Politics in a Glass Case
Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions

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Insights from Italy: Pleasure, Plurality and Shaping the Present

Jo Anna Isaak

I will suggest, then, that the proper political use of pleasure must always be allegorical in the sense [that] ... the thematizing of a particular 'pleasure' as a political issue (to fight for example ... for certain forms of sexual liberation; or for access to certain kinds of cultural activities; or for an aesthetic transformation of social relations or a politics of the body) must always involve a dual focus, in which the local issue is meaningful and desirable in and of itself, but is also at one and the same time taken as the figure for Utopia in general, and for the systemic revolutionary transformation of society as a whole."

Sprezzatura is an Italian term for the ability to do difficult and complex things with style and panache that make them look easy, elegant and pleasurable.1 The graceful curves and proportions of Roman aqueducts tend to make us lose sight of the intricate engineering that went into making them functional delivery systems for vast amounts of water. The Italian capacity for transforming the utilitarian, the laborious, or the ponderous into the pleasurable, graceful, or eloquent has provoked the admiration of almost everyone who has come to know the culture. Through my involvement with an Italian art exhibition, I came to understand that sprezzatura, this Midas touch of converting the difficult or demanding into the pleasurable and engaging, could be a strategy for creating cultural and social synergies. It may, in fact, contain strategies
for the political use of pleasure that the feminist movement in America could employ.

While teaching in Rome during the winter of 2006, I had been assiduously looking for work done by contemporary Italian women artists. I managed to find the work of a few women artists in small group shows, but not a single solo exhibition in Rome of work by a woman artist – Italian, or otherwise. I wondered what had happened to the Italian women’s movement that in the 1970s had produced a vast amount of work in the area of theory, pedagogy, social and political thought, and cultural production, all of which had had an enormous impact upon the lives of Italian women – particularly in the area of abortion and divorce laws. I hadn’t expected to find manifestos by *Rivolta Femminile* still posted on the walls of Rome, but where were the artists coming after Ketty la Rocca and Maria Lai or Carla Accardi, or the writers continuing the work of Lea Vergine, Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti or Carla Lonzi? In 2003 the Venice Biennale awarded the Golden Lion to octogenarian painter Carol Rama, but what had become of the younger generation of Italian women artists? Several years ago, during a panel at the New Museum in New York City, Vanessa Beecroft blithely announced that her Italian mother was a feminist and a socialist; therefore she didn’t have to be either. I wondered if a whole generation of Italian women had just slipped into that kind of complacency.

However, one day that spring in Rome, I received an email from Gaia Cianfanelli announcing the plans for an exhibition of Italian women artists. In the email she introduced herself and Caterina Iaquinta as the co-founders of START, a cultural association for contemporary art, intended to plan and realise curatorial projects through the creation of networks with independent arts organisations across Italy. The ‘text-manifesto’ presented the project as a *networking* experiment, an exhibition and at the same time an experience and review of the Italian art-cultural scene. This appeared to be what I had been looking for – a gathering together of the new generation of women artists working in Italy. Their invitation ended by saying, ‘Whoever wants to understand is invited to play’.

The title of the show *Dissertare/Discutere* – two verbs: *dissertare*, ‘to discuss at length’ as in ‘to write or give a dissertation’, and *discutere* ‘to desert’ or ‘abandon’ – was explained in the manifesto in terms of a provocative paradox:

*Dissertare/Discutere* was created as a discussion forum, to overturn clichés, to criticise stereotypes. *Dissertare* means discussing, exchanging
views, networking, being mobile and ready to put oneself on the line, in order to propose new forms of ‘cultural action’ while *disertare* means ‘deserting’ any static position and binding label.

