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## **Lucia Marcucci: Visual Poetry Against Social Violence**

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# Lucia Marucci: Visual Poetry Against Social Violence

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## Abstract

The article offers an original close reading of some of Marcucci's most famous works between the early 60s and late 70s, chosen as examples of a situated gendered specificity of the artist's poetics. Despite the self-declared distance from neo-feminist stances, Marcucci shines for originality and controversy in the themes and practices of creation in her contemporary landscape, mostly dominated by male artists. On the one hand, we observe Marcucci's artistic and cultural operation in Italy amid an economic *boom* but still suffered from the retrograde nature of the still deviously dominant fascist thinking, in conjunction with the bigotry of the Catholic Church, concerning women's emancipation. On the other hand, we also observe Marcucci's productive singularity in the context of her contemporary counterculture, which had not freed itself at all — although preaching it — from sexist power dynamics. The article aims to present a feminist lens (from male gaze to self-objectification) not as the absolute and only way of interpreting Marcucci's verbal-visual poems, but as useful in highlighting the specific qualities of Marcucci's research and poetics. Through the analysis of “Il Fidanzato in Fuga” (The Runaway Fiance; 1964), “Noxin” (1970), “AH!” (1972), “Aa Bb Cc” (1977), and “Culturae” (1978), an attempt will be made to offer a viable course of inquiry that does not isolate Marcucci's

work from that of her male contemporaries but considers its situated specificity as a necessary stand.

**Keywords:** Lucia Marcucci, visual poetry, Italian literature, mass media, collage

### ***Lucia Marcucci: Poesia Visual Contra a Violência Social***

*O artigo oferece uma leitura original de algumas das obras mais famosas de Marcucci entre o início dos anos 60 e o final dos anos 70, escolhidas como exemplos de uma especificidade de gênero situada da poética da artista. Apesar do distanciamento autodeclarado das posições neofeministas, Marcucci brilha pela originalidade e polêmica nos temas e práticas de criação no seu panorama contemporâneo, maioritariamente dominado por artistas masculinos. Por um lado, observamos a atuação artística e cultural de Marcucci numa Itália no meio de um boom econômico, mas que ainda sofria com a natureza retrógrada do pensamento fascista ainda desviadamente dominante, em conjunto com o fanatismo da igreja católica, relativamente à emancipação da mulher. Por outro lado, também observamos a singularidade produtiva de Marcucci no contexto da contracultura sua contemporânea, que não se tinha libertado — embora o pregasse — das dinâmicas sexistas de poder. O artigo visa apresentar uma lente feminista (do olhar masculino à auto-objetificação) não como a única e absoluta forma de interpretar os poemas verbo-visuais de Marcucci, mas como útil para destacar as qualidades específicas da investigação e poética de Marcucci. Através da análise de "Il Fidanzato in Fuga" (O Noivo em Fuga; 1964), "Noxin" (1970), "AH!" (1972), "Aa Bb Cc" (1977) e "Culturae" (1978), será feita uma tentativa de oferecer um percurso de investigação viável que não isole a obra de Marcucci da dos seus contemporâneos masculinos, mas que considere a sua especificidade situada como uma posição necessária.*

**Palavras-chave:** Lucia Marcucci, poesia visual, literatura italiana, meios de comunicação de massa, colagem

## **Lucia Marcucci: Visual Poetry Against Social Violence**

Although ( . . . ) the leaders of the Italian neo-avant-garde were for the most part oblivious or indifferent to the ideology of gender in their own discourse, both the linguistic and institutional scenarios with which they worked prefigured the dilemmas of the Italian and international women's movement. (Re, 2004, p. 145)

This article provides research into the 60s and 70s visual-poetry production of Lucia Marcucci through a feminist lens. Despite the not immediately intuitive alignment with contemporary Italian feminisms, this article aims to observe how an aspect of Marcucci's strongly gendered work can be given value through feminist tools for investigation. The newly established Constitution of Italy dated 1948 established universal suffrage and gender equality in a political turn

against the anti-feminist tendency of the fascist dictatorship. Nevertheless, the country's legal framework remained fascist until the 1960s, making the notion of gender equality almost impossible to implement, which was also strongly hindered by the country's general retrograde mentality. This mentality of sexist stereotypes and limitations has as its accomplice a perpetuation of traditional prejudices — declared as natural differences between genders — that threaten women's emancipation.

Italian women seeking to negotiate their position in regard to the hegemonic discursive practices of the 60s and 70s in Italy (before the advent of a full-fledged and self-conscious feminist theory) found themselves dealing with issues structurally similar to those tackled by the Italian neo-avant-garde, and, however indirectly, they profited and learned in a number of ways from the experience, the triumphs and the failures of the neo-avant-garde. (Re, 2004, pp. 145–146)

In an era of political conservatism and great cultural emancipation, especially for women, Marcucci and a few others managed to make their way in a counterculture context that claimed to be free of state power systems but instead, once again, reproduced a gendered imbalance of power.

