reforms regarding wages, housing, family (divorce, abortion), school (delegated decrees, inclusion), and the recognition of adult learning as a right (the 150 hours scheme, see also Formenti & West, 2018, chapter 8).

Different subjects had different motivations, though. Conscious and unconscious. When I enrolled in University, surprisingly many students were adopting practices of 'mass illegality', e.g., not paying for transportation or goods – the 'proletarian expropriation' – occupying houses, gate-crashing concerts, and so on. Those actions – typical of the 'autonomist' movement in late 1970s – forced antagonism against the State and challenged the arbitrariness of command, as well as private property. However, I did not see them as liberating actions. Most of those students appeared to me desperate, poor, far from home, and politically and existentially disorientated. Anyway, they performed 'disobedience', and I obscurely felt that it was a value.

The world was changing: very rapidly, the factory lost its symbolic value and class identity weakened; the ways of production were already re-organizing towards neoliberalism, leaving way to an emerging stratified and intersectional class of oppressed – a 'new proletariat' (Negri, 2005). The deepening societal fracture turned to the extremes: on one side, the 'years of lead' – terrorism, violence, urban guerrilla, suffocated with military repression; on the other side, heroin abuse, that swept away the hopes and dreams of a whole generation.

Within this turmoil, I felt like an ambivalent observer, refusing violence and illegality, but feeling the need and rightness of rebellion. It was an era of scary inner and outer conflict, but also hope and strong values. A better future was imaginable and it must be recognized that important political reforms and achievements were established. I have given for granted those rights throughout my adult life. But they were not. Not for all. Not forever.

The hidden curriculum of my generation has been shaped by the utopian dream for a new society; it drowned for many reasons and some conquests of those times seem vanished today under the pressures of the new establishment, the neoliberal scheme, consumerism, and competition. This is why I feel

worthy re-opening my/our memories of that period. Not least, to pass them on to the new generations.

3 Italian Feminisms: Philosophical and Existential Practices of Creative Difference

What was Italian feminism in the Seventies? The story is complex and can be told in different ways, from multiple perspectives. Here, I choose creativity and difference as my interpretative lenses. Narrative of the past is necessary to understand the present. Historically, something unexpected happened when women with different backgrounds – intellectuals, artists, teachers, activists, and housewives – suddenly became visible and connected, shared their experiences, and learned from each other. In public, they protested, sang, and danced. In more intimate feminist circles (Women's Bookstore, 1990, 2017), they explored their gender identities and roles implementing new relational pedagogies based on self-narration, awareness, and entrustment (Cavarero, 2000).

Their scope was very practical and philosophical at the same time. In reflecting on 'the Italian difference', Negri (2009) quotes, after Gramsci, two 'fundamental breaks' in Italian philosophy and intellectual life, the workerist Tronto and the feminist Muraro. In identifying capitalism and patriarchy as the main forms of exploitation in post-war Italian society, they identify subjectivity as the revolutionary idea to fuel criticality and creative difference. The 'thought of sexual difference' (Muraro, 2009) sees patriarchy and its internalized structures as the main form of human subjugation. Luisa Muraro interrogates the fundamental premises of human thought:

What happens to thought when the thinking subject is a woman, when it becomes aware that it is the thought of a female thinker, that is to say a thought linked to being a body? [...] the male sex has historically committed itself to safeguarding the thinking transcendence from its being a body, with everything that follows in terms of objectivity, impartiality, universality. (Muraro, 2009, p. 59)

Thinking differently means to reconnect mind and body. The Diotima group, founded by Muraro in Verona, was inspired by psychoanalysis (especially Lacan) in exposing the biopolitical theme of reproduction and motherhood as a concrete and symbolic dimension in women's lives that needed a deep revision. Radical difference was the basis for new practices: 'our eyes and

feelings are transformed: it is not simply a form of reasoning, but an experience' (Muraro, 2009, p. 61).

Carla Lonzi, pioneer of self-consciousness and sexual difference, defined women as the 'unexpected subject' in the public scene (2023). With Accardi and Banotti, she founded *Feminine Revolt*, a group whose manifesto abruptly closed: 'We only communicate with women' (Rivolta Femminile, 1970). Separatism was their radical choice: only women can understand each other, hence work together, to challenge categorization, the internalized practice that reduces life to a sum of roles and identities. Lonzi experimented with language, refusing academic jargon (she came from art critique) to invent new forms of expression, such as journaling (Lonzi, 2010, 2011) that she used to investigate lived experience from inside and 'undo' ideas and imaginaries colonized by patriarchy. Her objective was 'wearing out the unconscious relationships that keep us tied to the male world' (Rivolta Femminile, 1970).