The authors intended to explore what the current generation of Italian women artists had either engaged with, or turned away from, and included in the manifesto a passage from Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* in which she exhorts women to ‘overthrow’ syntax and ‘occupy’ the places of their exclusion. In order to discover how the new generation of women artists have occupied the spaces in the discourse opened by feminist theory, they invited curators and artists’ groups from all over Italy to respond. And respond they did! Small curatorial collectives and women’s groups joined in – in all, over 60 artists and 22 curators and cultural associations. As the exhibition changed and support grew, the site had to be expanded. Finally, they moved to the Centro Internazionale d’Arte Contemporanea located in the Castello Colonna in Genazzano near Rome.

On 7 July 2006, the day of the opening, thousands of visitors crossed the moat over a narrow bridge and entered an enormous space filled with an abundance of women’s art. At the entrance there was a map of the

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**Figure 20:** Contributors to the exhibition *Disertare/Disertare*, Genazzano, Italy (2006).
networks that had been created — it was a large map of Italy showing the locations of the cultural organisations, the curators and the artists who had responded to their invitation (Figure 20). All parts of Italy, with the exception of Sardinia, were represented.

So there we all were, happy to be in the middle of this particular Italian miracle — this sprezzatura that, in this case, had enabled this gathering of women's artwork to occur with the ease and grace of a natural force. The diverse activities of the artists in this exhibition made it clear that there was no homogeneous women's art movement in Italy, but taken collectively, their practices represented an in-depth exploration of the production of women artists living and working in Italy today. The vast exhibition space was functioning as a haven and a laboratory for women artists examining the social realities, the cultural myths and the material conditions of women's lives. Some of the work utilised post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, or semiotic theory. Some were expressions of liberation or fantasy, or revelations of repressed, or censored material. Some sought to explore the potential of play and pleasure. Others enacted a physical liberation through writing, dance, performance, or athletics. They were all brought together in this exhibition in a way that made it seem as if they had been working collaboratively for years.

As a curator and veteran of several large-scale feminist exhibitions I wanted to know how these young curators had managed to create this visually compelling, intelligent, politically astute exhibition. I knew that Italian institutions of higher education and art schools are woefully lacking in gender studies: there are no women's studies programmes, no courses on feminism in the curriculum and almost no mention is made of Italian women artists in Italian histories of art. In spite of this lack of academic and institutional support, it was clear that Disertare/Disertare had been systemically shaped and informed by feminist theories developed from psychoanalysis and linguistics, writers and philosophers such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray as well as Anglo-American writers whose theories American women artists had used to expand the realm of representation and understand their role in it. The whole nature of the exhibition — its research strategies, its curatorial methodology, its engagement with the artists and art organisations throughout the long process of the exhibition — planning, installation and evolution (the show was up for over three months and the following year they produced a book) — was an experiment in bringing those theories into play and praxis. When I asked the curators how they had managed to achieve this sprezzatura — 'We thought, we planned, we did it.'

Still, the question of the potential for this synergistic collectivity to become enmeshed upon the mythic, the 'ragnatela', a web of inspirations and ideas that is the spirit of the time, or a call', their ragnatela of scale, theoretically, the political correctness of feminist exhibitions.

Our curatorial approach allowed us to provide an informal, flexible space to work in, and to diffuse the various stages of the research, enabling them to objectify it and to articulate a new concept of difference within the existing art system, however they felt it might impact their research. They had used the potential of the invitation itself and to diffuse the curatorial process enabled them to reorganise this concept of difference to articulate a new model of curatorial praxis.

The crisis of research methodologies for new techniques of gender analysis, aesthetic categories and art historical narratives has to be today essential to a new kind of praxis that we understand...
how they had managed to do what they had done, they responded with *sprezzatura*—‘We read!’ they laughed.

Still, the question remained as to how all these autonomous and disparately located artists were gathered together in this coherent synergistic collective. The curators jokingly claimed they had called upon the mythical figure of Ariadne and combined her weaving skills with the modern technology of the Internet to cast what they called a *ragnatela*—a web, or a net, or loose supporting network of ideas and inspirations and energy which enabled all of these artists to connect with the spirit of the text-manifesto. Their invitation was no ordinary ‘artists’ call’. Their *ragnatela* turned out to be strong enough to support a large scale, theoretically coherent group show and elastic enough to transcend the political correctness, dogmas and factionalism that so often plague feminist exhibitions.