However blind the male neo-avant-garde might have been to the question gender, its work with and on language nevertheless laid the foundations for a kind of critique that could then be extended (much chagrin of some of the neo-avantgardists themselves) to unmask masculinist bias of their own discourse. (Re, 2005, p. 150)

More specifically, the focus will be on the artistically re-reading and re-purposing of advertising, a form of mass communication that more explicitly built on a foundation of sexism that persists still today.

Through an overview of the construction and restitution of the message in advertising practice that places the woman's body and concept at its centre, it will be presented the case of Lucia Marcucci as a shining example of deconstruction and re-appropriation of the message according to mechanics of format misconstructions and ironisation of the message useful to override the permeative and insidious power of the advertising medium in everyday life, yet without the intention of mocking the accessibility of the medium itself but rather making the visual poetic work approachable and intentionally of the same enjoyability.

As a result of a close analysis of some of Marcucci's most famous poetic panels — namely: "Il Fidanzato in Fuga" (The Runaway Fiance; 1964), "Noxin" (1970), "AH!" (1972), "Aa Bb Cc" (1977), "Culturae" (1978) —, an attempt will be made to offer a viable course of inquiry that does not isolate Marcucci's work from that of her male contemporaries but considers its situated specificity as a necessary stand.

## Neoavanguardia

### =/= Gruppo 63

The 60s — as the 70s — were animated by a fruitful experimentalism in the artistic area, particularly because of the new industrial materials, technologies, and above all the communication through new mass media. The 20-year period was incisively marked above all by social protests, feminist struggles, and the attack on capitalist and consumerist systems which, from the post-World War II period onwards, were perceived — by artists as by the rest of society — as the primary cause of the incessant socio-cultural homologation, alienation, and people subordination to the system itself. In this climate of dual stimulus, the artist-poets decided to fight against the dominant thought and the irresponsible capitalistic market in ways and manners that extrapolated from the exploited reality of the world, engaging politically and artistically with the misleading and unheeding times they were living.

Speaking of the avant-garde, in the Italian case, the association of the term with the artistic experience of the Gruppo 63 is immediate.

The old-fashioned cultural categories were no longer useful to describe the neocapitalistic context that emerged from the ruins of the Second World War and had to be replaced by new and more dynamic modes of representation. In the years following the immediate postwar period, during which the nation had experienced extreme poverty and misery, Italy underwent the first major industrial development in its history. Between 1958 and 1963 it became one of the most powerful industrial countries in Europe and in the world. Suddenly, the country was able to compete, politically and economically, with the rest of the world; the production — and consumption — of permanent goods such as cars, refrigerators, and televisions, dramatically changed the cultural landscape of contemporary Italy. (Chirumbolo et al., 2010, p. 7)

The early 1960s in Italy brought the desire, if not a need, to break with the past, from a formal point of view, by revolutionizing traditional stylistic features and regarding content, in which Marxist ideology fought against contemporary bourgeois homologation. The year 1961 marked a literary turning point with the publication of the *I Novissimi. Poesie per gli Anni '60* (I Novissimi: Poetry for the Sixties), which included poetry by Elio Pagliarani, Edoardo Sanguineti, Nanni Balestrini, Antonio Porta and Alfredo Giuliani, the poets who formed the core of the Gruppo 63.

The Gruppo 63 was established and perpetuated through a series of open meetings in which authors and thinkers met to discuss the cultural organization that would best meet the demands of the radical thought it promoted. The laboratory of this cultural and linguistic revolution was above all the magazine *il verri*, founded in 1956 by Luciano Anceschi, where, together with original texts, frequent critical commentaries by other authoritative thinkers such as Umberto Eco appeared.

The main objective of Gruppo 63 was the liberation of language from bourgeois culture, through which — setting aside claims to rationality and mimesis — a more pivotal understanding of the human relationships in the post-war context could be achieved. The formulation, therefore, of a language that would bring subjects back into relationship by removing them from capitalist alienation and consequently a language that would properly serve the revolutionary purpose.

Because of this full confidence in the language, despite the strongly inter-artistic nature of the movement's demands, which over 9 years of existence had promoted extensive collaborations especially with the musical and visual area, the very concept of poetry remained strongly anchored to the presentation, albeit often fractious, of the semantic sign.

The fact that Gruppo 63 and neo-avant-garde have become synonymous has blurred, at least in part, equally valid experiences that broke with the past. That is especially true of those varieties of experimentation that almost completely detached themselves from using the semantic sign and more explicitly dedicated themselves to crossing the boundaries of language.

