

NOW WE HAVE SEEN: WOMEN AND ART IN 1970S ITALY

MAGAZZINO
ITALIAN ART

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Saturday, April 27, 2024, 11:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m.

Now We Have Seen: Women and Art in 1970s Italy marks the final stage of a project of the same name launched in Rome in 2022 by the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, which concluded with the recent publication of a collection of essays dedicated to the relationship between art and feminism in 1970s Italy. Presented at Magazzino Italian Art in association with the Italian Council's Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity within the Italian Ministry of Culture, the day-long event will feature presentations by all the book's contributors: the editor of the book Giorgia Gastaldon, and authors Silvia Bottinelli, Maria Bremer, Lara Conte, and Raffaella Perna.

The title is drawn from a phrase in the 1970 *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile*: "We have been looking for 4,000 years: now we have seen!" This shift in language from "look" to "see," from passivity to agency, testified to the rising self-awareness of women artists in the period and their demand for change. Participants in the Magazzino event will address women's liberation in this era by exploring a constellation of topics in the visual arts, leading to a broader critical and historical analysis of the tools and paradigms of emancipation.

Schedule and Speakers

11:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m.

Introduction by Filippo Fossati, Director, Magazzino Italian Art, Cold Spring

Weaving and Stitching: Female and Feminist Practices in Italian Abstract Art in the 1970s

Giorgia Gastaldon, Assistant Professor in Contemporary Art History at the University of Insubria (Varese-Como)

During the 1970s, a number of women artists, inspired also by feminist prompts, reevaluated craft practices that were traditionally considered feminine, such as stitching, embroidering, and weaving—all of which experienced a creative Renaissance in that period of growing gender consciousness. As pointed out by Rozsika Parker in her pivotal book about embroidery and the making of the feminine (1986), these creative

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expressions were in fact historically not seen as art, but “entirely as the expression of femininity,” and for this reason they were “categorized as craft.” Because of this, at one point, the employment of techniques belonging to female daily life presented itself as an expressive tool which acquired political value, by the will to put at the center something that would have normally been marginalized. This happened especially in the work of several abstract women artists, who will be at the core of this discussion. Analyzing the research of some Italian female artists active in Italy in the Seventies, such as Carla Accardi, Renata Boero, and Maria Lai, scholar Giorgia Gastaldon will explore the possibility that abstract art truly represented, for some women artists, a space of greater comfort and creative freedom, given its inherent neutrality as an art cleared of all the iconographic elements that over time had eulogized a long series of male enterprises. In addition, the use these artists made of traditional feminine practices demonstrates the possible existence of a relationship between abstract art and the processes of gender claims, drawing on the long and ancient tradition of female experience, renovated and reinterpreted in light of more contemporary needs.

Behind the Window in Postwar Italian Art: Reframing a Metaphor

Silvia Bottinelli, Senior Lecturer and Chair of the Visual and Material Studies Department at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University, Boston

On view at Magazzino Italian Art, Luciano Fabro's *Three Nudes Descending the Staircase* (1988) incorporates two curved slabs of marble that cross a few steps, leading to a window. In curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's words, the sculpture “points to the experience of the world outside.” This discussion will use Fabro's piece as a springboard to reflect on windows in postwar Italian art, looking particularly at feminist production. The metaphor of the domestic window, which conceals a woman behind it, was already at play in Anne Marie Sauzeau's critical language and Lea Vergine's curatorial frameworks in the 1970s. Also, windows cropped up in artwork by Carla Accardi, Diana Bond, Chiara Diamantini, and Cloti Ricciardi, among others. Historically, windows had enabled social restrictions for women. According to theorist Silvia Federici, since the 1500s, women were forced to reduce their contact with the public sphere in order to remain devoted to the nuclear family: “Above all they were instructed to make their husbands and their homes the centers of their attentions and not to spend time at the window or at the door.” In the 1800s, as argued by Frances Borzello, the iconography of the woman at a window “underlines her position in society, a position akin to a caged bird.” Thus, windows might have elicited entrapment rather than exploration, fostering an association with patriarchal control. Building on previous theories and studies, this presentation will examine how artists incorporated and deconstructed the iconography of the window in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time of increasing emancipation and awareness of women's centuries-long confinement to the domestic sphere.