Our curatorial methodology was enabled by the Web. The Web provided us and the contributors with the technical means to give voice, space, and visibility to the project as it emerged and underwent various changes with a constant flow of images, information, and references. It enabled a multi-voice dialogue, where curatorial and authorial roles change and oscillate and operational modes play out around art subjects that are constantly changing. The networking approach allowed us to form a map of the subjects operating in the contemporary cultural scene, and show how they fit into the Italian art system, how they qualify their work and what tools they use in their research.

They had used the Web to invite rather than to choose and the medium of the invitation itself helped them in their aim to allow for polyphony and to diffuse the central, authorial role of the curator. Internet language enabled them to adopt a curatorial methodology that engaged the concept of *différance* as practice and action. In the process they managed to articulate a new role for the curator:

The crisis of representation, the dissolution of the sign, the quest for new techniques, materials, places, the transgression of entire aesthetical categories, has challenged art not as an institution but as a critical discourse. New professional figures such as the curator are today essential to recompose the artistic-cultural trail to identify the context in order to connect the work to other views. In this sense we understand *cura* (care, management) in the word *curatore* as
undertaking actions that produces explanatory elements, as providing a condition for the revelation of knowledge. In this view, what does it mean to be a cultural association of curators? First of all, the figure of curator changes from single identity to collective subject and the individuality and authority of the role of curator, turned into plurality, produces differences and multiplicity in views and actions.°

Strategies such as these are connected to Italy’s long and complex ancestry with alternative systems of networking on the left. Italy is the homeland of autonomist Marxism, which in the 1970s had very strong feminist voices in Autonomia femminista, and Carla Lonzi, in whose writings author and authority are displaced by community formations. Autonomous Marxism advocated action that did not centre on the state (hence the name ‘autonomist’) but on informal networks.° In his essay for the exhibition Antonio Tursi, a fellow at the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, noted several things about the contemporary network society that are relevant to the Dissertare/Disertare project. He suggests that network communication is mainly about ‘temperature’, the intensity of a communication relation that is not a transmission of a message but communion of desiring bodies, the pleasure of sharing something. There is no communication without heat, he says, a communication dynamics materialises only once you want to deal with the other; travelling on the web implies readiness to meet the other. The network society offers new spaces, what he calls new ‘bellies’° – about the relation between body, architecture and new media – that with their visceral quality, their heat, let us communicate. And once connected, he says, ‘the excluded are not inevitably marginalized’.°

Resurgence, revolution, replay, rebuttal

Now, as I write about Dissertare/Disertare, I find that the interval, while it diminishes my memory of the details of individual works, enables me to think about the exhibition in the context of some major feminist exhibitions that have emerged lately (particularly in the US) from within a fully institutionalised version of feminist art. Beginning in 2007 there has been an amazing resurgence of feminist art activity. Symposia and publications have made this a prolific time for women in the arts: the historical exhibitions WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution (2007), Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art (2007) and The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power.
ments, as providing a historical view, what does one therefore understand of all, the figure of the collective subject and the collective author, turned into reviews and actions.\footnote{3} 

In turn, and complex as it is in the left. Italy is the place where they had very strong historicists like Lanz, in whose community formations, carried the centre on the state and the works.\footnote{4} In this essay that the Indian Program in the course to, noted several works that were relevant to the problem of communication is a communicative relation and the formation of desiring body and communication affects materialises only once that applies readiness to communication, what he calls new media and new media tools communicate. And he is not a really marginalized.\footnote{5}

Figure 2. Poster for the exhibition *The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (1989).