## **Gruppo 70 and New Media**

Despite the various forms of textual manipulation that had marked the protracted research of Gruppo 63, it was only with the advent of the practices of experimenters such as those affiliated to the Gruppo 70 that a real break out of the rigid grid that saw the poetic sign as a written, heard, spoken construction and not, instead, seen, was achieved. Even more strongly to mark a rupture with the neo-capitalism that stretched its shadow over the dynamics of the publishing market, the exploration of visual poetry emerged in an even more transgressive faction of resistance to the bourgeois homologation already mentioned.

Technological poets who, in 1963, formed Gruppo 70 with its base in Florence. This group made one of the most radical breaks with conventional poetry. It adopted a variety of extralinguistic materials that put in place a process of contamination that shifted poetry from a verbal genre towards a semiotic area that could not be accurately described as literary since it leaned heavily on the visual arts. (Picchione, 2004, p. 180)

Although the predominant feature is direct interaction between text and image presented as simultaneous, the variants on the issue of verbal and visual expression are numerous, and the production — the Italian one, moreover, particularly rich — among the most varied and singular. The association and contrast between word and image reproduced created unprecedented and alienating works of art, which the visual poets originated intending to produce a visual shock in the viewer. Dealing with pressing issues such as the war, political and social tensions, and the role of women within society, this new type of production captured the audience's interest and attention; the pieces being constituted of mechanisms and dynamics adherent to the modern era (such as advertising, technologies, comics

and mass media), the communicative impact was direct and effective. Following the artists' desire, these works defined a new truly democratic mass art, within everyone's reach, denying the entrenched and elitist label that poetry had for a long time associated with it.

The terms adopted to categorize this body of experimentation are numerous: 'visual poetry' ('poesia visuale'), 'visual writing' ('scrittura visuale'), 'new writing' ('nuova scrittura'), 'verbal-visual poetry' ('poesia verbo- visiva'), 'symbiotic writing' ('scrittura simbiotica'), and others. However, the term 'poesia visiva' (as already mentioned, it emerged within the context of Gruppo 70) became the predominant one not only to describe the works of this particular group but also to designate the general area of poetic practice that arose after the experience of concrete poetry. (Picchione, 2004, p. 182)

The richness of verbal-visual research is deeply rooted in the resolute contestation of the cultural establishment: on the one hand, because of its compositional mode, which through the incorporation of different artistic practices and disciplines used as lenses to read these experiments, leads to a destabilization of the genre system; on the other hand, because of a renovation of the role of the poet who endeavors to follow the entire process of the work, from elaboration to dissemination, removing the work from the established and rotten publishing and art markets embracing an understanding of the reception horizon. The profound purpose that stirs these new mechanisms of creation and distribution is that of recovering the social function of the poet, thus rehabilitating the medium of poetry in its function of intercepting and interpreting the historical, cultural and social moment critically, facing the maximum trivialization of language and message.

It is not a coincidence that the poets of Gruppo 70 paid much attention to Marshall McLuhan's theories on mass media and their effects on human consciousness. Visual poets became fully aware of the fact that the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' with its logic and linear structure, had started to be pushed towards the periphery by the immediacy and sensorial force of the image-centred media. In many instances, this awareness was coupled with the ideological orientation of the counterculture of the times, which had not relinquished the belief that the arts can serve as a countervailing force to an alienating mass culture by producing messages of revolt and social critique. At the same time, subversive ideas and visionary activism converged with theories of structural linguistics, semiotics, information theory, and Gestalt psychology. In so doing, they assimilated into their poetic practices a critical awareness of the processes that regulate the various codes of communication and of the way they shape the perception of ourselves and of the world. (Picchione, 2004, p. 182)

Nevertheless, the intent is not reduced to a ploy to escape the controversial debate on the crisis of written language through the juxtaposition of images.

Rather, the formal choices completely undermined the spatial and temporal linearity of the reception process of poetic work. Although often simple, the newspaper headlines cut out for the creation of the verbal-visual collages reach the audience loaded with layers of meaning, and their interaction with equally seemingly simple images reveals the complicated relationship that humanity has with the media and its contextual messages.

The co-presence of different signs comprises a synaesthetic result that multimedia semiotics has not ignored and certainly was not ignored by the creators of visual poetry. The co-participation of the audience through the stimulation of different senses and in the tension of cross-references between the different signs aims to be emblematic of a cognitive effort that too often, due to a hyper-simplification of media language striving to assimilate the critical consciousness of individuals, is anaesthetised. Hence, multisensoriality is an essential feature of visual poetic work that, far from being a purely aesthetic choice, branches out into countercultural contestation on a critical and historical level.