Lonzi was a precursor (Zapperi & Ventrella, 2020). In her *Autoritratto* (Self-portrait, 2021) she interviewed thirteen affirmed artists (twelve men and one woman, Carla Accardi) positioning herself in a dialogic attitude. She was anticipating the interpretation of biography as inherently relational and auto/biographical, a joint adventure of subject and researcher (Merrill & West, 2009). The 'dialectic re-composition' that she proposes in *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1970) is an invitation to keep together the two and the multiple. Separatism is a refusal of any alliance or collaboration with the bourgeois institutions of patriarchal domination.

The practice of sexual difference (Women's Bookstore, 1990) carries on an immanent pedagogy of creativity (Negri, 2009) that establishes 'a radical modification of the philosophical horizon' (p. 9) through the symbolic re-presentation of biopolitical power and the concrete production of new social bonds. Separation produced 'a creative caesura' (p. 12) in regard to the hegemonic theories and practices of capitalism, Catholic Church, and 'good family life'. Difference is then a leverage to transform reality. As 'new and extremely strong flowers' (p. 12) in a desert, feminists produce a tension that proliferates and creates innovation in the short time. A transformative practice, embedded in social communication, micro-political interventions at universities, factories and workplaces, in families and social relations, makes feminism the most significant consciousness raising movement of those years. Its subversive power goes beyond mere critique, as these groups created real experiences and laboratories of life, designing an emergent biopolitical field of practices for the future.

In Italy, the biopolitical field of difference has been explored in all its ethico-practical intensity, and the gaze of these practices has been fixed

on what is to-come [a-venire]. In repression and in darkness, in the moments of that absurd calvary that the Seventies and eighties represented for the movement, a new light was born. (Negri, 2009, p. 13)

At the end of the Seventies, as said, movements derailed and faced repression and darkness. In this regard, Negri reflects on ‘the horizon of destruction and death that still smoulders behind us – perhaps, of not having thus accepted the sorrow that accompanies us no matter what’ (p. 14).

Seeds were planted, however. In feminist circles, writing and self-writing became transformative tools in a form of personal research and conscientization that had a collective horizon. It was life changing for many. The practice of difference (Women’s Bookstore, 1990) re-interpreted the need for societal change by refusing the dominant paradigm (be it capitalism, Hegel philosophy, or violence) and the ontological foundation of truth, to claim a dynamic, relational, and embodied ontology of freedom, creativity, and movement. Writing differently, doing differently, was a political act, towards undoing roles and rules that confirm oppression. If these practices relied on subjective experience, it was not for therapeutic, or comforting, or even self-branding ends, as it is the case nowadays in too many instances; on the contrary, stories were told within a collective framework of understanding and acting. Each spoke for the many.

So, the feminism of difference celebrated subversive dimensions of human life that were silenced by the patriarchal regime, and still are undervalued by the consumerist-rationalistic plot:

Subjectivity: the affirmation of new subjectivities in the public scene as a way to liberation and to the right of self-construction.

Body/embodiment: the original capacity for transformation and expression in human bodies and the social whole; sharing the biopolitical power of women’s bodies, not leaving it to the dominant class.

Imagination: creativity and transformation based on relationality and holistic knowledge, weaving the conscious and unconscious, the reasons of reason and the reasons of the heart.

Collectivity: new social networks of cooperation as a dream and a project for a new kind of society.

These values foster a relational ontology, moving back and forth from inside and outside, from the singular to the common, bridging micro, meso, and macro-levels of human and more-than-human existence. It is a paradigm by which ‘another’ world is made possible.

4 Why Photography? Exploring Artworks

In the Seventies, women photographers used their art in very many ways to communicate and address ‘untold stories’. Their ‘other gaze’ fueled transformative processes at an individual and collective level. However, a ‘herstory’ of photography in the Italian Seventies still needs to be written (Casero, 2021), and this is not my intent. I do not have the competence to make a thorough appreciation of their work, so I will not proceed in a systematic or comprehensive way, but I will explore the pedagogical meaning of some amazing artworks. How do the artistic choices of these photographers illuminate the world and its inhabitants? (Formenti, 2021).