A good deal of this activity has been retrospective in nature, recounting or returning to the heyday of the feminist movement. (Although the 2007 symposium at the Museum of Modern Art was called *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts*, it too was redolent with nostalgia for those early days of the women’s movement.) I understand this impulse to repeat: I did it myself in 1995 with the exhibition *Laughter Ten Years after*. The first exhibition, *The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (Figure 2), which opened in New York City in 1983 and travelled for two years, was organised in the urgency of the moment, when the search for what could bring about radical changes in the realm of representation was in high gear. A lot was at stake for women
in these new assessments of how meaning is produced and organised in all areas of cultural practice. A feeling of solidarity was developing as women working in various fields were looking for ‘liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order’. Laughter was a metaphor for thinking about cultural change. It offered an analytic point of entry for understanding the relationships between the social and the symbolic while freeing us to imagine these relationships differently. A proliferation of theories of humour, women, art, power and subversion helped level the playing field for women – and women artists, writers, curators, activists and cultural and political workers of all kinds began to play in the new authority-free zone. The re-play, *Laughter Ten Years after* was intended to include a broader range of artistic practices. By this time we had come to realise that the progress women had made was being lost or forgotten, that women's history must continually be re-inscribed.

The present moment seems to be a time to take stock of those heady thirty years during which so much has changed. In the US, a female art student will have no trouble finding feminist art history and studio courses taught by women art historians and artists. Female curators are working in all the major museums and galleries and an increasing number of commercial galleries are owned and operated by women. There is an enormous satisfaction in seeing how much has changed as a direct result of our collective and concerted efforts.

The paradigm shifts that took place in the 1980s are very much in evidence today. Feminism's influence on art production, history and reception is now often thought of as the norm and on the verge of being taken for granted. Anne Hollander thinks that 'because the feminist movement has accomplished what it set out to accomplish, and we're no longer forced to take a feminist agenda, everyone can go back and look at women the way they've always wished to do.' Rachel Whiteread acknowledges feminism's liberating force: 'When things change they become part of the fabric of life rather than something one has to constantly fight against.' But for many of us in the earlier generation, becoming part of the 'fabric of life' may sound a lot like fading into the woodwork. Yet how did we envision the end of the feminist campaign? Probably most of us did not think about our own obsolescence; indeed, it seems premature to plan our retirement when rank inequities endure. Of the 113 artists included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial only 33 were women. Of the 100 artists represented in the Tate Modern Guide *Artists A–Z* only 18 are women. As Anna Chave cautions us about handing in our weapons before the fight is over: 'Insofar as we imagine that

an aggressive multiculturalism, persistently, repeatedly, an artifact of the confluence of the progress and the present.

Nevertheless, there's still a stake for women. Virginia Woolf's books, for example, are frequently cited in discussions of women's lives and work. In *A Room of One's Own* she writes: 'Women and artificial life – and yet, in circles which are purely female, we make our own precursors. In... remnants, Zoe, the girl, the muse... a muse' and Zoe Lister-Jones: 'Ardele Lister-Jones' 1980s and 1990s five-channel video loop, where, in a hostile world, many women seek in the making and in the undertaking of the show or generation a means to reconcile the 1980s is seen, as part of the establishment or video loop, Zoe Lister-Jones: 'Ardele Lister-Jones' 1980s and 1990s five-channel video loop, where, in a hostile world, many women seek in the making and in the undertaking of the show or generation a means to reconcile.

Certainly, the political and intellectual work done at that time is still visible and influential today. But it is not just the work of that time that is important. The work of the 1980s is seen, as part of the establishment or video loop, Zoe Lister-Jones: 'Ardele Lister-Jones' 1980s and 1990s five-channel video loop, where, in a hostile world, many women seek in the making and in the undertaking of the show or generation a means to reconcile. Part of the work done at that time was to make the political and intellectual work of the 1980s more widely known and appreciated.