These poets make extensive use of extralinguistic materials selected from images produced by mass media (commercial photographs, advertisements, comic strips, photo romances, and so on). Their primary goal is to establish a connection between poetry, technology, and the products of consumer society. As a result, poetry shifts from an exclusively verbal practice towards a general art of the sign. This poetry displays an encounter, a convergence of different codes of communication that, by interacting with each other, offer new possibilities of signification. (Picchione, 2004, p. 185)

This new poetic form relies on a communicative synergy that is as rapid as it is profound, whereby the audience is prompted to interact critically as much in the moment of aural reception as in the reproduction of that critical mechanism in front of the possibility of creating such a critique mentally. Exposed to several signs the viewer is called upon to decipher and recognize, visual poetry impresses itself as a quasi-gymnastic pedagogical exercise reached through critical muscular training; an experiential impetus of which Lucia Marcucci, in particular, is a champion.

## *Supervisiva*

### **Lucia Marcucci**

“My poetics consists, through the word and the sign, in the literary and pictorial, but above all critical, reworking of the mass media (images, slogans, variously persuasive and mystifying languages of the contemporary social system)” (Marcucci, n.d.-b, para. 2).

Lucia Marcucci was born in Florence in 1933 and, in that same place, is still active today. She is one of the leading exponents of the visual poetry movement

in Italy, particularly of the Gruppo 70. She was raised in a family devoted to arts, with her father invested his free time in photography and her grandfather recounted the stories of the *serata futurista* (futurist evenings) he took part in (Fiaschi, 2009, p. 25). The recounting of the *Serate Futuriste* (Futurist Evening; Marcucci, 2009) is vibrant and full of events, a series of narratives so imprinted in the memory that they definitively shaped the young Marcucci's sentimental and artistic experience.

I used to listen to his stories and, apparently, build my cultural formation: I was five years old. In the family library there were magazines and a few futurist books that I flicked through with him attentively, because he didn't trust my little hand that held, tightly clenched, a pencil, ready to intervene on some drawing that ignited my childish imagination and libido. (Marcucci, 2009, p. 209)

After a few years engaged in her studies at the Accademia delle Belle Arti, she decided to move together with her husband to Livorno in 1955, where she started collaborating with the small but very important avant-garde theatre Il Grattacielo, taking on the role of posters designer, staging, and assistant director. During these formative years at the Il Grattacielo, directed by a young Andrea Camilleri at the time, Marcucci was inspired to produce her own first poetry-collages, experimenting with languages that clashed together the dramaturgy to the vernacular. In 1963 the artist created her first *poema tecnologico* (technological poem) — which remains unpublished — *L'Indiscrezione È Forte* (The Indiscretion Is Strong). It includes a series of printed papers elaborating linguistic sections from opera books from the 19th century, advertisement magazines, and newspaper excerpts. Marcucci herself defined it "a kind of artist's book, with pages full of collages, very experimental, one after the other, I had it photocopied, so it remained a rather ironic and disorienting prototype" (Saccà, 2003, p. 23).

In that same year that Marcucci, who had been traveling between Florence and Livorno, invited the protagonists of the Gruppo 70, and in particular, Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti, to join her in the first performance of *Poesie e No* (Poems and No), a "multisensorial collage experience" (Fiaschi, 2009, p. 27): the happening comprehended different sounds, from waltzes to popular ditties, which played during recitative performances and more gestural ones, such as the creation and tearing to pieces of artist posters<sup>1</sup>. Lucia Marcucci decided to move to Florence permanently in 1965, becoming, to all intents and purposes, a voice of Gruppo 70 and participating in the first exhibition of visual poetry in Naples at Galleria Guidi, organized by Gruppo 63. "All these events, which took place in succession in 1965, were marked by the major experimentation of the

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<sup>1</sup>Presented for the first time in April 1964 at the Gabinetto Scientifico Letterario, G. P. Vieuzeux, *Poesie e No*, consists of readings of contemporary and classic authors — such as Aesop and Shakespeare — freely combined with "excerpts" taken from magazines and newspapers, all accompanied by film clips, fashion songs and musical excerpts. The replica presented at Il Grattacielo was staged in May 1964, directed by Enrico Sirello (Spignoli, n.d.).

happening, with the dominant note always being the intermingling of languages” (Marcucci, n.d.-a, para. 9).

It is important to highlight that, despite being close to the group since its very origin, she was not one of the founding members: her very first production dates to the 2 years prior to her active participation in the Gruppo 70.

Her first production was thus produced in a period of direct contact with the visual poets, but prior to her affiliation with the collective. To the two-year period 1963-1964 date back, for example, the technological manifestos published in the magazine "La Battana" in 1965 and partly reused in the show *Poesie e no 3*, presented in the same year at the Feltrinelli Bookshop in Florence, at the Libreria Guida in Naples and at the III Convention of Gruppo 63 in Palermo. A similar story applies to some *collages* published in *Poesie Visive*, the first anthology of the movement curated by Pignotti in 1965; a text that testifies how, at this chronological height, Isgrò, Balestrini, Giuliani, Bonito Oliva and others also actively contributed to the group's poetics.