I want to celebrate the transformative power of visual communication, coupled with strong imagination and deliberate action. As Casero (2021) puts it, these artists celebrated new ways of: a) mirroring women’s experience in their own terms; b) starting a process of critical inquiry on established roles and rules; and c) witness hidden lives and contexts to make them available for the public. These diverse artistic paths compose an amazing catalogue for educational work. I have chosen some examples, fully aware that a vast majority will remain outside.

4.1 *Mirroring: Women Refusing Their Domestic(ated) Role*

I start with Milli Gandini, who represented in her work the refusal of the ‘knitting culture’ and domesticated creativity, expected from women to confirm their reproductive role and subjugation. In the Seventies, de-domestication was a major topic for feminists:

The housekeeper’s role, behind which isolation hides social work, must be destroyed. [...] Up to now, the myth of feminine incompetence, rooted in the isolated woman at home depending from another’s salary hence shaped by another’s consciousness, has been broken by one and only alternative: that of a woman owning her own salary, breaking down with economic dependence [...] providing work within a socialized structure, be it the factory or the office; that’s where she started her own forms of social rebellion adding to the traditional forms of class struggle. (Dalla Costa, 1972)

‘Feminist art is not born from an aesthetic instance, but from pain’ (Gandini & Seol, 2021, p. 9): here, Gandini’s daughter tells about the experience of physical and psychological abuse that pushed her mother to break off the centuries-old wail of women, transforming home in a revolutionary terrain.

'Mom is out' is her slogan. Knitting or embroidery (today, home decoration), represented the kind of creativity that is expected from disciplined women, nurturing the mystic of an edifying domestic life. This explains, at least partially, why Gandini's images are not beautiful: on the contrary, her instant black and white photographs are raw documents of scenes where she 'performs differently'; they are not meant to convey a nice image. In these ante litteram selfies, she captures her domestic performances using dust, dirt, and everyday objects. Her artwork celebrates the alliance between performance, photography, and activism. To challenge stereotyped gender roles, she took images of herself writing with her finger 'salary' (for housewives) and the female symbol on dirty windowpanes and dusty shelves (Gandini & Secol, 2021).

In 1974, Gandini co-founded the *Feminist Group Immagine* in Varese, a provincial town in Northern Italy. Their manifesto *Vogliamo – Vo(g)liamo* (we want, we fly) says:

Women increasingly want to write, to play music, to paint [...]. Surely this is a rebellion to a system that seized our creativity and made it acquiescent and complicit of our oppression. Creativity by consensus [...] in the production and re-production of the labour-force, in home furnishing, in beautifying our appearance, in soothing, loving, and even betraying the male, in children's care [...] even in shoplifting objects designed to confirm us in the role. In sum, a coercive creativity to do the domestic work. (Gruppo Femminista Immagine, 1975, my translation)

Their fight for domestic salary was not about money; paid work was a pillar of capitalism.

The Lords to whom women hold to account now, seem to 'take interest' in the movement [...]. If they'd talk to me, I would tell them that I still clean the toilet with my hands, that the most gross, humble, stupid, repetitive jobs are still of my exclusive competence, that I don't know how to dis-educate my children from what is impressed on us by the whole social structure, even before birth, fired-marked as owned calves. (Gandini & Secol, 2021, p. 12, my translation)

Gandini's photographs document performances on and with domestic objects: feminist symbols and phrases drawn in dust, pasta strainers stuffed with plastic flowers, saucepans sealed with barbed wire ... Gandini's daughter wrote, many years later:

I am the daughter of a feminist, I have seen the birth of the movement at home among pieces of broken dish-ware and dirty sheets but I also had perception of the dripping in my father's works. I saw my mother leaving her role at first symbolically, then physically. Art was the sharpest weapon she could build with her own hands. She had stolen it from him while speechless serving all his needs. Burning of talent and rage, Tino screamed 'I am the artist!' like Jack Nicholson in *Shining*. A gifted furious artist slipping on a very fragile emotional slope. (Gandini & Secol, 2021, p. 9)

The artist's private life, couple dynamic, and challenges, show how painful can be transformation, beyond the individual. Gandini's daughter witnesses the family loss of balance and breakdown when the normalized regime of care is disturbed.

The biopolitical role of women's body is mirrored in Ketty La Rocca's work around the myth of the Great Mother. The artist's body, especially hands and head, performs the tension between spoken and unspoken languages. In a famous sequence – *My words. And you?* – a feminine hand is progressively covered and finally completely immobilized by a man's hand. On both hands, the artist wrote the pronoun 'you', repeated as a mantra also in another series – *Craniology* – that combines photography, radiography, and performance. The body communicates beyond words: introspection and genders' relationship find new connections through handwriting.