Dissertation/Dissemination and rebuttal.
an aggressively activist feminism — a commitment to claiming openly, persistently, a female and feminist subject position — should remain an artifact of the past, we are deluding ourselves about the true extent of the progress we have attained to date. 13

Nevertheless, things have changed, and understanding what is at stake for women artists in the new century may require a new approach. Virginia Woolf thought every woman writer needed to have strong female precursors in order to be able to come into her own creative life — and young women artists now have a wealth of strong female precursors. However, such legacy may come to be felt as a burden. As Zoe, the girl singer in a band performing a music video asks, ‘You got a muse?’ and answers: ‘I got a fucking sweatshop full of them’. ‘Zoe’ is Zoe Lister-Jones, performance artist and daughter of feminist video artist Ardele Lister. The lyrics Zoe sings (recorded in ‘Zoe Come Home’, a five-channel music video by Guy Richards Smit) reflect the sentiments of many women artists of her generation. No artist, no matter how willing they are to credit the work of artists who have preceded them, wants the understanding of their work to be constrained by an evolutionary or generational reading. This may account for why the feminism of the 1980s is seen, or needs to be seen, by some young women artists as part of the establishment that has to be overthrown. Like a mantra in the video loop, Zoe repeats: ‘I refuse to be influenced by anyone who came of age in the sixties.’

Certainly, there has been a radical rejection of the theoretical 1980s. Work done at that time by avowedly feminist artists — work drawing upon theoretical writings — is now often rejected as didactic, illustrative, intellectually elitist, or arcane. As if re-inventing Descartes’ mind/body dualism, many of the later generation of artists have been repudiating the mind. Part of the persona developed around Tracey Emin, for example, is that of wild child who left school at 13 and knows only half the alphabet. Ghada Amer found the French theoretical approach to feminism to be as stifling as the growing Islamic fanaticism back home in Egypt, saying: ‘I had to find a way to address extremism — both feminism and religious fanaticism and their parallel problems with the body and its relationship with seduction.’ 14

Whoever wants to play is invited to join

Dissertation/Disertare may indicate a way out of this cul-de-sac of replay and rebuttal. The exhibition managed to engage with the past but
prioritise the present and gesture in very provocative ways to the future, particularly to the future role of the curator. True to its title (disertare), the show abandoned a lot of the past but engaged a contemporary feminist agenda (disertare).

The exhibition opened with the sculptural work of Clotì Ricciardi, born in 1939 and represented by 'Muro', a work from 1966. Her position at the entrance is also appropriate because of her work as a feminist activist and writer. For the most part, however, the artists in the exhibition are in their thirties and the majority of the work has been made in the last few years. The overall sense of the exhibition is that the past, both in terms of feminist theory and cultural production, is referenced, incorporated, expanded in this new work. But the exhibition is not homage to the past, resonating instead with Carla Lonzi's attitude: 'There are no goals, only the present. We are the world's dark past, we are giving shape to the present.'

A striking feature of this exhibition was the absence of images of victimised or mutilated women. This marks a sharp contrast to a number of the exhibitions in the US, particularly Global Feminisms, in which a great deal of the work uses images of mutilated women's bodies as provocative symbols of protest. While the work of artists such as Gina Pane had a strong influence upon Italian art in the 1970s, the current generation has chosen to abandon the use of women's bodies as symbols of masochism or martyrdom, privileging instead a feminine signified in pleasurable ways. In Disertare/Disertare women's bodies remain unscarred, unharmed and unfettered. Or, if they are fettered, the ties are family ties, as in Arianna Pecchia Ramacciotti's paintings of a woman pirouetting through the improbable positions attainable by only the subtlest gymnast. Attached to the woman's body is a thread, presumably the thread mentioned in the title 'Il filo di Elise Rapilly' (2006). The accompanying narrative describes Elise's life with her older brother who has suffered throughout most of his childhood from a severe speech disorder. The thread, it seems, is more of a connection based upon filial affection, rather than a tether.

Sara Basta's 'Toccammi non mi toccare' (2006) lighthearted, whimsical drawings outline male and female bodies that are literally conjoined. The words inscribed inside the cartoon heads suggest their alternating acceptance and rejection of each other ('Go away, don't touch me! / Touch me, don't go away'), a vacillation all the more comic since they are one being.