Hence, the transition from 'linear' poems to technological poems and visual poetry *collages* takes place for Marcucci along an autonomous path that is only partially affected by the influence of her colleagues. (Perna, 2015, p. 112)

Marcucci has always pursued her own poetics of deconstruction of the advertising message that pervades the spaces of social and private life, reaching some of her greatest achievements in visual poetry with the collages, which are the result of a daring, irreverent and ironic combination of images and words, stolen from the mass media and decontextualized from their traditional meaning. In these experiments, she is mostly concerned about women and the female condition, paying particular attention to the use of the feminine body and the exploitation of the same and the difficult juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine in the various existential spheres, including the artistic one, but also politics and the most tragic events of contemporary history.

The reflections on contemporary language carried out by the neo-avant-garde groups, both in the purely and categorically literary field and more broadly, are radically gendered by the non-male subjects who approach these new forms of poetic art. Lucia Marcucci, and some of her female associates — for example Ketty La Rocca, who was also affiliated with Gruppo 70 — metabolizes a series of other oppressive and assimilative mechanisms that lead to a specifically gendered reflection.

Extensive research on the psychological effects from the use of sexist advertising has been examined previously (e.g. Lanis & Covell, 1995; Taylor, Miyazaki, & Mogensen, 2013; Vezich, Gunter, & Lieberman, 2017). It is suggested that the way women are depicted in advertisements affects how women's role in society is perceived, and how a

woman should act and behave (Lafky et al., 1996; Lindner, 2004). A sexist ad would hence work against equality. (Andersson & Schytt, 2017, p. 3)

More extensively than some of her colleagues, Lucia Marcucci engaged in a kind of expropriation of the language of mass media, focusing mainly on advertising and the sexist rhetoric that permeated every aspect of it: from conception to production to sales target.

## Women and/in Advertising

A general and yet very punctual definition of advertising is the one offered by Harris and Seldon (1962), who observed it as a phenomenon “designed to spread information with a view promoting the sales of marketable goods and service” (p. 40). The intent is, therefore, to share notions with the consumer about a product to persuade the message receiver to become a buyer. Hence, the necessary rhetoric must be convincing in adding value to the product itself by making something desirable to the point of turning into a necessity; images, symbols, logos, and verbal fragments insert themselves into peoples' everyday life playing along with already established mechanisms and pushing the boundaries of the same to make products recognizable and wanted. Rather than pure information, advertising builds itself upon the concept of appearance and constructs a way of persuasion through the wishes for appropriation. What we choose to buy has specific consequences far beyond the immediate satisfaction of oneself: the violence produced by the advertising imaginary is the reproduction of the socio-cultural violence to which subaltern subjects are subjugated; it reinforces such power imbalance, and create even more room for further discrimination.

This pervasive form of communication became globally the new normal in post-World War II, and the Italian case was no different; the *poeti visive* (visual poets) debated extensively the otherwise semi-unquestioned social messages conveyed through this new media. The social impact of advertisement, now vastly researched, was evident to Marcucci, who decided to deepen her own research on the specificity of the case of women's rights and the not-so-subtle portrayal. As far as women are concerned the specificity of the female condition is annihilated by the re-proposal of confining structures such as the image of the mother (or good housewife, *angiolo del focolare* [perfect housewife] according to the fascist tradition) and the *femme fatale* (stimulating a desire for identification or possession; Goffman, 1976; Kang, 1997; Umiker-Sebeok, 1996).

As extensively researched and argued by Arvidsson (2003), through the new instrument of market surveys, women's fears of entering the modern era and emancipating themselves from the vision of the affectively perfect housewife of the 1950s were leveraged in the favour of the market. The market theory applied to these fears had a sexist root that considered women's natural desire and propensity for the role of the housewife and the modern social order an obstacle preventing them from fully realizing this primordial drive. Indulging

this phenomenon, advertisers set out to satisfy a supposed need by creating the new housewife in their own way and making her even more of a sales target through the foundation of new magazines specifically aimed at women (*Amica*, founded in 1962, but also *Grazia* and *Annabella*; Arvidsson, 2001).

At the same time, women were also presented as objects useful for the gratification of men (a portrayal still enduring, and which has been argued to justify sexual violence against women in the perpetrator's eyes; Kilbourne, 1999). Much of the advertising content addressing explicitly men included references to women as sex objects, accompanying the product rather than presenting it. Women's explicit sexually appealing features and postures were used for products that not even have any linkage with women themselves, with the sole scope to create a connection between the opportunity to own the object marketed as much as the woman sponsored with it (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008).