4.2 *Critical Inquiry: Deconstructing and Multiplying Identities*

Marcella Campagnano is maybe the most celebrated Italian photographer in 'doing feminism' (Hahn, 2016) with her project *The invention of femininity* (1974–1980), where she and her friends wear the clothes of a spouse, a housekeeper, a worker, a prostitute, a fashion victim, a leftist activist, or so, to represent women's diversity beyond the abstract and sexualized male imagery. This investigation on the material context (details, clothes, embodied attitudes) and social functions of women is an invitation to de-construct stereotypes, a political, social, and pedagogical act.

The display of multiple identities is very ahead of times: nowadays, it appears to me as a first step away from essentialism and towards a transformative paradigm. Campagnano offers a visual taxonomy, a grid of possibilities, but her characters are fictional, theatrical, oozing irony. They tell stories that could, in fact, become a piece of creative writing (as I invite to do workshops) by which anybody (not just women!) can play with their multiple identities. Playfulness, creativity, and criticality are allied in the liberation from categorization and

stereotypes, a transformative endeavour through art to contrast the neoliberal agenda (Gouthro, 2018). It goes beyond mere aesthetic pleasure or resonance, to trigger deeper explorations and discourses that enhance criticality.

Many women photographers explored identity themes using different formats, from reportage to symbolic representations, and portraits. Self-analysis, not least of the artist herself, sometimes involves objects, re-interpreted as symbols of women's experience. So, a powder case with a mirror becomes, for Paola Mattioli, a framework for a feminist protest; a photo in the photograph (Perna, 2016, p. 97). In Mattioli's long and very generative career, portraits and self-portraits have a central role (Mattioli, 2023). Every picture tells a story. Doing a portrait is 'thinking in the presence of the other', a two-sided encounter: 'here, self-exposure or a mask, and there, listening and giving back' (Mattioli interviewed by Silvia Mazzucchelli, 2023). 'A photo should not be beautiful, but good', she claims in a reflexive posture: 'why do you want to take it?'. The search around one's own eyesight is very strong.

And what to say of the genius of Verita Monselles, born in 1929 Buenos Aires then transferred in Florence in the Seventies? Among her images, one is especially surprising and metaphorical: a big vase in the foreground covers the genitals of a woman's naked body sitting behind the vase, her head and arms invisible, hidden by a red curtain suspended from the ceiling, and red anthuriums to complete the scene (Perna, 2016, p. 106). Total nonsense or a sort of dream? Her re-invention of still-life painting (a genre invented to celebrate power, see Berger, 1972), radiates with multiple symbolic references to the cultural representations of women's bodies as beautiful static objects to be collected and exposed, but also vases for reproduction, headless and speechless, and even deprived of their genitals, since the moral does not allow to show them. But anthuriums are also symbols of feminine erotic pleasure and the reference to blood and menstruations could turn the tables towards an imagery of strength, freedom, and generative power.

Verita (literally: truth) seems to ask: 'Who am I? How am I represented, as a woman, by the dominant discourse? What can I do to turn things around?' These questions still matter. A discussion on 'what you see' (Formenti & West, 2018) can go on for hours.

4.3 *Witnessing Silenced Lives*

Women photographers told stories that nobody had ever told, or wanted to know about.

Lisetta Carmi started doing photographs for a friend's ethnographic journey, then began her own search around the human condition, from portraying dockworkers in Genua to witnessing the dramatic changes in Israel, from the

promised land – an open, inclusive melting pot in her first 1962 reportage – to a broken country (the ‘land of two Peoples’) in her 1967 photographs of refugee camps in Gaza. She empathized with the dispossessed, the last ones, the forgotten. Her most famous project is *I travestiti* (1969–1970), documenting everyday life in a well-known but ignored community in Genua, where prostitution was the only way to earn a very costly gender transition. Her photos, an intimate representation of life in the neighborhood, became a book (Carmi, 1972) with interviews realized by psychoanalyst Elvio Fachinelli. The scandal was overwhelming: nobody wanted to distribute or sell the book, but copies were shared hand in hand, and became a cult object. Now, exhibitions of her work are sold out, and she is considered a precursor of LGBTQ+ themes in Italian art.