All of the work contributed by the group called Neon is about the suspension of time and of a long hair that has been tied over gymnasts' heads; 2001, the group opened with the long corridor where one moves back and forth. 'Guardaspadave', the exhibition of three women artists in relation by all Sicilian women in Sicily and of Sicily and Spain, divest themselves of the constricting baggage of mourning, bones and heavy weight.

While the strength is to be found in Disertare/Disertare, their work, they were in work in the US. The WACK! exhibition, which often used to show self-affirmation, often became embroiled in the provocative nature of women to submit to a study of Life' (2006) a simple dance on this simple dance.

The American exhibition, which women's liberation gained and the fashion icon Sophie Ustunier's work, together and simultaneously, comic comments to achieve the best.

Explorations of identity with feminism's artists in Europe and artists with feminine ways, photographs of people...
Five ways to the future, according to its title (Disertare), this show staged a contemporary retrospective.

Cloti Ricciardi, *Roma* , 1966. Her position at the end of the 1960s as a feminist activist and artist, but the exhibition are in the last few years have been made in the past, both in terms of content experienced, incorporated, incorporated, not a hommage to the past, but no goals. There are giving shape to the present.

The absence of images of mutilated women’s bodies in sharp contrast to a book by Global Feminisms, pieced together by artists such as Ricciardi. In the 1970s, the representations of women’s bodies as objects, instead of a feminine embodiment, are women’s bodies existing if they are fettered, are free. Maciacci’s paintings of women’s positions attainable by women’s bodies is a thread,

La Visual de Elise Rapilly’s life with her older brother from a severe childhood based on friendship and love.

The American preoccupation with analysing, or repeating the way in which women’s bodies are objectified or exploited by the television, film and the fashion industry seems to be lacking in this exhibition. Perhaps Sophie Usunier’s ‘Les empalées’ (‘Stuff’, 2006) which used clothing sewn together and stuffed with straw to form amorphous shapes, is the final comic commentary on the burden consumer culture places on women to achieve the body beautiful.

Explorations of the question of identity, central in art associated with feminism’s second wave and more recent feminist interventions in Europe and America, are present in the Italian show. In Desislava Mineva’s installation ‘La Stanza dei giochi’ (2006) the room is filled with feminine words. In the centre of the room are nine boxes with photographs of partial images of the artist’s own face and body enlarged.
and pasted on each side of the boxes. In this work are echoes of both the Danish artist Kirsten Justesen's 'Sculpture' (1968), in which her own body is curled up in a cardboard box, and of American artist Carolee Schneemann's 'Portrait Partial' (1970), close-up fragments of her own and other people's anatomy. In Mineva's work identity is a game like the Rubik's Cube and the audience is invited to play with the project of assembling a unified identity.

Gundalina Salini's 'Nostalgia dell'identico' (2006) is a series of black and white photographs of sheets and pillows on a rumbled bed. The linen is covered with writing as though someone had obsessively written their dreams on the sheets. In fact, it is the writings of the Italian occultist Count Alessandro Cagliostro, his accounts of women's initiation into Egyptian rites and mysteries based upon the Book of the Dead. In the sequence of photographs the sheets are washed in a small basin and wrung-out by hand ... still the writing remains. There is something in the delicate, liminal quality of the writing, as well as its invocation of the unconscious activity of sleep that connects it to the repetitive, almost somnambulant activity of the women's work of weaving or washing.

Moira Ricci's '20.12.53-10.08.04 (2004-2005-2006)' continues a tradition of women artists thinking back through their mothers. Ricci re-imagines her mother's life by re-imaging it. She inserts photographs of herself into old photographs of her mother: starting with a photograph of her mother as an infant twin, her mother as a young girl with her friends, her mother on a motorcycle, her mother on her wedding day, etc. It is as if the artist was vicariously participating in her mother's life even before she was born, imaginatively projecting herself back in time in order to more intimately understand her life. Ricci's images are redolent with the loss and longing Roland Barthes describes in Camera Lucida when he encounters a photograph of his late mother, taken before he was born.