In her work, Marcucci constantly emphasizes the double oppression, personal and collective, to which the feminine is condemned in the world of capitalistic consumption: on the one hand, the female body is reproduced according to dominant aesthetic canons that aggravate everyone's self-perception, through a standardization of the particular and varied features of the subjects, reducing them to a sterile unicum; on the other hand, this woman constructed according to the imperative of the male gaze often has as its market referent the woman herself, reducing her to a pure consumer according to desires inherent in the media.

The choice to use that specific mass media language in a falsely unaltered manner is Marcucci's way to change from within that same code that was giving “disinformative information”: “we would change the code and the meaning and shoot [*sic*] the same kind of language by changing the sign” (Fiaschi, 2009, p. 28). Through juxtaposing of stereotypical texts and images within the composition, Marcucci practices an extra-linguistic shock: this sense of estrangement takes place on a visual and mental level, through a daring montage of stereotypical elements that dismantle all the clichés that the mass media assume and reproduce about the female universe.

The format of the assemblage, idiosyncratically overlapping the various elements that compose it, allows for the simultaneous experience of different elements from the moment of creation to that of aural reception. In the complicated tension of the simultaneous re-signification of both the linguistic and iconographic sign, Marcucci critically and consciously participates in what Carla Lonzi (1970) commented on as the interruption of the patriarchal monologue<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Carla Lonzi was a philosopher and art critic. Her career as an activist and writer in the Italian feminist movement is best remembered by the founding of the political group Rivolta Femminile (drafting the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* [Women's Revolt Manifesto]), which also gave its name to a small publishing house. For these editions Lonzi published her major critical considerations about sexual difference and *autocoscienza* (self-awareness) practice. In *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Spitting on Hengel; Lonzi, 1970), the author fiercely criticizes the patriarchal approach of the government, society, and even the Marxist communist political

At this stage, what had hitherto been the subject of speculation by a small academic elite is transformed into a mass phenomenon, and the mass media subject of speculation by a narrow academic elite, and the mass media act as propagators of a new ideal of women and new social expectations: feminism sharpens its ideological and propagandistic weapons to analyze in a culturally and philosophically unexceptionable way of analyzing the causes of discrimination and women's claims, and to formulate political proposals. (Gajeri, 2002, p. 236)

The relationship of Lucia Marcucci with the local coeval feminist movements (*femminismi*)<sup>3</sup> is very complex and cannot be reduced to a *tout-court* adherence or not to the ideology. Above all, it must be noted that Marcucci had always denounced the uncritical assimilation to all forms of ideology, whether political or cultural.

Marcucci's substantive view on gender issues can definitely be included in that faction of thinkers and artists who have been able to critically question and emphasize a need to differentiate the term “feminine”, often improperly used for the sole purpose of constituting a pink ghetto and instigating sexist thinking that sees a natural propensity of female subjects for certain forms and themes (rather than research and practice), and feminism, to be understood as active critical thinking that leads to thematic and formal choices aimed at revising, overturning, or even dismantling those predetermined by patriarchal socio-cultural discourse.

Although the social construction of gender is not fresh, this perspective has more recently been formalized in objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Accordingly, being raised in a culture that objectifies the female body and sexualizes women leads them to internalize this objectification. This is called self-objectification. (Cortese, 2004, p. 61)

As Re (2004) pointed out, Marcucci is undoubtedly an example of how *politically* informed, feminist experimental aesthetic practices by women promote the reader's *activism*. Bearing this in mind, the last section of this article proposes an informed reading of Marcucci's selected works through a lens of a conscious destabilisation of the patriarchal system, within and outside the artistic dimension of the counterculture.

## A Feminist Reading

The collage “Il Fidanzato in Fuga”, dated 1964, presents three empty astronaut suits hung on hangers. The political reference is immediately to the space race running of those years, which saw the United States and the Union of

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and cultural movement.

<sup>3</sup>For an overview of the specific need of using the plural for the Italian case please see Guerra (2004), *Femminismo/Femminismi: Appunti per una Storia da Scrivere* (Feminism/Feminisms: Notes for a History to Write).

Soviet Socialist Republics facing each other, often proposing through conditioned information two not dissimilar versions of “supermen”. Instead, in the center of the collage, we find empty suits of men who have already left, not for a mission but for a flight. In fact, the verbal layer obtained by Marcucci through the distribution of a fragmented sentence on the image yet maintained very legible by the decision to organize the fragments fully horizontally, shows in its entirety “extraterrestrial paradise/of the woman/the boyfriend/fleeing/into space”. Political criticism is combined with an ironic pointing out of male cowardice (whose machismo is only one form of manifestation). However, as always in Marcucci's case, irony is also a form of social self-criticism. The paradise referenced in the collage and belonging to women is not terrestrial, thus indicating a certain necessity for the feminine to pursue, once again, the masculine in the extra-spatial dimension (where it fled). The simplicity of the picked up and reassembled language and its apparently very superficial connotation also ironically interact with the media-proclaimed glorious progress of science which would lead humanity to the conquest of outer space, creating a hyper-textual narrative that questions that same alleged progressive value.