Liliana Barchiesi is another witness. Co-founder of the *Collective Women Photoreporters* in 1976, she documented women’s world in public and private spaces with rigor and irony, such as in a series of housewives using electric appliances, or a young woman in an occupied apartment (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2019), or 3 girls surrounded by the objects-symbols of their expected future: dolls, a cradle, a stroller, and a shopping cart.

Paola Agosti offered a lively representation of feminist protests, but also women workers, prisoners, celebrities, and writers. In her first book (1976), the most iconic images of that season celebrate the angriness, joy, and sisterhood that characterized women’s presence in the public space. She specialized in portraying, of thousands of VIPs in politics, cinema, and arts (from Salvador Allende to Indira Gandhi, from Orson Welles to Isabella Rossellini, from Andy Warhol to Paolo Conte), as well as the unknown, the invisible, such as a young woman working in the car industry, a couple of peasants in a remote valley, or an old woman in her kitchen. No matter who, her subjects are represented in unusually intimate gestures, connected to their context. The art of portrayal is, also in her work, a meeting, a conversation between the photographer, subject, and context.

Reportage and portraits are two sides of the same process: telling stories that are invisible to the dominant paradigm. Stories of singularities, such as women with disabilities and mental issues, mixed couples, single mothers, industry workers, activists, and artists ... the whole range of women experiences started to be visible and celebrated. These reporters – I can just name here Letizia Battaglia, Carla Cerati, Silvia Lelli, Maria Mulas, Giovanna Nuvoletti, Marialba Russo, and the collective *Donne Fotoreporter* – represented ‘the other thing’ (Boetti, 1975, p. 57), deliberately choosing new contents, offering a different perspective, and valuing knowledge and practices that were under-represented, silenced, disqualified. Being recognized was not easy for them, due to two reasons: a woman should not do a man’s work (!), and besides they

expressed ‘another gaze’, one that challenged the habitus, the dominant way of representation.

They were inventing new narratives, new embodied and relational epistemologies, and the photographic language offered unexpected possibilities to represent and witness everyday life and gendered experiences. They legitimized new topics and ways of representation, showing women’s body and sexuality in a new light, and demonstrating that a portrait does not need to be institutional, celebrative, or detached. Their work was political in showing that intimacy, feelings, relationships, and private lives deserved to be explored, problematized, de-constructed, and recombined.

5 Is the Female Gaze Real?

In the Seventies, photography was still ‘a new thing’ with not much of a tradition, or official rules. This allowed personal interpretation and innovation that encouraged women artists and audiences to play with this language, and find their own narratives, their own gaze. From being the object of photographs, women decided to become subjects. It was a struggle: women photographers and reporters were – and still are – silenced, marginalized, and under-represented in collections, exhibitions, and publications (Hadland & Barnett, 2018). Even when they did not identify as feminists, there seems to be general agreement that their presence made a difference. But what kind of difference?

There is a debate around the ‘female gaze’, especially in film theory (Brey, 2020). Is it real? An ontological claim? Do women see differently, or is it a mythological construction? The ‘male gaze’ became common discourse after Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) that weaved feminism and psychoanalysis. John Berger (1972) had used the same expression in relation to the role of women’s body in European painting, following the idea that political and economic (male) power used art to represent, celebrate, and reinforce itself. The Western apparatus of art is historically made for a male, white, rich, and dominating audience. After the invention of perspective and realistic naturalistic representations, the (male) spectator is put in the central position as an individual. In this framework, the woman can only be the object of desire and possession.

Mulvey’s thesis was that female characters in movies are created to be looked at, while the man (and the camera) is the bearer of the look. Women’s body is fragmented, cut in pieces by the camera. The male gaze is ‘voyeuristic’ when dominated by the pleasure of possession and ‘fetishist’ when the fear of castration prevails. In Mulvey’s psychoanalytic interpretation, these attitudes

are components of scopophilia, the pleasure of looking at, a predatory form of perception, and unconscious feature of the patriarchal society. It is shared by the male spectator as well as the female object: the former is active and powerful, endowed with agency, and owner of his own narrative; the latter is expected to stay still, passive and powerless. Her existence is only for male pleasure, hence she is constantly called to perform self-exhibition. But what happens when the director, or the photographer, is a woman?

