

Carla Lonzi: Self-portrait

In 2013, I had the pleasure of organising a choral reading of the book *Self-portrait (Autoritratto)* with over 60 artists and cultural workers living in London and Bologna. At each reading, which was performed aloud in intimate and convivial settings, the room was filled with enthusiasm, surprise, passion and pleasure. This is what I call the Lonzi effect.

A well-established Italian art historian and feminist, active between the 1960s and 1980s, Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) published *Self-portrait* in 1969 as the result of her disappointment with the power dynamics of the art world and the celebration of a ‘male creative manifestation’. Immediately attacked by critic Paolo Fossati in *NAC (Notiziario d’arte contemporanea)* in December 1969 as ‘too emotionally easy’ in its ‘autobiographical viscerality’, the book did not receive the attention it deserved. We have had to wait till 2010 for the book to be rediscovered and republished thanks to the work of Laura Iamurri and various feminist scholars who have been debating Lonzi’s feminist legacy since; it is now translated into English for the first time by Allison Grimaldi Donahue.

Self-portrait is a free montage of recorded and transcribed interviews conducted by Lonzi between 1962 and 1968 with 14 artists. Apart from Carla Accardi with whom Lonzi co-founded the collective Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt) in 1970, they are all male artists, including Lucio Fontana and Cy Twombly, as well as prominent figures of the Arte Povera group, such as Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini and Pino Pascali. Arranged as an imaginary gathering which takes place only on the page, Lonzi constructs a polyvocal, fictional conversation in which the voice of each interlocutor resonates with each other yet exposes the self-referential triviality and the overtly paternalist tones of certain arguments: be that in the frustration of dealing with stubborn art critics, the competition with US artists, technical concerns about their own work, the Venice Biennale or comments on female sexuality and the student movement. Lonzi portrays herself within a patriarchal context, one which she decided to fiercely oppose. Not only did she withdraw her labour as an art critic at the beginning of the 1970s, she also became the main editor of *Female Revolt* and a signatory to the notorious manifesto *Spit on Hegel*, 1970, and *The clitoridian woman and the vaginal woman*, 1971 – key Italian texts on sexual difference.

Far from being a polished and coherent collection of interviews, the key characteristic of *Self-portrait* lies in the inscription of the voice into text, a process that Lonzi describes as a passage from ‘sounds to punctuation, to a script, to finding a page which is not a page which is already written’. And it is from the ‘condensation of sound into sign’, ‘from gas into liquid’ that Lonzi describes the process of transcribing recorded sound. Particular attention is given to the vocal quality of words and utterances, including phatic expressions such as laughter and exclamations as well as the ums and ahs. Donahue suggests that this first English translation aims ‘to keep the spoken nature of the text’ and to ‘allow English to perform Italian voices’. While Donahue succeeded in keeping with the Italian rhythms and structures of spontaneous speech, her translation of the book’s prologue seems to suffer from



Carla Lonzi transcribing interviews for her book *Self-portrait*, Minneapolis, 1967

too many anglicisms. Why, for example, translate the Italian word *incontro* (encounter) into ‘meeting’, diminishing the important feeling Lonzi wants to express when she defines an artwork ‘as a possibility of an encounter’, ‘an invitation to participate, addressed by the artists to each of us’?

The relational and intersubjective approach developed through the choral structure of the book is one of the most original features of Lonzi’s art writing. Although *Self-portrait* cannot be classified as a feminist book *per se*, its dialogic, polyvocal methodology, developed from attentive listening, leads to the formation of a new subjectivity that Lonzi eventually manifested through *Female Revolt* and the political practice of feminist consciousness-raising.

While the use of interviews can be easily associated with oral history and the ethos of hearing the artist’s authentic voice, for Lonzi the scope of this work is not to suggest ‘a fetishism about the artist, but to call him into another relationship with society, negating the role, and thus the power, of the critic as repressive control over art and the artists’. While Lonzi is aware that ‘the technology of recording in itself is not enough to produce a transformation in the critic’, she also argues that ‘the complete and verifiable critical act is part of artistic creation ... the artist is naturally critical, implicitly critical, by his very creative framework’.

Accompanied by intimate photographs of Lonzi as well as of the artists interviewed, *Self-portrait* is an accomplished artwork in itself. It does what it predicates in its prologue: it speaks for and in itself. Although this translation, as all translations, is an iteration, the publication in English is a welcome gesture towards a work that defies easy categorisation, appropriation and historicisation. It is the materiality of the writing that pushes the reader into action and calls for a new collective subject.

As Lonzi asks of herself: ‘What remains, now that I’ve lost this role [of the critic] within the art world? Maybe I’ve become an artist myself? I can respond: I am no longer a stranger.’ Or, as Donahue puts it: ‘I am no longer alienated.’

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