Even more iconographical is the poetic panel entitled “Noxin”. A seductive woman with thick hair, holding a brush and in a plastic pose of a true dramatic diva, stands out in the center of the page, towering vertically in apparently simple but very sensual clothes. Despite the awkward and contrived pose, the young woman's face looks ecstatic: out of the model's mouth comes what is commonly called a “speech balloon” in comics. Inside, a single word is reproduced; the same word that gives the title to the poem: “Noxin”.

This word is nothing but a mispronunciation of the name of the American president Richard Nixon, a conservative politician who had renewed his commitment against North Vietnam. In this way, Marcucci mocks him and his positions, continuing her anti-war commitment and the idealization of leaders. Moreover, choosing to use a female figure in a state of veneration for this false myth (Nixon/Noxin) challenges a whole series of power dynamics. In her uncomfortable pose, with arms and legs carefully bent to show the figure under the gown, the woman is reduced to total identification with that one word. As much as the iconographic value of the table is predominant, the fact that that word is ultimately clarifying the intent of the panel gives the semantic language a decisive yet non-decisional power. The word is misled, manipulated, and returned to the concrete world in a different form: in practice, for it actively interacts with a cognitive field other than the syntactic one, and in theory, because its meaning is emptied and resemantized through the apparent lapsus.

The function of the balloon in Marcucci's work often takes on an ironic key of destabilization and reversal of meaning, another example being the visual poem entitled simply “AH!” (1972). As is commonly known, balloons in comic strips are mostly used to express the thought or word of a particular character. A refined and quite serious-looking man (notwithstanding his barely-there smile) is next to a little blond girl. The man sits on a large chair with his hands crossed,

and from the black and white photo, his work shirt — very white in contrast — and perfectly knotted tie stands out. The man looks out from the poster and the little girl does not sit with him but rather faces his side, imitating her father's hand gestures but offering, always looking like he does towards the intended recipient, a sweet smile. The inscription accompanying this advertisement (the product of which is not made clear) reads: “in business he is an iceman, but there is someone who knows how to soften him up”.

The intervention on the image — automatically, in the text sign of the text — resumes through the speech balloon speech but this time, unlike in “Noxin”, manually. It is, in fact, directly the author's handwriting that assigns the simple sound “ah!” to a voice-over, reproduced in red and bold in a balloon of the same color.

Just like the persuasive communication system of advertising penetrates people's daily lives, the voice-over inserts itself in the representation offered by the commercial poster. There is a double mechanism of appropriation here that becomes clear to the receivers' eyes: one is the manipulation of the advert material itself; one is the manipulation of the subtle language mode of articulating the message.

The last years of the 1970s are characterized by a new practice. Although fitting into a current of use of the body common to its contemporaries, it unfolds in a very original manner. In fact, unlike the works analyzed so far, which were constructed from panels that had already been prepared in a certain way (posters, advertisements, images taken from newspapers) according to the tradition of the *objet trouvé* (found object), a season is now beginning in which Marcucci's own body is imprinted — literally — on the page.

On the blank canvas, Marcucci uses tempera to imprint parts of her own body such as her breasts, belly, and face. The physical and gestural intervention thus becomes material at every level. The imprint of the body becomes the canvas itself and it replaces the *objet trouvé* (or perhaps one's own body is finally found?), thereby making her physicality the very matter of the work, replacing it — and thus also balancing its value — with the materials so far collected and used, which varied between everyday communication and iconic artistic representations.

In her work “Aa Bb Cc” (1977), Lucia Marcucci's body imprint is interspersed with the transcription of the alphabet. The letters, written in upper- and lower-case cursive, as in a school exercise, pass through the body, including it in this new form of *abecedarium* (spelling book). The relationship between the female body and the re-appropriation of the alphabet is a theme that Tomaso Binga<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup>Tomaso Binga is the pseudonym for Bianca Menna (née Pucciarelli). The artist “explained that she chose a male pseudonym in order to parody the cultural privileges reserved for men. This ploy to discredit the art world, passing by way of a disguised sexual identity (a theme which occurs throughout her work), started with a demystification of the difference between the sexes in writing and language. She lives in Rome, where, since 1970, she has carried on her tireless activity involving the organization of avant-garde events with performances, collages,

pseudonym of the artist Bianca Menna, had already tackled the year before, in a series of photographs where she reproduced the shapes of the letters with her own body. In Binga's case, the female body lends itself plastically to a material reinvention of the word through its smallest fraction (the letter); in Marcucci's case the female body is overlaid and interspersed by this succession of letters. In Marcucci's case, the element of imposition of a phallogocentric language is even more evident, as the letters are imprinted above Marcucci's body image. Two critical readings of the author's drafting of the letters manually can be offered, which do not collide with each other but critically involve each other. On the one hand, the repetition of typical primary schools exercises seem to indicate a path that is no different from the one practiced up to that time, involving the imposition of the cultural system represented by the alphabet on the feminine. On the other hand, Marcucci's specific manual skill rather than an alteration on the canvas through the collage of letters taken from the press offers a hope of interpretation that sees the women finally able to imitate that patriarchal writing system and make it their own. The question remains open, however: is it worth it? Can the alphabet meet the needs of a subject who has always been marginalized and oppressed by that same linguistic system?