Film critics and artists debate on the meaning and presence of a 'female gaze'. Some would say that women artists are more able to show vulnerability and emotional connection; so, the veil between audience and artist becomes so thin that the spectator is allowed in. However, the concept itself of a female gaze is contradictory, since based on a generalized persona, while new feminisms tend to praise uniqueness and intersectionality. In 2016, TV producer Jill Soloway offered a sociopolitical interpretation of the female gaze as a way of 'feeling seeing', hence not a mere inversion of the male gaze from a feminine perspective, but a different quality of perceiving. The 'feeling camera' prioritizes emotions over action. Besides, the 'gazed gaze' allows viewers to grasp how it feels to be the object of the gaze; and the female gaze dares to 'return the gaze', reflexively. This conceptual exploration contains an 'essentialist fallacy' (Morse & Herold, 2021) by claiming that a 'feminine' emotional essence exists and can be transmitted to audiences. The difference and distance between spectator, character, or artist are neglected. Morse and Herold (2021) propose to overcome this view, to adopt a queer approach centered on 'haptic visuality', that is the process by which all senses are brought into the picture and conveyed to the spectator.

They suggest that emphasizing the 'look' or 'gaze' over the relationship could be problematic: 'Unlike the linearity, directness, and power dynamics of the look or the gaze, to see and be seen emphasizes mutuality, exchange, and vulnerability' (Morse & Herold, 2021). So, instead of reducing the meaning of artistic work to a binary counter position of male against female gaze, there is an alternative possibility for imagining and experiencing a plurality of new ways of seeing and being seen. Instead of essentializing the female gaze, the authors invite us to embrace a dynamic, multiple, and stratified definition of what can be 'another gaze' – a way to keep things moving.

What do you see – as a woman or man, a photographer, a spectator, an adult educator – when looking through the camera lenses to another woman? Do you see an object, yourself, or what? In 1977, Carla Cerati published photographs of women photographers at work; she wrote: '[I was looking] in their gestures mine and more, interpreting the effort and the rage, the joy and the satisfaction' (cit. in Casero, 2021). Casero speaks of a 'revolution' – breaking the

predatory pattern of a stolen image captured by a falsely neutral, absent eye. A new unexpected terrain for research is born when women – the subject/object of photography – start their own quest, doing self-analysis, mirroring, representing stereotypes, criticizing and breaking the existing rules, and recognizing themselves in the other and in the images they created. This does not need to be a womanly thing. Seeing and being seen, ‘they offer a way of looking at and with the loved one that exceeds mere reversal of the phallogocentric conventions of the male gaze’ (Morse & Herold, 2021).

6 Conclusions: Towards a Pedagogy of Transformation

What can we do to celebrate these women’s amazing work? It triggers reflexivity by celebrating diversity, desire, authenticity, and freedom in ironic, sensual, and embodied ways. It shows that gender, and any dimension of identity, is not just a product of speech, ‘but of watching, looking, seeing, and being seen’; so, ‘one way to combat sexist oppressions is to create other images, another visual discourse’ (Raymond, 2017, p. 4).

These images are powerful. In many occasions, during a collective visit to an exhibition, or bringing photographs and photographers to a group, I have used them to start conversations on gender stereotypes, or feminism, based on personal resonances, lived experience, and disorientating dilemmas. We can start a quest, interrogating artwork (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2020a) to fuel a search on the human condition, an existential inquiry connecting self, body, imagery, and discourse. We can question the power of representation: who has the right of representing what? Which stories, or identities can or cannot be told? And how do images affect us? Women’s artwork introduced the unexpected, as I tried to argue, in the aesthetic form, thematic choices, and unprecedented representations of inner and outer worlds. By bringing attention to women’s lived experience, embodiment, and silenced stories, it invites or provokes new perceptions, awareness, and reflexivity. It has a political and transformative role in contrasting dominant representations and stereotypes.

Photography is powerful, but there is a need for intentionality in building appropriate learning spaces that sustain multiple ways to see and being seen, voices, and languages. Using co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and Melandri’s ‘mineralogy’ of embodied writing (2006) to facilitate collective movements of critical awareness and epistemological reflection, I invite adult participants to ‘feel’ the artwork with their whole bodies, then represent their feelings and insights, using writing, drawing, dancing, or any form of aesthetic expression. Dialogue and a safe space do the rest. Sharing personal memories and

discussing values (not the same for everybody) is the following step: an intercultural dialogue among diverse people (men and women, different generations, backgrounds, etc.) to construct a sense of belonging and transformation. The multiplication of sights and the lessons learnt from the past nurture hopes and dreams, and deliberate action. Thinking and writing together, beyond individual experience, and entrusting our memories to each other is a perfect way to celebrate the value of these extraordinary artists.

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