Some of the more overtly political work also has affinities to work done in the US. Libera Mazzoleni's 'Rhuma eritis sicur de (sarete come dei)' (2005-2006) is a wall of text printed on various coloured squares of material that look, initially, like Jenny Holzer's 'Inflammatory Essays' (1979-1982) whereas, in terms of content, the work evokes Nancy Spero's documentation of the accounts of the torture and murder of women taken from Amnesty International. Mazzoleni's work is a documentation of the death and disappearance of women and children since the Second World War that has occurred as a result of natural disasters, or political or social atrocities, such as human trafficking. The text gives only the name of the woman or child, the date and the place of their

birth and death. The account of Rhuma is from 2001. Hundreds of similar accounts are present in this exhibition space and are subtitled 'Work in Progress'.

The environment is literal force and many are familiar with Francesca Tusa's series of environmental degradation photographs taken these photographs in Messina to the main road where the river is littered with bodies. Planners are making new roads installed because of lack of land. What is left is debris. The river is a symbol of unity at the end of the world.

While a lot of these exhibitions are political and political issues, in fact, from the exhibition space, it is the nature of the art world. The question is the American feminist political art: do the Guerrilla Girls' antics or the Guerrilla Girls' antics appeal to the art world. No one would have thought of women to men individually, of stems perhaps from women who have sought to move outside the box with the curators, and not worry too much about the major circuits. It is the difference both in terms of the political work and in terms of feminist thought and political thought that is at stake.

Many Italian feminists and feminists of equality ultimately advocate a patriarchal structure.

Woman's different...
birth and death. The title ‘Rhumia You’ll Be as a God’ refers to an account of Rhuma, a 4-year-old girl abducted from Kabul in August 2001. Hundreds of squares extend along the longest wall in this vast exhibition space and darken with crowded type. The work is ominously subtitled ‘Work in Progress’.

The environmental movement is gaining ground in Italy as a political force and many artists are actively engaged in environmental reform. Francesca Tusa’s series of photographs of Palermo document the environmental degradation that has occurred in the area (2005). She began taking these photographs when the plans for the bridge/canal linking Messina to the mainland were being hotly contested. In the photographs the river is littered with the remains of homes taken down by city planners to make room for this new construction. The project is now stalled because of lack of funding due to government corruption. All that is left is debris. The bridge/canal with the Italian mainland is a failed symbol of unity at odds with a fragmented Italy.

While a lot of the work in *Disertare/Disertare* addressed current social and political issues, oddly enough, one political protest that is absent from the exhibition is the protest against women artists’ exclusion from the art world. The desire for equality has always been at the heart of the American feminist movement, but here there are no attempts to insert women into the canon of art history. No one seems to be doing the Guerrilla Girls’ job of keeping statistical track of the inequities of the art world. No one even did what I did earlier — lament the ratio of women to men included in large group shows. This disinterested stance stems perhaps from the fact that Italian feminist thought and practice has sought to move beyond the paradigm of equality. In an interview with the curators, art critic Emanuela De Cecco says, ‘one simply should not worry too much about a lack of immediate visibility or the exclusion from the major circus … I think that today it is necessary to practise a difference both in terms of how we interrogate ourselves about the artist’s work and in terms of our stand to the so called art system’.16 Italian feminist thought and practice has long been wary of the lure of equality. Many Italian feminists agree with Carla Lonzi’s theory that a politics of equality ultimately promotes the continued entrapment of women in patriarchal structures. In her essay ‘Let’s Spit on Hegel’, she says:

Woman’s difference is her millennial absence from history. Let us profit from this difference; for once we have achieved inclusion in society, who is to say how many more centuries will have to pass
before we can throw off this new yoke? The task of subverting the order of the patriarchal structure cannot be left to others. Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which those with hegemonic power continue to control those without.\(^\text{17}\)