Photobooks and Feminism in Italy in the 1970s

Raffaella Perna, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History at the University of Roma La Sapienza

In continuity with the themes addressed in the workshop held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome in June 2023, this discussion will propose a reflection on feminist photobooks published in Italy in the 1970s. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the word “photobook” has become exceptionally popular, thanks to a large number of publications, festivals, workshops, fairs, websites and publishing initiatives. The term, however, has often been used to refer, without much distinction, to different types of books containing photographs, made for very different aesthetic, political and social purposes. This custom has generated a misleading uniformity that, as Elizabeth Shannon has observed, “obscures the historical, cultural, and ideological origins of individual books, hindering our ability to assess the nature and value of the photographic book.” For this reason, in analyzing the history of feminist photobooks published in

Italy in the 1970s, this discussion will examine not only the material and symbolic forms of these books but also their contexts of production and circulation, the path of the women photographers, and their relationship with Italian neo-feminism. Rather than the horizontal and encyclopedic perspective adopted by many recent publications devoted to the history of the photographic book and the artist's book, this discussion will propose a circumstantial analysis, starting with a comparison with a selection of books considered significant examples of the relations between photography, the artist's book and feminist politics in the Italian cultural context of the 1970s. It will examine photographic books that, while belonging to the different traditions of documentary and neo-avant-garde, are expressions of the instances of profound social and cultural change that emerged with feminism. Why, in this period, do numerous women artists and photographers close to the political thought and practice of feminism choose the medium of the book? What are the channels of production and dissemination of these publications, and how are they received in the context of art, photography and militancy? What is meant by the term "feminist photobooks"? Does the latter definition refer only to books published in close continuity with the Women's Movement, or is it possible to broaden the field of inquiry beyond the sphere of activism?

Q&A

1:30–2:30 p.m.

Lunch break

2:30–4:00 p.m.

Sculpture Practices and Feminist Perspective, from the Historical Dimension to the Present: Genealogies and Reception

Lara Conte, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History at Roma Tre University

This discussion will reflect on the theme of genealogy and on questions relating to reception, focusing on how the research on many of the women artists discussed in *Now We Have Seen: Women and Art in 1970s Italy* is at the center of a renewed interest and transgenerational exchange which allows us to focus on the fruitful interweaving of feminist thought, art history, curatorial writing and reflection on the archive as a non-linear practice. Emblematic in this sense was the exhibition *Io dico Io / I say I*, which Lara Conte co-curated with Cecilia Canziani and Paola Ugolini at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome in 2021. The exhibition brought together more than fifty Italian women artists of different generations who in different historical and social contexts developed their "adventure of authenticity," restoring their feminist perspective through a constellation of visions. Starting from the title, the exhibition placed a crucial question at the center of the discussion: how to deal today with the thought of Carla Lonzi, a radical thinker and central figure of Italian feminism of the Seventies, who undermined the idea of equality between the sexes in place of the affirmation of difference, and who was the initiator of the practice of "autocoscienza." Starting from oneself as the basis of any relationship, recognition and authenticity were the urgencies and Lonzian terms to which the exhibition *I say I* brought attention to investigate a concept of subjectivity that disrupts the symbolic order determined by a dominant gaze and presents itself to the world in its difference, crumbling the canon and the hegemony of its narratives. From this perspective, the reflection on the relationship between art and feminism does not remain confined to historiographic investigation but becomes the possibility of reflecting on the present, both in the dimension of study and research and in consideration of the art of women working today in Italy.

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Recognition Across Time: “Herstories” in Exhibitions (1970s/2020s)

Maria Bremer, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Ruhr-Universität, Bochum

From 1976 to 1978, an all-women cooperative organized ten exhibitions showcasing women artists' works at a self-managed gallery situated on a street named after Beato Angelico in the center of Rome. By exclusively focusing on “presenting, researching, collecting, and documenting women’s work, both past and present, in the field of visual art,” the cooperative advanced a partisan art-historiographic stance. Following the inaugural exhibition, which featured Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting *Aurora*, the organizers displayed works by members Suzanne Santoro and Carla Accardi, subsequently turning to retrospective exhibitions spotlighting women artists of the past, including Futurist Regina Cassolo Bracchi and seventeenth-century painter Elisabetta Sirani. Rather than adhering to traditional historical periodization, this discontinuous programming followed the principle of recognition of women artists by women artists across time, challenging both the male dominance of art history and the underlying premise of linear historicization. Advocating for a broader reevaluation of the all-women shows that emerged in the 1970s as conceptual contributions to art historiography, this discussion turns to the Cooperativa Beato Angelico to examine the exhibitionary enacting of “herstories.” First, it will delve into the retrospectives organized by the cooperative in the 1970s; second, it will trace how former cooperative members Suzanne Santoro and Stephanie Oursler have themselves been reconsidered by artist Constanze Ruhm in her recent exhibition *Come una pupilla al variare della luce* [*Like a pupil in the changing of light*], Vienna, 2023. What are the emancipatory potentials of an art history based on resonances among long-undervalued positions? And what does such a selective and non-linear focus on women, by women, leave out of the picture in turn? How can we begin to study “art-historical revisionism” as a “mode of making exhibitionary meaning,” to use Terry Smith’s terms?

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Q&A

The event is part of the research project *Now We Have Seen: Women and Art in 1970s Italy*, supported by the Italian Council’s Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity within the Italian Ministry of Culture.

Presented in collaboration with the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome. Scientific organization by Giorgia Gastaldon.

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