Reinforcing the thesis of ambivalence regarding the cultural function as a possible escape route for subaltern subjects is a second work produced the following year, "Culturae" (1978). Here, too, we find the now recognizable practice of imprinting the body on canvas. This time, however, the tempera intervention becomes almost macabre rather than childlike. In red tempera, in fact, the word "CULTURAE" dominates the female body to which a book is added. The red tempera drips like blood all over the figure, creating a series of vertical raining strokes that recall the cages of a prison. Moreover, the word is rendered in Latin: a language of the elite, a language of traditional Western culture indicating secular oppression. Nonetheless, the female figure holds a book with her, revealing an access to established culture as having been made her own.

These two examples show us that one cannot offer a univocal answer, and certainly not univocal is the answer that Marcucci wants to offer being an artist who has always fought hand-to-hand with language, fueling her art with new questions and food for thought.

## Conclusions

The scholar Maria Antonietta Trasforini (2000) interviewed 15 artists born in between 1930 and 1940, observing how these women whose encounter with feminism took place at a stage in life when they were already active as artists and who had fought their own battles for recognition prior to the explicit formation of the movements in Italy related to the term and practices of neofeminisms.

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video and sonic poetry works, and painting, involving nothing less than a contamination of codes—writing, gestures, bodies, signs, sounds and images—, very frequently pushed to the limits of meaninglessness" (Biagini, n.d., para. 1).

Trasforini concluded, basing her reflection on such interviews, and as perfectly summarized by Perna (2015), that a direct affiliation with neo-feminisms in Italy cannot be declared. However, the elements of proto-feminist instances are evident in Marcucci's creative work, and a feminist studies lens appear to be the most fruitful for interrogating the specificity of the themes chosen and the stances taken.

Of fundamental help for a correct interpretation of Marcucci's historically situated artistic production is the concept of the male gaze that film scholar Laura Mulvey (1975) has brought to light through her, by now, very famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”<sup>5</sup>. In Mulvey's study, a principle of expression of unbalanced forms of power between male subjects is analyzed and named: “the male gaze”. The male gaze, or more specifically its extended description being “the male heterosexual gaze”, is a result of visual media having a social tendency to respond to the voyeuristic desire to sexualize non-male subjects for the pleasure of male observers. This specific form of scopophilia is rooted in the centuries-old distinction that sees male subjects as protagonists in the world's ions and non-male subjects as “to be looked at”, whose role is passive. In this way, the agency of non-male subjects is completely annulled, and the sole purpose of their existence is to be represented for male pleasure, through various forms of dehumanization.

Despite Marcucci's overt ability to include every aspect of criticism and social reflection in her artistic production, and despite the fact that she targets a broad and non-gender specific audience with critical stimulation, the impact that her works — in theme and form — achieve is markedly feminist, as she places non-masculine subjects at the centre of the reflection and first and foremost offers them the tools to recognize (if not disavow) the process of self-objectification (Cortese, 2004).

The tools offered by feminist theories enable us to activate critical thinking that places Marcucci's work at the center of a feminist aesthetic and political debate. The works' undoubted quality matches the originality of themes, such as the focus on the feminine in market propaganda and the exposure of the female body as a propaganda tool (as proven by the analysis here dedicated to the 1960s collages). Elements that female colleagues have been able to explore in parallel autonomously and a task that their male colleagues have mostly missed, not fully understanding the socio-historical bearing.

At the same time, as demonstrated through the analysis of the late 1970s panels, the direct use of the body in artistic work seems to be perfectly in line with the contemporary feminist theories promoted, above all, by Carla Lonzi (whom we remember was primarily an art historian), centered on the need for the bodily presence of the feminine: more specifically, to engage directly with all the

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<sup>5</sup>Widely discussed and debated, Murvey's theory of male gaze still stands today as one of the most influential critical thoughts. See Gribaldo and Zapperi (2012), *Lo Schermo del Potere* (The Screen of Power) and Oliver (2017), “The Male Gaze Is More Relevant, and More Dangerous, Than Ever”.

surroundings and to start from one's own experience, one's own bodily, as *the personal is political*.

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