Instead, Lonzi states, the goal of seizing power should be emptied of meaning. This may be why contemporary Italian women artists do not seem to be looking for compensation for the way they are excluded from the art world. They do not stage occupations of major museums, or picket outside when no women artists are included in major shows. Instead, like the Italian feminism that has flourished outside the institutions, outside the academy, growing independently in small collectives and women’s cultural centres such as La Casa delle Donne in Rome, women artists all over Italy are working outside the art institutions in general: to produce amazingly diverse, viable work. What was needed was only a strategy and a space to enable them to connect. And that is exactly what Dissertare/Disertare provided. This exhibition may speak to the warning Virginia Woolf gave to women in *A Room of One’s Own* about the downside of their entry into Oxbridge (and by extension to male institutions in general): ‘I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in.’\(^\text{18}\)

In the end, the most amazing and gratifying thing about this exhibition may be that it happened – all of these women artists came together and addressed some of the problems, pleasures and potential of women today. Whether the curatorial methodology and the suggestions the exhibition offers are useful for feminist artists and organisations in other parts of the world, for example the US, is an open-ended question because cultural predicaments do figure in the way we address problems and in the kinds of problems we address. Nevertheless, there is a lot we can learn from the simple and elegant pragmatists, the *sprezzatura* of this exhibition. In my view, an exhibition in which women artists actively enable each other and are accountable to and for each other represents a feminist future in the making: ‘once connected, the excluded are not marginalized’.

**Notes**

2. *Sprezzatura* is an Italian word originating from Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, where it is defined by the author as ‘a certain nonchalence, so as to conceal all art and make whatever on the contrary.’
4. This vast rambling in 1979 has now become a book: *Curtailing Feminism* (Venice, Italy, 2008).
7. As the editors wrote to Neri, the ideas of feminism are about how things are. Recently, Neri compiled *Some Thoughts on Art* (ed.), *The Idea of Curatorial Control* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
8. An expression he uses in *elettronica e disordine*.
9. Antonio Tursi, ‘It is not a room and the Cobweb’ in *Sprezzatura*.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Ruslan and Lyubov* have historically been all about the church, the camera and the ruthless ‘class of the church’. The established order, its privileges and prohibitions.
14. ‘Normal Illes: On Being an Italian’ (Eric Rosenberg and Lee Lubell, *Sprezzatura*).
15. Quoted in Barbara De Cocco.
16. Emanuela De Cocco and Caterina Iaquinto in *Italian Feminist Thought*.
ask of subverting the art world and going it alone to others. Equality of treatment is not granted to all people. And what is the solution? 'Erecting institutions which try to accommodate those who are excluded from existing ones, on their behalf', concluded Pietro Consoli in the inscrip-
tion he etched on a 1938 letter to his mother, advising her to be prepared to make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and without any thought about it'.


18. This vast rambling castle was the site of the founding exhibition of Transavanguardia in 1979 and has continued to be the space were innovative movements begin.


20. Isaak et al., 'Curating Feminist Art in Europe and North America'.

21. As the editors wrote in a email to the author: 'Today primarily because of Antonio Negri, the ideas of Autonomia are everywhere: most contemporary theory on the left is now about how to do things beyond the state, how to develop alternative networks.' Recently, Negri concisely explicated his anti-state position in his essay 'Communism: Some Thoughts on the Concept and Practice' in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Zizek (eds), *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 153–64.


24. Mikhail Bakhtin's monumental study *Rabelais and His World* reveals that women have historically been aligned with the popular comic tradition of nuns and that they have a political stake in this site of insurrection. Because it existed unofficially, outside the church, the carnivalesque was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness: 'carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), p. 10.


In 2009–10 Masculinity in Kunst Stiftung Gallery in Wiesbaden, the nineteenthand intended as a place for milieux. This took the form of symposia, an exhibition, and the intervention *Check* as well as Europe.

Katrin Kivimanen's work as Gender Check as a form of socialism? And perhaps some others...

Bojana Pejić (Bojana Pejić)